

CITIZENSHIP, CITY COUNCILS AND MEDIA IN BRAZIL

News as an incentive to strengthen democracy

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ABSTRACT

The process of the strengthening of Brazilian democracy includes the now existing city councils, institutions of popular participation and citizenship which permit the expression of several community sectors and social actors in the regulation of public policies in areas such as public health care and educational systems, development and the rights of children, adolescents and the elderly. The media assume an important role in this context as they depict city councils' activities in a positive or a negative image, encouraging or discouraging participation. This paper indicates how these bodies were represented by ten newspapers from six regions of the State of São Paulo, offering parameters to evaluate the quality of the democratic culture composed by the media in the most densely populated state of the country. The media were found to be exerting a positive potential role in making democracy more effective on municipal levels.

KEY-WORDS

Media, city councils, citizenship, brazilian re-democratization.

Introduction

There are particular purposes for the scientific approach to the diverse relations between communication, society and citizenship in Brazil, a country that experienced, in 2006, its fifth presidential election under the democratic regime initiated in 1985, after 21 years of a military dictatorship starting in 1964.

As a shared goal with their counterparts in other democratic countries, the Brazilian media researchers analyze, this being one of their main objects, problems in messages from the media supposedly meant to inform the public. The objective, in this context, is to check whether there are distortions, whether certain aspects are furtively more emphasized while others are neglected, in what ways implicit meanings stimulate the adherence to some ideas or their rejection, etc.

A There are also researches that evaluate mechanisms through which the media can strengthen or undermine common practices of an electoral democracy, and encourage or discourage citizenship and participation in social groups, community associations, unions and public councils. In this case, there are prolific theories and detailed empirical studies, in addition to ample investigations which bring new chapters to the scientific work tradition in Brazil (AZEVEDO, 2000; FRANÇA et al, 2003; GOHN, 2000; GOMES, 2004; LIMA, 2001; MATOS, 1994; MIGUEL, 2000; MOTTA et al, 2002; PORTO, 2002; ROTHBERG, 2003 and 2004; RUBIM, 2004a and 2004b; SOARES, 1996 and 1999; WEBER, 2000).

The point which might add some deeper concerns in this context regards political institutions that have been created since the Brazilian process of re-democratization was started in 1985. Thus it must be stressed that the city administration level, which has unique characteristics among government structures, has become a center of interest that deserves special attention from researchers. This happens in Brazil because the country has seen, since the promulgation of a new Constitution in 1988 which marked a turning point in the country's political environment, the multiplication of city councils in areas such as public health care system, education, social care, rights of children, adolescents and the elderly, urban development and investment in tourism and travel businesses, which aim to satisfy a democratic demand.

These political institutions have created channels through which civil society can express itself and participate in the definition of public policies, contributing, in this manner, to minimizing a tradition of authoritarianism in Brazilian politics, very deep-rooted in the Executive and Legislative Branches¹. This process can be seen as a development in political institutions which is probably followed by a correlated impact on media and journalism practices, as suggested by the pertinent literature (ALBUQUERQUE, 2005; HALLIN and MANCINI, 2004; HALLIN and PAPANASSOPOULOS, 2002). This paper is engaged in exploring some aspects of that relation.

Therefore, considering the potential role of the frames built by means of communication in shaping a political culture, relevant research purposes have arisen in Brazil: to identify the perspectives from which the media focus on the city councils' performance, aiming to offer subsidies to evaluate the quality of democratic thinking and to verify whether these now existing instruments of political participation and citizenship are discerned positively as legitimate and efficient, or negatively as mere obstacles to the process of legislative and governmental decision.

These purposes were put in practice by an investigation conducted in 2004 and focused on news of ten different newspapers from six administrative regions of the State of São Paulo, the most densely populated state in Brazil. These are the means of communication which have their files accessible on the Internet and present extensive coverage on city councils' decisions.

In the first place, this article traces main aspects of the role of city councils in the process of re-democratization in Brazil from the 1990s on. Following that, it characterizes starting points of the investigation, performed under the auspices of a research group of the Universidade do Sagrado Coração (*University of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*), a non-profit organization located in Bauru, a city of 350,000 inhabitants in the western part of the State of São Paulo. After this, methodological procedures are presented. At the end, the most relevant aspects of the results are described and analyzed². The selected newspapers were found to be exerting a positive potential role in making democracy more effective on municipal levels.

