
Miscellaneous

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Public relations and dissent: Anti-racism digital advocacy Portuguese case study

Abstract

Social media platforms are being used to shift the balance of power, functioning as tools of resistance for activist publics on social justice issues. This article uses a postmodern approach to public relations with the purpose of clarifying the role of dissensus in social media contexts, connecting it to the principles of the ethics of care that promote dialogue but not necessarily with the aim of achieving consensus. Scholars and practitioners can claim a broader role for public relations in society by considering and analyzing conflicting perspectives in digital communication as a way to engage with activist struggles in social justice and human rights causes. By applying critical discourse analysis (CDA) to a case study that articulates interdisciplinary concepts, this research analyzes the first national weekly Portuguese newspaper *Expresso* support for the anti-racist cause through its promotion of a manifesto and a Facebook post against racist intimidation. In a contemporary society characterized by fragmentation, taking a public stance on important social and political issues, as in the case analyzed, demands moving beyond consensus-driven communication. The data confirm that social media platforms are not necessarily dialogic spaces and that conflicting communicative perspectives may be a useful way to analyze social

change in public relations theory and practice. By taking a public stand against racist intimidation, assuming the possible alienation of specific publics –and “Facebook bullying”– this private newspaper also demonstrated the practical application of the assumptions of the ethics of care.

Keywords

Public relations, communication, advocacy, digital, dissensus.

1. Introduction

Inspired by the work of Ciszek and Logan (2018), this article is a response to their call for more investigation that examines dissenting voices from a public relations perspective.

Scholars and practitioners can claim a broader role for public relations in society by considering and analyzing conflicting perspectives in digital communication as a way to engage with activist struggles in social justice causes, giving public voice to those who resist oppressive ideologies. However, in order to take advantage of the transformations that digital media have brought to public relations, the dialogic responsive principles that have been used in digital communication studies (Kent & Taylor, 1998) might not be appropriate to analyze dissenting voices and antagonistic views of reality.

Based on a Portuguese case study about a manifesto against racist intimidation signed by public figures, promoted and published on Facebook by the first national weekly newspaper *Expresso*, this research uses a postmodern approach to public relations. We explore agonistic dialogic communication and the concept of dissensus as a framework for studies of digital communication and social change. We use critical discourse analysis (CDA; Fairclough, 2001) to examine *Expresso*'s announcement of support for the anti-racist struggle on Facebook, as well as the resultant public response.

The main objective of the work is to highlight the role of advocacy in public relations in a context of conflicts and power negotiations that becomes increasingly visible in the digital environment. Specifically, the article intends to: a) analyze the best conceptual frames for public relations in situations of conflict and discord in digital spaces; b) understand how the ethics of care lens can support public relations researchers and practitioners addressing social justice and democracy issues.

The article starts with a literature review that articulates public relations theories and concepts with the ethics of care, addressing the significance of postmodernism and dissensus in an interdisciplinary approach. After describing our CDA method, we present our discussion and findings, addressing the critical role of dissensus when organizations and public figures advocate on behalf of controversial political and social issues.

2. Literature review

2.1. Public relations and virtual dissenting voices

The dynamics of social media have been studied in public relations as a great new way for achieving mutual understanding or consensus between an organization and its publics, leading to two-way symmetrical communication, and apparently supporting relationship management theories (Ciszek, 2016). Despite some criticism about the distinctive aspects of dialogue and symmetrical communication (Kent & Theunissen, 2016), the symmetrical lens still dominates public relations research, portraying any communication that does not pursue compromise or consensus as unethical or as not being “successful” (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012).

Evidence demonstrates, however, that social media have been used by practitioners as another tool for one-way information dissemination (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Carim & Warwick, 2013; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015; Yang & Kent, 2014), leading to the conclusion that “the dialogic promise of the web has not yet been realized” (McAllister-Spooner, 2009, p. 321). Dialogue is defined in public relations as “a specialized form of communication involving consensus, collaboration, equality, and mutual trust” (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 70). However, as Pieczka (1997, p. 70) contends, dialogue is an excellent utopian ideal but not practical as it fails to deal with the “strategic tactics” of participants, meaning that the “normative form of dialogue is difficult or impossible to implement in practice” (Lane, 2014, p. 7). Dialogue demands effort, and practitioners must plan and work for it. As “social media are discursive spaces,” they are not “inherently dialogic” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 123). In some circumstances, not responding and not interacting with certain online audiences can also be a strategic decision. For this reason, the conceptualization of episodes of contestation in digital communication can be useful to frame public relations in practices of care.

