

ARTICLE

QUALITY ISSUES IN NEWS COVERAGE OF DILMA ROUSSEFF'S IMPEACHMENT:

an analysis of six Brazilian newspapers



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ABSTRACT – This article aims to discuss quality issues in political journalism from six Brazilian newspapers and their coverage of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment process in 2016. We analyzed three major national newspapers (*Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *Estado de S. Paulo*) and three regional newspapers (*A Tarde*, *O Liberal* and *Zero Hora*). To do this we applied the methodology adapted from the Journalistic Added Value (VAP) together with quantitative and qualitative analyses. The study reveals the main quality issues in news coverage to be: the influence sources had on selecting which issues would be reported on; the lack of thematic diversity; the officialism of the sources; and the lack of time constraints on post-impeachment.

Key words: Journalism. Quality. Impeachment. Politics. Brazil.

PROBLEMAS DE QUALIDADE NA COBERTURA JORNALÍSTICA DO IMPEACHMENT DE DILMA ROUSSEFF: uma análise de seis jornais brasileiros

RESUMO – O presente artigo tem como objetivo discutir problemas de qualidade verificados no jornalismo político praticado por seis jornais brasileiros durante a cobertura

do processo de *impeachment* de Dilma Rousseff em 2016. Foram analisados três jornais nacionais de referência: *Folha de S. Paulo*; *O Globo*; e *Estado de S. Paulo* e três jornais regionais: *A Tarde*; *O Liberal* e *Zero Hora*. Para tanto, utilizamos a metodologia adaptada do Valor Agregado Periodístico – VAP, em um cruzamento de análises quantitativas e qualitativas. O estudo demonstra que os principais problemas de qualidade na cobertura ocorreram em aspectos relativos à influência das fontes na seleção do que é noticiado; à falta de diversidade temática; ao oficialismo das fontes; e à ausência de consequências temporais sobre o pós-*impeachment*.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Qualidade. *Impeachment*. Política. Brasil.

PROBLEMAS DE CALIDAD EN LA COBERTURA PERIODÍSTICA DE LA DESTITUCIÓN DE DILMA ROUSSEFF: un análisis de seis periódicos brasileños

RESUMEN – El artículo tiene como objetivo discutir problemas de calidad en el periodismo político practicado por seis periódicos brasileños durante la cobertura del proceso de destitución de Dilma Rousseff en 2016. Se analizaron tres periódicos nacionales de referencia: *Folha de S. Paulo*; *O Globo*; y *Estado de S. Paulo* y tres periódicos regionales: *A Tarde*; *O Liberal* y *Zero Hora*. Para eso, utilizamos la metodología adaptada del Valor agregado periódico – VAP, en un cruce entre análisis cuantitativo y cualitativo. El estudio muestra que los principales problemas de calidad en la cobertura ocurrieron en aspectos relacionados con la influencia de las fuentes en la selección de lo que se informa; la falta de diversidad temática; el oficialismo de las fuentes; y la ausencia de consecuencias temporales en el post-juicio político.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Calidad. *Impeachment*. Política. Brasil.

1 Introduction

Dilma Rousseff's impeachment process in 2016 led to numerous important changes in Brazil, both politically and socially. Since then, the country has experienced unprecedented political crises in addition to significant changes to the political game with the emergence of new actors with religious and conservative ideologies which led to the far-right running for presidency and ultimately winning the 2018 elections with candidate Jair Bolsonaro elected as President of the Republic (Chagas-Bastos, 2019).

Several analysts have already stated that it was the impeachment that disrupted the political order when it constituted itself as a parliamentary coup supported by the main Brazilian media organizations (Santos & Guarnieri, 2016; Albuquerque, 2017; Van Dijk, 2017; Santos, 2017). Four years later, the alliance between old

and new political actors that led to the fall of Rousseff and the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party) early exit from power has broken down into internal disputes between right-wing groups with different interests, which only further heightens the political-economic tension in the country.

