

Covid-19 pandemic: the reproduction and contestation of securitisation of asylum seekers, immigrants and Afro-descendants in the Portuguese media

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with discourses about the Covid-19 pandemic in the Portuguese media from 2020-2021. Through thematic qualitative content analysis, we explore how migrants, refugees/asylum seekers and Afro-descendants – that is, racialised people who are often read as non-Portuguese – have been portrayed by the media, and the idea of ‘non-Portugueseness’, constructed in relation to this phenomenon. The pandemic is an interesting context in which to analyse discourses reproducing the us/them divide, but also the ‘us’, given the heightened role security imaginaries have played in framing and reacting upon the pandemic. In this analysis, we examine (de)securitisation moves present in the Portuguese media when representing refugees/asylum seekers, immigrants and Afro-descendants, focussing on three main tropes: securitising said groups, explaining and deconstructing securitisation of these people, and shedding light on the threats and vulnerabilities faced by them.

Keywords

Media, Covid-19, othering, securitisation, de-othering, Portugal

Introduction

Media representations of groups, issues or events associated with ‘Otherness’ in relation to hegemonic identities or patterns of behaviours, often rely on or “stick to” (Ahmed 2004) in/security narratives and ingrained imaginaries, whether explicitly or implicitly. As these othering processes are somehow pervasive, the imaginaries and hierarchies that sustain them can be exacerbated when security topics and agencies are discursively constructed to overlap or intersect, fuelling each other and consolidating securitisation processes and results.

Since the WHO declared Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic, in March 2020, security grammars on the virus and respective disease pervaded unsurprisingly on public, media and political discourses worldwide, with people increasingly directing their attention to news media to make sense of the pandemic (OberCom 2020). While health security was understandably a prominent framing in the perception and interpretation of Covid-19 as a security issue, the fact

that several political leaders (BBC 2020; Chappell 2020; Rawlinson 2020) made frequent use of war rhetoric and lexicon – “combat,” “war,” “enemy” – paved the way for a spill-over security effect, where different topics and agencies of (in)security converged, creating a security matrix from which the threat potential of (already) securitised groups, identities and topics was exacerbated. Although usually taking place locally, othering and de-othering media editorial choices and representational trends do relate to wider structures of domination which systematise the world into “the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies of the modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world system” (Grosfoguel 2011, 4).

This article seeks to answer the following research question: how are asylum seekers/refugees, migrants and racialised people represented in the Portuguese mediascape during the Covid-19 pandemic? Portugal is an interesting case study of Covid-19 interplay with said othering mechanisms. It is a semi-peripheral country (Santos 1994) that, as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983), defines itself as tendentially white and is marked by the presence of self-identity imaginaries that perceive it as immune to racism or at least circumscribed to a ‘few bad apples’ – an idea inherently linked to the Lusotropicalism myth (Freyre 1933). This notion of benevolent colonialism – whose dissemination has benefitted from media’s input, together with the political change operated in the 2019 legislative elections, with the appointment of a far-right Party (Chega) member of parliament (MP), who actively denies racism and pursues a racist agenda (Santos and Roque 2021) – helped to reinforce the construction of national identity as strongly anchored in the colonial past, allegedly characterised by tolerance towards other peoples and cultures (Cardoso 1998). It ultimately led to the cementation of the belief of the Portuguese as naturally antiracist. Also, Portuguese society is sustained by “the imagination of the centre” (Santos 2012, 136), which makes Portugal formulate the problems of its society as the problems of developed societies, reproducing the agendas and frames of the ‘centre’ as their own.

Methodologically, this article covers the first and second pandemic waves nationally (March 18, 2020 – October 31, 2020). Its primary empirical material was retrieved from Portuguese print media, through their websites, namely *Correio da Manhã* (CM) (tabloid newspaper), *Diário de Notícias* (DN, liberal-conservative orientation) and *Público* (P, centre-left leaning) (reference newspapers), and was complemented through a google alert set up using specific keywords.

The following section provides an overview of the literature on securitisation and (de)othering processes in and through the media, while the subsequent one introduces and justifies the case study and methods of critical thematic analysis. Afterwards, the paper examines overall trends in media coverage of asylum seekers/refugees, immigrants and Afro-descendants. It proceeds to explore how imaginaries and hierarchies that sustain othering

processes are discursively activated and, more importantly, how media constitute a negotiation realm concerning security narratives.

Hierarchies, securitisation, and (de)othering processes in and through media

Security is here understood as a socially constructed, intersubjective and self-referential practice that emerges “not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat” (Buzan et al. 1998, 24). It, thus, relies mainly on “securitisation,” i.e. a complex process that makes a specific issue/ideal/object/subject be labelled as a security issue that requires extraordinary measures. De-securitisation lies opposite to the idea of securitisation, referring to a process through which a specific issue is no longer defined in terms of security and, thus, moved away from the security agenda to that of normal politics (24-31).

Securitisation is often linked to othering politics. The concept of ‘othering’, which can be traced back to the feminist and postcolonial works of de Beauvoir (1947), Said (1978) and Spivak (1988), alludes to explicit and latent processes of reproducing differentiation and hierarchisation of identities into the in-group and out-group and marginalisation of the out-group. Krumer-Nevo and Sidi describe othering as “a process of homogenising groups and the hierarchisation and exclusion of groups/cultures through discourse” (2012, 300). It entails the discursive resort to binary opposition of in-group/out-group, built on subordination and hierarchy, where the former dominates the latter (Spivak 1988; Brons 2015; El-Tayeb 2011), but this superiority/inferiority is not always explicit.

