

WORDS BEYOND THE PANDEMIC: A HUNDRED-SIDED CRISIS

Coord.: José Reis
A collective work by CES

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Centro de Estudos Sociais
Universidade de Coimbra



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MEDIA DISCOURSES AND ALTERITY

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The current COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic reduction in social interaction, which reinforced the crucial role of the media – a stage where narratives of sanitary, punitive and security content, among others, are disputed – in interpreting and producing realities. Some media stood out in facilitating access to information on the pandemic and communicating health risks, highlighting some of the social groups most vulnerable to virus exposure due to their health profile, profession, or socio-economic fragility prior to the pandemic. However, some media (re)produced – albeit well-meaningly – the narrative according to which “we are all in the same boat”, thereby neglecting the socio-economic, racial, age, gender and health differences, etc., that pre-existed and were aggravated by the new scenario. In addition, the media conveyed representations that situated the origin and spread of the virus in people who are foreign or considered as such: tourists, immigrants, refugees, blacks and Roma.

The media, and especially social networks, conveyed the idea that the Chinese were responsible for the emergence of the virus and that southern European countries, in particular Italy and Spain, were its disseminators on a global scale. The suggestion that Africans are more resistant to COVID-19, alongside the portraying of migrant, refugee and Roma communities as particular hotbeds of contamination, has normalised media and policy narratives of a racist and xenophobic nature, providing support for security and punitive measures towards certain groups.

As an alternative to this, solidarity discourses and practices should be promoted, including:

- Developing and enforcing media codes of conduct when covering marginalised and vulnerable groups;
- Giving visibility to groups that are especially vulnerable to the pandemic – i.e., racialised individuals and people living in poverty, who are also the most exposed to economic crises and lack of rights –, clearly evidencing their point of view. Particular attention should be given to people who are in an extremely vulnerable position or exposed because of their gender, identity, sexuality, type of work, etc.
- Supporting initiatives that fight for rights and tackle the pandemic (meeting basic needs, supporting access to information on labour as well as social, health, antiracism and xenophobia rights) organised by migrants, refugees and racialised people;
- Promoting partnerships between mainstream, collective, alternative and other media/forms of communication in order to bring awareness to the problems faced by migrants, refugees and racialised people, among others, and implementing strategies to tackle these difficulties;
- Promoting increased representation of marginalised and vulnerable people, including racialised people, in the media and newsrooms (especially in publishing and other decision-making positions).