News and newsletters in Portugal (1703-1754)

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As is well established nowadays, not only is there no antagonistic opposition between scribal and printed culture, but we must also see the manuscript world as a differentiated one. Even the narrow universe of the news was still a field of complexity. The news leaflet was certainly less prestigious than the manuscripts produced by the “scriptoria”, but neither was it a conservative medium nor only the clandestine form of news.

Scribal publication satisfied a wide range of needs, some of which were relatively recent in eighteenth-century Portugal, such as the need to receive news of what was happening in distant towns on a regular basis, particularly news of war. Other needs were very ancient, like the appetite for criticism or playful short social narratives. The circulation of different sorts of manuscripts, shown by the relatively large number of copies that still exist in libraries and archives, filled several roles. At the beginning of the century, they took the role of the momentarily absent press. Even after printed newssheets appeared, they allowed discussion of subjects which were deemed inappropriate for it or comments judged unsuitable for publication. They were still the best way to reach certain audiences.

This article aims to identify and distinguish the manuscript newsletters produced in Portugal and to describe briefly some examples of two of the scribal news types that have the closest relationship with the printed gazette. It will also discuss the relationship between these different genres of newssheet and between scribal and print news during the first half of the eighteenth century in Portugal.

Four types of scribal newssheets can be distinguished in this period:

1 - the occasional sheet, containing the description of an event, or commenting on some political decision, or the behaviour of a member of society, or reproducing an allegedly genuine document;

2 - the individual letter, written not in personal terms, but referring to some interesting information about political, social, military, and cultural life in a specific place;

3 - the collection of news compiled on a regular basis, corresponding to what Harold Love (1993) has called a “user publication”;[i].

4 - the newsletter, the content of which may seem similar to the previous type, corresponding to what the same author has called an “entrepreneurial
As it will be shown, all these types of scribal news have different purposes, different means of circulation, and a different relationship to the print press.

The first type has the two main distinguishing features of scribal news. In terms of subject, these sheets have the really alternative, clandestine narratives, but they appear irregularly, depending on the occurrence of newsworthy events.

It was only through such sporadic publications that readers were able to follow the gossip surrounding the building of the Mafra Monastery from 1720 to 1732, the scandal about the luxury of the project and the fact that many people worked on it reduced to miserable or forced conditions. These publications revealed the masons’ strike as the building was being finished, as well as the more general criticism against the despotic will of the king, who was described as a thief. A large number of pamphlets spread the conversations of small groups. Foreign visitors recorded these complaints in their travel journals. The French naturalist Charles Frédéric de Merveilleux, who stayed in Lisbon several times from 1722 to 1726, made reference to the gossip opposing the building of the monastery in his book published in Amsterdam in 1738.

The controversy over the monastery was an exception, as generally these pamphlets were aimed at particular figures, or social situations that had no relations to the Crown. But even some of these occasional leaflets could have a strong impact. The mockery after 1728 of the aspirations of the Papal nuncio Bichi to become a Cardinal also affected the Portuguese king, who supported Bichi’s position in Rome. Other subjects were taken up in occasional scribal publications, some of which were innocuous, concerning curiosities, reproducing official documents or letters, or telling interesting stories. These were the kind of subjects also treated in periodicals and in occasional prints. But what is specific to these manuscript publications is the fact that the interest in the story itself determines the timing and format of the news sheet.

In contrast, periodicity is characteristic of both user news publications and newsletters produced by enterprises. And even private letters frequently had a different relationship with time, as many correspondents observed a periodical routine. They would normally choose the same day of each week to write to those who were in contact with them, a pattern determined by the periodicity of the mail rather than the volume of gossip. Private letters pose fewer problems as far as form and content are concerned. Let us therefore turn to the other two forms of scribal news.

“User publications” are a form that has frequently been discussed from perspectives that fail to consider their functions. One example is the Gazeta em forma de carta (“gazette in letter form”). Often it was put together with titles that had a wide diffusion as if it were a copy of a large, subsequently lost, edition. If there were no other copies, it was not classified as a
“real” newspaper. There are several examples of such publications during the first half of the century. The Gazeta em forma de carta was produced by the future Academy member José Soares da Silva from 1703 to 1716, and includes information from 1701 onwards. Another series, called the Várias notícias de casos, written by Salvador António Ferreira between 1709 and 1719, contained news going back to 1705, and was later revived by another author in 1782 and 1785. Other examples would include the journals produced by Luís José de Figueiredo, in 1749, called Noticias de Portugal and Noticias annuaes 1740 até 1749. In all these cases someone took care to record events on a regular periodical basis. These are clearly not intimate, personal journals, a genre that was not developed in Portugal at this time. The subjects are not at all personal, but deal with war, politics, society, and curiosities of the time, the news that the author could glean from conversation and what he learned from publications from abroad or from other towns in Portugal. This was the kind of news that someone living in Lisbon would receive every time a boat docked, or every time he received mail from the provinces.