In this process of othering that corners subordinate people in ‘other’ subject positions by means of discourse, it is the centre that has the power to describe who is the (inferior) ‘other’. It is thus connected to who has been given the right to fit in, follow, be read as “us” (El-Tayeb 2011) and “sing” the nation-state (Butler and Spivak 2007) as well as counter and question it. The exclusion/segregation of forced immigrants as an out-group (Brons 2015), along with other non-majority groups, namely Roma, Afro-descendent, indigenous and queer people (El-Tayeb 2011), is an example of this dynamic. It entails, first, their stigmatisation (Jensen 2011) and stereotyping as inferior and or as radically different/alien members of society; and second, discursive violence against the out-group as a weak and voiceless (Spivak 1988) social actor, deprived of social status.

By ‘de-othering’, we mean the process of opposing and resisting homogenising groups and the hierarchisation and exclusion of these. It entails identifying and deconstructing othering processes by dismantling the binary opposition in-group/out-group, rejecting the possibility of elevation of any group at the expense of another one, and abandoning stigmatisation practices. This can be achieved through direct participation of out-groups and/or in-groups, namely in discourse production, particularly through the media.

Mainstream media tend to be “framed upon and built – consciously or unconsciously – to secure the dominant cultural, political and economic frameworks” (Santos et al. 2018, 455). Media’s framing power (i.e. rendering visible or invisible specific facts, creating a particular order of events, opting for specific adjectives or adverbs, and/or priming connotation processes that activate specific imaginaries) is simultaneously thin and powerful: major perception changes might happen by making small changes when presenting an issue or an event (Chong and Druckman 2007, 104). In Portugal, research on the media’s representation of immigrants and minorities or internal others – namely Afro-descendants and Roma people – has appeared since the early 2000s, focusing on: examining the images associated with them in the press (Cádima and Figueiredo 2003); shedding light on a set of negative media representations of the other; focusing on how the thematic salience of minorities in the context of crime tends to “erase the social and political contexts of said phenomena; making the exploitation of several forms of violence (physical and symbolic) the synthesis images of a group in a situation of social ‘illegitimacy’” (Cunha et al. 2002, 419); showing that the media dismissed issues associated to immigration and minority rights; or emphasising the frequent references to nationality/ethnic-racial background media made when news pieces focused on criminality (Cunha et al. 2002; Cádima and Figueiredo 2003) while ignoring racism (ERC 2009, 127). Positive shifts were also registered, that is, since 2005 there has been an increasing presence of immigrants and minorities as victims of social exclusion, growing resort to civil society sources (i.e. immigrant-based) and the inclusion of topics on integration and economic and demographic benefits of migration (Cunha et al. 2004, 2006; Ferin et al. 2008). Still, the general trend goes in line with mainstream European media, whose coverage was often polarised, and prevailed so during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’, positing those on the move as ‘others’ versus ‘them’ (the Europeans) (Marques and Ramos 2020), with othering constructions remaining hegemonic, alongside an idea of Europe as incompatible with xenophobia and far-right movements (Himmel and Baptista 2020).

Case study and methods

Time span	Keywords
March 18 – May 31, 2020	“refugees”
September 1 – October 31, 2020	“Immigrants,” “Afro-descendants,” “Africans,” “Cova da Moura,” “Jamaica,” “Amadora” ²

Table 1. Time span and keywords used.

To discuss the representations of asylum seekers/refugees, immigrants and Afro-descendant people in the Portuguese mediascape³ during the Covid-19 pandemic in the mainstream press,

this article identifies three *corpus* of analysis defined by date and topic and uses a mixed-methods approach. It focuses on three related securitisation moves disseminated by the media and activated and supported by political actors against the backdrop of the pandemic: the securitisation move of asylum seekers/refugees, immigrants and Afro-descendant people. While in terms of outgroup, the comparison of asylum seekers, immigrants and Afro-descendants might be debatable, given that the three groups might fit different political-judicial categories (foreign/immigrant and national) and, for this reason, it might make more sense to compare Afro-descendants with descendants of other origins, both are indeed discriminated against and read as foreign, regardless of their actual legal status, which is why we chose to proceed with this analysis. We are, however, aware of the pitfalls of this choice and do not condone conceptual, political and juridical confusion nor corroborate an already institutionalised association that equates Afro-descendants with immigrants (Queiroz 2018). Also, ‘Afro-descendant’ is the term used in the media, particularly after the Journalists’ Union issued a declaration supporting this editorial choice.

Data was extracted manually through newspapers browsers using keywords and specific time spans, as described in Table 1, and through Google alerts to obtain a broader picture of the Portuguese media coverage. Multimedia contents or articles that, despite being included in the search results, were not related nor used any of the keywords were also excluded from the analysis.

Analysis was undertaken through quantitative content analysis (QCA) to provide a snapshot of trends and critical thematic analysis (CTA) (Lawless and Chen 2019) to grasp the interweaving of power, global hierarchies and media’s discourses concerning refugees, immigrants and Afro-descendants, more often than not read as ‘internal others’. QCA was put forward taking into account six analytical categories, as described in Table 2. CTA was then undertaken to shed light on how text and subtext were articulated, which connotations were suggested, and which imaginaries were activated concerning the (de)securitisation options synthesised in the six analytical categories used for the quantitative content analysis.

