

(In)Visible (a)sexuality? Media discourses and representations on asexuality in Portugal

(As)sexualidade (in)visível? Discursos e representações mediáticas sobre a assexualidade em Portugal



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Abstract This article uses multimodal analysis to explore the representation of asexuality in Portuguese mainstream media from 2011–2017. After an overview of how the concept of asexuality has been discussed in scientific literature, I briefly address how its relationship with the media has been an object of study internationally and how the concept captured media attention in Portugal. I then proceed to a multimodal analysis of a collection of media stories on asexuality in Portuguese print (newspaper and magazines) and broadcast (radio, television and internet) mainstream media, identifying major themes and then considering the critical trends and absences. The major tendency points to a positive portrayal of asexuality as part of the human experience and puts asexually identified people centre stage, owning the narratives about themselves.

Resumo Este artigo usa uma análise multimodal para explorar a representação da assexualidade nos *media* dominantes portugueses entre 2011–2017. Após uma apresentação de como o conceito de assexualidade tem vindo a ser discutido na literatura científica, abordo de uma forma breve como a sua relação com os *media* tem sido objeto de estudo a nível internacional e como o conceito captou atenção mediática em Portugal.

A principal tendência aponta para um retrato positivo da assexualidade como parte da experiência humana e coloca as pessoas assexuais no centro do palco, tomando controlo da narrativa sobre si mesmas.

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Introduction

Asexuality is predominantly accepted as describing people who do not experience sexual attraction and as a sexual orientation, thus differing from celibacy and desire disorders (AVEN, 2021). The concept has proven to be extensively polysemic, as becomes evident in scientific publications that focus on the topic. Literature has referred to asexuality in different ways, namely as a life-long lack of sexual attraction towards other people and claiming the usefulness of defining it as a sexual orientation typified by absence of sexual attraction towards others (Bogaert, 2006; 2008; Prause and Graham, 2007; Brotto and Yule, 2011) or challenging it by affirming that individuals may move into and out of the category (Hinderliter, 2009). It has also been put forward that asexuality may be best understood as a meta-construct, equivalent to sexuality, including constructs of attractions, desires, fantasies, behaviours, and self-identity even though these may not be related in the same way for all people (Chasin, 2011).

To accommodate the concept's complexity, other authors have offered more political definition of asexuality.

Kim (2011) considers it as a disidentification with sexuality, emphasizing that both are produced in a specific historical and cultural context. Cerankowski and Milks (2010) also discuss a "feminist mode of asexuality" and, to further explain that concept, draw attention to those who are sexually inactive (but not intrinsically asexual) "whether short-term or long term, not through a religious or spiritual vow of celibacy but through feminist agency" (Cerankowski and Milks, 2010: 659). Przybylo (2011b) creates a rupture with most definitions of asexuality advocating for a rendition of asexuality centred on the capacity of deconstructing and rearranging common ideas of sexuality and relational networks. Therefore, the author proposes that asexuality should be thought of what it does, rather than by what it does not or is not. In Portugal, the scholarly on asexuality is close to non-existent, resulting in very few academic studies on the topic (Lemos, 2011; Campos, 2017; Alcaire, 2015; 2019; 2020; 2021).

I side with definitions of asexuality beyond "lack of" and with the claim that it can be inherently radical, contains the potential for resisting, rethinking and disturbing norms and emphasize the great diversity within the people that identify as

asexual and the importance of allowing the definition of asexuality to remain fluid and more open (Alcaire, 2020). I defend the possibility of other approaches to asexuality that can disrupt and destabilize sexusociety (Przybylo, 2011a). Approaches that define asexuality not as lack of sexual attraction but as “alternative plural enactments” (Przybylo, 2011a: 457).

In a period of less than two decades (since the nought years), asexuality — as an identity, a sexual orientation and a movement — has gained visibility particularly in North America and Europe. This happened because those who identify as asexuals have claimed the status of sexual orientation and of identity for their absence of attraction. Furthermore, it has been due to the proliferation of virtual communities and the work of asexual activists (on the streets, online and in the media) that this political claim has gained momentum.