The ethics of care is an example of the contribution of other areas of study to illustrate visions of dialogue that can be relevant to ethical practice of social media relationship management (Bowen & Stacks, 2014). This approach concerns itself especially with caring

¹ At the beginning of 2022, *Expresso* journal was forced to set up a new website and an entire digital information operation after a computer attack. If some links referred to in this research are not active, it may be related to this computer attack under investigation by the Portuguese authorities. The details under this attack are explained in this January 5, 2022, *Expresso* article: <https://expresso.pt/expresso/2022-01-05-0-ataque-ao-expresso-e-a-sic-11-esclarecimentos-aos-nossos-leitores-e-espectadores>.

relations, it considers sensitivity to multiple possible perceptions and possibilities in specific contexts. It promotes dialogue, but not necessarily with the aim of achieving consensus. The ethics of care emphasizes the kind of “dialogue that empowers its participants to express themselves rather than on discourse so ideal that actual differences of viewpoint fall away” (Held, 2006, p. 20). Although relational harmony in communities is the goal for moral problem solving (Gilligan, 1982), it is necessary to acknowledge that conflict is a component of dialogue, communication, and social change (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). The ethics of care provide resources to deal with power and violence issues considering the possibilities for nonviolence and of countering violence in other, appropriate ways (Held, 2006, p. 139).

Social media are being used to shift the balance of power and function as tools of resistance (Veil *et al.*, 2015). Activist publics can use social media to empower themselves (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a, 2012b). We defend the possibility that public relations’ contribution to a practical ethic of care within digital landscapes involves conceiving discord and digital communication according to Ganesh and Zoller’s (2012) agonistic orientation of dialogic communication. The authors present three research positions on dialogue: collaboration, co-optation, and agonism. Dialogue–collaboration positioning involves consensus and equality, while co-optation focuses on the role of context in power and conflict.

Much existing literature within public relations and dialogic communication comes from a collaborative approach (Ciszek & Logan, 2018), and this can be problematic because it diminishes attention from the critical role that contestation and tension can have, neglecting other methods of activist social change that perform as confrontational communication (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012, p. 73). Agonism recognizes the “value of permanent contest, dissensus, and performance in vibrant public spaces which expose and test the legitimacy of those who hold power and privilege” (Davidson, 2016, p. 145). Agonistic theory, particularly the work of Chantal Mouffe (1998), is defined by Ganesh and Zoller (2012, p. 77) as “pluralist views of democratic processes that treat social conflict as central.”

2.2. Reimagining public relations roles: postmodernism and dissensus

As in the ethics of care, postmodernism considers new ways and multiple perspectives of seeing and thinking about the social world, thereby challenging dominant considerations and universal truths. For postmodernism, processes of power are a “part of everyday life” and not inherently positive or negative (Hatch, 2006, p. 275). Postmodernism emphasizes unpredictability and chaos, seeking to expose underlying processes of power and discourse that impact reality by asking how meaning is created through discourse (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 117). Furthermore, as Ciszek (2016) explains, postmodernism contemplates social power imbalances by analyzing the uses of discourse to express domination and/or resistance (Foucault, 1980; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2012; Lyotard, 1984), in opposition to dominant relationship management theories that position symmetrical relationships as essential to sustaining organizational balance (Grunig, 1992).

In line with critical theory, a postmodern approach to public relations “allows one to consider PR [public relations] as a narrative, a way of talking about the world, the people in that world, and PR’s relationship with those people” (Radford, 2012, p. 50). A critical understanding of the signs and symbols of culture allows one to see the allocation of power and the dominant ideology (Mickey, 1997), and eventually permits an understanding of different publics rather than controlling them or predicting their behavior (Mickey, 1995).

Postmodernism in public relations allows for reflection on how to address empowerment at the intersection of research, praxis, society, and organizations (Edwards, 2006; Holtzhausen, 2000; L’Etang, 2009). As Madden, Brown and Xu (2019) concluded, a postmodern lens can allow students to become critical consumers and producers of public relations knowledge and practice. Postmodern public relations scholars have pushed back against the acceptance of a functionalist approach to public relations that is rooted in a consumer society

(Radford, 2012). This postmodern perspective can add value to the technical training already in place, aiming at better preparing students for future challenges.

Holtzhausen (2000, 2012) and Holtzhausen and Voto (2002) have claimed that although public relations can create, maintain, and reproduce powerful, dominant discourses, it can also resist and disrupt such discourses. This article explores the concept of dissensus understood by Lyotard (1988) as contrary to consensus, where unanimity is neither required nor the goal of communication. Democracies are shrinking worldwide, and restrictions on freedom of expression are increasing with the growth of autocratization (Lindberg, 2021). An ethics of care in public relations permits dissensus instead of focusing on rational consensus-driven approaches, because “dissensus may foster discursive and ideological plurality” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 117), opposing ideological frameworks and challenging oppressive worldviews (Radford, 2012, p. 50).