Focus	Category		Description of articles
Not focused on Covid-19	Securitising	Refugees	Securitise refugees based on number (e.g. avalanche; hundreds; wave), origin (e.g. north-African, African, Moroccan Syrian; Muslim), status (e.g. illegal, irregular, undocumented)
		Immigrants	Securitise immigrants based on number (e.g. avalanche; hundreds; wave), origin (e.g. north-African, African, Moroccan, Syrian; Muslim), status (e.g. illegal, irregular, undocumented)

		Afro-descendants	Securitise Afro-descendants based on number (e.g. avalanche; hundreds; wave), origin (Cova da Moura, Jamaica, Amadora) and/or stick specific neighbourhoods to insecurity and threat (Cova da Moura, Jamaica, Amadora)	
		Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of	Refugees	Showcase and deconstruct xenophobic discourses on refugees presented by political actors
			Immigrants	Showcase and deconstruct xenophobic discourses on immigrants presented by political actors
	Afro-descendants		Question and deconstruct racist discourses on Afro-descendants presented by political actors or that shed light on structural racism	
	Shedding light on threats faced by	Refugees	Question EU and Portuguese government policies concerning refugees and asylum seekers or that focus on the risks refugees and asylum seekers face when attempting to cross borders (e.g. the Mediterranean)	
		Immigrants	Question EU and Portuguese government policies concerning immigrants or that focus on the risks immigrants face when attempting to cross borders (e.g. the Mediterranean)	
		Afro-descendants	Focus on threats that structural racism poses on Afro-descendants (e.g. law enforcement, judiciary or government policies).	
	Covid-19	Securitising	Refugees	Portray said groups as distinctive agents of virus transmission (e.g. contagion, confinement and containment)
			Immigrants	
Afro-descendants			Portray said groups or specific racialised neighbourhoods (e.g. Amadora, Jamaica, Cova da Moura) as distinctive agents or spaces of Covid-19 transmission (e.g. contagion, confinement and containment)	
Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of		Refugees	Showcase and deconstruct xenophobic discourses on refugees with a focus on Covid-19 by political leaders	
		Immigrants	Showcase and deconstruct xenophobic discourses on immigrants with a focus on Covid-19 presented by political actors	
		Afro-descendants	Question and deconstruct Covid-19	

Shedding light on threats faced by	Refugees	Question EU and Portuguese government policies concerning refugees and asylum seekers or that focus on the risks refugees and asylum seekers face when attempting to cross borders (e.g. the Mediterranean) with a focus on Covid-19
	Immigrants	Question EU and Portuguese government policies concerning immigrants or that focus on the risks immigrants face when attempting to cross borders (e.g. the Mediterranean) with a focus on Covid-19
	Afro-descendants	Focus on threats structural racism pose on Afro-descendants (e.g. law enforcement, judiciary or government policies) with a focus on Covid-19

Table 2. Codebook used in QCA. These analytical categories do not exclude one another. The same article can be included in two or three analytical categories.

Data and analysis

Snapshot of trends

The first question was focused on what the numbers tell us, i.e. which trends can be identified? In general terms, the narratives that most frequently circulated in the Portuguese mediascape concerning mainstream coverage of asylum seekers/refugees were much more in line with a securitising approach towards refugees/asylum seekers either with a Covid-19 focus (40%)⁴ or not (22%), than showcasing threats faced by said groups generally (20%), drawing attention to their increased vulnerability in the context of a pandemic (22%), explaining and deconstructing securitisation of said groups in general terms (5%) or with a particular focus on Covid-19 (2%). Yet, despite the general trend, and although all three newspapers preferred news stories (97%) to opinion editorials (OpEds) (3%) to cover the topic, the editorial choices of each media outlet considered were slightly different concerning the way the agenda and discussions were put forward, and the framing of said groups was produced. While P's coverage privileged messages that shed light on threats faced by refugees/asylum seekers in general (46%), or with a specific focus on their vulnerability amidst the pandemic (43%), the trend was clearly the opposite in CM, which dedicated 22% of their coverage to securitising refugees/asylum seekers, in general terms, and 39% securitising said group with a Covid-19 focus. The trend of DN coverage was similar to the one of CM, even if the latter is a tabloid and the former a broadsheet. In fact, despite having published much lesser news pieces (only 6 articles, in comparison to the 66 of CM and the 28 of P), 50% of the news stories on refugees in DN can be read as securitising this group with an emphasis on the Covid-19 (50%). Although there are articles that showcase solidarity initiatives towards refugees⁵ – which can contribute to de-securitisation – there is no piece dedicated to explaining and deconstructing securitising rhetoric concerning said group. However, news about contagions among refugees at times

denounced their living conditions, showcasing the fact that every now and then hybrid messages are provided in the same news piece.⁶

	Category	P	DN	CM	Total	P (N= 28)	DN (N=6)	CM (N=65)	Total (N=100)
	News Story	27	6	64	97	96%	100%	98%	97%
	OpEds	1	0	2	3	4%	0%	2%	3%
	Total	28	6	66	100				
Not focused on Covid-19	Securitising refugees/ asylum seekers	3	3	15	21	10%	50%	23%	22%
	Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of refugees	0	0	0	0	0	0%	0%	0%
	Shedding light on threats faced by refugees	13	1	8	22	46%	17%	12%	22%
Focused on Covid-19	Securitising refugees/asylum seekers	2	3	35	40	7%	50%	53%	40%
	Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of refugees	0	0	0	0	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Shedding light on threats faced by refugees	12	0	8	20	43%	0%	12%	20%
Total articles		28	6	65	100				

Table 3. The number and respective percentage of articles per newspaper according to the categories presented in Table 1 concerning mainstream media coverage of asylum seekers/refugees (March 18 – May 31, 2020) and news story or OpEd.

Immigrants

Most narratives circulated through news stories (93%), while 7% by means of opEds. The most circulated representations were in line with the securitisation of immigrants (46,7%), even if soon followed by narratives shedding light on threats faced by said communities (39%). Indeed, news stories that debunk immigrant securitisation are slightly higher than those found concerning the analysed refugee coverage (2%).

