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LULA VS. LARRY ROHTER

Misconceptions in international coverage

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ABSTRACT This article discusses the conflict between the *New York Times* foreign correspondent Larry Rohter and Brazil's President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva over a story published by the American newspaper on May 9, 2004 accusing the President of being a drunkard. Larry Rohter's piece was criticized for its lack of facts and of reliable sources, and for its ironic overtone. President Lula was criticized for cancelling the journalist's visa, a measure later revoked because of public pressure. The case exemplifies a well-know sequence of misconceptions and stereotypes from both sides (the world's most prestigious newspaper and the president of the largest country in Latin America), which brings to light a much needed discussion on the quality of international news coverage, press freedom and social responsibility. This article also attempts to advance the discussion on how framing – second level agenda-setting —may influence how we think about foreign political leaders.

KEY-WORDS Freedom of expression, Freedom of the press, Human Rights, Regulation, Content analysis.

1- FRAMING FOREIGN POLITICAL LEADERS

U.S. international news coverage has been at a crossroads since the end of the Cold War, which until then offered a model for foreign news coverage to American journalists (PARKER, 1996).

> The end of the Cold War has opened new horizons for the American media, but embedded in that wider perspective is the problem of making sense of a world in which change is the only constant. The old criteria for covering foreign affairs on the East-West confrontation model -- and many of the old standards of newsworthiness -- don't apply in a post-Cold War model". (VANDEN HEUVEL cited in PARKER, 1996).

Parker suggests that American media seem unable to find a coherent frame of reference for organizing costly foreign coverage and, for that reason, may venture off-shore only when U.S. foreign policy has a clear interest at play. During this transition period, the world has become "smaller", more complex and interdependent due in part to the growth of the global economy and advances in communication technologies. Readers now actively check multiple information sources on the Internet, although they still count on traditional media to translate "the world outside", as Walter Lippmann put it in the early 1920s.

In an environment of strong competition for audiences, foreign correspondents struggle to provide their piece of "social reality". They have to cover larger areas, sometimes several countries as in the case of South America. They face suspicion, pressures, restricted access, expulsion and kidnapping. They cope with cultural and language barriers. While new media technology facilitates their work, it has also increased their contact with their base newsroom, which can closely monitor their activities and restrict their ability to provide fresh perspectives that challenge stereotypes (HESS, 2005). In addition, foreign correspondents expected new media technology to free them to pursue their stories in detail. Instead, they have had to file instant reports for online outlets whether they have new information to convey or not, do live inserts on television (we see a lot of "rooftop journalism" these days) and many times work for several media under the same umbrella organization.

Their work faces other issues as well. On one hand, American foreign correspondents, as most U.S. journalists studied by David Weaver (1998), appear to be more concerned with getting the news quickly rather than with offering analysis and investigating government claims. In many cases, news organizations decide the angle and tone before the facts are gathered (HERBERT, 2003), which ends up limiting the reporters' autonomy to follow the natural course of the news stories. On the other hand, the line between reporting and commentary is sometimes unclear. W. Lance Bennett (2001:7) points out that there is a tendency "to report shallow, dramatized news that often put the focus on the most personal and sensational aspects of politics and social life." Bennett contends that such a tendency is not due to journalists'desires, and he attributes it to pressures beyond their control.

Therefore, too many variables play a role in the work of a foreign correspondent, and too much is at stake when they file their stories. They are out there in the world on their own making decisions that will affect the international news flow and influence the readers' views of other peoples and lands. By framing actors and events from their own point of view and/or

the point of view of their news organizations, while bound by professional routines and constraints, foreign correspondents offer a fragmented, somewhat puzzled vision of our mediated knowledge of the world.

Framing involves highlighting aspects of a perceived reality related to an issue or an actor while ignoring others. According to Entman (2004:26), "framing directly promotes interpretations that lead to evaluations." Intentionally or not, consciously or not, foreign correspondents produce moral evaluations, definitions, causal interpretations and/or treatment recommendations, as spelled out by Entman when referring to journalists in general (1993).

