

## **Young offenders' interests and motivations related to accessing TV and Press news**

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### **Summary:**

This paper aims to discuss how young offenders placed in Portuguese custodial institutions look at TV and press news, and what interests, motivations and habits they have in accessing news. Based on a questionnaire survey and individual interviews, the study involved 150 participants, of both sexes, between 12 and 21 years of age. It focused on a population that tends to gain the media's attention, but their own interpretation of social matters has rarely been heard. The results reveal they were particularly interested in news on two issues: children in danger, and crime. News are regarded as a crucial link to the outside world, and through the analysis young offenders made of their choices, they (re)viewed their life trajectories and projected into an aftercare future. Many had direct contact with journalists in a double sense, 'delinquent actor' vs. 'social actor', and diametrically opposed meanings emerged from their experiences.

**Key words:** youth participation, young offenders, delinquency, juvenile justice system, custodial institutions, TV and press news.

### **Introduction**

The juvenile offences highlighted by the media and the permanent dramatization and politicization of youth offenders in Western societies tend to suggest we are currently living in a unique social setting, where youth have become more violent than ever. The existing data related to this matter in many European countries do not provide evidence confirming an increase in youth offending, but the distorted or excessive media coverage of high-profile cases can amplify the social perception that juvenile delinquency is increasing, particularly

when associated with the idea that youth perpetrators always tend to be successful and the social control institutions are rarely effective (Smith, 1994; Asquith, 1996; Muncie, 2001, 2008; Anderson et al., 2005; Fernandes, 2008; Halsey and White, 2008; Carvalho et al., 2009; Castro, 2009; Santos et al., 2010). This perspective ultimately undermines the confidence of individuals and social groups in such institutions and erodes social cohesion (Cohen, 1972). Substantive issues arise in the discussion in this field regarding the security of societies and citizens as well as law enforcement. Individual and collective safety are fundamental values in social interaction; they are inseparable from the notions of freedom and justice (Lourenço, 2009).

We live in a time where there is an apparent greater concern about the enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Western societies, and a growing recognition of children and youth's specific needs and interests. Nevertheless, their opinions and attitudes are often devalued by adults, particularly in regard to the discussion of more complex issues, such as those relating to delinquency and juvenile justice.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, the opportunities for participation in social life afforded to children and youth as full citizens in a society, particularly in the cases of young offenders, are, in many communities, far from legal ideals (Madge, 2006; Kilkelly, 2011; Pruin, 2011; Moore, 2013).

In Portugal, the Children and Youth Justice Reform, started in the 1990s, introduced the principle of the young offenders' responsibility,<sup>2</sup> but it has remained focused on the application of educational measures, and has not signified a rising punitive trend (Figueiredo, 2001; Carvalho, 2009). In fact, the Portuguese juvenile justice system differs from most other EU countries, giving less importance to the offence than to the need for the offender to be educated on the fundamental community values that have been violated by the illicit act.

Within this 'child-friendly justice' framework, this paper seeks to give voice to young offenders placed in custodial institutions in Portugal, aiming to discuss how they look at TV and press news, and what interests, motivations and habits they have in access to news. Juvenile institutions are restricted spaces. They are stigmatizing and under one system of authority; individuals there realize their whole existence, often by different normative standards (Goffman, 1961). Through enforcing the detention of those who are considered deviants, societies justify and legitimize their segregation by aiming for the future rehabilitation and social reintegration of such individuals.

As an exploratory research study focused on a specific context and population at a particular time the findings presented cannot be generalized to other settings.

### **Public perception, news and youth offending**

The news on youth, particularly with regard to youth offending, emerges as one of the areas where organized voices and public and institutional sources constitute a privileged door to access themes that otherwise would be distant from many individuals and social groups (Ponte and Afonso, 2009). Researchers have acknowledged that the media tend to give intense visibility to the most serious cases of youth offending, which influences public

opinion since most people only have access to delinquency and juvenile justice issues through the indirect knowledge transmitted by the media (Bolieiro, 2005; Agra and Castro, 2007; Carvalho et al., 2009; Halsey and White, 2008). Thus, the media play an important role as a forum for the enforcement of social control, both formal and informal, which cannot be dissociated from the trend of calling for more punishment for youth offending that is widespread in Europe (Santos et al., 2010; Kilkelly, 2011; Pruin, 2011; Moore, 2013; Carvalho, 2013a). The economic crisis affecting some European countries, such as Portugal, could also be related to the controversial public and political call for more restrictive social control over youth (Moore, 2013). Furthermore, the public perception that youth have become more violent could lead to the idea that the few financial resources available should not be used in the rehabilitation of juveniles, only in their punishment, particularly of the most serious offenders.

Several authors suggest that since James Bulger's death in England, in 1993, in an act perpetrated by two young 10-year-old boys, public and judicial attitudes towards children and youth involved in delinquency have hardened worldwide (Asquith, 1996; Brym and Lie, 2007; Castro, 2009; Carvalho, 2013a). The role of the media in publicizing the crime has been extensively questioned (Smith, 1994; Rolim, 2006), and the controversy persists, as further legal charges against one of the murderers, now under a new adult personal identity kept anonymous by the courts, brought to public attention in recent years, rekindled the discussion about the media's role in the news coverage on justice proceedings (Carvalho, 2013a).

The James Bulger case is paradigmatic of the stereotypical dichotomy presented by the media between the so-called 'good childhood' associated with the child victim, innocent and dependent, and the 'bad childhood' associated with the two boys who committed the act (Madge, 2006). Recurrently, this opposition wins other forms of expression when considering that the first one is frequently regarded as referring to 'our children', the children from the social groups supposedly dominant in society, while the second one refers to the 'other children', 'other childhoods', the 'children without childhood', whose lives are far away from social conformity where can be found a wide and complex range of unwanted situations, such as maltreatment, abuse, negligence or delinquency, among others (Almeida, 2009; Ponte and Afonso, 2009).