Participation and communication

In Brazil, after the promulgation of the new Federal Constitution in 1988, the matter of channels of political participation took on a different aspect. This document set the scene for the rebirth of the democratic institutions, after the fall, in 1985, of the military dictatorship established by a *coup d'état* in 1964.

The process of writing a new Constitution was based, says Dagnino (2002: 10), on the “recognition of the importance of authoritarian mechanisms that, historically deep-rooted, have organized Brazilian society in its totality”, according to a tradition of “clientelism” as well, in which political decisions are taken not as a consequence of public demand, but as a result of the exchange of favors among elites. This conjuncture was fed by a political situation in which city halls, along with state governors, used to make the majority of their decisions without public scrutiny.

The new law opened the path to the creation of different institutions, invested with the purpose of changing the previous frame of blocked participation channels. Thus it defines the cities as a starting point from which a significant political project of decentralization of administrative power should be built, contributing to “strengthening a point of view

that locates the struggle for democracy at the very center of civil society” (DAGNINO, 2002: 10).

The 1988 Constitution allowed larger transferences of funds directly to the cities, according to a new system of tax administration and distribution. As a consequence, the “cities began to have a higher number of duties, either in social policies or other spheres that include infrastructure projects, employment and public safety programs and local strategies to improve economic activities”, says Kerbaury (2002: 2).

The whole process resulted, according to Dagnino (2002: 10), in the construction of a new citizenship, mainly based on the definition of a citizen as an “individual who has rights, including that one related to real participation in society’s administration”. And yet this route was not homogeneous; instead, it was characterized by dispute among different political projects which revealed their own limits, compressed by the new situation begun in the 1990s, when the “effect of the structural adjustments established by neo-liberal policies brought significant difficulties to the pace of democratic development”.

Nevertheless, the capacity for mobilization and political organization of civil society has reached new levels. Tatagiba (2002: 47) analyzes that the 1990s marked the emergence of an active movement of “social actors involved with the shared invention of new arrangements and designs of policies”:

The aggravation of social problems and of the crisis which has distinguished the public sector — with a growing demand from social sectors for the control of the state and its policies — has produced, on the one hand, the questioning of centralism as an authoritarian and discriminatory pattern that has characterized the relationship between the governmental agencies and the beneficiary of public policies (emphasizing the necessity of democratization of the process) and, on the other hand, the questioning of the capacity of the state to respond to social needs (emphasizing the matter of efficiency in the search for results).

The vigorous process of creation of city councils which has taken place in Brazil basically resulted in three kinds of institutions.

The first type corresponds to the councils of childhood and youth guardianship. These institutions have a unique status, as their members are the only ones among all the councils who are elected for the job and receive salaries. Every city must have at least one council (it may be necessary to have more than one, depending on the size of the population), which takes on the duty of protecting children and adolescents from

abuse. Councilors must be aligned with social work assistants and follow the determinations given by a specific legal department. These are the only councils which actually perform some activity in the places where the problems happen, e.g. preventing criminal behavior when they are able to count on support from the police.

These councils have another important role, as they are responsible for the supervision of special institutions which take care of children and adolescents from poor families. These people often become homeless and survive by begging on the streets or sometimes mugging. So they are particularly vulnerable and require a systemic social work approach which, although it has achieved notable progress, still needs improvements and increasing resources.

The second kind of councils is represented by those which are not linked to a specific legislation and thus remain only connected to representative social and political profiles of a city, in areas such as environment, public transportation and urban development. They do not have, in fact, legal functions, and operate only as consultative bodies, giving the society, however, several channels of participation in the debate about the formulation of public policies. Their members are appointed by the groups or social segments relevant to each area involved, in an unspecified peer composition (for example, in one city, engineering and architectural professionals can be over-represented in a city council of urban development; in another city, an economic sector can be more influential, depending on the local configuration of political forces).