The concept of framing, originally created by sociologist Erving Goffman and anthropologist-psychologist Gregory Bateson in the early 1970s, has been successfully applied to understand the media's role in political life (REESE, 2001). Framing emerges as a more far-reaching approach than the traditional gatekeeping concept, which is limited by its "ready-made and unproblematic form at 'the gates' of the media, where news it is either admitted or excluded" (MCQUAIL cited in DURHAM, 2003:124).

Instead, the construction of news through framing involves the ability of reporters and sources to "share ideological assumptions about what constitutes evidence and how to construct a frame with it" (DURHAM, 2003:124). As pointed out by Reese (2001: 20), the power of the frame depends also on journalists' access to resources and strategic alliances, among other aspects. Therefore, facts do not speak for themselves as some editors around the world still claim.

> "What's the angle?" on this story is perhaps the second most frequent question in editorial meetings, second only to 'Who are the sources?'....In most traditional newsrooms the culture of journalism is to determine the basic nature of a story before assembling all, or even most of the facts. Just as many theorists develop a working hypothesis before collecting the data, many journalists are used to formulating the angle, or frame, of a story before they interview anyone, read a document or collect any other facts (PAVLIK 2003: 312).

As other reporters, foreign correspondents frame their news stories. Investigating their framing process is even more relevant today, when agenda-setting research challenges Cohen's assertion that "the press may not be successful in telling us what to think but is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about," made 44 years ago. In fact, researchers now sustain that framing – a second level agenda-setting that investigates

the transmission of attributes of an issue or actor by the news media to the public – does influence how we think (WANTA, GOLAN AND LEE, 2004).

Therefore, understanding the nature of foreign news coverage is vital, especially, that produced by an elite medium such as *The New York Times*, which serves as an agenda-setter for other media worldwide and, in consequence, influences opinion leaders at a global level.

Around the world, leaders of developing nations are concerned with how they are covered by powerful agenda-setters. Several studies about international news coverage have shown that developing nations are mostly underreported and, when they appear in the world media, they are frequently associated with unrest, corruption, crime, coups, assassinations and disasters. In the fight for space in a contracted international coverage focused on the Middle East and on Europe, Latin America along with Africa are either left behind or portrayed in an oversimplified manner that reinforces stereotypical views as shown in many studies (SWAIN, 2003; GOLAN, 2003; WEAVER, PORTER & EVANS, 1984; LARSON, 1982).

In this context, the Lula-Rohter episode is a revealing example of the misconceptions and stereotypes that plague both sides. The case is analyzed here with the help of Entman's view of framing (2004) and Schudson's view of relations between facts and symbols as determinants of news (2001). Schudson (2001:189) believes that cultural accounts of news help to explain "generalized images and stereotypes in the news media – of predatory stockbrokers just as much as hard-drinking factory workers."

These images and stereotypes produced by American journalism are partially explained as the product of sets of traditional news values (proximity, prominence, impact, negativity, personification, controversy, conflict, sensationalism, novelty, timeliness, relevance, usefulness, drama and many others) somewhat "un-transparent" even to those in the business (HALL, 1973). They operate along with American core values identified as ethnocentrism, altruistic democracy, responsible capitalism, small-town pastoralism, individualism, moderatism, social order and national leadership (GANS, 1979). They assist journalists to not only manufacture a version of the world, but also a version of journalism itself, as pointed by Schudson (2001:193).

Foreign correspondents who work for the elite media have attracted critical attention from countries where they have reported as well as from their own news organizations and media researchers. *NYT* foreign correspondents are the object of particular scrutiny, as observed by Berry (1990). Journalism professor Elliot Parker, of Central Michigan University, studied Larry Rohter's correspondence from Haiti for the *New York Times* between 1994 and

1996. After analyzing a total of 196 news stories produced by the foreign correspondent, Parker concluded that the journalist offered a "condescending view of Haitian life" and "could not resist exploiting the use of voodoo by Haitians". In Parker's view, Rohter's writings suggested that Haitians were a backward people with primitive beliefs. Furthermore, Parker found that Rohter's pieces were in concert with U.S. policy in the region.