The exacerbated feelings about the danger coming from the 'other', particularly from those who are considered 'outsiders' (Becker, 1963) such as young offenders, accentuate the social perception of the need for their institutional segregation. This is not a new phenomenon; however, never before have societies disposed of so much information and so many ways to improve the conditions and quality of life of the population, which could avoid stigmatization (Wyness et al., 2004).

The high-potential newsworthiness of news on youth offending (Hagel and Newburn, 1994) relates to the difficult, but challenging, balance between the media's duty to inform the public on these issues, and their compliance with a framework of ethical principles and values to ensure the protection and safety of the youth and victims who are the focus of the

news (Carvalho et al., 2009). The events related to these social problems are often reported by the media in a way that causes damage by violating the Convention on the Rights of the Child involved therein, whether in relation to offenders or also to their victims (Bolieiro, 2005; Azeredo, 2007; Halsey and White, 2008; Ponte, 2009; Santos et al., 2010).

More often than is desirable, some of the news presented in the Portuguese press about youth offending and juvenile justice seems to boil down to a concern that was already present in the theological debates of the 18th and 19th centuries about these social problems (Azeredo, 2007; Carvalho et al., 2009): a moral concern focused around the dichotomy between good and evil individuals (Digneffe, 1995). Both then and now, some children and youth are seen as products of social and moral disorder that affects certain segments of the population, and simultaneously marks them as exclusively responsible for their own acts and excluded from participation in social life (Jenks, 1996). And just like back then, the debate on youth offending is often reduced to questions on the criminal liability of individuals (Digneffe, 1995), within a framework of moral panic that increases feelings of insecurity (Cohen, 1972).

The structural ambiguity of societies towards young offenders tends to be built on a basis of stereotypes and simplification processes presented in the news which deny the complexity of this social problem. Article 40(2) of the Convention of the Rights of the Child contains a list of minimum standards which aim to ensure that all young people accused of committing a criminal offence receive fair treatment and trials. A child cannot be heard effectively where the environment is intimidating, hostile, insensitive or inappropriate for her/his age. The right of the young person to be heard on all matters is regarded by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as a fundamental principle of a fair, 'child-friendly justice' system. The right of a child to effectively participate and express his/her views freely should be at the basis of any judicial intervention. But even within a 'child's rights perspective', a young offender's interpretation on social matters is rarely considered and publicly discussed (Smith, 1994; Hagel and Newburn, 1994; Asquith, 1996). As a population under permanent media attention and news coverage, it is crucial to identify and understand the role that the news play in the lives of offenders.

### **Methodological framework**

Within the project "Children and Youth in the News Media" (2005–2007),<sup>3</sup> an exploratory study was carried out with the purpose of exploring how young offenders placed in Portuguese juvenile justice institutions looked at TV and press news. Stressing the need for giving voice to youth, the main goal was to identify what interests, motivations and habits the young offenders have related to access to newspapers and television news inside and outside the juvenile institution where they were placed. For that purpose, a questionnaire survey and individual interviews were conducted, based on a set of guiding questions defined before entering the field with the following concerns: i) what interests young offenders reveal towards TV and press news; ii) what experiences they have had in relation to journalists; and iii) what forms of regulation they would propose to the

journalists/reporters when editing news about children and youth. Because these generated a reflexive debate during the interviews, a fourth question arose from the field work: iv) when selecting and discussing TV and press news, especially those involving children and youth, in what ways do these young offenders (re)view their own life trajectories and their attitudes towards the institution and the juvenile justice system?

### **Context and participants**

Since 1911, Portugal has had a juvenile justice system and special laws regarding youth offending. There has never been a juvenile criminal law in the country. The minimum age of criminal responsibility is 16 years old, which is also the minimum age for criminal majority. A person between 12 and 16 years old who commits an offence judged by the penal law as a crime can be subject to educational measures, as defined by the Educational Guardianship Law (Law n.º 166/99, of 14<sup>th</sup> September). The State can only intervene in indispensable cases, and young offenders' rehabilitation is based on their need to be educated on the fundamental values for living in society, with the aim that they would assume a constructive role in society (Neves, 2007, 2008a; Storino, 2012). The system could be described as what Bailleau and Fraene (2009: 6) considered a 'tendency towards bifurcation – a soft approach in most cases and tougher actions against a limited number of adolescent undergoing a custodianship order'.

In accordance to international standards, placement in custodial institutions, in any of its modalities, must be only used as last resort. The Portuguese state custodial facilities for young offenders, called educational centres, are managed by the Directorate General of Reintegration and Prison's Services (DGRSP), which constitutes an auxiliary body of the judiciary administration. The educational centres are distinguished according to the type of regime carried out, and organized into residential units, with secure accommodations. A liberty-depriving measure can be executed in one of the three regimes defined by the law, which are based on their extent of deprivation to youth's liberty. The criteria on which the measure is determined by the court rely on young offenders' needs, which are evaluated before the sentence by social, psychological assessment or psychological assessment in forensic context, and also on the seriousness of the committed offences in relation to what is defined in the penal code.

Below the age of 14 years old a young person cannot be placed in the closed regime, only in the open or semi-open regime. Depending on the young person's progress in custody, a change to a less restrictive regime can be proposed to the court, and the detention measure applied can be reviewed and changed accordingly, although never to a more restrictive regime. For each young offender, there is a range of mandatory activities according to the individualised Personal Educational Project that are court-approved. Control and permanent attention, in the form of intensive occupation of time and space in the institution, are expressed in rules embodied in internal regulations. These regulations 'should be a relatively formal and explicit set of requirements and prohibitions that exposes the main requirements for the conduct of the institution' (Goffman, 1961: 50).

