Ten years of consensual non-monogamies in the media in Portugal

AN ANALYSIS OF NEWS COVERAGE
SHORT REPORT 1 – CNM-MOVES PROJECT
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Short Report of the CNM-MOVES Research Project
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Introduction

The research project "CNM-MOVES: Consensual Non-Monogamies and Social Movements: A Comparative Study of Activism in Portugal and the UK" seeks to make a comparative transnational analysis of how activism and social movements have evolved, organized, and changed, when it comes to consensual non-monogamies (CNMs). Part of this process involves understanding whether these movements are represented in the *media* and how, and what rhetoric and narratives are available to the general public.

This work was carried out under a European Comission Grant, reference 845889; more details can be found at the end of this document.

One of the functions of media, and journalism in particular, is to make new or different realities known to the public, to educate and inform with rigor and impartiality, and to allow the dissemination of diversity present in society.

Studying the way CNMs are represented in the print media in Portugal allows us to understand how the coverage of the theme has evolved, what language was used, which social actors were mobilized to talk about it, and it helps to understand what ideas are passed on to the general public.

In the context of the CNM-MOVES project, analyzing the Portuguese and UK press allows, on the one hand, to identify groups and individuals that are relevant for social movements and, on the other, to understand which narratives reach the public.

Methodology

In order to understand more deeply how the Portuguese print media talk about CNMs, and to allow a later comparison with the UK press, a survey of allusions to CNMs over the last decade was carried out.

Through a collaboration with the company Cision Portugal, all pieces (e.g: news, reports, opinion, editorials) of national and regional print media that contained at least one of the following keywords were collected: "poliamor" OR "poliamoria" OR "não-monogamia consensual" OR "monogamish" OR "relação aberta" OR "casamento aberto" OR "anarquia relacional"[1]. Swinging

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[1] Meaning "polyamory" (with two different spellings), "consensual non-monogamy","monogamish", "open relationship", "open marriage", "relationship anarchy".

was not included in the keyword search as the literature shows that there is little to no activism around it, and as it would greatly increase the number of extraneous results. The search was carried out by a Cision Portugal technician, on 17/01/2020, and reports from 01/01/2010 to 16/01/2020.

Of the 264 original results, five were removed because they were duplicated or because they were invalid entries (e.g.: one of the words listed in a content index), and 22 entries were removed because they did not actually refer to questions about CNMs. In the end, 237 entries remain, which constitute the total *corpus* of this analysis.

A coding grid for Computer-Assisted Content Analysis was created, using the NVivo 12 software, which focused on identifying social actors, themes, frameworks, geographical references and other details, some of which are present in this Short Report. The text genre (e.g.: opinion, brief, news, reportage), the place and the date of the publication were identified in the research, but omitted from this Report for the sake of brevity.

What follows is a compilation of the main results obtained, focusing on the themes, social actors and approaches chosen by media editors. The results are presented as percentages of the total articles in the *corpus*.

Main results

1 - Which non-monogamies?

The keywords used to do the research partially limit the types of CNMs present in the news coverage. Even so, more types of CNMs were contemplated than those used for searching the database, and it is important to note the difference in the distribution of references.

Polyamory	74.26
Open Marriages	24.89
Open Relationship	15.61
Swinging	9.70
Polygamy	8.44
Free love	4.22
Cruising	3.80
Relationship Anarchy	2.11
Communes	1.69
Monogamish	0.00

Table 1 - Types of NMC, as a percentage of total pieces (N = 237). Project data.

- **Polyamory is the most frequently mentioned type of CNM**, which is in line with research that shows an explosion of its visibility, but also as a catch-all term to various forms of CNMs. More than 74% of the pieces collected mention polyamory.

- **Open marriages come a distant second**, with about 25% of the pieces alluding to them. This points to the importance of marriage as a touchstone for the way relationships are represented. Moreover, and as will be seen later, a good part of the references to open marriages are also references to famous people, present or past.
- **Swinging**, a practice already established with decades of tradition, both nationally and internationally - and even with its own commercial spaces - is another major reference in news stories, with **nearly 10%** of mentions. A few references contain polygamy, although most of these references are not culturally specific - many pieces used "polygamy" as a synonym for "polyamory" or other CNMs.

2 - Which people?

The way in which sources are presented in news pieces is important, as it allows us to understand who is given a voice, who has the legitimacy to comment on each topic, and also allows us to understand whether or not social movements are successful in attracting attention media and co-determine CNMs' narratives.

Not all sources have the same type of legitimacy, and not all are framed in a similar way, often using 'specialized' sources to establish a higher 'truth'.