The third type of city councils in Brazil corresponds to those originating in specific sectors such as public health care system, social care, education and rights of children, adolescents and the elderly. They have legally defined functions, and the cities can obtain more federal financial resources when they have solid representative bodies like these. They do not execute activities aimed at producing concrete results; they only deliberate about priorities, seeking to define the correct alignment between public demands and plans to distribute public resources. Besides, they act as supervisors, subjecting investments in public health and educational systems, for example, to close monitoring and control. Their members are also appointed by the groups or social segments relevant to each area involved, but in this case there are rules to peer composition, which must equally reflect the several areas involved (for example: in a city council for the public health care system, doctors, nurses, hospital managers and ordinary citizens must have similar participation).

All three kinds of councils operate in a separate sphere from state institutions, although they interact with the mayor and the municipal legislative council and in fact depend on financial resources from the city administration in order to cover costs relative to their maintenance.

A level of accuracy and consolidation of local democracy is given by the representativeness of a council. If its composition reflects a wider range of multiple sectors involved in a certain area, it tends to be more successful in linking major public needs to an efficient distribution of a large amount of resources. But if its members are found to maintain clandestine connections with the mayor, members of the local legislative council or even with businessmen interested in getting contracts with the city administration, its legitimacy declines and then the whole function for which it was created fails.

In this context, the process remains in a slow pace of maturation, Tatagiba (2002: 88) indicates. After all, “even if they are challenged by an authoritarian political culture, experiences of participation through councils have come to be regarded as important moments of democratic learning, in the sense of building a new political culture”. There is, according to the author, “an ongoing tendency that, even though it is fragile compared with the prevailing pattern, seems to be pointing towards the democratization of political and social relations in Brazil”.

The conflicts between old and new patterns of politics are taken into account by Wampler (2000: 5):

The parameters of political conflict in Brazil's new democracy have been established, on the one hand, by traditional politicians seeking to restrict the breadth of change and, on the other, by democratic reformists working to deepen actual, existing democracy. Traditional politicians have governed by reinforcing the authority of the executive branch, emphasizing private decision-making venues, and eschewing the participatory institutions inscribed in the 1988 Constitution. Democratic reformists, on the other hand, have sought to expand the number of access points, to increase direct citizen participation in policymaking venues, and to extend the range of contentious issues in the public debate.

Hybrid participatory institutions and traditional representative institutions established in the 1988 Constitution greatly expanded the number and range of decision-making venues. Yet efforts to utilize these new institutions faced stiff challenges from traditional politicians who have little to gain from either the spirit or practice of democratic rule. Traditional political elites actively resist efforts to establish the rule of law, to open decision-making authority, and to promote horizontal accountability.

Thus the possibility of overcoming the obstacles depends on the strengthening of the idea of political participation of civil society in channels currently institutionalized as a factor salutary to the very affirmation of citizenship. As the “social authoritarianism, hierarchical and discriminatory views of society and politics constitute crucial obstacles to the construction and operation of public arenas”, says Tatagiba (2002: 280), the “weight of the cultural sources in the process of democratic evolution (...) is an essential component” of the context that must be confronted in the trajectory of the consolidation of Brazilian democracy.

It can be said that this course has been successful, according to certain indicators. “Social movements, particularly in the areas of public health, urban reform and social care have been building a whole work of institutionalized participation”, says Guimarães (2004: 201).

But this author indicates the existence of barriers, such as the “disruptive and instrumental strains coming from the mass media”. As the means of communication take on a privileged role in building and transmitting representations of a cultural and ideological nature, the need for the construction of a culture of citizenship faces problems. Media are businesses and, therefore, have particular interests, which are not always compatible with the imperative of progressive maturation of a democratic system.

Journalism, newsmaking and framing

In Brazil, where the market has shaped almost every medium³, this obstacle is studied, among others, by Gomes (2004: 52), who characterizes journalism’s ethics and its social field, understood as a space with specific professional rules:

The mechanisms of communication were gradually accepted in the social sectors of information and mass culture as elements entirely intended to satisfy their intrinsic interests and not the interests of the communication of any other social sector, unless they are compatible.

In this manner, the author points out (2004: 55), a particular social field arises, determined by “perspectives of profits which strategically define decisions, choices and preferences of journalists”, who are involved in the processes by which the problems, methods and strategies that can be considered as truly journalistic are selected.