In Portugal, asexuality enjoyed increased visibility over the last ten years in newspapers, magazines, internet outlets and television talk shows. The collection of media stories that address asexuality is a major part of the repository of publicly accessible information on asexuality on the subject and influence the representations the public might have about the phenomenon itself. This, media attention has generated an internal debate in the Portuguese asexual community more generally, in LGBTQI+ groups and events as well as academically on how asexual

people are interpreted and represented, but also on social representations of sexual diversity in general. The use of the word community in this article, when referring to the asexual Portuguese context, should be taken as meaning a discourse community (Swales, 1990) and a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). In other words, a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic and who come together to fulfil both individual and group goals. In the same way as in other countries, the proximity between the asexual community and the LGBTQI+ movement in Portugal results from the fact that they operate the same type of discourses, namely those that distance themselves from mental illness, that allow for reflections on identity and belonging and mobilize for collective action.

While asexuality in the media has already been an object of study, the academic literature has focused mainly on television and film representation, particularly in fiction and pop culture: the spectacularisation and fetishisation of the asexual bodies (Cerankowski, 2014), the association of asexual characters to crime (Sinwell, 2014), the equation of asexuality to disability (Barounis, 2014), or the need for the asexual characters to be either sick, dead or lying to be considered real (Marks, 2017) and targets explicitly North American productions.

As such, there is a gap in the asexuality literature regarding longitudinal mass

media news coverage. My research contributes to filling in this gap, in an innovative and timely manner, by analysing the representation of asexuality in the media in Portugal, a southern European, post dictatorial an EU focused country.

In this article, I consider the representation of asexuality in Portuguese print (newspaper and magazines) and broadcast (radio, television and internet) mainstream media. The main objective is to examine if asexuality and related subjects were able to be included in the media agenda, while also defining the terms of the discussion of Portuguese media in the period from June 2001 to February 2017. I examined representations of asexuality present in the Portuguese public media and discussed wider public effects that go beyond the individual and/or collective accounts of this identity. Specifically, I investigate what discourses have been used to address asexuality and asexual people and how the subject has been presented to readers/viewers, throughout the aforementioned timeframe. Mapping the Portuguese media landscape from 2001 to 2017 allowed the signalling of the presence of asexuality and its related subjects and the persistence of discourses about it. Consequently, I identified patterns of representation of asexuality that have emerged from the analysis of these news media pieces that I present later in the article. The repeated ideas that appear in the texts and audio-visual contents reveal a great deal of

the Portuguese media approach to the subject, its possible impacts and, I argue, the dissemination of a type of knowledge about the topic that is often built by the opposition and/or similarity to the norm, as I will explain in the discussion.

Methodology and data collection

To examine the narratives about asexuality that circulated in the Portuguese media, I scrutinized publications and broadcasts from June 2001 to October 2017. The year 2001 was chosen as a point of departure for it is when The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), the largest asexual online community (including a community forum with over 100,000 members), was founded by North American asexual activist David Jay. AVEN was formed as an informational resource for people that identified as asexual or people that were questioning their sexual identity, as well as scholars interested in research on asexualities and established a milestone in the process of gaining recognition and visibility for the asexual community. Since its emergence, AVEN has served as a reference point for almost all academic research on asexuality internationally. AVEN was created at a time when there was little information on asexuality. Thus, it created a very important territory for debate and evolved into a space not only of sharing experiences, but also for knowledge production about asexuality (Alcaire, 2019). Its activity

was pivotal to the depathologisation of asexuality, and its removal from the fifth edition of the *Diagnosical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a desire disorder (Alcaire, 2015), contributing to the public acceptance of the growing asexual community. AVEN's centrality to the asexual community around the world is so strong that scholars have frequently depended on the site, not only as a resource for information on asexuality but also as a gatekeeper between scholars and asexuals. So much so, that an AVEN team drew up a list of rules for using AVEN for research purposes followed by an "Open Letter to Researchers", offering a number of substantive recommendations for scholars who want to contact registered site members. These documents take positions on several methodological issues and on the process of recruiting and engaging with participants, such as consent, privacy issues, interviewing minors or how to properly quote information from (fixed content or forums) of the site.

The temporal arch of the research ends in October 2017, coinciding with the publication of a very symbolic news piece that integrated the first testimony by a cisgender Portuguese male asexual, not under a pseudonym.

In this approximate 16-year time span, I was interested in registering and analysing the occurrence of the topic, not the frequency it appeared in this array of printed, audio-visual and digital data. I examined what was reported and how

by journalists in different media outlets; tried to understand what the context of production was (if it was a translation of an existing article or an original piece, if it appeared following another coverage or event related to asexuality), for example, and if it had a potential impact in terms of promoting social change.