	Category	P	DN	CM	Total	P (N=13)	DN (N=4)	CM (N=39)	Total (N=56)
	News story	10	4	38	52	77%	100%	97%	93%
	OpEd	3	0	1	4	23%	0%	3%	7%
	Total	13	4	39	56				
Not focused on Covid-19	Securitising immigrants	3	1	21	26	23%	25%	54%	4%
	Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of immigrants	4	0	6	10	31%	0%	15%	2%
	Shedding light on threats faced by immigrants	8	2	12	22	62%	50%	31%	39%
Focused on Covid-19	Securitising immigrants	0	0	0	0	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of immigrants	0	0	0	0	0%	0%	0%	0%
	Shedding light on threats faced by immigrants	3	1	0	4	23%	0.25%	0%	7%
Total articles		13	4	39	56				

Table 4. The number of articles per newspaper and respective percentage according to the categories presented in Table 1 concerning mainstream media coverage of immigrants (September 1 – October 31, 2020) and news story or OpEd.

While this is a general trend, each newspaper held distinct editorial options. CM coverage stood out for privileging the securitisation of immigrants, while P and DN (the latter with much

fewer articles) were more focused on examining threats faced by immigrants (62% of P’s coverage and 50% of DN’s coverage). Covid-19 was much less of a focus (only 7% of the total of the news stories), with 3 articles from P and 1 from DN focusing on threats faced by immigrants, which is a much lower number if we considered the number of news stories on the same topic concerning refugees (20%).

Afro-descendants

The majority of media discourses were put forward through news stories, with the majority of the coverage not focusing on Afro-descendants as particularly vulnerable or as othered, and with almost half (48%) of codified pieces securitising Afro-descendants (1 article from DN and 54 from CM) making oftentimes words like “gunshots,” “homicides,” “gang wars,” “stabbing,” “kidnapping,” and “police intervention” to match specific neighbourhoods, like Jamaica (in Seixal, in the Lisbon metropolitan area – LMA), Cova da Moura (in Amadora, in the LMA), in news titles or texts. Concerning securitisation with a Covid-19 focus, 12% of the coverage was related to “illegal parties,” contributing to understanding these neighbourhoods as distinctive places of contagion. Around 9% of the articles deconstructed and explained securitising processes concerning Afro-descendants (5 from P and 5 from CM), and 6% shed light on threats faced by Afro-descendants in general (4 articles from P, 2 from DN and 1 from CM) and 1% with a Covid-19 focus (1 article from DN).

	Category	P	DN	CM	Total	P (N=17)	DN (N=12)	CM (N=85)	Total (N=114)
	News story	17	12	83	112	100%	100%	98%	98%
	OpEd	0	0	2	2	0%	0%	2%	2%
	Total	17	12	85	114				
Not focused on Covid-19	Securitising Afro-descendants	0	1	54	55	0%	8%	63.52%	48%
	Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of Afro-descendants	5	0	5	10	29%	0%	5.88%	9%
	Shedding light on threats faced by Afro-descendants	4	2	1	7	24%	17%	1.17%	6%

Focused on Covid-19	Securitising Afro-descendants	1	5	8	14	29%	42%	9.41%	12%	
	Explaining and deconstructing securitisation of Afro-descendants	0	0	0	0	0%	0%	0%	0%	
	Shedding light on threats faced by Afro-descendants	0	1	0	1	0%	8%	0%	1%	
Total articles		17	12	85						

Table 5. The number of articles and respective percentage per newspaper according to the categories presented in Table 1 concerning mainstream media coverage of Afro-descendants on September 1 – October 31, 2020 and news story or OpEd.

Text, subtext and (de)securitisation moves

The second question we posed when facing our corpus concerned the imaginaries' news stories and OpEds activated, i.e. how are those representations, narratives and labels discursively produced and validated?

Refugees

The discursive processes of securitisation concerning refugees were twofold. The first relates to the activation of specific imaginaries through connotation and subtext. This was successfully achieved by focusing the news stories on numbers, often provided in a rhythmic mode, activating imaginaries of 'invasion' or 'flood'. Also, the construction of threat has also been produced through cornering refugees to specific contexts of (il)legality. Another pervasive way to analyse news stories, create or validate the perception of refugees as illegal, potentially dangerous or, at least, non-compliant with existing norms and, therefore, in line with a "moral panic" reasoning, was having as centrepieces of the story both refugees and police enforcement or places under military or police authority, without giving context to those specific circumstances nor explaining or deconstructing the pre-existing conditions and structures that make, at times, those two groups interact on the ground (e.g. the construction of the State or the territorial and personal competencies of the State in international and national laws).

Specifically, news media focusing on asylum seekers/refugees who resided in hostels and tested positive for Covid-19 tended to shed light on dislocation initiatives (i.e. the refusal of a few people to get off the buses,⁷ the escape of some of the refugees from the hostels in the meantime),⁸ the health care centres at the military bases they were taken to,⁹ and on the apparent surprise of institutions such as the Mayoral services of Lisbon with the hosting of

asylum seekers in hostels,¹⁰ even though this has been regularly denounced by refugee and migrant associations and by those who research this topic. The object of these news was mainly Covid-19 transmission, which might be understandable in a pandemic. Nonetheless, there was a lack of attention paid to the undignified conditions in which almost 200 asylum seekers were living as kept in 40 rooms. Also, using hostels as housing solutions for asylum seekers and the migration management policies as a whole were rarely examined.