> Haitian men and women appear only irregularly in Rohter's work. When they do, the Haitians make token appearances for anonymous quotes, such as "a toothless vendor" and "a middle-aged lawyer in a rumpled blue seersucker suit" (1994, August 2, 3A). In these ways, Rohter's correspondence offered a strategy designed to degrade and demean Haiti (PARKER, 1996).

2. THE NYT PIECE ON PRESIDENT LULA

"Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has never hidden his fondness for a glass of beer, a shot of whiskey or, even better, a slug of cachaça, Brazil's potent sugar-cane liquor. But some of his countrymen have begun wondering if their president's predilection for strong drink is affecting his performance in office," wrote foreign correspondent Larry Rohter in the first paragraph of a story published by *The New York Times* in May 9, 2004. The title: Brazilian Leader's Tippling Becomes National Concern."

The piece was troublesome from its beginning. The tone was ironic, almost condescending. The foreign correspondent based his story on rumors disregarding a basic concern for accuracy. The piece lacked solid sources and quotes. Statements were borrowed from other journalists' websites and columns regarded as biased and unreliable by their Brazilian peers (the cases of Claudio Humberto and Diogo Mainardi). Rohter contacted the President's spokespeople by e-mail about the topic. Would they really dicuss the president's habits by e-mail with a *New York Times* foreign correspondent? Certainly not, as Rohter reported: "…they dismissed speculation that he drank to excess as a 'mixture of prejudice, misinformation and bad faith.'"

The seven-month old photo published by the *New York Times* showed the Brazilian president wearing a Bavarian hat and raising a beer mug at the Oktoberfest celebrated by German descendants in the southern state of Santa Catarina. It helped to play down the article's ambiguities considering it was the only factual evidence that President Lula enjoyed drinking. Yet, it was not enough to sustain the addiction to alcohol claimed by the reporter.

While the populist left-wing president has not concealed his craving for food and drink and has shown it in public as noted by Brazilian media critics,

Brazilian journalists and politicians did not consider it a national concern, as reported in the national media after Rother's piece was published. Proud of his working class background (he is an elementary school drop out) and aware of his poor knowledge of grammar, President Lula, as he is known, does not seem to mind his frequent gaffes. They are perceived by his supporters as part of his spontaneous behavior that appeals to the less educated masses, although they significantly deviate from the politically correct behavior expected from chiefs of state.

Differently from the U.S., where a president's private life is a public matter, in Brazil a public figure's privacy is ultimately off limits. Such a perception has developed as a product of cultural traditions that combine a strong Catholic formation with a Colonial Hispanic-Iberian influence that separates public and private spheres. The colonial heritage, encouraged by the macho Latino culture and prevalent gender stereotypes, helps to explain the national tolerance toward certain misconduct.

The absence of tabloid magazines exploring personal tragedies of celebrities and public figures in Brazil corroborates the trend. Yet Brazilian journalism devotes a great deal of space and time to denouncing corruption, nepotism, bribery and embezzlement involving public figures in politics and business, as has happened in several instances of President Lula's first term and in past governments. Politicians and business people involved in such matters have their personal lives scrutinized in a muckraking style.

> Though political leaders and journalists are increasingly talking among themselves about Mr. da Silva's consumption of liquor, few are willing to express their misgivings in public or on the record," says Rohter's third paragraph.

The few sources who talked to the foreign correspondent lacked credibility and he probably knew it, considering his long experience in Brazil. One of them was former governor Leonel Brizola, deceased in June of 2006. Brizola was well known for saying whatever came to his mind as attested by journalists who knew him well, including myself, and was a declared political enemy of President Lula. Rohter wrote:

> During the concerns he expressed to Mr. da Silva and which he said went unheeded. "I told him 'Lula, I'm your friend and comrade, and you've got to get hold of this thing and control it," he recalled. "No, there's no danger. I've got it under control,' Mr. Brizola, imitating the president's gruff, raspy voice, remembers Mr. da Silva replying then. 'He resisted and he's resistant,' Mr. Brizola continued. 'But he had that problem. If I drank like him, I'd be fried."