I started this survey in early 2014 by doing an exploratory retrospective examination of media articles on the subject, using internet and media databases. This first assessment made clear that few articles and no broadcasts included the words asexual or asexuality. Since asexuality is a spectrum, an umbrella term that encompasses a range of identities, is often mistaken for other conditions and phenomena and is a recent concept that has yet to establish itself, it was imperative to be aware of other terms and descriptions to fully grasp the representations on asexuality in the Portuguese media. I expanded the research to encompass other words or expressions: the absence of sex, lack of attraction, lack of desire, frigidity, abstinence, celibacy, virginity, and vocabulary on the lexicon of asexuality, such as aromantic (not romantically attracted to or desiring of romantic relationships at all), demisexual (someone who does not experience sexual attraction to another person unless or until they have formed an emotional connection) or grey-a (do not usually experience sexual attraction, but

do experience it sometimes). Another term I searched for was *assexuado/a*. In Portuguese, the correct term is *asexual* but often it is mistaken for the term *assexuado/assexuada*. In the Portuguese language, *assexuado* means one who reproduces without sex or sexual organs; one that reproduces without the union of differentiated cells of the two sexes; one that he has no sex life. The concept of asexual does not confer legal rights to asexual people, but it does so in symbolic terms. It aligns asexuality to other known and accepted orientations such as bisexuality, pansexuality, homosexuality and heterosexuality. Therefore, the erroneous use of the term *assexuado* to mean asexual is noteworthy.

The result of the data collection was a selection of 14 news stories (nine in print media, two television broadcasts, one radio broadcast and two internet articles), accomplished from four main sources: 1) The internet, namely the individual online archives of the main Portuguese newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations available on their websites; 2) A public relations and marketing service that monitors and analyses media; 3) Lisbon Newspaper Library to confirm dates, check for the placing and page occupation of printed articles and to see if the cover of that edition had any reference to them; 4) Media produced following asexual activism related activities.

From the global results, I removed articles that were issued in LGBTQI+ or

Sexology related publications or websites. In this manner, I could screen news related content disseminated solely through mainstream Portuguese mass media.

The pieces that were identified as pertinent for scrutiny were scanned or downloaded and archived by date. Electing a chronological principle as the main lens proved to be the most pertinent for the enquiry at hand, namely in understanding if there were any (social, political or cultural) changes throughout the defined period, towards the way asexuality and related subjects were interpreted and represented. All the articles were read/listened to/viewed methodically numerous times. The radio and television broadcasts were fully transcribed to facilitate my analysis and to detect differences and changes over time, namely in terms of the language used, the main actors involved and the types of images broadcast. Codification was made concerning the subjects addressed in each one of them, the way these subjects were structured and developed throughout, what were the keywords, whose authorship (hence, authority over what was written or said), main participants, which media outlet was responsible for its transmission, which section it was assigned to (health, society, lifestyle, sexuality, LGBT issues, behaviour...) and which was the context of the publication. Also, what title and subtitle were chosen for the article — what were the words selected to define

the story and capture the audience's attention. For printed materials, I also paid attention to page occupation (brief mention, part of the page, full-page). Likewise, I was interested in knowing whether there was any photograph or infographic in the article, and if so, what image was chosen and what did it show. Consequently, in my database, each of the press articles includes information on the following categories: media outlet, date (day, month, year), title (pre-title and subtitle, when present), section, pictures/graphics, author, placement on the page, highlight on cover or timeslot of broadcast and existence of online version, and — when possible — the reason for publishing. I also included two other categories: guests/sources cited; and their presentation by the media. The analytical corpus selected for this research is composed of opinion columns, newspapers, magazine and internet articles, and television segments of morning shows and radio show specials.

Considering the number of items in my database and the number of media outlets that were responsible for their publication, it became clear that to comprehend the representations of asexuality in the Portuguese media I could not compare like to like and it became more relevant to examine all the pieces found and critically analyse their content.

In this analysis, I will draw from several studies. Although insufficient, Lasswell's model of communication

(1948) is a valuable contribution to identifying the key elements of the Portuguese media representations of asexuality. Lasswell produced a model that can be summed up by the question — “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?” — directed towards a wider understanding of the media, breaking up the communication process into its essential components and formulating an interpretation of the relationships between them. Lasswell's approach suggests that each of the components he identifies have equally important implications for the outcome of the communication process. For that reason, I analysed not only the content of the different news pieces but also the motivations of those who created and distributed them and the limitations of the medium that did it. The Lasswell model applies to all manners and forms of communication and all types of medium.