These newssheets all reproduce the structure of a regular newspaper. Each has a title, sections, and the articles follow a certain pattern. In all the above cases, the retrospective records are presented in a different format from current news. In 1703, José Soares da Silva included references to the two previous years and then changed the title of his publication. The Gazeta composta em forma de carta (“Gazette in the form of a letter”) becomes in 1704 Carta em forma de Gazeta escrita em Lisboa (“Letter in gazette form written in Lisbon”). Salvador António Ferreira began his paper with an account of the four previous years. Luís José de Figueiredo wrote a separate journal to register the ten years before to the beginning of his own periodical record. Then they started writing down the relevant events of their time. José Soares da Silva and Salvador António Ferreira did so that for more than ten years, while Luís José de Figueiredo apparently only did so in 1749.

The question here is not whether anyone else had access to those records. Close circles of relatives and friends probably read these publications, although there is no clear evidence for of this. But even if no one other than the writer had these publications in his hands, they still are interesting as news publications. They must then be taken as the result of the spread of news reading. They should not be seen as useless exercises. None of the records of these publications is the result of it's writer's work as a reporter (whom no one will read). They document instead the practices of a reader, or a listener. This is exactly what happened in the cases of many other documents copied by someone who wanted to keep a record of something that for some reason was important at a particular time.

There are many such collections of manuscripts. For instance, there are large collections about the so-called “siglist” debate in 1746-/1748, or collections of texts produced after the earthquake of 1755, with the same texts copied by several different hands. While not every copy would circulate, the story did. The same happened with these news publications. They correspond to a “real” circulation of news, and they are, furthermore, they are the expression of how people understood the structure of a news publication.
Salvador António Ferreira kept his publication going for a long period. Between 1709 and 1719 the ink, the handwriting, and the way the news is developed changed as over time passed. Through that period time, the writer reflected the network of correspondents with whom he was connected with. The records of the Gazeta em forma de carta do not follow always the same periodicity, but it is clear that there are regular units of time between each record. The basic unit was one week, although the gap between the records often was often a fortnight. And the title of the publication reflects its frame of reference. It is conceived both as a gazette and as a letter, and the changes of the title reflected the author’s dilemma about the nature of the records. In fact, it is neither like the old seventeenth-century Portuguese gazette nor does this letter seem to have a specific addressee. However, its conception corresponds to those frames of reference, treating the subjects usually found in gazettes in the personal voice of someone who reports the news regularly, as correspondents should do, and with the persistence and the care of a good news writer.

There is, however, something that brings these manuscripts closer to the letter form than to that of the gazette, which increases the interest of these publications. A printed gazette would never describe riots, or signs of social tension directed against the Portuguese authorities. On the contrary, both José Soares da Silva and Salvador António Ferreira on the contrary both recorded the voices of dissatisfaction on specific issues. They registered events everyone would then talk about at the time, such as like the protests of people at the Lisbon market as the queen was passing (1709, Salvador Ferreira), or the rise of the people of Alcanena against a tax, that made them arrest the local authorities for some time (1710, Soares da Silva), among others. They were certainly not the vehicles of criticism, as were some of the pamphlets mentioned before could be; but they simply register corded the existence of those such voices, which is still more than an official or legal publication could ever do.

Entrepreneurial publications have a different approach to the news. Like the printed gazette, they do not reproduce voices raised against the authorities, but unlike the gazette they do focus much of their attention on crimes and on noblemen social life and disputes of noblemen. Thus, there is also an expression of trouble, of the fragile internal situation, not found in the gazette. There is an obvious complementarity between the press and the scribal news in term of their subjects. Apart from the question of what may be said in each article, there is a completely different balance between articles. The gazette was dedicated mostly to what was happening in other countries and the article “Portugal” would not take up more than 10 per cent of each paper.

The opposite converse is true in as regards scribal news where a large amount of what was written concerned events in Portugal. In the newsletters, the gazette’s structure of articles according to countries becomes typically a structure according to provinces, following a general article on world affairs. Nevertheless, some have a different organisation, starting with the most important news and then presenting the rest of the information according to the days of the week (‘Addição à Gazeta’, 1736-1738).
Moreover, in both cases, the news of from Portuguese origin is dominance. One of the subjects that we may follow in these newsletters is the Court and its sensitivity. Especially if we distinguish versions and sides, the disputes between families may be very meaningful, especially if we distinguish versions and sides. Newsletters report the events around which power is on display shown (weddings, funerals, and parties, for instance) as well as issues questions of protocol and convenience in many apparently seemingly insignificant situations. How should a count address the nuncio? How should he respond? May we know about the facetious episodes of noble disputes? Not only the newsletters give us this kind of information, inappropriate for an official paper, but we may also understand the relationship and complicity of each newsletter with regard to among the most important families of the Court. This does not necessarily mean that the news writer is the an agent of a certain family, but that he obtained his information from certain sources, and not from others, and this is something relevant as far as the power structure of the Court is concerned.