**Table 1:** Educational centre's regimes

REGIME	CONDITIONS	DURATION
<b>Open</b>	The young person lives and is educated in the education centre, but may be allowed to spend weekends and holidays with the family or going out unaccompanied. He/she may also attend school, education or training, employment, sports and leisure activities outside the centre, as defined in the Personal Educational Project approved by the youth court. An open residential unit accommodates the maximum of 14 juveniles.	From three months to two years
<b>Semi-open</b>	Applicable to those who juveniles have committed an offence against people that corresponds to a prison sentence in excess of three years or two or more offences punished by a prison sentence in excess of three years. An young person is educated and attend educational, training, employment, sports and leisure activities inside the centre, but may be allowed to attend them outside, and may be allowed to enjoy holidays with family as defined the Personal Educational Project approved by the youth court. A semi-open residential unit accommodates the maximum of 12 juveniles.	
<b>Closed</b>	Applicable to a young person at the age of 14 or older, who has committed an offence corresponding to a prison sentence of more than eight years or when the committed offences correspond to crimes against people, punished with prison sentences of more than five years. A psychological assessment in forensic context is required before the judicial decision is taken. Young people live, are educated and attend all the activities inside the centre, and going outside is strictly limited to attend judicial duties or due to health needs or other equally ponderous and exceptional reasons, and always under surveillance. A closed residential unit accommodates the maximum of 10 juveniles.	From six months to two years (and exceptionally three years in the most serious cases)

**Sources:** Law n.º 166/99, of 14<sup>th</sup> September; Decree Law n.º 323-D/2000, of 20th December.

At the time of our field work, the Portuguese custodial institution's facilities had the capacity to accommodate a total of 267 individuals: 248 male (92.8%) and 19 females (7.2%). In this research, seven of the ten existing educational centres were selected, comprising two open residential units, seven semi-open and five closed residential units.

The study involved 150 young offenders, of both sexes, between 12 and 20 years of age. The predominance of males, 140 in this study, matches the tendency in juvenile justice systems worldwide (Bailleau and De Fraene, 2009; Carvalho, 2003, 2013b).

Most had committed offences against property (80.5%), followed by a significant percentage of those who had committed acts against people (16.3%). By regime, the semi-open (78.1%) was the most common, followed by the closed (13.7%) and the open (8.2%). In terms of age, very few were between 12 and 14 years old. Most were 17 (29.7%), 16 (22.5%) or 15 years old (18.8%), while the total for older ages (18–20 years) was significant (16.6%). Thus, the share of those who were already at the age of criminal responsibility was high at 68.8%. Females were slightly more represented at 14 and 17 years of age, while males were more often 16 and 15 years old.

A significant number had had a detention educational measure imposed (86.8%), and nearly half of these measures pointed to a duration exceeding 18 months in custody. There were several cases in which the placement in the educational centres was extended for a further 1-2 years due to a succession of juvenile justice proceedings which led to the enforcement of more than one liberty-depriving educational measure.

In global terms, this population had low educational levels and school trajectories marked by school failure, absenteeism and abandonment. The most represented districts for the last-known place of the young person's residence were those that, at the national level, have higher demographic rates in these age groups, particularly in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Oporto. By ethnic origin, when comparing to the average statistical expression on the Portuguese population, there was an overrepresentation of youngsters of African origin (25.3%), mainly from the former Portuguese colonies, and Gypsies (8.9%).<sup>4</sup>

## **Procedures and data analysis**

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the data collection involved two instruments: a questionnaire survey (N = 150; 56.1% of the total population placed in the juvenile justice system in 2006–2007), which covered the range of young offenders' interests, motivations and attitudes towards the news extensively; and a semi-structured individual interview (N = 86; 32.2%) where their experiences in relation to journalists were explored. The data collection began in October 2006 and lasted until April 2007. Through informed consent, a random sample was collected.

The field work was carried out in close collaboration with the technical staff according to young offenders' daily lives in each of the selected institutions, based on an ethnographic approach. The authors had access to different moments in the lives of these youth, including the most formal in classrooms, the more relaxed in the playground or at meal times, and even occasionally in their rooms. All these aspects are relevant to the research and they ultimately influence the relation between the researcher and the population under study.

The questionnaire was designed in two parts, one dedicated to press news and the second to TV news, each with a similar structure. There were 22 open and closed questions, including, among others:

How much interest do you have in reading press news (watching TV news)?

- How often do you read press news (watch TV news) per week?
- What are the newspapers (TV channels) you like to read (watch)?
- What makes you want to read press news (watch TV news)?
- When you read a newspaper (watch TV), what news content are you most interested in? Less interested?
- What calls your attention in the news?
- Where do you read newspapers (watch TV news)? With whom?
- Have you ever used the Internet to read (watch) news?

The questionnaire was applied in the residential unit's classrooms or living rooms by one of the authors, in small groups of 3-4 youngsters gathered according to their learning and writing abilities, and in private conditions. In all situations, the questionnaire was previously read by the researcher to the group. On average, the questionnaire took around 35-45 minutes to complete.