Analyzing news coverage of the impeachment also helped towards understanding the current political situation and the role that mainstream media played in this historical period. Many authors have identified certain characteristics of news coverage at that time such as the misogyny present in images published of Dilma Rousseff on the covers of newspapers and magazines (Fausto Neto, 2018), the anti-political framing that treated one of the most significant events in recent Brazilian politics as an average story (Rizzotto et al., 2017, 2018), and the editorial position of major national newspapers on the impediment (Marques et al., 2018; Guazina et al., 2018).

It is public knowledge that on April 17, 2016, a request to open impeachment proceedings on Dilma Rousseff was voted on in the Chamber of Deputies. It received a lot of support from parliamentarians (367 in favor; 137 against; seven abstained and two were absent). The process was then forwarded to the Senate the following day, and on May 12 of 2016, a new vote was taken in the Federal Senate and Rousseff was subsequently removed from office, temporarily replaced by vice-president, Michel Temer. During the three months he was in power, Temer adopted policies and proposals which were far different from those he had promised in his vice presidential campaign.

On August 30, 2016, the Federal Senate made its final decision. Rousseff made her defense and answered the senators' questions for more than 14 hours. The following day, August 31, the first woman to be elected and re-elected president of Brazil was removed from office under the official ruling that she had committed a crime of fiscal responsibility. But she did not lose her political rights for that.

This entire political shift was not only closely monitored by the Brazilian media, but it was also at the center of the articulations of political groups that promoted the changes. How possible would it be to produce quality journalism in this context?

In this article, we shall discuss four main elements of journalistic quality and, as we will show later, the problems that occurred around these elements during coverage of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment: a) how sources can have an influence on

what is reported; b) the lack of thematic diversity; c) the officialism and anonymity of the sources; and d) the absence of verifiable consequences on the post-impeachment.

Our object of study was the political editorials of print newspapers. We chose *Folha de S. Paulo*, *O Globo*, and *O Estado de S. Paulo* as they are the country's largest newspapers by circulation, in addition to being among the ones most read by parliamentarians¹. We also included *A Tarde*, *O Liberal*, and *Zero Hora*; regional newspapers² from the North, Northeast and South regions.

There are basically three major phases to this process, so we found it fitting to monitor the coverage in each of these phases. We chose to look at the seven days leading up to each phase in order that we observe the consistency of the narratives. In addition, as the voting stages were quite spread out, we were able to acquire special materials for these most critical periods of the process, which proved to be important to our research. So, we looked at coverage from April 11th to 17th; May 6th to 12th; and August 25th to 31st, 2016.

We selected the impeachment texts that made the main headlines on the front pages of the newspapers. If they did not make the main headline we then looked at secondary headlines and cover stories, and if there were no cover stories, we went to the first article in the politics section. We did not select any texts that were solely opinion-based.

The *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* newspapers reported on the impeachment process every day during our research periods; a total of 21 articles for each one. The *O Globo* and *O Liberal* newspapers had 20 articles each. *Zero Hora* publishes joint weekend editions, meaning their Saturday editions are reprinted on Sundays (April 17, May 8 and August 28 editions). This amounted to 18 editions which we analyzed. The final *corpus* consists of 121 articles.

2 Quality in journalism: how do we define it?

Studies on quality in journalism, as well as how it is understood, is impacted by cultural, social and temporal influences. There are many ways to address this topic and define it in an objective and systematic way. In addition, not many bibliographies include methodological models for a quantitative assessment of the quality of news production (Guerra, 2010).

Despite the increased number of studies in recent years, quality in journalism is still a literary challenge in the field of communication. The search for a definition of what quality in journalism is has been mainly undertaken by empirical academic research which lists the categories and characteristics of what “good journalism”, “quality journalism” and even “leading newspapers” is supposed to be.

From a historical perspective, quality in journalism has been characterized by dualist definitions such as “quality” and “prestigious” newspapers (Merril, 1968). This also includes lists of criteria such as those defined by Bogart (1977) in his study on the perception of the reading public. He lists the criteria of editorial quality as being precision, impartiality, research and qualified personnel. Journalistic awards (Shapiro et al., 2006), the socialization of standards and codes of conduct (Vehkoo, 2010) and individual perceptions of quality (Lacy & Rosenstiel, 2015), in addition to the influence of competitors (Picard, 2004), are all aspects that have been studied as possible indicators of quality.