The other source in Rohther's piece was a comment published by columnist Diogo Mainardi of *Veja* newsweekly magazine-- an opinion loaded with irony as most of his writing is. Rohter wrote:

> "Stop drinking in public", he (Mainardi) counseled, adding that the president has become "the biggest advertising spokesman for the spirits industry."

A third source was also a quote from a column published by sensationalist journalist Claudio Humberto, former spokesman for President Collor de Mello, impeached in 1992 for corruption. Referring to Humberto as the Matt Drudge of Brazilian politics, Rohter wrote:

> Whether or not Mr. da Silva has a drinking problem, the issue has seeped into the public consciousness and become the subject of gibes. When the government spent $ 56 million early this year to buy a new presidential plane, for instance, the columnist Claudio Humberto....sponsored a contest to give a tongue-in check name to the aircraft. One winning entry, recalling that the United States president's plane is called Air Force One, suggested that Mr. da Silva's jet should be designated 'Pirassununga 51,' which is the name of the most popular brand of cachaça.

The story goes on without presenting facts. At one point, it mentions a letter from a reader published in *Veja*, the country's leading newsmagazine, about "Lula's alcoholism," and cites unnamed websites that had tackled the issue.

> Spokesmen for Mr. da Silva declined to discuss the president's drinking habits on the record, saying they would not dignify baseless charges with a formal reply. In a brief e-mail message responding to a request for comment, they dismissed speculation that he drank to excess as "a mixture of prejudice, misinformation and bad faith."

The New York Times piece framed President Lula as "a man with strong appetites and impulses." It emphasized that President Lula "spent years leading labor unions, a famous hard-drinking environment." The deceased president's father was described as an "alcoholic who abused his children," although the reporter points out that Lula da Silva barely knew him. "Stories about drinking episodes involving Mr. da Silva are legion," writes Rother, who added one anecdote told by anonymous sources about a night in 1980, when Lula da Silva got off the elevator at the wrong floor of the building where he lived and tried to enter somebody else's apartment in Brasília, the nation's capital.

Besides framing President Lula as an alcoholic leader, *The New York Times* pictured Brazil as a country that does not take the matter seriously.

> ...With a mixture of sympathy and amusement, Brazilians have watched his efforts to try not to smoke in public, his flirtations at public events with attractive actresses and his continuing battle to avoid fatty foods that made his weight balloon shortly after he took office in January 2003.

The "reality" highlighted by the foreign correspondent implied a moral judgment of the president's behavior, based on rumors. The criticism seemed to extend to Brazilian public opinion, which sounded sympathetic and amused by the President's gaffes in the reporter's view. The *NYT* piece revealed a lack of knowledge about the nature of social relations in Brazil, although the foreign correspondent has known the country for several years and has shown his expertise about it in other pieces.

Powerful traditions such as Catholicism, paternalism and populism mark the Brazilian culture. Other characteristics such as the presence of a strong state that controls social life, a rich mix of ethnic groups and a rigid social class structure also characterize Brazilian society. Contrary to the American tradition, that values self-interest and individualism, Brazilians favor social networks and extended families as well as group loyalty; social cohesion is more a result of a collective solidarity than a belief in the law, as Brazilian anthropologists such as Roberto da Matta have attested.

Furthermore, Brazilian social norms involve a great deal of informality and spontaneity. People, including authorities, hug and kiss each other on the cheeks; it is considered impolite to talk to someone without making eye contact. Unfamiliar foreigners tend to confuse Brazilian social friendliness with sexual or romantic flirtation.

3-THE GOVERNMENT'S REACTION

Foreign correspondent Larry Rohter's 1,426-word piece had the effect of a missile fired at the Planalto, the President's palace. Its content shocked politicians of all parties and generated a wave of solidarity toward President Lula from his political enemies and the Brazilian elites-- the first one since he took power in January of 2003 (DINES, May 18, 2004). In an attempt to capitalize on the episode, two days later the government put a bullet in its own foot by cancelling the journalist's visa and asking him to leave the country in eight days. In a brief interview to journalists, President Lula claimed that Rohter's piece "deserved action, not an answer."