Assuming that advocacy² is a central function of public relations that involves several practices, most practitioners know this function, in itself, is neither good nor bad. Instead, it is how the function is performed that makes the difference. Edgett’s (2002) research aiming to advance a systematic ethical framework for advocacy in public relations observes that persuasion is a legitimate public relations function and that it can be performed to high ethical standards. In a contemporary society characterized by fragmentation, taking a public stance on important social and political issues, as in the case analyzed in this article, demands moving beyond consensus-driven communication.

Corporate political advocacy (CPA) is a concept from business ethics literature that argues that businesses should publicly communicate their positions on sociopolitical issues and try to engage the different publics on difficult subjects (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). This approach implies the acceptance that “not all stakeholders will agree with the ideologies and values advocated by an organization, resulting in the possible alienation of specific publics” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 118). CPA is emerging as a new trend in communication dynamics. It suggests that implied political values on behalf of companies are likely to foster divergent consumer reactions. This practice causes simultaneous “disapproval and boycotts from those that oppose the company’s position, but approval and buycotts from those that support the company’s position” (Hydock, Paharia & Weber, 2019, p. 76). CPA presents an organizational reality that public relations practitioners may eventually have to deal with, assuming that their organizations can become actively engaged with public action on a given controversial sociopolitical issue (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 118).

Based on the methodology used by Ciszek and Logan (2018) for analyzing the American ice cream company Ben & Jerry’s support for Black Lives Matter, this article presents the case of the Portuguese newspaper *Expresso* supports for the anti-racist cause as a form of CPA put into practice by a private media company. We argue that taking a public stand against racist intimidation and assuming resultant conflicting perspectives in digital communication, beyond the fear of being criticized by the different publics, is a strategic public relations decision and a form of cultivating an ethics of care.

3. The case: *Expresso* takes a public anti-racist stand

On the night of August 8, 2020, a group of ultranationalists went to the headquarters of SOS Racismo, an anti-racist Portuguese association, and held a vigil exhibiting similar white supremacist behavior to that of the Ku Klux Klan. In statements to the Portuguese press, members of SOS Racismo classified this situation as an act of “political terrorism” that used “intimidation and coercion against anti-racism as a form of political dispute [...] surpassing all the limits of ideological confrontation” (Henriques & Fernandes, 2020).

² Advocacy is defined as “the act of publicly representing an individual, organization, or idea with the object of persuading targeted audiences to look favorably on –or accept the point of view of– the individual, the organization, or the idea” (Edgett, 2002, p. 1).

The group of Portuguese neo-Nazis Resistência Nacional, which has links to similar German and Polish ultranationalist groups was being watched by the Portuguese authorities and was under investigation by the public prosecutor's office related to the case. Shortly after this widely reported episode, 10 people received an email with death threats that gave them 48 hours to leave the country; among these 10 were members of the Portuguese parliament and anti-racist activists. These threats were associated with the same group of Portuguese neo-Nazis who organized the August 8 (Franco *et al.*, 2020).

Contrary to a Portuguese media tradition that claims to privilege “objectivity” and “impartiality” in the reporting of events, one major newspaper took the unusual step of expressing of unequivocal support for the anti-racist cause. The *Expresso*, a privately owned newsweekly with the largest distribution in Portugal, announced on August 13, 2020, that it asked 40 Portuguese public figures –actors, politicians, journalists, academics, artists, activists, and sporting figures– the question: “How can decency overcome intimidation?” The testimony of these public figures was published in the newspaper on the same date³ and on the official page of *Expresso* on Facebook⁴.

In a movement parallel to the case of Ben & Jerry's support for Black Lives Matter in the United States (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 119), the newspaper *Expresso*'s support for the anti-racist cause generated several responses on social media. This fact leads us to consider the following research questions:

RQ1. What are the main characteristics of the interactions and comments on *Expresso*'s Facebook post?

RQ2. Can *Expresso*'s support for anti-racist cause be considered an ethics of care initiative in social media contexts?

4. Method

Language is the focal point of critical discourse analysis (CDA) because it highlights the beliefs and identities present in discourse, searching for the relationship between power and language (Wodak *et al.*, 2009). In line with other public relations researchers who have used CDA techniques to study the relationship between discourse and social reality (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Edwards, 2015; Henderson, 2005; Motion & Weaver, 2005), we employ Fairclough's (2001) CDA techniques to answer our research questions and examine dissensus in action in a European context. As Ciszek and Logan (2018, p. 120) remind us, methodologically, CDA is appropriate for a postmodern theoretical framework because both method and framework emphasize the relationship between language and power in human interactions.

Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999, p. 60) present the method for “doing” critical discourse analysis. Their approach categorizes five stages by which CDA can be “operationalized” in order to produce “theoretically grounded analyses in a wide range of cases.” In the first stage, it is necessary to identify a social “problem.” The second stage presents ideological, contextual, and conjunctural “obstacles” to the problem being solved. Stage three analyzes the “function of the problem in the practice,” which entails how ideology relates to the social order. The fourth stage looks for “possible ways to pass the obstacle” and to resolve the social problem. Finally, stage five calls for critical “reflection on the analysis” as an instrument for achieving social change.