This matter is, according to Gomes (2004: 56), essential in order to understand the relations between communication and society in Brazil:

As industrial sectors, movies, radio, press and television work like any of the systems that comprise the economic field, that is, they are directed toward assuring the largest possible profit and are concerned about satisfying the more numerous clientele and the biggest possible number of advertisers, as well as pleasing the largest audience they can possibly obtain.

This leads us to the concept of newsmaking, understood, in the words of Wolf (1999, p. 188), as a group of criteria that defines the relevance of a single fact and the possibility of it becoming a piece of news, and that is essentially given by two factors: the professional culture of the journalists and their methods of work organization. Both are configured as components of a corporate routine of a business conducted to maximize profit.

Criteria of relevance which are helpful to establish the *newsworthiness* of a fact emerge in this context, in connection with four axes: a) the very content of the piece of news that is expected; b) the availability of raw material, considering the nature of the means of communication (printed, audio-visual, electronic etc); c) the profile of the target public for each informative product; d) the competition faced in each situation.

The first axis refers, according to Wolf (1999: 201), to the degree and hierarchical level of the individuals involved in an event, to the supposed impact on national interest, to the number of people that the event involves or who might have their lives affected by it and to the relevance of the event to other probable events in the perspective of the future evolution of a specific situation.

The second axis is related to the possibility of an event being manipulated by the usual techniques of a means of communication - that is, if there is raw material available, also considering the resources accessed by journalists. In this case, evaluations about the very nature of the news are taken into consideration. Here, news is understood as something that breaks up daily life's normality and facilitates the creation of the spectacle of information — many times seen as indispensable to attract the public.

Reflections on the third axis are centered on the image that journalists from a specific means of communication have of their target public. In this case, events are chosen according to a certain representation, built

by a medium with more or less rigor, of the expectations and preferences of receptors-probable buyers.

Finally, the fourth axis is related to an assessment of the expected competitors' actions. On the one hand, this criterion stimulates the search for scoops. However, on the other hand, it discourages innovation, since there will always be the risk of the public rejecting something that seems too distant from habitual patterns of coverage utilized by the media in general. The result is, it can be said, a sort of standardization of the segmentation among editors and of the actual newsmaking criteria.

Moreover, newsmaking criteria are needed to speed up journalistic tasks. "That is, they are inserted in the procedures of production, because that is where they obtain their meaning, perform their role and take the appearance of 'common sense' that makes them, apparently, definitive elements", emphasizes Wolf (1999: 215).

The employment of newsmaking criteria in journalistic coverage generates implicit meanings and perspectives, which can be taken into account by the research in communication as elements placed within frames. That is, as long as the process of framing can be understood as an inevitable journalistic procedure, not necessarily planned, frames are the natural consequence of newsmaking criteria being applied in newsrooms.

Framing involves selection, exclusion and emphasis of information or interpretations, combined in a piece of news according to a specific sense of *newsworthiness*. In this sense, a journalist, when selecting the material supposedly appropriate for a story, bases his choice on personal and corporate views of what is valued by readers. The result of that judgment can be seen in the news as a frame, which certainly contains, on an implicit level, particular perspectives on many issues. As Entman (1993: 52) explains, "to frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described" (italics in the original).

Although a full frame can "define problems", "diagnose causes", "make moral judgments" and "suggest remedies", according to Entman (1993: 52), "a frame in any particular text may not necessarily include all four functions".

Therefore, the frames identified by this research contained a depiction of the situations in which a city council operates such that the very existence of this body seemed to be highly welcomed — an implicit

sense that can be seen as an important value with which a new political institution is presented. Along with this, the diagnoses offered by the councilors were depicted positively, as well the remedies proposed by them.

It can be said that framing theory validates this approach. “Frames highlight some bits of information about an item that is the subject of a communication, thereby elevating them in salience”, Entman points out (1993: 53). “The word salience itself needs to be defined: It means making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences”. So, if a piece of news shows that a city council is working in order to solve a serious matter of allocation of public funds, and its proposed measures are in fact producing the expected results, this is salience of information which brings the perception that a specific democratic design is working well and deserves public support.