Sources-wise, most articles referred only to governmental and police sources (e.g., SEF – the Portuguese border police – or Europol), making imaginaries of threat to be more easily activated than humanitarian or solidarity ones. For example, in P, “After the tests were carried out, health authorities identified 136 infected, who were transferred to the Ota military base.”¹¹ A similar construction is found in CM, where one article states that “the PSP [police force] is in Lisbon's Central Mosque where the approximately 30 refugees gathered there, infected with Covid-19, were ‘agitated and aggressive’ at the time of receiving lunch this Wednesday.”¹² The news about five refugees/asylum seekers who were at Ota and had protested the confinement conditions being subsequently housed in Loures (city in the LMA), after being accused of “contempt”¹³ and labelled as “rioters,”¹⁴ is revealing of this same construction, signalling the individualisation of responsibility for non-compliance with Covid-19 norms and validating the perception of refugees as potentially risky subjects or, at least, non-compliant with existing norms. The same refugees/asylum seekers became object of media attention a few days later when they were described as having “run away”¹⁵ from the house they were placed in, identified by police forces at the supermarket^{16,17} and subsequently charged with civil disobedience, failing to mention that these people had neither any type of follow up nor access to essential goods, which was why they went to the supermarket in the first place. In these news pieces, asylum seekers/refugees were rarely the subjects or the sources and, thus, their perspectives, reactions and initiatives went mostly unheard and unnoticed. Associations such as *Fórum Refúgio* and *SOS Racismo*, which were following up the situation of asylum seekers/refugees kept at Ota and Santa Margarida military bases and at Loures, identifying problems such as food shortages and unattended or aggravated mental health conditions,¹⁸ were seldom sources in the news pieces about this issue, with the exception of P. Insufficient media attention was also paid to the pandemic management mechanisms that directly affect these populations and national and European migration management policy as a whole. Nevertheless, newspapers such as P, and to less extent DN, helped to identify the issues and gaps of pandemic containment mechanisms based on confinement, teleworking and online teaching for populations such as refugees/asylum seekers, migrants and Afro-descendants. They published open letters by antiracist and antixenophobic collectives demanding additional protection for immigrants (i.e. the open letter about the immigrant detention centres,¹⁹ pointing out the risks that these people are exposed to), asylum seekers,²⁰ and racialised people (i.e.

the open letter “The antiracist struggle cannot quarantine”²¹ and the coverage of the letter of anti-Roma prejudice organisations and individuals against Chega’s proposal²² for a specific confinement plan for Roma people).

Creating a hierarchical bordering logic between the national community (fundamentally good and therefore made to be perceived as a security referent) and foreign communities (implicitly portrayed as dangerous and unreliable) has also been noted. This trend can be illustrated through CM and P’s examples. While the former uses the supposed contrast between the danger of infected migrants with the place where they were taken: “the building is mostly made up of private dwellings where families live,” the latter states that refugees will be transferred to the facilities where “doctors who do not want to infect their families are” staying.²³ This trend was also noticeable in some of the news articles on the granting of temporary regularisation to immigrants and asylum seekers by the Portuguese government, which was extended to March 31, 2021 and allowed people with temporary permits to access social benefits and public services such as the national healthcare system and education. This news was often reported acritically, based on wire accounts,²⁴ or without providing context, echoing the unprecedented role of the Portuguese government in the temporary regularisation of immigrant and asylum seekers and failing to interrogate the operationalisation of said decision. It thus reinforced the trope of the national community as a model security provider and pandemic manager, which could be interpreted as a declination of the representation of Portugal as a model refugee and immigrant integrator during the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ (Torkington and Ribeiro 2019). Exceptions included P’s piece,²⁵ which, despite pointing out the merits of said political decision in attempting to ensure the protection of these groups from heightened social vulnerability amid the pandemic, also identified its limitations, referring that most public services were unaware of said policy and that operationalisation remained deficient.

While securitising refugees was recurrently made through subtext and connotation processes, the identification of the threats refugees face was often shared in explicit ways, being put forward by mentioning the dangers refugees and asylum seekers faced on their way to Europe, the precarious living conditions they were most times offered, and the failures of policies at national and European level. Open critique or demands for policy change was nonetheless absent from analysed news stories.

Immigrants

The securitisation of immigrants was much stronger and recurrent than the one on refugees, despite the terms – although legally pointing to distinct groups – were often used interchangeably. Securitisation of immigrants was usually produced employing two main discursive constructions. The first one is the identification of someone who committed a crime

or was violent as an “immigrant.” This mainly happened on CM, but also on DN. Three examples illustrate this construction. In two CM articles, one can find the following titles: “migrant strangles sister who wanted him away from home in Sesimbra,”²⁶ and “immigrant group engages in ruckus after being run over in Peniche”²⁷ when the reference to immigration is not at all relevant for the news story told. The second one is creating a continuum, from the perspective of the host society, between the threats that immigrants face and the threats immigrants themselves embody concerning the host society. News stories on the alleged novel migration route that originated from northern Africa and aimed at Algarve (the southern region of Portugal) or human trafficking are clear examples of the approach mainly used in CM and DN. In the latter, one article is titled “SEF discovers Moroccan route. GNR and Navy strengthen surveillance.”²⁸ Thus, the focus of the narrative is made by the illegality of the route, the surveillance of the police forces and the dismissing structural causes of said phenomena. As such, the illegality of trafficking sticks to the immigrants themselves. It is essential to highlight that securitisation does not occur in a vacuum, nor it happens in a linear way with a clear beginning and end, but rather informs and embodies security dominos making different security imaginaries converge, rendering specific securitisation processes particularly successful. The news of “disembarkments” of Moroccan immigrants in the Algarve’s coast – signalling that “more than two dozen immigrants arrived,”²⁹ later described as “illegal Moroccans,”³⁰ as well as those on their installation in prisons and military barracks, and the subsequent flight and attempted capture of 17 of the 28 detained immigrants, after 3 of them had tested positive for Covid-19, condensed the tropes of migration-as-economic-and-security-threat, patent in the ‘manhunt’-like narrative, and were joined by the sanitary threat trope. In fact, except for a piece questioning the installation of immigrants in prisons and barracks,³¹ in both DN and CM ‘manhunt’ and ‘contamination’ narratives prevailed, fixing immigrants to illegality, criminality and sanitary threat imaginaries through describing at length their “flight” from the barracks.³²³³ They also followed closely the details of the police operation set up to find the missing migrants, labelled as “fugitives” and “elements”³⁴ in CM and “elements”³⁵ and “outlaws” in DN,³⁶ in recognisable ‘police speak’, furthering the associations between immigrants and illegality. It is also worth mentioning that the same photograph accompanied all pieces about immigrants entering Portugal via Algarve in DN, showing a boat with masked men and some police officers on the shore, reinforcing said connotations. This coverage was also followed by dramatised media reporting elsewhere. The expression “Portugal under pressure,” used in an opinion segment in the 24/7 channel SICN – by focusing on ‘moral panic’ and stereotypes, did not take into account or somewhat obscured the effective conditions of installation of these people and that did not match their profile of administrative detainees, rather a criminal one. It also did not consider the stories of these people, rendering

them silent and depicting them as undifferentiated masses; nor the limits of the country's reception policies aimed at immigrants.