People in CNMs	48.52
Celebrities	32.49
Scientists from other Social and Human Sciences	22.36
Fictional characters	21.10
CNM activists	15.19
Psychologist	13.08
Policymakers / stakeholders	6.75
Non-CNM activists	3.38
Scientists of Sciences Natural	2.53
NGOs not linked to CNMs	2.11
Companies	0.84
Religious movements	0.84
Other Exact Science Scientists	0.84

Table 2 - Types of social actors present, as a percentage of the total number of pieces (N = 237). Project data.

- **More than half of the pieces (51 %) do not include people living in CNMs**. However, coding is done from the way these people are presented, and not from a legitimacy check on whether or not any practice constitutes CNM from a more sociological point of view. This means that much of

the news coverage about CNMs is done in the absence of the people behind these experiences, and that their voices are considered dispensable.

• **Celebrities** show up in a considerable amount of pieces collected - **almost 33%** speak of one or more people with a high degree of public visibility, such as philosophers, cinema and theater professionals, and others. In fact, many of the references had only to do with news or rumors associated with behaviors of celebrities.

• Scientists and academics in the field of social sciences and humanities are also present in various news, with **psychology** being frequently represented (**13% of the pieces**). It is important to consider here that several people who live in CNMs and/or who campaign around CNMs are also mentioned as having completed academic studies in the social sciences and humanities.

• **Fictional characters are mentioned in about 21% of the pieces**. This includes references to books or plays that address relational issues, but also allusions to historically relevant works (e.g.: *A Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert Heinlein, a famous book within some polyamorous communities).

• **Activism (as a political form of action)** - **only 15%** of the pieces include people identified as activists, and less than 7% referenced politicians or public stakeholders. From these results, it is possible to see that the political side of CNMs is largely removed from the processes of news coverage.

3 - Which aspects?

In addition to identifying who speaks or what type of CNMs are mentioned, it is also important to understand what aspects are referred to, in order to identify the main axes of media attention. These allow us to further explore what is prioritized by media planning in Portugal.

Relational dynamics	68.78
Lack of visibility of relational diversity	13.50
Informal or interpersonal discrimination	10.97
Polymarriage	5.06
Formal discrimination	4.64
Criminal Law	3.80
Representations erroneous of CNMs	3.80
Polyparenting	3.38
Internalized polyphobia	3.38
Inheritance or shared ownership of property	2.53
Education	0.42

Table 3 - Aspects of the mentioned CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 237). Project data.

• Each of the **legal issues** (e.g., criminal legislation on bigamy or inheritance and property) is **mentioned in about 5%** of the sources or less; the most common reference (5%) has to do with the possibility of having multiple marriages.

• **Informal discrimination (11%)** or references to problems linked to lack of information available on CNMs (14%), which would point to more reflective and socially critical dimensions, are also rare elements.

• The **vast majority of news pieces focuses on relational dynamics (69%)**. This means that the way relationships work ends up capturing a good part of the media attention, transforming news into an exploration of relational strategies or problems, rather than focusing on all the social ramifications that result from it.

4 - What frameworks?

Searching for media frameworks means looking for the way in which certain facts or ideas are put in articulation with each other; how they are ordered and presented, how they are made coherent.

Sexual Expression	63.71
Alternative to Monogamy	34.18
Normalization	27.85
New Generational Trends	13.92
Social/Cultural Corruption	13.08
D/Evolution of Gender	11.39
Future of Relationships	9.70
Fetishization	9.28
Reflection of Neoliberalism	9.28
Pathologization	8.02
Sexual Perversion	6.75
Religion and Spirituality	3.80
Free Love Revivalism	2.95
'External' influences	2.11

Table 4 - Frameworks used for CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 237). Project data.

• Placing **CNMs as a form of sexual expression or intimacy** is by far the most frequent framework, used in **64%** of the articles. This data points, once again, to a kind of individualization of the phenomenon, although it is relevant to mention that, for better or worse, some references also link CNMs to changes related to gender dynamics (11%), impacts of neoliberalism (9%), sociocultural 'corruption' (13%) or the idea that CNMs are a 'new generational' trend (14%).

• **CNMs as normal (28%) or as an alternative to monogamy (34%)** are also relatively common, pointing to an integrative perspective on these realities.

• In other pieces, **fetishization (9%), pathologization (8%), or sexual perversion (7%)** are some of the frameworks used that contribute to increasing the stigmatization of people in CNMs and show how the media contribute to the promotion of mononormativity - that is, monogamy as the only socially valid discourse on loving relationships.

5 - With what tone?