When the question is, as in the focus of the present study, what kind of support for democracy would be emerging from the performance of the media, a major concern is to find out the characteristics of the frames with which city councils are being depicted. Hence the goal of the research, which was devoted to perceiving whether the implicit perspectives for viewing those institutions in stories of selected newspapers of the State of São Paulo were valuing or devaluing them, and therefore were capable of encouraging or discouraging the participation in the channels provided by them, besides strengthening or weakening them as mechanisms of democratization. The evidence presented below supports the idea that the media were exerting a positive potential role in making democracy more effective.

Goals and methodological considerations

Under the supervision of the author of this paper, a research conducted with the participation of a group of students in the undergraduate journalism course at the Universidade do Sagrado Coração (*University of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, Bauru, São Paulo, Brazil)⁴ had as its purpose the evaluation of frames in the news coverage of city councils presented by ten newspapers of six administrative regions of that state, which are accessible on the Internet⁵. The focused councils were related to areas such as public health care system, education, social welfare, rights of children, adolescents and the elderly, urban development and investment in tourism and travel businesses.

The news frames identified by the research were classified in categories, which mainly indicated three aspects: a) whether the councils of each area were depicted with a positive or negative approach, and the reason or explanation for this; b) which were the most common sources of the stories, the reasons for those choices and which were the most common subjects involved in the reported city councils' performance; c) whether the councils were depicted as a source of conflicts, and among which social and political actors.

It must be stressed that a news frame is neither necessarily outlined in an explicit way by a journalist, nor is it specified with recognizable arguments. Thus this research group took, as a methodological procedure, the perspective that the investigation should concentrate on the general outlook offered by an analyzed story. It is to be expected that a journalist, writing strictly informative (not interpretative) news, will not state in as many words that a specific council "operates positively in order to support those who are benefited from public health care services". However, the positive value assigned by a journalist to a specific council will be logically noticeable in an informative piece of news that characterizes, for example, the strategy adopted by a council in order to achieve the extension of availability of medical attendance in a certain hospital.

Frames like these were considered, within the scope of this research, in terms of the *preferred readings* of the analyzed media, and cannot of course be assumed to be the only possible reading. This principle of caution, employed in the assessment of the stories, corresponds to a careful attitude taken by researchers, who were not allowed to have the last word about the main meaning of a story. Indeed, they adopted what were thought to be adequate scientific procedures, listing both salient and non-salient aspects of the stories.

And in fact the analyses often noticed competing meanings in a single text, which were carefully described on the appropriate sheets. However, in the final phase of the study, an ultimate judgment had to be made in order to produce an intelligible understanding of the patterns of the frames found in the whole sample. But those patterns were not pre-determined; instead, they emerged from the stories, in a slow process of filling data sheets and evaluating the entire sample with appropriate figures produced by a simple software programming scheme. Thus the main frames presented below are supported by a relatively large number of occurrences of salient aspects in the stories about a specific council.

There were, as could be expected, some texts which did not fit into the main patterns of frames (or the preferred readings) identified when the full number of stories was appraised. However, they were not many, and so they did not jeopardize the coherence of the existing evidence that supported the findings. They may, however, be used in future research, devoted to searching for the perception of minor, but nevertheless important, aspects of the subject.

Despite the adoption of these procedures, which can be seen as related to a bourdieusian concept of epistemological vigilance, there was a methodological concern which could not be properly taken into account. Whether the readers would possibly show some resistance to the preferred readings and, according to their own stock of knowledge and experiences, build diverse understandings, was not possible to verify. As Tuchman (1993: 40) indicates, this point cannot be dismissed: "Yes, the media seem hegemonic. They offer preferred readings. But even relatively uneducated individuals and groups of working people have their own thematic understandings of the social and political word. Researchers must realistically take these into account".

Due to limitations of time and resources, audience research was not carried out. And yet the results, supported by strong evidence, were considered coherent enough to offer some interesting perceptions about the potential role of the media in a context of urgent need for deepening democracy. Therefore, it is not possible to say for sure whether the stories did influence the readers, leading them to a certain understanding of the councils' activities and decisions which can be considered salutary for democracy. In spite of this restriction, at least it is possible to point out a strong likelihood that the media had been acting in that direction, as the majority of their stories depicted the city councils in a very positive manner, valuing them as instruments of citizenship and encouraging participation through the channels they have created.