The episode funneled Brazilians mixed feelings about the United States, which alternate between admiration and contempt. Some Brazilian left-wing groups perceived the episode as a conspiracy to weaken a populist government that at times has opposed American dominance. Brazil´s most respected media critic, Alberto Dines, offered an elaborate interpretation of the government's attitude at the time:

> ...There were versions about a Yankee plot to harm the reputation of the continent's leading nation. Besides morally punishing the American reporter, the event could be associated with Bush, 'the Great Satan.'... The negative effects resulting from such an authoritarian gesture that could hurt the government's democratic pledge would be digested by those who suffer the effects of the global economy and neutralized by the lack of credibility of the world media....After months of showing signals of fragility and omission in so many spheres, the government after all performed a radical gesture against the villainy engendered by the foreigners guilty of all our misfortunes... press freedom is an abstract value , it does not appeal to low income people. This became clear when President Lula minimized the world's media reaction and blamed it on the corporate sector" (DINES, *Observatorio da Imprensa*, May 18, 2004).

Brazil's Justice Ministry argued that the article offended the president's honor. In an official note, the Justice Minister said, "The presence of the author of the offending article on national territory is inappropriate." On May 11, the Justice Minister cancelled Rohter's visa. The official note, written by the President's spokesman Andre Singer, ignited an internal crisis among the government's staff members as recounted by former government press secretary Ricardo Kotscho, an experienced journalist who was against Rohter's expulsion and predicted a negative reaction against it both at the national and international levels.

> The issue would have died on Monday –the article was published on Sunday-- ...if the President's spokesman had not written an aggressive note which gave the article and its author far more importance than it deserved (KOTSCHO, 2006: 277).

In the meantime, the *The New York Times* carried a letter signed by the Brazilian ambassador in the United States, Roberto Abdenur, on May 11 stating that Rohter's article was "flippant, lying and damaging to the integrity of the President of the Federal Republic of Brazil and the image of the country." The ambassador expressed his "perplexity and indignation" considering it surprising that the *Times* gave credit to such "an offensive

and totally unfounded story." He tried unsuccessfully to negotiate an apology by the *New York Times*. Nonetheless, the paper stood by its allegations. A spokesman for the *NYT* told Agence France-Press that he believed the article to be correct, according to Reporters Without Borders. Furthermore, executive editor Bill Keller said in the online version of the paper on May 12:

> If Brazil intends to expel a journalist for writing an article that offended the president, that would raise serious questions about Brazil's professed commitment to freedom of expression and a free press (CHETWYND, The Guardian, 13 May 2004).

The newspaper's attitude infuriated President Lula and some of his advisors, who wanted to punish the foreign correspondent. They knew, though, that Larry Rohter, 57, was married to a Brazilian citizen and the couple had lived in Rio de Janeiro with their two children since 1999 . For that reason alone, the Supreme Court could oppose the expulsion as it did indeed, helped by a *habeas corpus* requested by Senator Sergio Cabral favoring the foreign correspondent.

At the beginning, the political storm united government and opposition to condemn the *NYT* article as "libelous" and "injurious". In a matter of hours, though, the case engendered a national discussion about President Lula's reaction. Several critics and legal commentators considered the expulsion an immature act of the President as well as a serious threat against press freedom. President Lula's negative reaction generated a second wave of protests, this time against his attitude. The solidarity toward President Lula quickly vanished. Opposition senator Tasso Jereissati said of the expulsion:

> This is ridiculous. It's more like an immature act of a dictator of a third-rate republic who does not understand what government is about" (CHETWYND, The Guardian, May 13, 2004).