As previously stated, this model falls short for this (and other) analysis for communication is not a one-way linear process in which the sender has all the power over the message and the receiver is a passive recipient. Recipients do not just receive messages. They might also engage actively with the content, drawing on their existing identity and surroundings to produce their interpretations and reactions to what the senders present them with. In that sense, the construction of meaning must be seen as a joint project between senders and receivers. Recipients

also can influence the messages sent to them by their delivery of different types of feedback to senders (Fiske, 1990). Therefore, mass media are sensitive to audience responses.

The methodology and type of analysis that I chose to carry out draws from the aforesaid asexuality studies texts (Cerankowski, 2014; Sinwell, 2014; Barounis, 2014; Marks, 2017) and has too been informed by *Policing the Crisis* by Hall et al. (1978). This media studies classic centres on the moral panic around mugging in 1970s English cities. The authors considered press coverage of a 1973 court case in Birmingham (United Kingdom) to compare how the story was framed: examining the elements in the articles that were chosen as key news angles — as expressed in the headlines —, perceiving who was considered a primary definer of events, chosen to frame the case in context, exploring how the story was structured and focused around particular concerns, what explanations were offered in editorials and how language and typifying labels were used in feature material. Hall et al. suggest that a crucial way in which the media engage in ideological discourse favourable to the dominant forces in society is by privileging the voices of figures such as politicians, employers, the police and so-called experts who become primary definers of events, and whose “primary definitions set the limit for all subsequent discussion by framing what the problem is” (Hall et al.,

1978: 59). For the authors, the hierarchy of power in society is reproduced in the media as a structure of access “systemically skewed concerning certain social categories” (Hall, 1986: 9). Mainstream media news coverage privileged the interpretations of the powerful because “the hierarchy of power perceived by journalists reflected the structures of power in society” (Manning, 2001: 138).

Therefore, it is impossible to study media in isolation, as if it were a detachable part of wider social processes. The connections between media and society work in several directions. Media processes are part of the material world, yet we must also capture the force of the mystifications that media generate or, less pejoratively, their contribution to the “social construction of reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Media, like the education system, are both mechanisms of representation and source of taken-for-granted frameworks for understanding the reality they represent.

Given the multimodality nature of the media discourses and representations I analyse (text, sound, image), I also draw on the work of Wendy S. Hesford (2011) on how the visual aspects of human rights advocacy influence audiences.

I was also a member of the three Facebook groups (two secret groups with seven and 32 members, formed in 2014 and a private group with close to 250 members, formed in 2015) that gather people in Portugal that identify on the

asexual spectrum, therefore being able to access privileged data and information. The groups were created in an activist context of a search for a common identity. Being part of these groups, fully disclosed as an academic, allowed me to be informed beforehand and to take part in asexual awareness activities, group decision making processes and to have access to documents before they were made public. This 'double-agency' (Santos, 2012) as both an academic and an activist also offered a unique opportunity for tracing the process of appearance of the asexual community and asexual collective action in Portugal, as well as media representation on the subject.

Results

In the Portuguese context, the media played a pivotal role in the relationship between the newly formed asexual community and the wider audience. Firstly, because the strategy of conquering visibility that happened internationally is followed with the same political implications, nevertheless, not with the same political impact. Likewise, the increasing media coverage on asexuality and the arising collective action depicted in them triggered people to start contacting "Assexuais em Portugal" Facebook page, at the time. Also, this visibility in the media played a part on how one might come to view the phenomenon itself (Alcaire, 2021).

Taking this selection of news fitting to the chosen period as a case study, I tried to grasp in what ways asexuality was approached, what values and attitudes were transmitted, and who or what contributes to the affirmation of those values and attitudes. In a time when sexuality is so firmly related to the self-making and self-invention as well as to dominant ways of the regulation (Weeks and Holland, 1996), I have examined the media for different discursive and representational ways of seeing asexuality, symptomatic of and eventual change of how it is perceived.

Before 2004, asexuality was not mentioned by the Portuguese media. Several reasons can concur to elucidate this circumstance. AVEN started in 2001, and only subsequently did the community around it and the concept start to form. The first activities developed by the community were limited to the online arena, and because the aspirations of asexuals did not imply public activities that drew attention to them, as is the case of the LGBTQI+ community, neither did their identification of absence of sexual attraction entice public or media scrutiny, either positive or negative. Hence, I argue that it was not already an established notion at the time, and the number of people outside of the United States of America who were familiar with the concept — which implied access to the internet and some degree of knowledge of how to search for and access specific

types of content — was residual. As a consequence, few to none would know the concept and identify as asexual. Altogether, these factors created a void in the Portuguese public sphere on the subject, before 2004 (data of the first article I was able to locate). Since then, there has been an increase in media coverage about asexuality (and related topics) from 2014 onwards, and it contributed to change how human sexual diversity is approached in Portugal, namely:

- The Pride Marches manifestos, flyers and glossaries on sites of LGBTQI+ organizations started to include references to asexual or asexuality;
- Academic work on LGBTQI+ diversity, LGBTQI+ youth, etc., started considering asexuality;
- Portuguese websites, blogs and other outlets connected to the Portuguese LGBTQI+ movement started showing interest in the subject and asked for contents to share with their readers or people to interview (*Rede exaequo*, *Dezanove*, *Novamente LGBTQIA*, *Sociedade Portuguesa de Sexologia Clínica*, etc.).

Discussion of findings

The increase in invitations by the media to grant interviews in news pieces they wanted to publish made the asexual community reflect on its public presentation, discussing which media outlets they wished to participate in,

under what conditions, who speaks, who shows their face, and which messages should be conveyed to the audience. As a result, what comes across is an emphasis on narratives of health and happiness, separation from ideas of trauma, illness or concealed homosexuality, etc. At the same time, there is a conscious or unconscious reproduction of the discourse produced by social networks and online communities, mostly AVEN.

This posture represents a choice to distance themselves from the myths and preconceived ideas about asexuality and about asexual people and build knowledge on what they believe it to be, according to AVEN and to their own experience. At the same time, it shows a reaction to their first participation in the media and the stern criticism they were subjected to, and their relationship with their family, namely having done their coming out or not, on how the fact that they identified as asexual was faced within their relationship. For example, the interviewee that participated in one of the newspaper articles was offended and fat-shamed in the comment section, with some readers attributing the interviewees asexuality to the fact that they were “ugly and fat”. They had previously participated in a podcast and in another news article where they did not show their face or use their last name. This news article where they revealed their name and image for the first time was a very important moment for it represented their coming

out (after disclosing their asexuality to their father). Since that moment, they have never accepted to take part in the media again. This shows identity management made by each person that has reflections on collective identity and action.

In line with Santos (2008), I consider this stance tends to distance activism, in this case, asexual public collective action, of a central role in deconstructing and challenging the dominant heterosexist and heteronormative frame, representing a distancing from the queer project. People that identified as asexual and as polyamorous did not want to participate in the media. People who identified as asexual and were in a relationship that involved sexual intercourse with their partners did not want to participate. People perceived as being male did not wish to participate. All considered that their subjectivities were not an accurate portrayal of asexuality and could not convey undeniable facts of asexuality's existence, thus miseducating the public and troubling the increasing visibility to build shared meaning and acceptance for asexuality. The underlying assumption is that they cannot speak with authority.

The decision of some self-identified asexuals that were engaged in the Portuguese community not to participate is essential to consider. Even though it was transmitted individually when an invitation to participate in a media piece, the general idea was that their lived experience was not adequate to

the concept of asexuality. This shows a reflection and a strategic decision concerning how asexuals in Portugal wanted to divulge their individual and collective identity. In search of a core cohesiveness of what asexuality should be, this calculated choice promotes, in a not always conscious way, the creation of an internal normativity that is supported by a strategic essentialism.

As a result, the image of asexuality that is portrayed in the Portuguese media is a normalized one, often easy to digest for the general audience: white, young, female, family-oriented, monogamous, healthy and happy. Most recent coverage on demisexuality and asexuality is contributing to change this monolithic idea (Demisexuality: desire only happens when there is affective connection, *Diário de Notícias*, 1 February 2017; Being happy without sex, *Lux Woman*, October 2017). Nevertheless, this image of asexuality is important, for it is accessible to the public and created mainly by those who identify as asexual and describes a reality that was unknown or known residually and associated with several myths and erroneous ideas. At the same time, it creates a monolithic image of what asexuality is supposed to be that sets aside intersections, assemblages, vulnerabilities and the richness of the subjectivity that people can bring to the table. These subjectivities are considered as not belonging or not acceptable in the public sphere for they bring a lack of verisimilitude.

As a member of the three Facebook groups that gather people in Portugal that identify on the asexual spectrum, I have witnessed or taken part in discussions amongst the participants in these groups on which invitations to accept, on who should take part in the news stories and who should answer questions. Those discussions had no intention of creating a “rule book” on how to act towards the media or how to act in any public events. Nonetheless, it created a set of assumptions of what asexuality should be and extra attention on not creating interference on that idea, which happens many times and in a strong way comparable to the difficulty to reveal one’s visual identity in the news story. These decisions have repercussions on how asexuality and asexual people are represented and apprehended by the public.