Results

The results and conclusions presented below came from the analysis of 461 stories, published from January to September 2004 by the selected newspapers, which refer to activities performed by city councils.

The councils of childhood and youth guardianship and defense of the rights of children and adolescents received the largest number of stories: 41.8% (193 texts). The coverage of subjects involving these councils' operations was substantial. If the whole number of 461 stories is to be

considered a set of journalistic focuses that represents the importance given by the selected newspaper to the municipal instances of democratic participation in general, it can be noticed that both areas were worthy of special attention.

In second place, considering the city councils that captured the attention of the selected newspapers, are the councils of the public health care system (20.6% of the stories, or 95 texts), followed by investment in tourism and travel businesses (8.9%, 41 texts), cultural and architectural development (7.6%, 35 texts), support for the elderly (7.1%, 33 texts) and education (3.2%, 15 texts).

The remaining 10.8% (49 texts) of the stories referred to other kinds of councils which, at the time of the research, did not exist in all the cities which were studied, as bodies devoted to stimulating local cultural production and to create measures to fight racism. These stories, as they referred to isolated fields only in a few cities, have not been assessed yet, although they may be so in the future, when more evidence may be added.

The high exposure of childhood and youth guardianship and defense of the rights of children and adolescents must be taken carefully. On the one hand, which is positive, it means that the analyzed media were paying attention to the violence perpetrated against these groups and constantly reporting abuses, in order to verify what had been done by the councils to respond to the problems of the community. One of the aspects that corroborate this perspective is the presence in the stories of detailed information on the solutions proposed by the presidents of the councils to prevent risky situations which threaten the safety and development of children and adolescents.

An outstanding journalistic practice was found in relation to a mission of vigilance exerted by a newspaper, with support from councilors, on the infrastructure maintained by a municipal government in order to provide proper education for poor young people. According to one of the stories within this pattern, from the newspaper "Diário do Grande ABC" (April 24, 2004), for example, the shortage of vacancies in vocational courses was due to a "failure in the social work assistance programs offered by the municipal governments of this region, in the opinion of councilors for the defense of the rights of children and adolescents and of the childhood and youth guardianship councilors who were interviewed by 'Diário do Grande ABC'".

In another story, the city council for defense of the rights of children and adolescents appears as a partner of the private sector in fighting

typical problems of an emerging country. “The Group of Entrepreneurs for Support for Children and Adolescents of Bauru and the City Council for Rights of Children and Adolescents invite entrepreneurs, social welfare institutions’ representatives and authorities to the launching of the project *No child on the streets* (...). Children and adolescents who live or spend their day begging on the streets will be attended to”, writes the journalist (“Jornal da Cidade de Bauru”, May 21, 2004).

On the other hand, and this might be a particularly negative characteristic of the coverage of the subject, the high number of reports on childhood and adolescence injuries could be related to an excessive exploitation of violence, including sexual offences, against children and adolescents. Revealing the victim’s suffering attracts readers because it causes empathy. Therefore, emphasizing the pain of those who were victimized by sexual offences or mistreated by their parents can be convenient for journalism practitioners. This practice can be fed by sensationalism, which could take the place of responsible focuses, more relevant if the goal is to provide full enlightenment on the subject. Thus, although it obscures the role of journalism in a democratic society, turning news into an exciting or shocking show could be present in the coverage of these city councils as well.

Furthermore, only 6% of the reports on these councils bring statements of specialists such as psychoanalysts, sociologists and social work assistants. The presence of evaluations from these professionals is considered adequate, from a journalistic point of view, as they enrich the context of the story with assessments about the validity of the decisions made by a council, and because they focus in a more comprehensive way on the social factors which have caused the problems in question. In that case, the stories refuse to explore the crudeness of the facts and begin to create consistent frames of information to the appropriate extent for increasing the readers’ understanding of the causes of the reported problems.

Therefore, dramatic focuses tend to exclude more profound comments from specialists or more embracing contexts, as the finality here will be only to dramatize people’s sufferings in order to make them more attractive to readers. Hence the small number of stories offering points of view from psychoanalysts, sociologists and social work assistants may suggest that the newspapers analyzed might be exploiting the morbidity of violence and sexual offences, which is a journalistic procedure that takes place when the value of more information and comprehensive

context is ignored. This problem occurred, for example, with stories that provided details about the violence perpetrated in one particular case of child abuse, but did not refer to the social and economic factors which might originate such offences, nor to the sort of social work which can prevent them.