Prestigious organizations such as the Brazilian Barsociation and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) asked the president to reconsider his decision. Aidan White, IFJ General Secretary, said that an official reply to the report would be more appropriate than engaging in punitive action against the reporter. The organization Reporters Without Borders wrote to President Lula:

> We are surprised by this decision which is unworthy of a democratic regime. Moreover, there is a risk that it will damage your image abroad more than the contents of the offending article. Libel issues should be decided in the courts....Brazil proves nothing by expelling Larry Rohter. It could also lead to self-censorship on the part of the foreign press correspondents who now know they could be at risk of expulsion when referring to the president (www.rsf.org, May 15, 2004).

Two associations of foreign correspondents operating in Brazil criticized the government's attitude as well. One of them, ACE (Association of Foreign Correspondents), considered Rohter's piece biased and incomplete (BRANDÃO, *Zero, 3* June, 2004).

The matter was not settled. Andre Singer, then the president's spokesman, said the article was groundless, fabricated and an example of the worst kind of journalism. He added that President Lula's social habits were moderate and no different from those of other Brazilians. Politicians cited by BBC alleged that Rohter made the story up while he was having a beer at the beach in Rio de Janeiro. When asked about the case, during a press conference with Chinese journalists before leaving on a state visit to Beijing, President Lula said he would not reply to "such stupidities" and that he believed Rohter was more worried than him.

The Supreme Court, however, did not support the government act, and declared that in a democratic state, convenience or opportunity by the Administration could not override the freedom of a foreigner person to come and go. On May 13, the expulsion act was cancelled. At the same time, the government quickly negotiated a letter from Larry Rohter's lawyers saying he had not meant to offend the president. The Brazilian government restored the journalist's visa on May 14 and dropped the deportation threat.

By then, the case took over the pages of most of the Brazilian press. A little late and at a slow pace, the first accounts relied only on government's opinions. Apparently, the Brazilian press faced a moral dilemma on how to treat the *New York Times*' accusation that the president was a drunkard.

> There prevailed an unspoken understanding that a news story about the fact that President Lula liked alcohol would be considered not only an act of invasion of privacy, but even worse, an unpatriotic act for exposing the chief of state with all the negative consequences to his image, challenging the government´s stability and the respect the country longed for. Who could prove that a President's decision was taken under the influence? It was not clear that such a news story would benefit the public" (LUIZ WEIS, *Observatorio da Imprensa*, May 11, 2004).

Only the daily newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* fully transcribed the *New York Times* piece and had a front-page headline "NYT says Lula abuses alcohol; government denies it." Other newspapers such as *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Globo* buried the news on inside pages. The Brazilian press addressed Rohter's piece indirectly, sometimes with a malicious overtone.

The Brazilian government restored the journalist's visa on May 14 after the negative publicity about President Lula's action. The Justice ministry announced it had acted after receiving a letter from Rohter's lawyers saying he had not meant to offend the president. The case was officially resolved, but the public debate about the incident intensified in the Brazilian media. Brazilian most prestigious media critic Alberto Dines moaned about *The Times*'s blunder:

> The NYT story is faulty; it's third rate journalism… Even Jason Blair would had been more cautious…President Lula's habits are not a national concern because he has never concealed his fondness for a drink…George Bush was an alcoholic in his youthful years; because of that he had to make it public during the presidential campaign. If he were photographed drinking alcohol, it would be a political case. The alcoholic Boris Yeltsin was a source of national concern. More than that, an international concern because he could push the wrong button while drunk and initiate a nuclear holocaust…. Rohter should know that gossip in the Federal District (equivalent to Washington D.C.) doesn´t always echo national issues….Sources in Rohter's news story have no credibility; there are no facts, just opinions.

Alberto Dines also criticized the Brazilian media for not probing the case. "*The New York Times* acted as if it was drunk, and the Brazilian newspapers simulated a hangover." Dines touched on a sensitive issue. There is press freedom in Brazil, but the media seems apathetic in many cases. Although organized crime, corruption and impunity make daily headlines, there is little in-depth investigation by the media about these issues. Fear, intimidation and political pressure have inhibited investigative reporting.