According to recent data, Facebook is the most used social media platform in Portugal (Marktest, 2019), qualifying it as relevant for analysis in this case. First, we examine the

³ “Fighting racism is simpler than it looks. Just the firmness of decency is enough:” 40 manifestos from all over the country against intimidation (translated from Portuguese by the author). *Expresso* (August 13, 2020). Retrieved from <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2020-08-13-Lutar-contra-o-racismo-e-mais-simples-do-que-parece.-Basta-a-firmeza-da-decencia-40-manifestos-de-todo-o-pais-contra-a-intimidacao>.

⁴ *Expresso* Facebook Post (August 13, 2020). Available for consultation and analyzed between (August and February 2021) at <https://www.facebook.com/jornalexpresso/posts/10158224328532949>.

content of the “40 open letters to the editor from around the country against intimidation” promoted and published on Facebook by *Expresso*. Next, we analyze the public’s response to the post that was published on August 13, 2020, focusing on user-generated comments between August 14–24, 2020. In this period, the post generated 716 comments, over a thousand reactions (likes and others), and 220 shares. In summary, the sample size of the corpus analyzed consists of 40 open letters and 716 Facebook comments, according to the systematized analytical procedure in Table 1.

Table 1: Discursive issues studied according to the analytical procedure.

Critical discourse analysis		
Stages	Analytical procedure	Discursive issues
Stage 1. Identifying the social problem	Literature review/ document consultation	Racism in Portugal
Stage 2. Ideology	Literature review/ document consultation	Obstacles to abolishing racism in Portugal
Stage 3. Challenging the social order	Context analysis/ Literature review	Expressions of racism in the media in Portugal
Stage 4. Resolution	Content analysis of: a) 40 open letters against intimidation b) 716 user generated Facebook comments	a) Solutions to the problems associated with racist intimidation b) Public response: Conflict and contestation
Stage 5. Discussion	Critical reflection on previous analysis	Possibility for social change

Source: Own elaboration.

4.1. CDA, Stage 1. Identifying the social problem: Racism in Portugal

George Floyd’s death in the US on May 26, 2020, prompted a global reckoning over racial injustice and police aggression, with protests also happening in Portugal. Similarly, the death of Bruno Candé in Portugal on July 24, 2020, for alleged racist motivations, rekindled the debate on racism in Portugal. The vigil in front of headquarters of SOS Racismo by a group of Portuguese neo-Nazis, followed by an email with death threats to politicians and activists involved in the anti-racist action, brought to light an existing division in Portuguese public opinion between those who recognize that there exists a problem of racism in the country and those who deny it. The data from the European Social Survey (2018) confirms that more than 60% of Portuguese respondents express racist beliefs. The author Joana Gorjão Henriques (2018, p. 17) reminds that racism in Portugal is a complex problem and has a structural and institutional dimension that leads to exclusion. The author exposes situations of racial violence, discrimination and prejudice undermining national justice and education systems and blocking constitutional rights for afro-descendant people, such as access to housing or work. Other authors in Portugal have been examining the same racism topics in the country and issues related to ethnic-based discrimination (Lages *et al.*, 2006; Malheiros & Mendes, 2007; Rosário, Santos & Lima, 2011).

In 2019, a representative of a political party Chega, which has been described as nationalist and populist, was elected to the Portuguese parliament. Although social networks do not adequately represent Portuguese public opinion, this party’s “simplistic” discourse (Pinto, 2020) has been strongly supported in the online environment. The case of the vigil at SOS Racismo headquarters and the subsequent death threats was highly politicized. The Chega party leader said that there is no racism in Portugal and that “whenever the left goes

out to say that the country is racist, we will take to the street to show that it is not”⁵. This political party has been involved in several polemics that associate it with extremist right-wing movements, with prominent support from businesspeople and influential families, and with evangelical pastors asking people to follow the ideology of the party⁶.

It is in this context of political and social fragmentation that the Portuguese newspaper *Expresso* promoted and published its forty open letters to the editor from public figures against racist intimidation.