Securitisation can also be put forward through hybrid processes that entail security and vulnerability concerning the same agents. One example comes from a news story on mental health published by CM. While drawing attention to the vulnerability of children of immigrants, the piece does not explore how that specific threat can be circumvented and frames this vulnerability in a way that it might be perceived as a threat to the Portuguese society: “we have indications that the migratory process itself is responsible for several traumas, with the integration process emerging as an aggravating factor for these traumas.”³⁷ While this creation of ‘moral panic’ through showcasing vulnerabilities is a form of securitisation, this same hybridity can be identified in a much more straightforward way when different sources with opposite views are quoted or used as source. An example can be found in the articles covering the changes in the nationality law. The positions of MPs in favour of the law change pointed the positive factors that both host society and immigrants benefit from when living together, while MPs with the opposite position used expressions such as “easing of a European passport” and that Portugal should “never be an occasion maternity hospital” that activated imaginaries of insecurity.³⁸

Conversely to what happened with the coverage of refugees, mainstream media's reporting of immigrants explained and deconstructed the securitisation of immigrants, particularly through acknowledging their humanity and the benefits they bring to host societies. These constructions have been quite explicit and detailed. P also shed light on gender and class issues when reporting on immigrants' vulnerability.^{39,40} A specific focus on Covid-19 was, nevertheless, residual, particularly if compared to the coverage of refugees, and when having that agenda, news stories showcased immigrants' vulnerability rather than framing them as distinct agents of contagion.

Afro-descendants

The securitisation of Afro-descendants was highly subtle and mostly done through sticking to ‘objective’ reporting, i.e. a descriptive approach focused on events, dismissing processes and framing events in security terms; thus othering racialised neighbourhoods and rendering them to be perceived as a threat.

Indeed, despite not being statistically predominant in our sample, we identified one instance of securitisation of Afro-descendants during the time frame considered that coincided with one of the approaching Covid-19 peaks in Portugal. It can be traced to the media's role in the spectacularisation of police operations in the neighbourhood of Cova da Moura in October 2020. That was produced by highlighting in titles or news leads, often in a logic of contrast, police action and/or the alleged illegality that groups in those neighbourhoods were committing,

dramatising the narrative and securitising said groups. These editorial options were in line with what happened before, that is, on May 30, 2020, when media, especially TV, followed the disproportionate police intervention, labelled sanitary, in the Jamaica neighbourhood, in the event of 16 cases of Covid-19 infection. At that point, television live streams⁴¹ and press⁴² followed 50 heavily armed police officers from the PSP special force in their operation to seal and close all eight coffee shops in the neighbourhood, when nothing at the time prohibited them from remaining open.

In fact, while some of the media coverage of an illegal party in the neighbourhood of Cova da Moura and the police operation set up to interrupt it in October 2020 provided contradictory accounts of the number of participants – some referring to “hundreds of youths”⁴³ and others to “large dozens of youths,” the latter in line with PSP spokesman for the intervention⁴⁴ mostly coincided in their description of the reaction of said participants to police intervention, mentioning that police forces were “met with gunfire.”⁴⁵ As Cardoso (2020) stated in an article suggestively titled “Cova da Moura in the *Arrastão* of a press that mixes facts with fiction”⁴⁶: “While the police only confirmed being targeted with stones and bottles⁴⁷ – which is unwarranted but still not equivalent to being under fire – media preferred to echo speculation, aligning in the reinforcement of a biased narrative on Cova da Moura.”

At the same time, different articles in all three newspapers used the term “citizens” to refer to people living in neighbourhoods predominantly inhabited by Afro-descendants and also provided information concerning anti-racism proposals in parliaments or civil society initiatives to combat racism. There were also other examples of balanced journalism, which identified their vulnerability to virus exposition and transmission and questioned the pandemic management proposals that were based on the idea that these people are a problem and that the solution is to contain them (i.e. DN coverage of Roma communities and their inability to follow home confinement measures⁴⁸ and one news article on P that shed light on the daily difficulties and violence people in these neighbourhoods face).⁴⁹

Conclusion

Four main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis undertaken. The first is the confirmation that othering media representations in Portugal, a semi-peripheral country, tend to be informed by colonial imaginaries which, in turn, produce, in a variable geometry logic informed by race, class, gender and nation, sub hierarchies in the same thread, (re)producing securitising and othering logics. The different weighting of the various categories and hierarchies means that within the media securitisation processes, each group can be more or less securitised, more or less frequently, and more explicitly or implicitly. In this case, immigrants were the group that was most explicitly and frequently constructed as a threat as refugees/ asylum seekers can be at times perceived as victims in need of assistance, and Afro-descendants hold Portuguese

citizenship. Regardless of intensity, visibility or frequency, all three groups were securitised in the three newspapers via similar securitisation and othering processes (activation of colonial and security imaginaries through connotation and subtext and cornering – sometimes overlapping – said groups into illegality) and all based upon and validated by the global hierarchies Grosfoguel identified (2011). Often othering processes, which tend to be long term, feed into securitisation processes, as ‘meaning maps’, with usually othered groups as targets of securitisation. This links to the second conclusion: Covid-19 was a conjunctural catalyst of ongoing structural hierarchies and subsequent securitisation processes. As the fight against Covid-19 promoted the borderisation of bodies, communities and countries, security grammars on health were made to overlap with security grammars on othering, where the ‘imagined community’ of the nation and of whiteness (still) pervades Portuguese society.