The titles and images

The overall placement and choice of content is noteworthy. Titles and images are usually the first contact and first impact that readers have with the subjects addressed by the articles and help create ideas that are sometimes hard to break. In several articles, the choice was to use database pictures, and we rarely find photographs purposely taken for each particular news story (the interviewees appear in just three of them: (In)visible asexuality, *Jornal de Notícias*, 29 June 2014; Asexuals do not feel attraction

and are happy that way, *Público*, 16 July 2014; Demisexuals: desire only happens when there is affective connection, *Diário de Notícias*, 1 February 2017).

The titles of the articles make evident that, when it comes to language, what seems to be at stake is not a claim for the right to non-discrimination and for visibility, but the search to frame asexuality into something familiar and heteronormative. Asexuality is announced as something similar to the norm, by naming several aspects that are considered to be part of the norm: families, children, falling in love.

This is also aided by the fact that asexual people are not appearing in public with concrete claims to legal rights, but with claims for recognition as an identity, as a sexual orientation, for visibility, and the freedom to choose the way they want to live their intimate life and the recognition of the many ways of being in relationships that exist and that are silenced.

Both the titles and the images (photographs, illustrations, infographic) that are present in the press articles seem to reinforce the patriarchal way of thinking and gender binary. There are repeated mentions that it is not a menace to the patriarchal system: “they still want a family”, “they want a relationship”.

Language

Asexuality disrupts language, and when language is disrupted, it becomes a

mark of difference. Hence, the concept of *a-sexuality* is often included (sometimes forced) by the language of sexual desire, a language system so structured around sex that it limits the ways in which asexuality can be talked about and understood. Sex is, at present time, so discursively central to lives that those who do not feel sexual attraction might have few resources to describe their multi-layered, complex and unique relationships and feelings. Therefore, I argue that the dominant culture is inadequately equipped for the task of making sense of asexuality through the lenses and languages of sexual normalcy. Not only can the existing language system not reserve a place for the asexual, but it also converts the understanding of the asexual into the language of sexual desire. Unable to bear difference, the difference is transformed into sameness and converts the other into the familiar. Nevertheless, the most recent articles in the database and others published after the period considered here, are interested in emic and folk categories connected to asexuality.

The television interviews in the database provide a good example of the use of language by placing interrogations about “are you”, “have you”, “do you” followed by something (considered) sexual (“gay”, “aroused by”, “masturbate”) (Asexuality: what is it?, *Queridas Manhãs*, SIC, 25 August 2016). Even when these questions are purposely deviated by the person being interviewed, they

are typically turned back onto them to eliminate any possibility of sexual presence. As if the interviewers can only make the asexuals believable and understandable through the terms of sex and its absence. In other words, when it becomes visible and audible, asexuality demands sexual explanations.

Public images

I do not consider that, as it happens in North American media, asexual bodies are made spectacular (Cerankowski, 2014) in the Portuguese media. Asexuals are not sensationalized as it happens with other sexual and gender dissidents whose difference from the norm is measured as more of excess, rather than a lack. Trans people are often hypersexualized and fetishized as exotic sexual objects, as opposed to asexual people who are sexualized because it cannot be imagined that the person cannot desire sex (referring to the more common-sense assumption of what asexual means). Asexuals may become objects to conquer (“they have not met the right person yet”), but they are not hypersexualized because of pre-existing eroticism that has been constructed around them, as in the case of trans people, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Rather, asexuals are made sexually visible because they have been deemed “unimaginable” (Cerankowski, 2014: 295).

Notwithstanding the different styles and angles adopted by the various

analysed pieces, the Portuguese press produced a remarkably similar public image of asexuality that, amongst other things, acted to terminate any debate before it could go beyond the boundaries of the dominant ideological field (Hall et al., 1978). The outcome is a “powerful and compelling form of rhetoric closure”, involving the reproduction of “public images”—clusters of impressions, themes and pseudo-explanations—in place of an analysis of underlying structural forces in society (Hall et al., 1978: 118).