Judges routinely issue injunctions banning news organizations from covering corruption allegations involving public officials, politicians, and businessmen, according to the non-profit organization Committee to Protect Journalists (2006). The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights report of January 2007 mentioned the tapping by the Federal Police of journalists' telephones of the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* as well as the Federal Police questioning of journalists of the newsweekly magazine *Veja* in order to get them to reveal their information sources in a scandal involving President

Lula´s reelection campaign. Lula's staff was accused of buying documents that supposedly incriminated the president's unsuccessful rival, Brazilian Social Democratic Party presidential candidate Geraldo Alkmin.

In 2004, the government-allied National Federation of Journalists unsuccessfully sought to increase regulation of journalism. The Brazilian Press Law issued in 1967, during the military regime, is still in place, as well as an outdated Code of Telecommunications. Brazil does not have specific laws to regulate and guarantee the principle of transparency provided for in the Constitution, revised in 1985 and amended in 1988.

In 2005, the news media uncovered the scandal involving monthly payments to representatives of Congress by members of President Lula's administration and high-ranking officials. The scandal forced the resignation of several officials of the governing Worker's Party (Freedom House, 2006). The 2006 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, produced by a global coalition against corruption based in Berlin, found that Brazil has a significantly worse rating since 2005, ranking the country in 70th place along with China and India. The index defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain and measures it.

4-THE JOURNALIST AND THE PRESIDENT

The U.S. media frequently display stereotypes and misconceptions about different areas of the world. They rely heavily on the news organizations' own view of the world and take into consideration U.S. government interests and foreign policy, as found in many past studies. That helps journalists to frame political leaders from distant lands for American public opinion. At the same time, new technologies, expectations of media convergence, multi-tasking and work overload have impacted the routines of foreign correspondents (ELLIOT PARKER, 2002). *The New York Times* has one correspondent that covers Latin America from Mexico to Uruguay, including Brazil.

Brazil's presence in the pages of the *New York Times*, as is the case of most Latin American countries, is episodic with a focus on individuals rather than on issues. News stories rarely explore the origins of social problems and the larger social, economic or political contexts. Foreign correspondents abroad follow the similar prescription adopted by American journalists working at home. As Bennett explains in his book *News and the Politics of Illusion*:

> We learn more about the powerful and glamorous personalities in government than about how government works....The focus on winners and losers and on personalities and their personal conflicts gives the news audience a distorted view of power and its political consequences....In addition, direct emotional projection onto distant news figures can result in highly egocentric and ethnocentric views of the world (2001, p. 49).

An unconfirmed report about an allegedly alcoholic president of a distant South American country may be far removed from comprehension by the *NYT* average reader. Also, it does not offer background and context that would help readers to put together a coherent picture of the Brazilian reality. Rohter played the well-know "gotcha journalism". Objectivity, transparency, accuracy and substantive investigation were left out. In this particular case, sensationalism and tabloid style replaced commendable professional standards, because news stories with those characteristics are easy to develop (the journalist could report without leaving his office) and quickly fill the news hole.

Issues such as Brazil's high unemployment rate, street violence, organized crime, drug-trafficking, high homicide rates, police violence, overcrowded prison system, chronic corruption, racial discrimination, land invasions, high suicide rates among native Brazilians, violence against women and children and press freedom demand more time and work from foreign correspondents. Their coverage, though, would help to educate U.S. readers about Brazil's real problems and would better serve all sides.

This article did not intend to make generalizations about coverage of Brazil by the *New York Times* based on the analysis of one news story. Its goal was to demonstrate how one poor news story published by an international agenda-setter generated a poor reaction from a chief political leader, and to explore the elements involved in the case regarding framing, international news coverage quality and press freedom.

Both the journalist and the president fell into a similar trap. One surrendered to stereotypes, an easy way to frame an unusual political leader of a nation that defied a foreign correspondent's personal and professional values. The other confused vague concepts of honor and patriotism that led to an ill-fated demonstration of press control in a country that is still in its democratic infancy.

The thoughts presented here are part of a larger project that will investigate how the U.S. elite media portray foreign political leaders, especially those from developing nations. A second line of this study will analyze the current problems related to foreign correspondence in developing nations.

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