Gómez-Mompart et al. (2013) state that quality in journalism is a very broad idea. They point out that the issue of quality not only involves specific aspects of the news product or the democratic posture of journalists, but also the production process itself. So, not only can content be analyzed, but also the role of sources, news agencies, and journalists, the economic structure of the media, and the participation of citizens in digital information environments.

We can say, then, that the definitions of quality span over a broad theoretical-methodological spectrum that searches for indicators from different actors and stages of the news production process. Studies on this topic even cover external elements, such as credibility and prestige with the public.

One aspect which has been studied a great deal is the management of information sources. In a study on the relationship between sources and journalistic quality in Spanish journalism, Ripollés and Rabadán (2013) show how the overrepresentation of institutional sources, a common aspect of political journalism, compromises the pluralism of coverage and the potentially democratizing capacity of journalism in that country.

Their research analyzed news coverage from two newspapers with divergent political positions (*ABC* and *El País*) between 1980 and 2010. The authors, when observing the sources of information

used in these newspapers' coverage, were able to identify indicators of news quality both internally (professional status, transparency and verification) and externally (credibility, pluralism and citizen participation in content production). The origin of the information sources is therefore an important aspect to consider when analyzing the quality of journalism and a fundamental element of the methodology we have adopted.

Additionally, Gómez-Mompart et al. (2015) draw attention to different approaches in each social and academic context. The issue of quality in the United States is developed around the commercial focus of media companies and their search for economic profits, while in Germany it is developed around the issue of professionalism. These authors say research in Latin American countries, including Spain, has focused more on social responsibility and democratic quality.

Brazilian researcher Josenildo Guerra (2010) developed the Q-Avalia, a tool for assessing news quality from an organizational perspective, taking into account writing manuals, technological innovations, the organization of media companies, and media accountability systems. He believes it is difficult to reconcile the difference between theoretical and practical perspectives.

Regardless of whichever methods and approaches are used, foreign and Brazilian scholars converge on the multidimensionality of news quality as a concept and practice. There are a number of different perspectives and theoretical-methodological paths, and in this paper we focus on the methodology called VAP (Spanish acronym for Journalistic Added Value), which assesses what journalism content is added to information that the public has access to (Pellegrini & Mujica, 2006; Pellegrini et al., 2011). VAP is initially based on selecting patterns of any particular media vehicle, even if that vehicle has a different normative style.

Theoretical studies for further developing VAP began in the 1990s by looking at the standards of journalism shared by academia, professionals and the public. There is a link to theoretical aspects explored in the other studies cited in this paper, especially in pioneering studies on quality. VAP standards apply regardless of the editorial line, mission or objectives of any particular medium or media vehicle.

The last stage involved recording the perceptions of professionals and the public through focus group studies conducted in 2003. These studies revealed three criteria shared by the focus

groups considered to be central to so-called “good journalism”: informative weight or relevance; clarity in style; and the geographical and emotional proximity of the information. Journalists considered relevance to be the most important criteria, while the public considered it to be proximity.

VAP also indicates that obtaining information must follow two central procedures: the professional selection of facts and sources based on theoretical and technical precepts, verifying whether the fact actually occurred (referred to as notary function); and the hierarchy and interrelation of content so the public is able to properly understand it (referred to as assigning meaning) (Pellegrini & Mujica, 2006).

The methodology was used internationally due to the dynamism of attending academic-theoretical aspects and also of journalistic management (Pellegrini & Mujica, 2006). Its first studies focused on newspapers from Latin American countries such as Mexico and Peru. VAP includes criteria which is universally shared by journalism, and takes into account the different socio-political contexts, communication systems and frameworks of each region. Gordillo et al. (2013) applied this methodology to Spanish journalism, making progress on the sources and their confidence in the quality of the information produced.

For our research, we used the concept of quality journalism proposed by Santos as a starting point (2019).