A positive aspect is that only 19.7% of the stories about the councils of childhood and youth guardianship and defense of the rights of children and adolescents indicated the existence of conflict between these councils, municipal governments and municipal legislative bodies. Since the number of stories with this kind of approach remained limited, it is possible to say that the journalistic coverage of these councils' activities did not show them as sources of political disputes among different priorities. Instead, their job seemed to be done under a relatively consensual status. If this cannot be used to conclude that the councils' performance has been approved by the local political systems, at least it appears as a reasonable indication of that backing.

Therefore, there are two main aspects in the stories about the councils related to child and youth protection. One lies in the extent of the coverage, which highlighted positively the potential role performed by the media; this can be seen as an indication of the support positively given by the media to a new area of democratization. The other one is the tendency to produce reports characterized by superficiality and sensationalism. As these are, however, frequent aspects of the printed media, both in Brazil and other countries, and may affect many other subjects, they should not be taken as a journalistic fault exclusively related to the newsmaking criteria employed by reports on city councils. Therefore, this problem cannot be assessed as something intrinsic to the frames which were identified here. It is actually a circumstantial indication of improper journalistic procedure, manifested in many other situations, and which deserves further studies to be thoroughly taken into account. That is why the first aspect — the role of a massive coverage that highlights the solutions provided by the councils in each case — will stand here as the major characteristic of that coverage, at least until more evidence can be produced.

The media also seemed to value another core area of the process of democratization. The majority (71.5%) of the 95 stories on the city councils on the public health system in the regions encompassed by the newspapers analyzed reports the forceful performance of those institutions for political administration in the control of the quality of

the services provided by public bodies and in the supervision of the distribution of their resources.

In one story, for example, this vigilance was exerted as a support for the workers in the system with the purpose of pressing the mayor for improvements. “A report from the Union of Workers in the Municipal Public Service of Santo André disapproved of the infrastructure conditions of the building and of the service at the Psychosocial Care Center”, writes a journalist from the “Diário do Grande ABC” (May 18, 2004). “Aguinaldo Teixeira, a representative of the system’s users in the City Council of Public Health, accompanied the inspection made by the union and said that ‘the municipal government had said that it had been looking for a new property for two years. I saw the roof caving in, and broken window panes’”.

A similar approach could be seen in a story from the “Vale Paraibano” (May 19, 2004), in which the city council of the public health care system appeared to clarify the deficiency that needed to be solved. According to the council, the city “has a deficit of 100 doctors”. In response to this the Executive Branch declared it “was evaluating the contracting (...) of 30,000 medical appointees to try to end the five-months wait to receive attention from a doctor in the municipal facilities”. The council’s president reluctantly accepted the proposition, and said that the council “has approved the contracting of doctors, but considers it only a palliative measure”.

Councilors and members of municipal legislative assembly which support the role of the councils for the public health system were shown in a positive manner. And mayors, municipal government secretaries and managers of the public health system were depicted in a negative way when criticizing the councils’ activities.

Almost half (44.2%) of those stories revealed conflicts which occurred between councils of the public health system and the municipal government as a result of the efforts made by the councils when endeavoring to do their job.

This relatively high number suggests that the new formats of city democratic administration still co-exist with a political culture which is frequently contrary to this manner of solving collective problems. Particularly in the area of public health, in which the resources are limited and the demand for services is increasing, many mayors still prefer to resist the vigilance and the power of deliberation exerted by a city council. They prefer to manage local public services according to priorities established in an authoritarian way.

And what gave rise to many stories was in fact an accusation from members of the local legislative council related to an alleged action of a mayor who was supposedly managing public resources without due control by the related council. In that case, the newspapers analyzed were outstanding in carrying out appropriately their function of vigilance regarding the public administration.