The third one is the acknowledgement of crosscutting hybridity concerning editorial choices and newspapers coverage. Many pieces may contribute to the securitisation of immigrants/asylum seekers/refugees/Afro-descendants, while at the same time providing information that contributes either to the de-securitisation of said groups or to inform about the specific vulnerabilities or threats they face. P, which has a lower record of pieces that contribute to securitisation and a higher number of pieces deconstructing securitisation of all groups and shedding light on specific Covid-19 challenges for these populations, and giving space, in its OpEds, to civil society groups and academia, also securitises said groups in some of its news articles. CM, the most sensationalist one, holds articles that contribute to the securitisation of these groups in Portuguese society and implicitly or explicitly provide information that contributes to their de-securitisation.

Finally, conceptions of what journalism is and how it should be are deeply ideological. When framed in a particular way, the same story leaves all other possible ways of telling it aside and unknown. The definition of what stories matter, which frame is best to tell them, which words and labels are to be chosen and which implications will derive from that particular editorial option depends on the journalist’s own “enunciation locus” (Mignolo 2000) and will undoubtedly have an (ideological) impact in society. Within a society where hierarchical and colonial imaginaries are pervasive, the journalistic option for shedding light on events rather than processes, numbers rather than stories, and institutional sources rather than multiple voices is an ideological choice that tends to validate existing hierarchies.

Notes

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² Cova da Moura and Jamaica are two peripheral neighbourhoods in the Lisbon metropolitan area (LMA), which are highly racialised. Amadora is a city within the LMA that is home to some heavily racialised neighbourhoods.

³ Some media outlets stood out in facilitating access to information on the Covid-19 pandemic by eliminating paywall on all digital content related to the pandemic (P during the first wave and since November 20, 2020 onwards, and *Observador* since March 11, 2020), allowing their content to become available to a higher number of readers; and by communicating health risks.

⁴ Percentages in the text and tables are rounded to the nearest unit for the sake of fluidity.

⁵ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/24/culturaipilon/noticia/bordalo-ii-leilao-peca-beneficio-ong-trabalham-campos-refugiados-1913564>. Accessed September 5, 2021.

⁶ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/testados-98-migrantes-ao-coronavirus-em-tres-pensoes-de-lisboa>. Accessed September 5, 2021.

⁷ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/05/21/sociedade/noticia/ultimos-56-requerentes-asilo-deixaram-base-aerea-ota-1917499>. Accessed September 5, 2021.

⁸ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/refugiados-de-hostel-com-coronavirus-em-fuga-ocultam-paradeiro>. Accessed September 5, 2021.

⁹ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/20/politica/noticia/base-ota-recebe-130-refugiados-morais-soares-1913005>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹⁰ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/presidente-da-junta-de-arroios-exige-que-asa-fiscalize-hostel-evacuado-12092353.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹¹ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/26/local/noticia/cerca-200-migrantes-hostels-lisboa-testados-fimde semana-1913977>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹² See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/alerta-cm--30-refugiados-infetados-com-coronavirus-causam-desacatos-na-mesquita-de-lisboa-pp-obrigada-a-intervir>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹³ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/22/local/noticia/covid19-migrante-ferido-desacato-base-ota-1913462>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹⁴ See https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/infetados-com-coronavirus-desordeiros-saem-da-base-aerea-da-ota-para-loures?ref=Mais%20Sobre_BlocoMaisSobre. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹⁵ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/cinco-refugiados-infetados-com-covid-19-que-foram-transferidos-da-base-da-ota-fogem-e-vao-as-compras>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹⁶ See <https://www.cm-tv.pt/atualidade/detalhe/refugiado-infetado-com-covid-19-volta-a-supermercado-em-loures-com-fato-de-protecao>; <https://www.dn.pt/pais/loures-refugiado-infetado-foi-as-compras-porque-tinha-fome-12206557.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹⁷ This news was replicated in Portuguese far-right social media, namely by Chega. See <https://www.facebook.com/PartidoChegaOficial/posts/3081646178568570>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

¹⁸ Online debate ‘Covid-19, migrants and right to housing’ (April 27, 2020).

¹⁹ See <https://expresso.pt/opiniao/2020-04-09-Carta-aberta.-Covid-19-e-os-Centros-de-Detencao-em-Portugal-41-associacoes-e-mais-de-100-cidadaos-pedem-libertacao-dos-migrantes>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

²⁰ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/05/31/opiniao/noticia/covid19-descortinar-praticas-sistema-asilo-portugues-1918690>. Accessed August 8, 2020.

²¹ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/13/sociedade/opiniao/covid19-luta-antirracista-nao-faz-quarentena-1912021>. Accessed August 8, 2020.

²² See <https://www.dnoticias.pt/pais/figuras-publicas-e-associacoes-repudiam-afirmacoes-de-andre-ventura-sobre-ciganos-LD6225915>. Accessed September 8, 2021.

²³ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/04/20/politica/noticia/base-ota-recebe-130-refugiados-morais-soares-1913005>. Accessed September 8, 2021.

²⁴ See <https://www.dnoticias.pt/2020/3/30/62159-conselho-da-europa-sauda-portugal-por-regularizar-imigrantes>; <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/governo-esta-a-contabilizar-imigrantes-e-a-informa-los-sobre-apoios-durante-pandemia-de-coronavirus>. Accessed August 8, 2020.

²⁵ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/03/28/sociedade/noticia/governo-regulariza-imigrantes-pedidos-pendentes-sef-1909791>. Accessed September 8, 2021.

²⁶ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/imigrante-estrangula-irma-que-o-queria-fora-de-casa-em-sesimbra>. Accessed July 8, 2021.