4.2. CDA, Stage 2. Ideology: Obstacles to abolishing racism in Portugal

The Portuguese colonial past was violent and built on a racist ideology that divides human beings and hierarchizes them. “Racism is a system, it is an ideology, and it is a practice that is based on power relations that are reproduced and perpetuated until today –also in Portugal” (Henriques, 2018, p. 12). In a very synthesized way, the main obstacles to combat racism in Portugal are, first, the denial of the problem and, second, the fact that schools continue to teach a narrative that glorifies the colonizer but omits the fact that colonization enslaved populations, treating women and men as objects. On the analysis of Portuguese history textbooks, researchers Araújo & Rodríguez (2012, p. 1266) “propose that the textbooks’ master narrative constitutes a power-evasive discourse on history, which naturalizes core processes such as colonialism, slavery and racism.” Within the scope of the same project, in 2017 the researchers claim, “that school textbooks obliterate racism in Portuguese colonialism and trivialize slavery.” They give as an example a phrase extracted from a 6th year manual for 10-year-old children: “The Portuguese brought gold, slaves, ivory and chilies from Africa –products of great value.” Slaves are presented as “products,” without any additional reference, and without being a quote from the period (Câncio, 2017).

Black communities are pushed to the periphery of cities, without access, or with only precarious access, to essential services such as education and health and they perform much of the most poorly paid jobs (Henriques, 2018, pp. 11–16). The report released in 2018 by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhumane or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) found that episodes of police violence and mistreatment in prisons are frequent in Portugal and that people of African descent are more exposed to these rights violations, demonstrating how racial discrimination is practiced by some Portuguese police.

4.3. CDA, Stage 3. How *Expresso* challenged the social order

The more traditional expressions of racism in Portugal are perceptions that are repeatedly expressed “in the media and have supported the taking of measures at the legislative level” (Vala, Brito & Lopes, 2015, p. 70). In January 2019, a Portuguese generalist television channel (TVI) invited to a program a controversial person, leader of the far-right ‘New Social Order movement,’ condemned for his involvement in racially motivated attacks and racial discrimination. This situation originated two reactions: 1) an open letter from civil society that demanded an end to racism in the media in Portugal; 2) The presentation of a formal complaint against the television channel by the Union of Journalists⁷.

By openly promoting and publishing open letters against racist intimidation from Portuguese public figures, *Expresso* challenged ideologies about race that reign among the social order and that facilitate racial inequality and discrimination in Portugal. The initiative

⁵ *Expresso* (July 29, 2020) (translated from Portuguese by the author). Retrieved from <http://expresso.pt/politica/2020-07-29-Ventura-anuncia-contramanif-Sempre-que-a-esquerda-sair-a-rua-para-dizer-que-o-pais-e-racista-nos-sairemos-a-rua-para-mostrar-que-nao-e>.

⁶ *Público* (May 21, 2020). Retrieved from <https://www.publico.pt/2020/05/21/politica/noticia/pastores-evangelicos-promovem-andre-ventura-1917509>.

⁷ *Sábado Magazine* (online) January 7, 2019. “A carta aberta que exige o fim do racismo na comunicação social.” Consulted on March 29, 2022 at <https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/a-carta-aberta-que-exige-o-fim-do-racismo-na-comunicacao-social>.

functioned as a public relations decision (made by a private company with repercussions on relationships with different stakeholders and on its image and reputation). It was a call to action with the potential to inspire audiences to position themselves similarly against racial intimidation. *Expresso's* support for the struggle for racial justice and equality is also a form of advocacy journalism, embracing its ability to expose social injustices as a core function of journalism (Henriques, 2018, p. 18). Furthermore, it also illustrates Wettstein and Baur's (2016, p. 203) criteria for corporate political advocacy, because the company's primary driver of activism is "[its] belief in and [its] commitment" against these forms of intimidation based on racial issues.

4.4. CDA, Stage 4. Resolution: Overcoming the obstacles

The longer statement published on the *Expresso* website and linked through the newspaper's Facebook post offers suggestions on how to solve the problems associated with racist intimidation. The forty statements of Portuguese public figures from different backgrounds –including the representative of the Portuguese Medical association, managers, and scientists– share the conviction that the protection of human rights and democratic values happens in the courageous resistance and open manifestation against intolerance, racism, and fascism. According to the public figures and *Expresso*, overcoming the obstacles of racist ideologies requires that people assume that racism exists in Portugal. The attention that this newspaper and public figures gave to these events represents a contribution to raising awareness on the issue, and is an example of the ethics of care approach. This approach presupposes that sensitivity to social injustice is cultivated through the conceptualization of a relational self, one concerned with the wellbeing of others (Okano, 2016).

One of the public figures declared that "the threats to which three deputies and several activists have been subjected are unacceptable." Another affirmed that "those elected must consider new realities and profound social transformations, but we voters must also do our part, precisely in the choices (or the absence of them) that we make when we vote." A journalist points out that the dilemma modern journalism faces is how to act when one side of an issue is publicly faced with threats to fundamental human rights. In one politician's vision, anti-racist actors must respond by "condemning racist intimidation as intolerable and demanding public identification and exemplary punishment in a court of law for those responsible for it"⁸.