Councils for defense of historical and architectural properties were also depicted in a positive way. In 80% of the 35 stories about them, their activities and proposals were presented with details, and this can act as an incentive for readers to be aware of how these issues are addressed by a specific format of municipal administration which is open to the participation of organized civil society. That figure is 82.9% in the case of the 41 stories about councils of tourism; in general, they were depicted as effective instruments in the coordination of public and private investments in tourism and travel businesses.

In turn, the city councils of education were rarely focused on by the newspapers analyzed. This reflects, possibly, the insufficient attention given by journalistic coverage to that issue, which generally depends on official sources that only periodically attract the journalists' interest — in the sporadic publicizing of statistics related to public policies, government reports, new plans etc. Although small in number (15 texts in the whole sample of 461 covering all city councils), all the published stories about those councils depict them as instruments of supervision of the quality of public education and control of the distribution of public resources.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that, although limited, given the recent legal framework furnished by the Statute of the Elderly (Federal Law 10,741, of October 1, 2003), the number of stories about councils for defense of the rights of elderly people was significant: 7.1% of the whole analyzed sample (or 33 stories) valued the performance of these institutions, contributing to create a favorable context for the consolidation of a specific set of rights in the country.

Most of these stories (90.9%) depicted those institutions as efficient means for defense of the interests of this segment of the population.

Thus it can be said that the newspapers analyzed attributed a notable importance to the performance of the city councils as mechanisms for democratization of municipal administration. Therefore, the journalists would be making their contribution to the overcoming of the tradition of a culture characterized by populism and authoritarianism, built as a result of a past history of dictatorship. In this sense, the media would

be making their contribution to the consolidation of citizenship and of the value of participation by civil society in municipal administration. At the same time, they would be helping to increase the rejection of authoritarian practices of government.

NOTES

- 1 A Brazilian city council is different from other political institutions which receive similar nomenclature in some countries. In Brazil, city councils do not have administrative powers, but are invested with the capacity of expressing, as an institutionalized channel, collective demands to the city administration — which is, in fact, exerted by the city hall and its secretaries, mainly, with some functions performed by a local legislative assembly, which can rule limited areas such as urban expansion and taxation, but always under a restricted scope, given the major powers of the states, the federal government and the national legislation.
- 2 This article is a completely new and extended version of a paper originally written for presentation at the Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences, 2005, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.
- 3 The exception is seen in public service broadcasting which remains under the responsibility of the state budgets, insufficient to give TV and radio networks what they need to increase their audiences, currently less than 1%, on the average. Moreover, their statutory position submits them to the control — implicit or explicit — of state governors. See ROTHBERG, D.; SIQUEIRA, A. B. (2005). TV pública e democracia: perspectivas para o Brasil. *Revista Fronteiras – Estudos Midiáticos*, São Leopoldo, v. VII, n. 2, 131-142.
- 4 These are the students: Alessandro Fioco, Aline Maria Fuzisaki Leão, Ana Carolina Teixeira de Mello, Ana Cristina Consalter, André Luis Lourenço, Camila Andreia Cor-rea, Erika Cristina Bandeli, Flávio Rossi Mantovani, Francielle de Oliveira, Gustavo Rechinho Castello Branco, Jaqueline Serra Lopes, José Paulo Toffano, Juliana Poli, Juliano Dip Lencioni, Karina Gerin, Leandro Rocha, Luciana Galhardo Batista, Luis Davi Venturino, Mariana Picaro Cerigatto, Natália de Oliveira Conte, Patrícia Ferreira Ariosi, Rene Rodrigues Lopes, Thereza Belluzzo, Tiago Rodella and Vitor Henrique Godinho.

- 5 These are the newspapers: *Jornal da Cidade*, from the city of Bauru, and *Comércio do Jahu*, from the city of Jaú (Administrative Region [AR] of Bauru); *Correio Popular*, from the city of Campinas, and *Gazeta de Limeira*, from the city of Limeira (AR of Campinas); *A Tribuna*, from the city of Santos (AR of Santos); *Diário da Região*, from the city of São José do Rio Preto (AR of São José do Rio Preto); *Vale Paraibano*, from the city of São José dos Campos, and *Imprensa Livre*, from the city of São Sebastião (AR of São José dos Campos); *O Estado de S. Paulo*, from the city of São Paulo, and *Diário do Grande ABC*, from the ABC Paulista (AR of Metropolitan São Paulo).

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