Quality journalism is that which, in democratic contexts, offers its audience diversified information with a wide range of viewpoints and credible sources outside the official political circle, being able to provide explanations and verifiable data on how political decisions are made and what their impacts are so as to enable citizens to understand the reported event and have an informed opinion on it. (Santos, 2019, p. 176).

When analyzing the news coverage of the impeachment, we took into account the theoretical aspects that highlight the profession’s social role and thus the relevant relationship between journalism and democracy – more specifically, between information and freedom. However, we cannot forget that current political and social contexts have also influenced people’s perceptions of mainstream journalism, especially when it comes to political coverage. Journalism no longer holds the same power that it did in the 20th century. In Brazil, for example, since the 2018 presidential

election campaign, disinformation has been one of the most hotly discussed topics among the public, also having an influence on how news companies position themselves in regards to the issue. Current bibliographies have pointed to multiple variables that have impacted disinformation and to how its definition has made for even more complex discussions³.

From the point of view of those who study quality in political journalism, misinformation can lead to serious political consequences. As Alves (2019) observes when discussing the occurrence of fake news, the instrumentalization of news criteria by political groups and the ripple effect generated by news coverage can massify low-quality investigations and favor framing. For example, journalists can magnify false information from social media or information published directly by sources (p.140).

However, although we recognize the importance of the current debate on disinformation, this article does not offer an in-depth exploration of the relationship between this issue and the quality of journalism. Our focus is on the application and discussion of a specific methodology for measuring quality criteria. We hope that the results of our analyses can serve as a starting point for studies on the possible connections between disinformation in journalism and its impact on the political environment.

Another important aspect to understand when discussing the quality of traditional political journalism is how it has transformed in the political scene and in the debate on the main themes of the public agenda. It is important to remember that the dynamics of visibility, of production and consumption of information have changed in contemporary times due to the impact of the digital environment and algorithms. Furthermore, the direct action of groups and political actors has had an effect on the agenda of topics and the framing of news, leading to significant changes in what is chosen to be published, something Alves and Albuquerque (2019) refer to as the press losing its hegemony in the dispute for visibility. The disintermediation of hybrid media systems, as pointed out by Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018), has significantly changed the way in which political information is circulated. This is a result of the complexification of the information environment that directly affects the process of news production.

However, journalism is also a practice that has transformed and adapted to the technological, social, intellectual, and other challenges it

has had to face. These adaptation strategies have had different effects, and have not always led to more plural or impartial news. There are times that political journalism can be an opponent to political power, like a watchdog, yet it can also act like a lapdog, collaborating with political elites or temporarily aligning itself with political parties in exchange for future business favors (Mazzoleni, 1998).

In this complex game of interests that shapes journalism on politics, quality is a professional issue, a way for managing the business side of journalism, yet it also has a historical side to it, a socio-cultural background of its power structures, the structure of media, and the structuring of the product itself (the news).

In this article, we will discuss the problems we found in terms of the quality of news coverage on Dilma Rousseff's impeachment from the empirical observation of the newspapers chosen for our study. Our main goal here is to apply VAP (Pellegrini et al., 2011) to verify and analyze the quality of the news reporting on political issues at a time of crisis in the country. This allows us to suggest possible ways for improving professional news practices in political coverage.

3 Social role: the quality of information and democracy

Studies on news quality generally start from a liberal perspective on the role of journalism in democracies. As a social practice, journalism is generally defined as being primarily responsible for providing citizens with relevant information that enables people to make informed judgments and participate in the functioning of a democratic state. More than just “bringing” the information to the reader, the role of the press is traditionally seen as identifying the relevant information for public debates (Barnet & Gaber, 2001). One of its jobs is to monitor governments and be capable of “inhibiting an abuse of political power” (p.1).

Barnet and Gaber propose to understand news not only as a random collection of information, but as a process affected by fluid influences. One aspect of this fluidity, in the current context of circulation of information, is the politicians having direct access to the public, at a time when “political content can be transmitted directly to large audiences often without passing through news organizations” (Bennett, 2012, p.2).