With regard to the interviews, it was important to understand the 'worlds' of the interviewees and the factors that may influence their responses (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Benjamin, 1995). Therefore, interviews were semi-structured and based on five areas — press news, TV news, rights of the child, journalists and the youth's participation in the making of the educational centre's journal. The interviews were conducted in a familiar language adapted to youth, based on the following questions, among others:

- Why do you like to read press news (watch TV news)?
- What kind of news do you like most?
- Do you remember any news you would like to talk about?
- What do you feel when reading about (watching) the news?
- What news on childhood and youth issues do you remember?
- What do you think about the news on youth?
- Have you ever been in the news? When and how did it happen?
- Have you ever been interviewed or had contact with journalists?
- What did you feel when reading (watching) the news about you?
- Have you ever heard/read about the rights of the child in press/TV news? What do you remember about it?
- Would you like to be a journalist? Why?
- If you could give any advice to a journalist, what would you say?

All interviews were conducted individually with each interviewee, in private spaces, and recorded. An approach based on 'a relationship of active and methodical listening' (Bourdieu, 1993: 1393) was implemented that led to in-depth interviews with many of the youngsters, each more than 1 hour in length. This trend of long interviews was particularly experienced with those involved in cases that had been strongly mediated.

Ethical issues were acknowledged at all levels of collecting and analysing the study data (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). As required by law, the complete depersonalization of the texts produced was ensured, safeguarding the young participants' identity and the privacy. The main objective was to provide a space for them to speak freely, privileging open-ended questions because these allow the respondents to more freely express their beliefs, opinions, thoughts and feelings about the matters in discussion (Bourdieu, 1993). Translated from Portuguese, the youth's language and expressions presented in this paper are retained as much as possible. For ethical reasons, participants are only referenced by gender (male/female), age and custodial regime.

As a procedure prior to data analysis, the authors created a categorical framework whose definition of variables and modalities resulted from the bibliographical research of the problem under study. Following the previously established coding, the questionnaire data were aggregated into a computer database created specifically for this purpose in SPSS.<sup>5</sup> After validation procedures, data processing was carried out with univariate and bivariate statistical analysis (simple crosstabs). In the case of interviews, once fully transcribed, content analysis was conducted (Bardin, 1977; Vala, 1986; Krippendorff, 2004). The procedure had as a starting point the five main initial areas, but an exploratory approach 'from the texts themselves, grasping the links between different variables [which] operate on the deductive process and facilitate the construction of new hypotheses' (Henry and Moscovici, 1968, in Bardin, 1977: 99) led to a review and restructuring of the initial framework, eventually stabilizing into five new categories: interests and habits in the news, personal experiences in relation to journalists and the media, how the young offenders review their life trajectories in the news, rights of the child, and the participation in the journal of the Educational Centre. In this essay, we presented findings from the four first categories. For each category, sub-categories were created emerging from the analysis.

### **Young offenders' interests and habits related to TV and press news**

As noted above, the Portuguese custodial intervention is based on the principle of maintaining all the civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights and guarantees legally granted to youth that are compatible with deprivation of their liberty (Figueiredo, 2001). Within these guarantees and rights are, among others, the right to be informed in a personal and adequate manner; the right that the centre will act in the best interest of the young person's life, physical integrity and health; the right to preserve one's dignity and privacy; and the right to maintain authorized contact with the outside world, by different means (e.g. letters, phone calls, visits) (Rodrigues and Fonseca, 2010).

Thus, the interests and habits of young offenders placed in custodial institutions relating to access to TV and press news provide important information about the overall educational guidelines implemented by the juvenile justice system.

The findings indicated that participants were particularly attentive to what was happening around them, and regular access to press and TV news has proved to be fundamental in creating links and relations, not only with the world outside the custodial

institution, but also as a vehicle for deepening relations among institutionalized peers and with the centre staff.

### ***Press news***

The results reveal that the young offenders had a special interest in reading newspapers: 74.3% had 'interest' or 'strong interest', only 18.9% indicated having 'little interest' and 6.8% responded 'never have an interest' in it. These figures point to a higher frequency trend among this population when compared with different groups of young people in Portugal for the same type of habits (Gomes, 2003).

Concerning their reading of press news per week prior to custodial placement, close to one fifth of the participants (19.7%) did not have the opportunity to read newspapers, with the remainder reading 'every day' (15.5%), 'almost every day' (18.2%), and 'only a few days in the week' (41.9%). Their placement in custody reduced the number who claimed to 'never read' (minus 6%), and increased the number of those who read press news 'every day' (plus 3%). The intermediate categories have seen their numbers increase, which indicates that there is easy access to newspapers inside the institutions, mainly brought inside by the staff, families, teachers and trainers. Regarding the spaces where they read newspapers they highlighted the educational, but also mentioned their homes, the public space (street) and coffee shops. Around 6% reported that they read newspapers anywhere.

Access to press news in the custodial context is conditional upon internal rules that vary from institution to institution. News reading tends to be an individual act (52.0%), but it was also done in peer groups (20.9%). Press news was also read on the Internet by 26.4%, and 14.9% had never done it but showed interest in trying. Nevertheless, a high percentage (28.4%) had never thought of accessing it in this manner.

According to the participants, the role of the institutional staff (especially the Social Rehabilitation officers) in access to TV and press news emerged as crucial for jointly monitoring the discussion and the reading of news with the youngsters.

With reference to their favourite newspapers, the most frequently mentioned were a daily specialized sports newspaper (*A Bola*, 51.3%) and the leader among the popular press (*Correio da Manhã*, 49.3%). Two other sports newspapers (*Record*, 34.5%; *O Jogo*, 33.3%) and one other popular newspaper were also commonly chosen (*Jornal de Notícias*, 25%). About 10% of respondents indicated no preference. Only 12.8% singled out just one newspaper title, while more than half of the sample mentioned up to 2–5 newspapers they liked to read. Amongst these last ones are those who simultaneously reported popular press and sports newspapers (30.4%), followed by those who liked to read only sports newspapers (15.5%) and those who preferred mainstream press and sports newspapers (13.5%).