Health and happiness

One of the patterns that most quickly stood out from the analysis of this database is the idea of happiness (Asexuals do not feel attraction and are happy that way, *Público*, 16 July 2014; Being happy without sex, *Lux Woman*, October 2017). Although it seems, at first glance, not to be a statement, this identification is very present in the discourses of both asexual and LGBTQI+ movements and communities. This connection to happiness can and should be understood as a revolutionary act against the dominant narrative linking non-normative orientations and identities to shame and sadness these non-normative groups have always been forced to. It must also be seen as an astute strategy to combat the premise of the impossibility or unlikelihood of asexuality. But for this analysis, it is more interesting

to note the parallel path to this, which can have perverse effects. Happiness, like health, is a complex concept that can very easily fall into the discourse of “normality”. As Ahmed (2010) warns us, happiness often reinscribes culturally valued norms and supports social heritages. Ahmed urges us to consider that “Rather than assuming happiness is simply found in ‘happy persons’, we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable.” (Ahmed, 2010: 11). By extension, claims of asexual happiness and health seem to confer other (queer) forms of affection on non-normative relationships of lesser validity.

Who speaks? The “experts” as a primary source

Media portrayals of asexuals often prevent them from having agency by constructing their narratives. That circumstance can create an obstacle and an epistemological resistance to reading alternative sexual identity representations and can lead to the construction of hostile spectators. A deeper and more nuanced understanding of how visual spectacles reinforce—rather than resist—sexist, paternalistic and oppressive western ideologies is necessary.

This concept of primary definition which sees journalists as secondary definers has subsequently been criticised for downplaying some complexities of relationships between journalists and sources. However, acknowledging the

complexities involved in such relationships, and noting some exceptional instances in which alternative explanations have achieved prominence in the media, does not disprove the existence of a tendency for the powerful to enjoy routine advantages in news access (Manning, 2001).

An episode that took place before the broadcast of a television show I was invited to be part of helps sum up this idea. When the invitation came about, I was contacted by one of the show's producers to discuss asexuality in a pre-interview. The pre-interview took place by phone and was expected to last no more than 10 minutes. The producer showed great interest on the subject, asked several out of the box questions concerning context, history and the testimonies that I gathered. By the end of the phone call, more than half an hour later, she opened up on how researching the topic of asexuality had made her rethink several aspects of sexuality and relationships and how it was so important to address them in a show that reached so many people, namely older people, that might never have heard of the concept and would identify as asexual. I informed her that due to overlapping engagements I might not be able to attend the show but was available for any questions and contacts needed. The producer told me not to worry because, whether I was able to attend or not, an expert would be present at the studio: "We would always have a psychologist or a psychiatrist present, to properly frame the subject."

Also noteworthy is that asexuals who speak in the press do it from a privileged space that is heard and understood. For example, one of the asexual persons that often participated in the selected media had higher education in the health and biology areas, so was quick and able to refute biological and evolutionary explanations with which she is confronted in interviews and public lectures on asexuality and the misuse of language. The idea of the acceptable and otherwise normative asexual has not sparked debate in the Portuguese online community. Internationally, it has. In 2011, the terms "unassailable asexual" and "gold star asexual" were coined to refer to the asexual who presents as normative, able-bodied, trauma-free, cisgender, conventionally attractive, sociable, and thus theoretically cannot have their asexuality denounced through pathological means. That is the choice of speaker. This creates a bias on the way asexual persons are portrayed in the public sphere and silences other lived experiences within the community.

Visibility is the key. Visibility is a trap

Media visibility potentially exposes the public to the concept enabling those who are interested in or identify with asexuality to come to terms with the fact that there are more people like them and that they could join groups of people. But it also places asexuality before the public eye.

Nevertheless, visibility may not

always be beneficial and may not produce the desired results. It may fail to educate, it may create a spectacle of fascination and entertainment that leads to a displacement of desire rather than understanding and a new comprehension of asexuality (Cerankowski, 2014: 288).

Often in these media spots, with the announcement of their asexuality, asexuals are met with reactions of incredulity by the interviewers (“You have to bring us someone like that to the studio”) or are pathologized by expert discourses (“There are also some pathologies, some diseases that make the person have less interest in sexual intercourse, or less sexual desire, right? There are some pathologies of desire, right?”). Contrary to this effect, the community’s goal of identity and visibility politics invested in the expectation that visibility is always instructive and empowering. It can also produce a paradox: visibility projects can simultaneously raise awareness while failing to result in education and comprehension of a given identity.