The tone of the journalistic pieces is another important element to understand how a topic comes to public attention. Although the idea of journalistic objectivity is an underlying assumption of how newsrooms work, opinion pieces are not subject to this criterion, and even journalism itself should not be exempt when it comes to safeguarding issues related to Human Rights.

Positive	30.80
Neutral	29.54
Negative	17.30
Mixed	12.24
Satire	8.44

Table 5 - Tone used in pieces on CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 237). Project data.

The **majority of the pieces are positive (31%) or neutral (30%)**. However, 17% are negative and 8% contain elements of satire in relation to the topic at hand, demonstrating that journalism still deals with minorities in a potentially discriminatory way. Even so, there are observable differences between opinion articles and news, which are more neutral.

6 - In what geographical areas?

Portugal	65.40
USA	29.54
Brazil	7.59
United Kingdom	3.38
Germany	2.11

Table 6 - Countries most frequently referred to in pieces on CNMs, as a percentage of the total pieces (N = 237). Project data.

Although **65% of the pieces focus partially or exclusively on national events or people**, 30% also contain references to the USA and 8% to Brazil, showing the role of the USA in terms of the ability to attract media and thematic attention in what concerns CNMs; and linguistic and historical proximity to Brazil as another relevant geographic nexus.

Discussion

Over the past decade, CNMs have been represented more frequently. However, there is no increase over time. In the two years with the

most news and opinion pieces - 2011 and 2019 – most mentions are linked to celebrities or public shows. This, in turn, sometimes connects with more attention to CNMs in in-depth articles.

Still, **a great deal of media representation around CNMs focuses on everyday relationship management**, either by people unknown to the general public or celebrities. The ability of people recognized as activists to gain media representation is still extremely limited, compared to other social actors.

Likewise, CNMs as a social and political category or an issue within legal, fiscal, and human rights' frameworks, seems to be still mostly absent from the news coverage, perhaps demonstrating an excessive journalistic attention to the "human side" of the news, without seeking to delve sufficiently into the possible social and political implications of the topic covered.

Even so, it is worth noting that specific events, due to their news value, focus media attention at specific moments - in this data set, events such as the entry of a person who claimed to be "suffering from polyamory" to a TV reality show, the sharing of results associated with the INTIMATE project (2014-19) of the Center for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra, or the premiere of a play where "polyamory" was one of the topics covered.

The tone of the media coverage is far from uniform, and it is closely related to the type of piece under consideration - while the news is generally neutral or positive, the in-depth reports are clearly positive and the opinion pieces or letters from readers are clearly negative or even satirical.

Partly because of how relevant celebrities are in these results, the USA is frequently featured, showing the powerful impact of Anglo-American culture and media.

It is also relevant to note how much the word "polyamory" has spread through media culture. This attention to the term is not exclusive to Portugal - research at the international level shows that the word has become almost synonymous with the total of CNMs.

To reinforce this conclusion, a relevant fact that was left *out* of the set of pieces analyzed in this Short Report: several pieces were excluded from the analysis because the word "polyamory" was used as a metaphor for, among other things, inter-party political connections. It is highly interesting here to mention the references to the tripartite parliamentary coalition that has constituted Government in Portugal since 2015. The term that became popular when talking about this coalition was "contraption"[2], but several commenters decided to speak of a "polyamorous marriage" among the three coalition parties and /

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[2] "Geringonça", in the original.

or their respective representatives. The use of the word, without further explanation or definition, shows how far it has spread in Portuguese media.

Overall, data shows how **there is an individualizing, and therefore potentially depoliticizing, focus in the media narratives around CNMs**. There is a predominance of psychological discourse, a common absence of people who self-identify with CNMs, and an almost total absence of people who self-identify as CNM activists. There is a lack of representation of people linked to policymaking, few references to legal issues or potentially controversial elements like polyparenting or polymarriage.

It is also possible to observe a **discrepancy between (biased) opinion pieces and (more neutral) journalism**, suggesting the possibility of a culture of generalized discrimination against people in CNMs (a view supported by other studies).

In light of the project's overall objectives, it is important to note that, although polyamory seems to have entered mainstream vocabulary, the **media agenda is mostly not responsive to the claims and arguments presented by CNM activists in Portugal**, demonstrating a limited ability of CNM activism to make their voices heard and to impact media representations.

A more in-depth analysis of the published texts may complement these results with Discourse Analysis, in order to explore the wider symbolic and ideological implications of these media representations. This Report, however, focuses only on a more generalist Content Analysis, in order to capture general trends in media coverage during the last decade.

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Thanks, Funding, More Information

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