### ***TV news***

Television news was a key part of their daily lives before the enforcement of the liberty-depriving measure: most used to watch news on television 'every day' (67.6%) or 'almost

every day' (20.3%). Once placed in custody, the figure related to those who viewed TV news 'every day' increased by 6%, while the other categories declined. This trend cannot be dissociated from the internal regulations and institutional dynamics. With the loss of liberty, television had become an increasing pole of attraction for the youngsters. It is however important to note that the frequency of viewing television, in general, was slightly below the national average among this age (Gomes, 2003), which, up to a certain point, could be due to the strict regulations to which these young offenders are subjected. It is possible for them to watch TV news, but not at all times or every time they want. Therefore, not surprisingly, the participants pointed to watching more news at night.

The most preferred TV channels for watching news on were private generalist channels (*TVI*, 36.1%; *SIC*, 21.6%), followed by a public one (*RTP1*, 5.4%) and a private cable news channel (*SIC Notícias*, 1.4%). Around 16.0% preferred both generalist and specialized news channels.

They also emphasized the opposition between TV news and printed news. Although the participants tended to follow both, they highlighted the strength of the image and the power of the spoken word broadcast live, two aspects which maximized their interest in TV news. They tended to give more credibility to image and oral speech than to written text ('Newspapers may lie, but what you are seeing on television is more difficult to falsify.' *Female01, 16 years old, semi-open regime*; 'TV gives you more feeling about people, gives you more thoughts, gives it all!' *Male01, 16 years old, semi-open regime*).

### Young offenders' motivations related to TV and press news

Participants showed awareness of issues in the news that, at the time, were publicly being discussed in Portuguese society. They had different purposes and motivations for gaining this knowledge: to be informed, to increase their knowledge, to have an awareness of what is going on with people they know, and to occupy their free time (**Table 2**). By contrast, school attendance does not provide strong motivation for watching/reading TV and press news, and a similar trend happens in what concerns employment and training needs. Both categories registered the highest number of negative responses ('never').

**Table 2:** Motivations on TV and press news

MOTIVATIONS	PRESS NEWS		TV NEWS	
	Never	Always/ many times	Never	Always/ many times
'I'm seeking for a job/employment'	22,3%	18,2%	49,3%	16,9%
'It's because of school'	44,6%	25,7%	39,9%	26,4%
'It's fun'	27,7%	36,5%	20,3%	51,4%
'Just to pass the time'	23,0%	44,6%	13,5%	56,1%
'I feel good, I like reading'	20,3%	45,9%	16,2%	50,7%
'To see what is going on with people I know'	22,3%	48,0%	16,2%	56,8%
'Want to get more knowledge'	12,2%	62,8%	10,8%	64,9%
'I like to be informed'	8,8%	71,6%	6,1%	79,7%

It appeared that the young offenders' selection of the news was associated with a range of intentional and conscious choices. The wish to acquire knowledge on social matters is connected with an informal outlook that does not overlap, from their point of view, with the knowledge obtained in school.

It became clear that these youngsters privileged the need to be informed and to improve their personal and social skills ('I want to become more educated.' *Male02, 17 years old, semi-open regime*; 'I like to read news ... is more knowledge that I get from the news' *Male03, 18 years old, closed regime*). On the other hand, the news was understood as a window to the world: for many, watching or reading TV and press news was a process shared in their institutional group based on their shared need to maintain contact with the outside world ('I like to hear things going on in my country... like work and even some policies, to see what happens outside.' *Female02, 16 years old, semi-open regime*).

The effects of their loss of liberty are reflected in the increasing importance they gave to their liking for direct references to their origins (neighbourhood, group, family, peers), something that most pointed out in their preferences ('I liked it because I saw my city.' *Female03, 16 years old, semi-open regime*; 'It may provide news of what happens around my neighbourhood and I don't know because I'm here inside, if anything bad happens I can see on the news.' *Male04, 15 years-old, semi-open regime*). News may provide a connection to their origins, which is regarded as extremely valuable because, given the educational centre's location, many of them were sent away from their communities and places of residence. In some cases, this decision taken by the Ministry of Justice services is based on security and disciplinary reasons. Alternatively, in some cases, this option is taken in the best interests of the juvenile due to the requirements of his/her lawsuit.

### **Young offenders' news preferences and their relation to their personal life trajectory**

Obviously, Portuguese educational centres are 'total institutions' meeting the most important features Goffman described in his work (Carvalho, 2003; Fernandes, 2008; Neves, 2008a; Manso, 2009). But, as Neves (2008b) stated, as noted above, they must be places that have a range of intensive educational purposes and actions. When addressing the newsworthiness of the news on juvenile delinquency ('I don't know if you realize... When I see the news on TV and on newspapers it seems that all the youth are young offenders, all youth are less serious people...' *Male21, 17 years old, open regime*), the participants did not cease to question the appropriateness of the judicial intervention imposed on them, namely the beginning of the enforcement of the liberty-depriving measure, sometimes too far away from the time of the criminal offences were committed:

Journalists say there are many youth crimes, so many that young people are losing their lives in crime...but I've gotten stuck here because of older

processes. I was already out of that life; I was working. When I committed the crimes, I was fourteen. Now, I'll be eighteen soon, almost four years later!

*Male05, 17 years old, closed regime*

As pointed out by Trépanier (2008: 134) 'if you want an intervention to have any chance of success, you need to put it into practice as soon as possible after the facts, before the young person had time to rationalize these facts in order to extract value from it'.<sup>6</sup> This is not only a problem of a delay in time; it could also indicate that the principles of opportunity and proportionality are not fully implemented, and some decisions are made without the necessary update of evaluation of the young offender's need for 'education in the law'.