4.4.1. Public response: Conflict and contestation

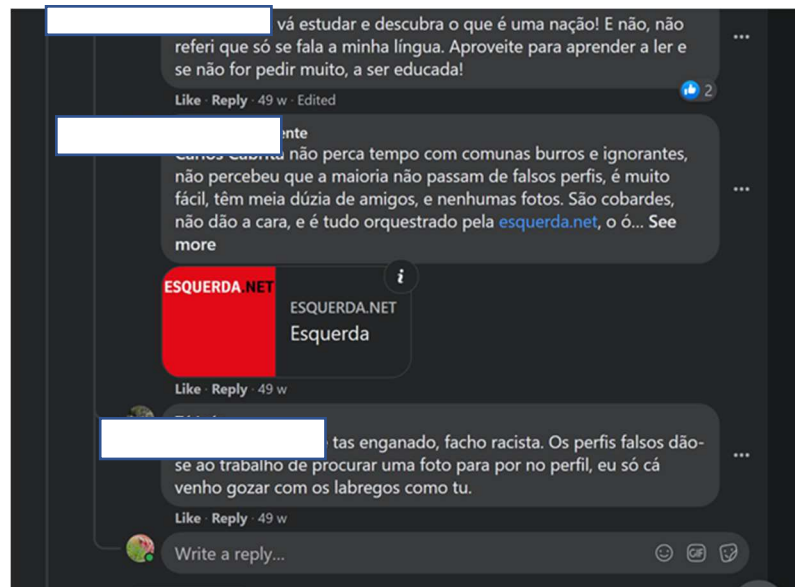
As it also happened in the study of Cizek and Logan (2018), the data demonstrate that *Expresso's* Facebook post on the open letters became a space to comment on racial tensions and politics in Portugal. However, contrary to the analysis done by these authors, in our case, commenters engaged with one another, but not in a dialogue. Instead, the phenomenon of "Facebook bullying" was visible as a consequence and an extension of the social battles among different ideologies (Kwan & Skoric, 2013).

The conflicting opinions about the events and what they represent were noticeable. There were several threats, personal offenses, conspiracy theories and aggressive statements in the comments among users (Figure 1). Expressions such as: "dumb and ignorant communes," "she is ugly as death," "you are an ass,"⁹ etc., were used as forms of provocation. One user labels another of being a homosexual as an accusation, due to his beliefs against racism, and invites him to "come out of the closet."

⁸ "Fighting racism is simpler than it looks. Just the firmness of decency is enough:" 40 manifestos from all over the country against intimidation (translated from Portuguese by the author). *Expresso* (August 13, 2020). Retrieved from <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2020-08-13-Lutar-contra-o-racismo-e-mais-simples-do-que-parece.-Basta-a-firmeza-da-decencia-40-manifestos-de-todo-o-pais-contra-a-intimidacao>.

⁹ Author translations of original posts in Portuguese.

Figure 1: Examples of exchanges of politicized personal offenses between users (user's names were covered for data protection).



Source: Print Screen *Expresso's* Facebook post.

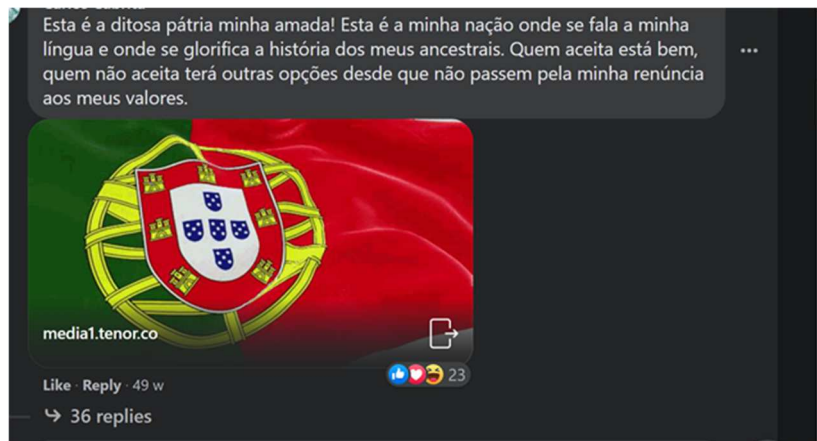
The interaction on these comments is marked mainly by the conflict of ideas and opposing views on reality, with the publication of satirical images and accusations between users. 71.7% of direct comments and sub comments interactions between users (513 in 716) are negatively critical of the public figures who expressed their position and of *Expresso*, among users that identify themselves through the use of expressions such as “being on the right side of history.” Within the 71% of users that are negatively critical of the initiative, 91% (467) question the “ideological independence” and “democratic character” of this initiative, implying that all public figures are on the left-wing of national politics (Figure 1) and also that representatives associated with the right-wing parties are lacking. *Expresso* was accused of being a communist newspaper, when in fact, a recent analysis of the different patterns of bias in Portugal found, in terms of tone, a slight preference of *Expresso* for parties from the right (Graça, 2017).