This kind of scenario, which many authors refer to as disintermediation, has led to the popularization of political debates on digital networks. But they can also create controversies and ruin reputations, ironically threatening the very values that are important to democratic societies.

If the freedoms of expression, information and the press are still essential values for democratic states (at least from a liberal viewpoint) how are these rights enforced in the daily routine of news production? Freedom of expression implies citizens' right of expression, without any type of censorship, while that of the press guarantees freedom and security for the media to inform their public. Journalism also positions itself as a space for the visibility of citizens' interests, and when this occurs, there is a meeting point between freedom of expression and the press. However, Kucinski and Lima (2009) and many other authors point out that freedom of the press serves as a shield against any criticism of the media companies.

On one hand, as highlighted by Lattman-Weltman (2003), the media often assume a monitor the legitimacy of the government. The media has the power to defend the interests of the public by monitoring government actions and proposing public agendas (Soares, 2006). Sousa describes the media as the most decisive institution for the quality of the exercise of citizenship – a fundamental aspect towards re-democratizing Brazil. He believes the media plays a role in electoral campaigns through its use of specific languages, by using symbolic and cognitive elements to sway voter choice; and shaping a consensus on political and institutional agendas. This is how it ends up “in one way or another, defining the public agenda, from its most general terms to some of its most specific. It defends the consumer, decides on justice, denounces corruption, exposes fraud” (Lattman-Weltman, 2003, p.131).

McNair (2009) argues that, in the past, journalism used to avoid the abuses of power, but journalists in democracies now have a professional obligation to monitor the exercise of power. As pointed by Santos (2019, p. 40) the media role includes to seek answers to questions like: “are governments competent, efficient and honest? Are they fulfilling their responsibilities to the people who elected them? Are their policies and programs based on sound judgments and information, and designed with the best interests of society as a whole in mind?”

That is how, according to McNair (2009), “political journalism oversees the activities of our government, in our name, and with our permission” (2009, p. 239 – free translation). And, with this implicit authorization, journalism positions itself as a mediator between politicians and citizens, allowing citizens to have their voice heard.

On the other hand, however, the context of today is different. The multiple displacements resulting from disintermediation, disinformation and political polarizations have led many authors to rethink the place of political journalism in the public agenda and the very role of journalism as a mediator. In addition, digital social networks have changed the forms of producing and practicing journalism (Massuchin et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the rights to freedom of expression and the press do not seem to be guaranteed in democratic countries governed by extreme right-wing populists such as Brazil, and this includes professional journalists⁴.

We must also point out that journalism is an integral part of the political field and, as such, may be able to incorporate different voices, including those from digital social networks, which constitute and transform the public scene. Despite the editorial positioning mentioned earlier in reports on the Dilma Rousseff impeachment, it is important to recognize that, controversies, negotiations and disputes can occur on a daily basis in the news (Negrine & Stanyer, 2007; Kuhn & Nielsen, 2014).

It is up to us to investigate important elements of quality journalism, as demonstrated by the literature in the field (Guerra, 2010; Pellegrini et al., 2011). What is the source of the information in the reports on the impeachment? What is the thematic diversity of news related to the process? Did the newspapers we analyzed provide enough context and information for readers to understand the consequences of the 2016 impeachment? These are questions that we will discuss in this article from the application of VAP.

We understand that the parameters used in international research can contribute to the comparison of similar phenomena in different realities and, also, to the consolidation of an applicable model of quality analysis in journalism. As Guerra stated (2010), in Brazil, the methodologies used for assessing and assigning objective criteria to measure quality have not yet generated public tools to assess the news production process (p.3). Building quality assessment models can be an effective

path to further dialogue and transparency between all parts of the news production chain and, above all, it can be a tool for citizens to assess political news through its minimum criteria of plurality and diversity.

4 A methodology for quality

The Journalistic Added Value method (VAP) collects quantitative data and, based on these data, performs a qualitative analysis by cross matching and interpreting the number of matches and variables identified.