One of the strongest criticisms on the juvenile justice system made by one of the interviewed in relation to his comment on the news is focused on the founding model of the juvenile proceedings:

When I read the news I think these people [social workers and other practitioners] aren't thinking clearly. They have the idea that children are in need of a psychologist, but I think it is the opposite! My foster mom wanted to get me a psychologist and I told her "you're the one who hit me and it's me who needs to go to the psychologist?!..." And then she beat me again!

*Male06, 16 years old, closed regime*

Young offenders' responses to questions suggested that many news items tend to help spread an idea of a 'universe of youth', restricted, and closed the line advocated by Bourdieu (1980: 145) as a social group seen as 'of impermanent irresponsibility: these "young" are in a sort of no man's land, where for some things they are regarded as adults and as children for others.' Most of the youngsters perceived the media as tending to present a negative portrait of youth ('Most newspapers only talk about the crap that young people do and never speak of the good things they do.' *Male07, 16 years old, semi-open regime*). They argued, essentially, that youth are treated in the news in an unequal way when compared to other age categories, and emerge as devalued by adults. From their perspective, this situation could be associated with the existence of a certain paternalistic and condescending media attitude towards youth that does not take them seriously ('Mistreated! Is true in all... News doesn't give a correct idea of what the youth are like.' *Male08, 17 years old, closed regime*; 'Speak all of evil, this young person here, the young person there, and if he is black or of other races is even worse!' *Male09, 17 years old, semi-open regime*).

Among the news issues considered the most appealing, both on television and in press, are sports/football, crime and music; conversely, they expressed having 'no interest' or 'little interest' in politics, employment, education and astrology topics (Carvalho and Serrão, 2012).

In their interviews, there was a prevalence of negative feelings about the news, in particular on the topics of poverty and social exclusion, delinquency and crime, disasters, terrorism, and especially children and youth at social risk ('Be happy? Every day I read the newspaper I become more sad.' *Male10, 19 years old, closed regime*; 'Pedophiles! [Referring to a case of sexual abuses] If it were me, I'd made them suffer in one way here ... the lower parts, cut them!' *Female01, 16 years old, semi-open regime*). The topics in the news that marked them more positively are grouped around two main themes: sports and school.

When asked to talk about news they were more interested in, most reported cases have children and youth as protagonists, but in two different ways. Besides their attention to the news presented about themselves, a special preference was given to two themes: children at social risk or in danger, and crime. The most mediated cases in the country in recent years, especially related to the murder of children and youth or sexual abuses, were repeatedly mentioned. In their discussion of news content, a moral judgment emerges with negative connotations in relation to the crimes committed; there were even references to negative consequences that the knowledge of these events had on their personal well-being ('If I would pick up a guy like those doing such harm to my sister, I would have killed him. This makes me feel sick...' *Male11, 16 years old, closed regime*).

It is in these subjects that TV and press news seem to provide them with a more powerful reflection about their personal trajectories and tend to project on the news a mixture of intense feelings and emotions ('Parents who leave home... mine did the same with me ... I don't like it ...' *Male04, 15 years old, semi-open regime*). News on parental abuse and neglect and abandoned children were central concerns. But not only the past appeared in the interviews; some of them manifested a great concern with their own present or future parental role, especially in the cases of those who already had children or are going to have them in the near future:

As I am a father I think I'll never do that to my daughter [in relation to news of parental abuse]. Now my daughter is going to grow up without me. It will be one year in August that I've been here. She's going to grow up without me; she's growing up without her father and I wanted... until five years I grew up with my father and at least that's what I want for her. I want her to grow up with a father until a certain age, until adulthood. I don't want to happen to her what happened to me. I don't want it. *Male08, 18 years old, closed regime*

Being a parent while in custody represents a significant challenge for the young person as well as for the institution. News on children and childhood themes seems to awaken these young people to a complex reality that has common characteristics with many of their own past experiences. Furthermore, regarding this matter, almost all participants expressed the view that there was a regular violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child when children's issues are the main theme ('In the news they only care when a parent does not want a child or a mother that leaves her son, only then they talk about it.' *Male12, 15 years*

*old, open regime*; 'I think the media do not respect the rights of the child.' *Female05, 14 years old, semi-open regime*). The need to have a more constructive perspective on the enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the country was suggested.

News about crime and delinquency tends to generate great ambivalence. At one level, some participants showed an attitude that reveals a degree of shock and bewilderment by analysing, now in custody, their own criminal offences and consequences from a distance, in an apparent movement of internal reflection ('Then I appeared in the newspaper, but I did not see it. I don't like to see these things, you know, things that are mine... Now, if I were to see it, I would become sad.' *Male13, 17 years old, semi-open regime*). At another level, other participants showed a sense of admiration and identification by being portrayed in the news. The news in which they were the protagonists was seen as a way to make real their own deviant trajectory, which has led to several consequences, such as the reinforcement of that pathway ('I saw it on the news and it gave me joy (...) I said to the police that I was shown as a hero on the news...' *Male14, 18 years old, semi-open regime*). Others look at the news in a different way by starting to rediscover and question their own criminal offences ('When I read the news on what I did, I felt guilty for having done something terrible that I know it was me.' *Male04, 15 years old, semi-open regime*).