Others accuse some of the public figures of not having a “moral curriculum” allowing them to speak on this subject. Others suggest that the public figures do not attend street protests, and therefore they do not have the legitimacy to talk about the issue. The cynical discourse and disbelief in the institutions are characterized by the fracturing separations and accusations between the defenders of right and left policies.

Within the 71% of users that are negatively critical of the initiative 75% (387) deny that Portuguese people are racists. Examples of this are literal user's expressions such as: “they are taking political advantage of the situation in an indecent way because this issue has no comparison with real racism” and that “racism only exists in the US, not in Portugal.”

The agonism expressed in the interactions of the *Expresso* Facebook post is also visible in the references to Portuguese colonial history, emphasizing a cultural discourse that privileges and celebrates colonization. A user that identifies himself as belonging “to the people” says that anti-racism movements (promoted by some journalists and politicians) only intend to divert attention away from other matters more important to the country such as corruption.” Furthermore, other claim that when “white police officers are attacked, no one comes out in their defense.” A patriotic commentary with an image of the flag of Portugal (Figure 2) generated several interactions with hostile naming, such as “donkey,” “stupid,” and “fascist.”

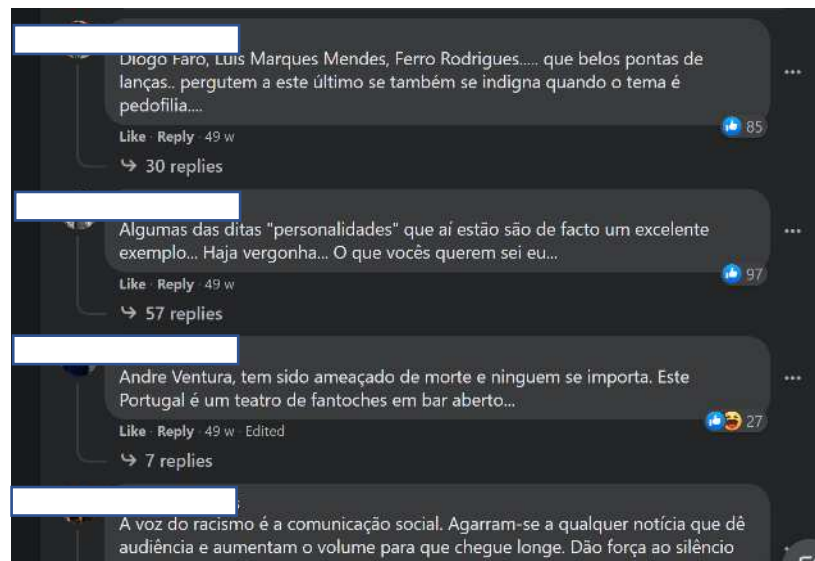
Figure 2: Patriotic commentary with an image of the flag of Portugal.



Source: Print Screen *Expresso's* Facebook post.

There are insinuations that the whole situation that triggered this social debate was a scenario created by the head of SOS Racismo and another deputy (both of whom are black) to make themselves victims and raise public attention. One user writes that “André Ventura (leader of the Chega party) also receives many threats and that nobody cares” (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Examples of comments on the defense of the leader of the Chega party (user's names were covered for data protection).



Source: Print Screen *Expresso's* Facebook post.

With a more moderate tone, one user claimed that the subject “is too serious” and that “it cannot be used by the extreme right and left politicians.” In general, comments that call for tolerance, dialogue, and respect for human dignity are a minority –only 7 out of 716 fall into this category.

Expresso's post on Facebook generated a space that functions as a “discursive ideological reservoir of competing perspectives” (Ciszek & Logan, 2018, p. 123).

4.5. CDA, Stage 5. Discussion: Reflections on the analysis and the possibility for change

At this stage, we critically reflect on our analysis, answering our research questions, and using the results to frame the relevance of dissensus for digital dialogic communication theories. By assuming a discursive positioning on racist intimidation and social conflict, the newspaper *Expresso* and the public figures showed how advocacy in public relations might foster conditions for dissensus in digital landscapes, embracing the ensuing results and tensions. Speech acts/actions have the “power to shape certain aspects of the social world” (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, p. 6) and they are used to achieve a desired positioning in the minds of the publics. This intentional positioning in public relations strategies can impact positively the social capital of an organization (James, 2014), leveraging the public legitimacy of some social justice causes. *Expresso*’s anti-racist manifesto and Facebook post was a form of intentional positioning in public relations, that is, an “attempt to stake out and occupy a site of intentional representation in the contested space where meanings are constructed, contested, and reconstructed” (James, 2011, p. 98).