The examples of entrepreneurial publication during this period carry several titles from 1729 to 1754. Nevertheless, only two big enterprises may be distinguished. In spite of the fact that there is a short period when there are three publications at the same time (1740), we may consider that the most important one ran from 1729 to 1754, from Santarém, a town 60 km from Lisbon. The editors were Luís Montez Mattoso and Rodrigo Pereira de Faria.

From 1729 to 1740 they published a newsletter called Diário, or Diário de Lisboa, or Diário de Lisboa Occidental or, from 1735, just Lisboa or Lisboa Occidental, with the date written together with the title. From the first issue known (9 of August 1729) till December 1733 it consisted in a newsletter of four to eight pages long (15.5 x 21cm), written in folded sheets (31 x 21cm). We do not know if this newsletter has been published in 1734, but it appears again in 1735, with two to four pages (15 x 21cm), regularly till until 1740. During this first period it is also certain that Francisco Xavier de Meneses, Count of Ericeira, also took part at this project as its main responsible. During this first period it is also certain that Francisco Xavier de Meneses, Count of Ericeira, took also part at this project as its main member. During this first period it is also certain that Francisco Xavier de Meneses, Count of Ericeira, took also part at this project as its main responsible.

Why would we consider that this “Diário” belonged to the same enterprise as the “Folheto de Lisboa”? Apart from the handwriting, there is a link between the two newsletters is the fact in as much as that, in his correspondence, in 1740, José Montarroyo Mascarenhas mentions that Mattoso started doing his newsletters eleven years before. Even so, as far as the “Folheto de Lisboa” is concerned, it corresponds to a new project starting in 1740. Like the printed gazette, whose title was each year Historia Anual, chronologica e politica do mundo (“World political and chronological history of the year”) each year systematically, this publication had a different title each year for the volume collected each year. This means it had a weekly diffusion, as a newspaper, and it also could also be considered a book where events were registered. This book was called the Anno noticioso e historico, and it was divided in to several news letters called Folheto de Lisboa.
Two aspects must be underlined. The firstly, one is the repetition of some words, such as “Year” and “History”; the secondly, one is that this was a time when there was no clear distinction between books and periodicals, and those who devoted themselves to newspapers saw their work not as “journalists” (a concept that did not exist) but as literary authors. Accordingly, the final result of their work would be of the same nature as that of a book, adopting a name more suitable to the collection. From this point of view, the “Folheto” is the only newsletter that followed the printed gazette in its pretensions. Furthermore, the frontispiece of the annual volume was printed and contained all the elements of a printed book, including a symbolic name for the printer (Officina da laboriosa curiosidade).

For several months the “Folheto” coexisted with the “Lisboa”. The latter was published every Tuesday and the “Folheto” every Saturday. Afterwards Rodrigo Pereira de Faria would joined his friend later, probably in 1742, and the weekly “Folheto” changed the title to Mercurio Histórico de Lisboa and, occasionally, to Mercurio de Lisboa. Following the death of Mattoso in 1750, Pereira de Faria still tried to keep the publication going. In 1753-1754 it again reverted to the title Folheto for a short period and then disappeared.

The period between 1742 and 1745 was when the business seems to have been most successful between 1742 and 1745. We still have access to several copies of the same issue, in Lisbon, Coimbra and Évora for that period. There are as many as six copies of some issues. This is quite extraordinary if we considering that we are dealing with an edition of less than a hundred copies. Moreover, these newsletters are precarious objects, not bound and not mentioned in library inventories. Subscribers may have kept them, but they were not deemed valuable and rarely survived at to the next generation.

The Folheto was sent to readers throughout the country, several of whom known from correspondence. For many years it was completely handmade, but in 1742, with an apparent increase in of the production, the heading (title and picture) started being printed, together with a frame for the first letter of the first article. As the title changed to Mercurio, the picture changed too. The figure of Mercury replaced that of Fame. The copyists thus copied the articles onto prepared sheets. In the copies kept today we distinguish more than ten different handwritings. For that reason, some copies of the same issue had twelve pages while others had fourteen. In some cases, an article found in one copy would be omitted in a different copy of the same issue.