The findings highlighted a tendency towards the internalization of a negative expectation presented in the news, and mentioned by them — 'in other people's eyes, we're always the problem!' (*Female03, 16 years old, semi-open regime*). This can lead to the construction of a social identity that switches between the role of passive actor and victim of the social systems ('I think there's something wrong on the news. They don't tell everything. Maybe delinquency is because of young people who do not have families or the parents had died early and then there was no aid in this country.' *Male08, 18 years old, closed regime*), and the role of author, aggressor, based on a feeling of omnipotence upon the others that justify, to themselves, the criminal offences they had committed ('People of the world can see this "issue" [the educational centre] is not for me. For me, this doesn't have any issue and I've got to a point that I would rather go to adult's prison than to be here. I'd rather be with men.' *Male15, 17 years old, closed regime*).

During the interviews, it was possible to identify how some youngsters tend to vary their responses to questions on the basis of this dual registry as it becomes more favourable to them, according to the circumstances (Fernandes, 2008), both inside or outside the juvenile institution.

### **Young offenders' experiences with journalists**

From young offenders' experiences with journalists, a double role emerges. On the one hand, some had been protagonists, themselves and their families, in highly publicized news about delinquency and crime. On the other hand, prior to placement in the institution, some of these youngsters had been present in the news as any other young person who is well

integrated in the community (in sports, music, theatre, dance, culture, school or youth associations).

The young offenders' general representation of journalists tended to be negative. Most of those interviewed draw a picture of these professionals as someone who is 'always interested in other people's lives whatever the means to reach that purpose' (*Male16, 15 years old, closed regime*). Journalists were mainly perceived as professionals under permanent pressure and in danger of being physically assaulted or beaten when covering or making the news. However, the violence that marks the lives of these youngsters also marks their content of speech towards possible reactions to journalists. In many cases, this notion is based on their previous experiences and contacts with the TV or press professionals before entering the custodial institution, a trend registered by more than a third of those interviewed.

In particular, young offenders highlighted as negative some journalists' lack of respect for the people who are the subject of news. They also pointed out the lack of credibility of many news sources, as they identified little caution and fieldwork in the treatment of information given to the public ('I will give them the advice to speak the truth, right?' *Female02, 16 years old, semi-open regime*; 'They want to do as many interviews, the largest number of reports and all the stuff, but they don't care about the people.' *Male17, 15 years old, open regime*; 'The newspapers are a bit too abusing of personal privacy, journalists try to provoke too much when talking about people.' *Male18, 18 years old, closed regime*).

In their previous experiences with the media, more than a third of the young offenders reported having had direct contact with journalists, pointing out some criticisms regarding their interventions, in a similar fashion identified in other studies (Brophy, 2010). They showed an awareness of their rights and were critical about the journalists' performance, especially about the procedures and ethical principles in handling information about children and young people ('Before speaking, they [the journalists] must have to ask permission ... and then talk to them politely, treat them well.' *Male08, 18 years old, closed regime*; '[The journalist] must respect children. If a child doesn't want to talk about it, he should not to force him to speak, because he must have some reason to not speak that you don't know.' *Male10, 19 years old, closed regime*).

In the interviews, youngsters reported violations in professional and ethical principles when they were contacted by TV or press journalists. They also had many complaints about the ineffectiveness of strategies to protect their identity ('I don't think it was the best way to show my person.' *Female05, 14 years old, semi-open regime*).

Overall, most of the study participants supported the idea that the role of the journalist is limited, mainly by presenting news just focusing on one side of the problem, without a real search for a solution ('In the news they [journalists] present only the issue, they don't question why things happen and why those scenes occur. They don't show the whole picture.' *Male17, 15 years old, open regime*), and suggested that media professionals should give more attention to aspects of personal mistakes and avoid information that does

not respect people ('Trying to learn as much as possible of the good things that young people do and not only the bad ones.' *Male18, 15 years old, semi-open regime*; 'It's important to feel good about a young person, right? We're not different! *Male19, 17 years old, semi-open regime*). In many cases, this opinion is related to the news in which their criminal offences were reported as well as the way they felt stigmatized ('Everyone must think we are all killers! Only about the "princes" [other youth] they speak well, now about the "animals" [the young offenders] they say they're always uneducated or behaved badly or are drug dealers and so on...' *Female06, 15 years old, semi-open regime*). They also stressed there was a lack of concern about explaining the context to better understand all of the available information ('We have to explain everything right to them [the journalists]; otherwise if we don't give them the full explanation, they lie.' *Male11, 16 years old, closed regime*; 'Journalists add more details to make news more attractive.' *Male14, 18 years old, semi-open regime*; 'Journalists do not know how to treat us [the young offenders]; they do not take us seriously or in the right way, so they don't know when it is better to stop and sometimes they insist and it causes a mess...' *Male20, 14 years old, open regime*).

## Conclusion

In this exploratory study, the young offenders' insights into their experiences in accessing TV and press news provided an understanding of the importance of the news in the relation to the world outside custodial institutions and in the rehabilitation process. This research on young offenders was based on a theoretical framework that views them as social actors, which highlights the need to attend to their voices from their own field of action and location, and enables us to understand the active part they play in social dynamics and change (Hagell and Newburn, 1994; Carvalho, 2003, 2013a; Neves, 2007, 2008a; Manso, 2009). This is a population that tends to be an object of media attention, but their own interpretation on social matters has rarely been emphasized (Carvalho and Serrão, 2012).

The Portuguese juvenile justice system does not have a retributive or punitive purpose; it is focused on addressing offending behaviour in a manner appropriate to a young person's development. In a context marked by the deprivation of liberty, through the discussion of a young offender's interests and motivations to watch/read the news the news, it was possible to increase knowledge in the custodial institutions where they were placed and empower youth's participation within a 'child-friendly justice' framework. Having as a starting point the discussion of the TV and press news, some of the participants' opinions on the juvenile proceedings show how the system needs to be more attentive to the core educational and socializing principles.