However, this action did not generate dialogues between users, nor did they get involved with the original message. The users generally remain attached to aggressive and hostile criticisms of what the message represents ideologically (i.e., the challenge to the dominant belief that there is no racism in Portugal). Our analysis of Facebook users’ interactions about the open letters does not find characteristics of dialogue like engagement, inclusivity, respect, trust, reciprocity, and responsiveness. Comparable to what occurred in Ciszek and Logan’s (2018, p. 123) case study, “users did not appear to listen, learn, or adjust their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs.”

The data confirm that social media platforms are not necessarily dialogic spaces, and that agonistic communication may be a useful way to theorize and analyze social change in public relations. When public figures and the newspaper *Expresso* took a public stand on this issue, they knew –because they positioned themselves “against” something– that dialogue and consensus were not the main objectives of their communication action. For this reason, the dialogic principles (Kent & Taylor, 2002) and the two-way communication perspectives (Kent & Lane, 2017) may not be the best conceptual frames to analyze these situations of conflict and discord in digital spaces. It was possible to characterize the interactions and comments of *Expresso*’s Facebook post, fundamentally based on conflict and contestation, being observable how agonism was expressed.

Online hate speech has been identified as a pressing problem in society, with experts from different fields of investigation looking for approaches to detect and prevent it. Recent research implements and evaluates innovative tools to deal with this phenomenon (Vrysis *et al.*, 2021) and analyses emotional responses and the construction of “alternative counter-narratives to this socially alive issue” (Ortega-Sánchez *et al.*, 2021, p. 1).

Even though conflict is not necessarily dependent on violence, but a state of disharmony between individuals or groups, language is at the heart of all conflict (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010).

Based on a CDA analysis, this article confirms the findings of Ciszek and Logan (2018) in a European context. This research detected antagonistic interaction on Facebook more visibly than any kind of shared meaning or issue resolution.

The theoretical contributions of an ethics of care in social media public relations management assume that social media are a “humanly constructed artifact shaped by power relationships and crafted according to certain values and standing points” (Luka & Millette, 2018, p. 3). The ethics of care lens sees caring as the existential element of all activities in which actors necessarily “reach out to something other than the self” (Tronto, 1993, p. 104), especially when we are exploring the possibilities for a more inclusive society.

Gillies and Alldred (2012) claim that contemporary ethics of care is constructed on three formative processes: “representing women” (p. 49) across colonial, developing, and indigenous points of view and experiences, “deconstructing and undermining ‘knowledge’ structures” (p. 55), and facilitating practices of care such as “initiating personal change through action research” (p. 51). This perspective can support public relations researchers and practitioners in identifying biases and assumptions and to better understand what their commitments and objectives are, as well as those both of organizations they represent and their stakeholders, through an ongoing negotiation of power relations that becomes increasingly visible in digital contexts. Answering our second research question, *Expresso’s* support for anti-racist cause can be considered an ethics of care initiative in social media contexts.

This case study demonstrates that emotions are at the top of discursive tensions in digital landscapes. Contrary to the ethics of justice, the ethics of care considers aspects like emotions important in the process of ethical decision-making (Tao & Kimb, 2017). As Aeron Davis (2002, p. 14) demonstrated, “while news sources and PR practitioners may act with rational goals, public relations battles, and the public discourses that result, are far from rational.”

When dealing with questions of power and conflict, public relations would benefit from alternative ways of conceptualizing agonistic views of reality. Behavioral psychology in social species brings interesting contributions to formulations about agonistic communication, since certain displays led to aggressive or non-aggressive responses (Senar, 1990). Agonism can be a lens to address activist struggles in issues of morality, equality, and democracy, giving a public voice to those who resist oppressive ideologies.

5. Conclusion

Today’s digital revolution is a worldwide phenomenon that became even more visible with the crisis resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. It has profound and differential consequences for communities around the world and their relationships to one another. After 30 years of its creation, Internet is not yet a freedom space. In his speech at the Web Summit conference in Lisbon (Portugal) in 2018, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the inventor of the World Wide Web, has called for a set of shared principles aimed to defend a free and open internet (Sandle & Heinrich, 2018).

For communicators to promote meaningful engagement in digital context, and when they need to adopt intentional positions on controversial issues, the principles of the ethics of care can be a way to address future communicative problem-solving.

The results of this CDA contribute to a public relations paradigm suggesting that communication goals may not always prioritize reaching consensus. In the context of human rights advocacy, for example, confrontational communication may be necessary, even at the risk, as *Expresso* did, of distancing certain publics. Since power and influence relations are the DNA of public relations (Berger & Reber, 2013), the need for research that seeks to understand communicative processes as bases for transforming power structures that create and sustain oppressive and unbalanced conditions is recognized (Dutta, 2019, pp. 409-410; Moloney & McGrath, 2020).

This research was limited to data from one case study; therefore, results are not presumed to be generalizable. However, it highlights the relevance of this discussion to public relations, theory and practice, role on social change and in the debates regarding social justice causes.

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