To analyze our *corpus*, we used VAP as it is proposed by Pellegrini et al. (2011). Their groundbreaking work makes a comparative investigation of the quality of journalism in six newspapers (*Clarín* and *La Nación* from Argentina; *El Tiempo* and *El Colombiano* from Colombia; and *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* from Chile).

This paper will refer to VAP as VAP-A (acronym for Adapted Journalistic Added Value) because we removed some categories and subcategories, and performed some crossmatches that do not occur in the original methodology. The 33 original subcategories are included in seven major categories: data identification; selectivity, equality, access, style, content and focus. In this article we work with four of these seven major categories, as described below.

Selectivity: subcategory for the origin of information. This origin has four definitions:

- Undefined: the origin cannot be determined;
- Reproduction: the content was produced by another medium, such as an agency, major newspaper, clippings of official documents, or transcription of press releases.
- Origin from source: issues that originate outside the medium on which it was published. These include conferences, public statements, concerts, accidents, disasters, etc.
- Origin from medium: the medium itself reports on the event from its own perspective.

Equality: subcategory of thematic or agenda diversity. As our focus here is on politics, we selected topics included in the "State and Politics" section: Government (entity); Congress/parties; Foreign policy; Justice/police; Military/defense; Government and its activities.

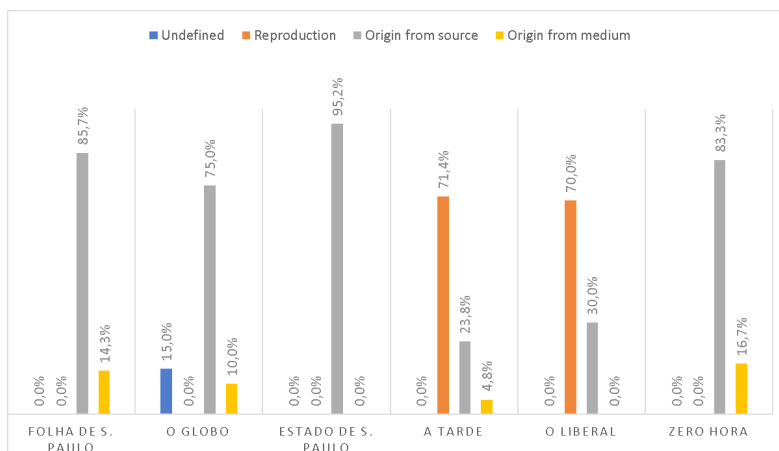
Access: use and diversity of sources in the news. There are four types of sources: documentary, other means, indefinite and personal. Personal sources are subdivided into: government, public officials, private officials, specialists, testimonial and unidentified, with protagonists, antagonists and neutral versions.

Content: subcategories background and consequence. These verify the backgrounds and verifiable consequences in the text. Verifiable data include all information that can likely be verified by the public. For example, when someone makes a statement, that statement is assumed to be true, and that it can be proven. They are counted from verbs in the text that validate actions. The number of verifiable data in the text determines the degree of depth of the information. To do this, we looked at all the verifiable data in each report and estimated an average based on all the evaluated reports. With the exception of very brief reports, information with fewer amounts of verifiable data leads journalists to consider it speculative and, thus, has a higher level of superficiality.

We chose these aforementioned categories because they give us a complete view of the cycle of news which helps to describe the result of journalistic work. According to Puente et al. (2004), this is the main value of the method, and not setting rules or delivering formulas. This allows us to highlight and discuss problems in news coverage as it relates to a specific theme.

5 The four problems with news coverage of the impeachment

Our first category investigates the origin of the information, looking at the cause of the news, meaning, where the information is taken from. In Graph 1 below we show the indices for the origin of information for each newspaper. We can see that, even with the oldest newspapers, the content which originated in the newspaper itself (highlighted in yellow) is low. As for the companies, it is worth remembering that their own investigations or selection of themes are not exclusively based on the events in progress or the people involved in them.

Graph 1 – Origin of information

Source: authors, 2019.