A more effective juvenile justice system requires the promotion of youth's social responsibility through which rehabilitation can be achieved (Neves, 2008a). Responsibility and autonomy, which are at the basis of the custodial intervention, are not static concepts; these notions are (re)constructed by youth in the social contexts in which they live, and where the media have gained increasingly relevance (Hamley, 2001; Livingstone 2002; Buckingham, 2008; Ponte, 2009; Brophy, 2010). The findings pointed up how news contents

were mainly understood as essential windows to the world: for many participants, reading or watching news was a process sustained by the need for maintaining contact with their communities and the world outside custody. The results show that this population was particularly attentive to what was happening around them, making the news a privileged vehicle for deepening relationships in their peer groups and with the institutional staff within a context of strict rules. They manifested apparently consolidated interests and habits, which the institutions tended to deepen by the easy, but simultaneously controlled under specific regulations, access to news. These trends become more visible where the deprivation of liberty was more restrictive, especially among those placed in closed regime units: the more the system is regulated and closed, the greater the value is assigned by these youngsters to the news content. This conclusion places them in a different position compared to other youth consuming news, once the deprivation of liberty is a crucial variable in the data analysis. Not only was their experience in the juvenile system clearly reflected in their discussion about the news, they also strengthened the relation of some news content with their attitude towards their families, peers and institutions.

Similar to the findings presented by Mâropo (2014) in this journal issue about youth living in neighbourhoods in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, we have confirmed that news discourse plays a significant role in the construction of identity of young offenders placed in juvenile justice institutions by being an important part of their daily lives. The discussion about TV and press news provided significant moments for young offenders to develop a deeper analysis of their life trajectories. Ethical and methodological options were decisive in this research and are reflected in the way the semi-structured interviews had become in-depth interviews that allowed an unexpected introspection into their own lives and into the juvenile justice system. The power of the news to enable this kind of social interaction was clear. Throughout the news they had selected, it was possible to identify how they saw themselves before and after entering the institution, and how they were able to project these into an aftercare future. Our attitude of availability and active listening, associated with the ethnographic moments in the custodial institutions, promoted the creation of moments for the interviewed to express themselves more freely in a strict liberty-depriving context. Their interviews were often marked by strong feelings and mixed emotions, where they clearly were able to show their sadness, anger, and resentment, but also their affection and hope in the future, as any other youth of their age.

Young offenders' agency to analyse and participate in social life has been clearly expressed, and their preferences and motivations regarding news do not seem to differ significantly from those manifested by other social groups with the same age identified in different studies on the same matters (Hagell and Newburn, 1994; Gomes, 2003; Mâropo, 2013, 2014). The news coverage of their neighbourhood was a central topic of interest at the origin of deeper reflections and increasing attention, similar to Mâropo's (2014) research.

It is important to note that there were no significant gender differences, which might suggest both male and female young offenders are present in the same spaces when

involved in delinquency and also subject to the same tensions and conflicts. When placed in custody in the Portuguese juvenile justice system, it seems they have access to the news media in similar conditions. This can lead to an understanding of how both males and females are increasingly challenging traditional children and youth's gender behaviours in Portuguese society (Almeida, 2009), but further research on the enforcement of gendered interventions in a 'child-friendly justice' framework is required.

The young offenders were particularly interested in news on two issues: children in danger, and crime. Their awareness of social problems was high, and their wish to be heard and to intervene was strongly expressed. As such, there is a need to engage more systematically with youth in the juvenile justice system, providing them with real opportunities for developing their potential and constructing and planning for their future. Institutional work requires community engagement in supporting youth focused on a positive and holistic approach towards offenders, recognizing their needs and strengths in a process where the media and journalists may play a decisive role.

Overall, the generalized representation of journalists tended to be a negative one. In this process, they gave special attention to the enforcement of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in news on issues regarding children and youth, and suggested the need to present more positive experiences and events concerning children and youth's participation in social life. This recommendation constitutes valuable information not only for journalists, but also for policy makers.

Through the brief research discussion presented in this essay, the importance of media as a socializing instance becomes clear, similar to previous studies (Hamley, 2001; Livingstone 2002; Gomes, 2003; Buckingham, 2008; Ponte, 2009; Brophy, 2010; Carvalho and Serrão, 2012; Mâropo, 2013, 2014). In this field, the major difference regarding other youth consuming news is the fact that digital media seemed to not be accessible in custody, which was justified by the strict regulations to which youth were subject. But simultaneously, in a time where the media are more present in the life of youth than ever, their answers concerning their habits prior to the enforcement of the liberty-depriving measure did not point out the regular use of the internet when accessing news.

Finally, the ways in which young offenders are seen and presented in the news ultimately influence their behaviour and are reflected in the attitudes and positioning of themselves towards their peers, adults and institutions that cannot be dissociated from their desire to be included in social life. Social relations and actions are shaped by the different points of view that the various individuals and social groups put into play, which includes the way these young offenders wanted to be seen, be known and be presented throughout this study.

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Council of Europe's Recommendation Rec(2003)20, in this paper, the term 'juvenile justice' is used in a broad sense. It refers to 'all legal provisions and practices (including social and other measures) relevant for treating children in conflict with the law' (Doak, 2009, p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> The term 'young offender' is used in a restricted way according to the current Portuguese sentencing framework (Educational Guardianship Law): it refers to a person between 12 and 16 years old who commits an offence qualified by the penal law as crime and, as a result, can be subject to educational measures. As proposed by Neves (2008b), this option is not a way to ontologize a youth's behaviour being instead focused on the formal social reaction.

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<sup>4</sup> More than half of the female participants were of foreign nationality (six from Eastern European countries) associated to transnational organized crime.

<sup>5</sup> Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.

<sup>6</sup> Translated from French.