²⁷ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/grupo-de-imigrantes-envolve-se-em-zaragata-apos-atropelamento-em-peniche>. Accessed July 8, 2021.

²⁸ See <https://www.dn.pt/edicao-do-dia/06-out-2020/sef-descobre-rota-de-marroquinos-gnr-e-marinha-reforcam-vigilancia-12873031.html>. Accessed August 3, 2021.

²⁹ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/mais-20-migrantes-desembarcam-no-algarve--12725156.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

³⁰ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/mai-justifica-permanencia-de-marroquinos-ilegais-com-falta-de-voos-regulares--12729994.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

³¹ See <https://www.dn.pt/edicao-do-dia/25-set-2020/capacidade-esgotada-no-sef-governo-poe-migrantes-em-cadeias-e-quarteis-12752841.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

- ³² See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/autoridades-procuram-migrantes-que-fugiram-do-quartel-de-tavira-12862359.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ³³ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/alerta-cm--autoridades-procuram-migrantes-que-fugiram-de-quartel-em-tavira>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ³⁴ See https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/ministerio-da-administracao-interna-pede-abertura-de-inquerito-a-fuga-dos-17-migrantes-de-quartel-em-tavira?ref=DET_RelacionadasInTex. Accessed August 5, 2021.
- ³⁵ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/prosseguem-buscas-para-capturar-8-dos-17-migrantes-que-fugiram-de-tavira-12869992.html>; <https://www.dn.pt/pais/continua-em-fuga-o-ultimo-homem-por-capturar-dos-migrantes-que-fugiram-de-tavira-12876829.html>. Accessed August 1, 2021.
- ³⁶ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/mai-abre-inquerito-para-investigar-fuga-de-migrantes-marroquinos-de-tavira-12866840.html>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ³⁷ See <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/criancas-imigrantes-em-portugal-tem-risco-acrescido-de-problemas-de-saude-mental-revela-estudo>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ³⁸ See https://www.cmjornal.pt/politica/detalhe/20201002-1535-parlamento-ultrapassa-veto-da-lei-da-nacionalidade?ref=Pesquisa_Destaques. Accessed August 1, 2021.
- ³⁹ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/09/02/p3/noticia/lisboa-vai-casa-pessoas-trans-imigrantes-1929844>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ⁴⁰ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/09/13/sociedade/noticia/covid19-imigrantes-empregos-precarios-atingidos-crise-abusos-1931426>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ⁴¹ Similarly, to the media coverage of asylum seekers/refugees and Covid-19 positive testing in hostels in Lisbon, tv coverage of this police intervention was significant, mainly in the form of live streams by the generalist channels and also 24/7 news channels (SICN and CMTV). Although it falls out of this article's scope, it is noteworthy that these securitisation moves have the potential for greater effectiveness due to their reach.
- ⁴² See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/operacao-policial-em-curso-para-fechar-cafes-no-bairro-da-jamaica-12258905.html>; <https://www.publico.pt/2020/05/30/sociedade/noticia/covid19-encerrados-oito-estabelecimentos-bairro-jamaica-seixal-1918808>; <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/autoridades-preparam-encerramento-dos-cafes-no-bairro-da-jamaica-devido-ao-coronavirus>; <https://www.cmjornal.pt/sociedade/detalhe/policia-encerra-estabelecimentos-comerciais-em-operacao-musculada-no-bairro-da-jamaica-no-seixal>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ⁴³ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/policia-recebida-a-tiro-na-cova-da-moura-12936044.html>; <https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/alerta-cm--psp-recebida-com-tiros-e-pedras-ao-tentar-travar-festa-ilegal-com-centenas-de-pessoas-na-cova-da-moura>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ⁴⁴ See <https://rr.sapo.pt/2020/10/19/pais/psp-recebida-a-tiro-em-festa-com-dezenas-pessoas-na-cova-da-moura/noticia/211457/>. Accessed August 15, 2021.
- ⁴⁵ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/policia-recebida-a-tiro-na-cova-da-moura-12936044.html>; <https://www.cmjornal.pt/portugal/detalhe/alerta-cm--psp-recebida-com-tiros-e-pedras-ao-tentar-travar-festa-ilegal-com-centenas-de-pessoas-na-cova-da-moura>; <https://www.publico.pt/2020/10/19/sociedade/noticia/psp-recebida-tiros-festa-100-pessoas-cova-moura-1935775>; <https://rr.sapo.pt/2020/10/19/pais/psp-recebida-a-tiro-em-festa-com-dezenas-pessoas-na-cova-da-moura/noticia/211457/>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ⁴⁶ This alludes to the coverage of a pseudo-*arrastão* (plundering) on the national holiday of June 10, 2005, when dozens of Afro-descendant youths who were at the beach in Carcavelos, in the LMA, were reported as being involved in a series of robberies and assaults, which was proven false. This coverage motivated a complaint of the National Commission for Equality and Against Racial Discrimination at the High Authority for Social Communication and the documentary 'Era uma Vez um Arrastão'. See <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xe4px>. Accessed August 8, 2021.
- ⁴⁷ This is mentioned in <https://tvi24.iol.pt/sociedade/tiros/psp-recebida-a-tiro-apos-interromper-festa-com-mais-de-200-pessoas-na-cova-da-moura> and https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/amadora-psp-foi-recebida-com-violencia-no-bairro-da-cova-da-moura_v1268393, directly quoting PSP inspector Paulo Flor. Accessed August 5, 2021.
- ⁴⁸ See <https://www.dn.pt/pais/ciganos-ensino-a-distancia-medidas-de-higiene-como-se-ate-a-comida-falta-12091140.html>. Accessed August 15, 2021.
- ⁴⁹ See <https://www.publico.pt/2020/09/17/culturaipilon/noticia/basil-cunha-filmou-carta-amor-reboleira-1931634>. Accessed August 8, 2021.

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