An interesting feature of these prepared sheets is that there are copies of the same issue with different headings and different titles, even after 1742. For some reason, there were sometimes not enough prepared sheets, and the copyist had to do the title himself. A copy of a 1745 issue of 1745, for example, has the picture of Mercury printed, but instead of the title Mercurio histórico de Lisboa found in other copies of the same issue, the copyist drew “Mercurio de Lisboa”. This story shows how the enterprise worked, and the problems facing that a critical edition has to face nowadays.
The other newsletter published at the time was probably produced together with the official printed Gazeta de Lisboa. We know that José Montarroyo Mascarenhas, the writer of the gazette, also produced a newsletter. This is probably the same publication of which some copies are known from 1736 to 1738. But some years later (1741-1743) he still mentioned the existence of such a “folheto” in his correspondence, and even Montez Mattoso in his newsletter happens to mention Montarroyo’s folheto as a source of Information (October 1743).

This publication was called Adição à gazeta (“Addition to the gazette”) and was normally two to four pages long, written in folded sheets of 31 x 21cm, rarely cut, and exceptionally going up to reaching eight pages long. Every week, on Thursdays (together with the printed gazette), the writer had room to relate stories that could not be included in the official paper, as had happened with Théophraste Renaudot’s gazetins, in seventeenth-century France, or in the cases of the abbé Buchet (1717-1721) and Chaspoux de Verneuil (1726).

In all probability, very few copies were made. From what we know from his letters, he Montarroyo had no facilities to produce both the gazette and a large edition of newsletters, as he had very little support. But this “folheto” may be seen both as an extension of the printed paper for a chosen audience, and as an extension of his activity as a correspondent. In 1743 he explains in a letter to Rodrigo Pereira de Faria that after having sent his folheto to Mattoso, based on the news taken from the Amsterdam gazette, he received other news from Germany that changed his views on the war.

Montarroyo never had great political or social relevance in Lisbon, or among the Academy where he failed to be elected. This corresponds to the low cultural status given to news work. But he had a central position among those who devoted themselves to the task of consuming and spreading the latest reports. He received foreign newspapers, and selected his own material from them. The fact that he had information that he did not publish in the gazette gave him a certain authority. He also had acquaintances at the Court and was part of the most important newsletter networks in the capital.

Consequently, he was instrumental connected in several ways to the growth of interest in the news, especially after 1742, when the gazette started to be published twice a week and when more scribal news-sheets were read. The author of the gazette produced his newspaper, his newsletter, and he was still in touch with other authors of scribal news, supplying them with a part of their material. At the same time, a Portuguese translation of the Spanish Mercurio started being published. By that time, there were not many few authors were trying to publish their papers. José Barbosa with his Expresso da Corte was an unsuccessful exception and Francisco Xavier de Oliveira was an outsider with his Cartas familiares, históricas, políticas published in Holland, and which, apart from the title, hardly corresponded to the kind of publication Mattoso and Montarroyo were keeping in Portugal.

There was no real competition between scribal and printed news during this period. On the contrary, they seemed to provide mutual support, enhancing the
reader's general interest, and strengthening the new habits of expecting, reading, and discussing the news on a regular basis. This is something known for France and England at the time, as Laurence Bongie explained (1993: 137-138). But this is also the case of Portuguese newsreaders that often in their correspondence complained in their correspondence about the lack of details they could find in the Gazeta, even for stories that could be told in an official paper, as those concerning events in Europe. This means that the newsletters were cherished for many reasons, and not only for the Court gossips.

Given the scarcity of our sources, we are not able to give a full account of the manuscript newsletters of this period. We have merely just isolated examples. But it is possible to draw a picture of the relationship between them. Being completely alternative, the occasional manuscript will always exist, depending on the urgency of the news. The perspective of these publications is conflictual in the sense that several occasional publications make conservative comments on the activity of the news people, and on the conception of the periodicals, criticising both the scribal ‘folheto’ and the printed ‘gazeta’.

In contrast, the “user publication”, at least as it existed at the beginning of the eighteenth -century, seems to be much closer to the printed periodical. Eventually, other types of news (print or manuscript) replaced it. The details belonging to this type of record that did not fit into the other periodicals could always circulate as an occasional publication. This was not the case of the “entrepreneurial” publications. Not only did they resist the gazette, but they seemed to exist as complement to it.

The choice between producing a newsletter or a printed newspaper depended on the writer's priorities. Luís Montez Mattoso justified his choice of the scribal publication, in 1740, stressing the advantages of speed and the possibility of treating internal news. In contrast, Bento Morganti, in 1754, explained why he had chosen the press. For him it was more important to reaching a wider audience in space and time. A larger edition allowed the newspaper to be found and still read many years after the publication. But as long as the printed press was not unable to cope with the needs for speed, ease of production, and diversity, the scribal publication provided this service. By 1754, when the Folheto de Lisboa definitely disappeared, and when the periodical printed press had new titles of different various kinds, the world of Portuguese news had already changed.

List of abbreviations

ACL: Academia das Ciências de Lisboa
BA: Biblioteca da Ajuda
BNL: Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa
BPMP: Biblioteca Pública Municipal do Porto
BPADE: Biblioteca Pública e Arquivo Distrital de Évora
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