Changes

We can quickly trace the big picture: the subject has started to get talked about, discussed in several outlets, and approached constructively. And even though there is a danger of spreading erroneous ideas about asexuality, amongst asexually identified people there was a consensus that journalists and television

presenters they talked to had positively surprised them and felt that space was being conquered that allowed them to correct those mistakes by providing more evidence-based knowledge and lived experience information. Taking the past few years into consideration, the scale was pending towards the positive side (to use their own words), although still with much to work on. There was a wave of interest on the subject in the Portuguese media, which allowed at least for the increase in the number of people who have heard or read something about asexuality, a good starting point and great contribution to anyone who is asexual and did not know of the concept or of the existence of groups. Important steps were taking place to end the enormous invisibility that, from where they stand, is what damages the community the most at this point.

Still, there is always work to be done: on the one hand, because the media is going through a clickbait period that in no way helps incite proper media and public discussion of delicate or unknown topics. On the other, because in the media about asexuality many myths persist, or there is a very narrow approach to slices of experience, leaving aside many others within the spectrum.

Absences

Having the different patterns that I have identified in mind, pinpointing several important absences is possible.

There is an urgent need for more articles focusing on self-identified asexuals that describe themselves and their lived experience in their own words. Using self-identified asexuals' testimonies helps break several myths on asexuality and connects the readers with stories being told and the people telling them.

At the same time, defining asexuality from how the concept came to be is also missing. Distancing asexuality from jokes, the uncanny, rather focusing on claims and demands and on the promotion of human rights. In this way, asexuality can be defined for what it is, rather than being constantly explained for what it is not.

Focusing the value of the concept on the words of asexually identified people and not on healthcare professionals' (including mental health providers) opinion. Asexual people are the key characters in a story that is theirs, and not told about them.

None of the articles in my database referred aspects that made evident mechanisms that can challenge heteronormative and patriarchal norms that, in some way, approached the queer potential of asexuality and of its disruptive and radical ability to challenge the norm (rethinking notions of family or reproductive strategies, for example). All people portrayed in the articles and broadcasts are white and able bodied. Intersectional narratives are also lacking. Asexual studies have been expanding the understanding of the intersectional

character of asexual identities (Kahan, 2013; Decker, 2015; Cuthbert, 2017). Asexuals can identify intersectionally as lesbian, gay or bisexual in their affective or romantic relationships and trans in their gender identity. Many asexuals identify as cisgender and heterosexual in ways that complicate their claims of widening the LGBTQI+ umbrella. Few media pieces in my database consider the possibility of collective action or connection to sexual education issues. Different facets of online and offline activism should be addressed, focusing both on asexuals that identify intersectionally as LGBTQI+ and those who identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual.

In a patriarchal society such as the Portuguese, cisgender male asexual representation that has only recently come to light in the media (Being happy without sex, *Lux Woman*, October 2017), has an added layer of difficulty that needs to be deconstructed and discussed. That could take place by problematizing the normative scripting of Western society that spreads the hypersexualised worldview that individuals should exhibit attraction to be considered *normal* or be labelled dysfunctional.

Conclusions

As far as the media is concerned, asexuality has been increasingly visible over the last years in Portuguese newspapers, magazines, internet outlets and television talk shows. This collection of

media stories is a major part of the public archive on asexuality and influences the representations the general public might have about the phenomenon itself. Media attention on asexuality in Portugal has generated a discussion inside the asexual community, the LGBTQI+ movement, but also in academia with seminars addressing the subject and research being done (Campos, 2017) and amongst healthcare professionals (Alcaire, 2021) on how asexual people are interpreted and represented, but also on social representations of sexual diversity in general. The major tendency points towards a positive portrayal of asexuality that puts asexual people in the forefront, owning their discourses.

Increasing mass media exposure of asexuality and related subjects was unswervingly connected to two main sources: as a result of asexual activism and as a reaction to media reports. The fact that people who identify as asexuals and their allies went public by occupying the streets, giving interviews and engaging in media narratives about their own identity created an interest in the subject. Periodicals, television and radio stations started scheduling interviews to investigate the different aspects of the subject that went beyond collective public action and the participation in events of great proportions such as parades. As a result, the emerging Portuguese asexual community and the Portuguese LGBTQI+ movement were impelled to reflect on their activity and on the public image

they want to send out (Santos, 2008). Therefore, the community had to make the following choices: which media outlet to participate in; who participates in the news stories created; whose faces the developing asexual message is associated to; to what extent the allies are to be taken into consideration; which types of discourses get privileged (consolidated and disseminated by AVEN, in form of dissertations, for example) and which become excluded regarding the asexual participation in the media. Amongst other effects, the LGBTQI+ Portuguese movement started to acknowledge asexuality in documents and other materials produced by them. Unquestionably, the corpus of materials on the subject has grown, and asexuality has been leaving a significant footprint.

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