In Graph 1 we can also see that the newspaper *Zero Hora* recorded the highest percentage of this type of content, with 16.7% of its reports adopting different perspectives from those expressed in Congress; this is followed by *O Globo* with 10%, *Folha* with 14.3% and *A Tarde* with 4.8%. *O Estado* and *O Liberal* did not have any reports which originated in their newspapers. In addition, all the reports from *O Estado de S. Paulo* originated from the source. This data shows us that all the analyzed texts from *O Estado de S. Paulo* were influenced by Congress and by the course of the political process.

In the case of national newspapers, most of the reports originated from the source, that is, from outside the media, through events such as meetings, public statements and congress sessions. This dependence on the sources, similar in all newspapers, is reflective of a type of culture or routine established in political journalism newsmaking which also occurred in coverage of the impeachment process. It also denotes the protagonism given and assumed by the sources to guide the news printed in the newspapers.

The material in the reports published by *O Liberal* and *A Tarde* originated from other mediums; newspapers, news agencies or press releases. Most of the content originated from the *O Globo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* news agencies. What we can see with these smaller newspapers is a relationship between media ownership and the dissemination of content, with limited perspectives from sources. They also demonstrate one of the impacts of scrapping newsroom

investments, with a preference for buying ready-made content, which is most likely cheaper than having a professional cover congress in Brasilia, for example. In this way, journalism from the country's interior brings back a kind of copywriting.

As for the theme, most reports discussed the impeachment along the lines of congress and political parties, highlighted in green in Table 3 below.

Table 1 – Ranking of newspaper themes

Theme	Folha de S. Paulo	A Tarde	O Globo	Estado de S. Paulo	O Liberal	Zero Hora
Government	38,1%	23,8%	30,0%	38,1%	20,0%	27,8%
Congress/parties	52,4%	71,4%	65,0%	57,1%	65,0%	72,2%
Foreign policy	4,8%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Justice/police	4,8%	4,8%	5,0%	0,0%	15,0%	0,0%
Military/defense	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%
Government and its activities	0,0%	0,0%	0,0%	4,8%	0,0%	0,0%

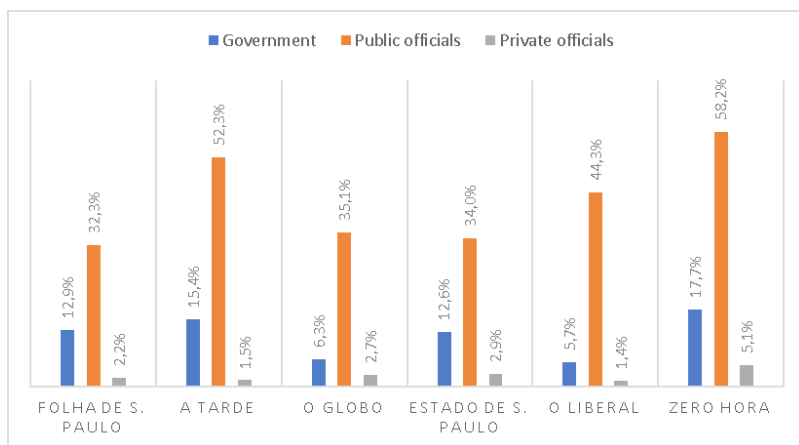
Source: authors, 2019.

The most prominent newspaper here was *A Tarde*, with 71.4% of its reports having Congress/parties as central themes. *Zero Hora* had 72.2% of its reports with the same theme. The emphasis on Congress and the political parties is expected to a certain extent considering that the entire process took place in the two Legislative Houses. In second place was the theme of “government”, also in all newspapers. *Folha de S. Paulo* and *Estado de S. Paulo* tied with 38.1% of their reports focusing on government, the highest index in this theme group.

Looking at these two dominant theme groups, we can see that they alternate between the accused, Dilma Rousseff, and the accusers, initially the Chamber of Deputies which then later was the Senate. One newspaper that was different was *O Liberal*, which had 15% of its reports based on the theme of Justice/Police. This may be related to the fact that they publish news from several agencies. The data also shows the standardization of news coverage and shows a low diversity of themes on the deposition. This could have been examined from other perspectives in other themes such as how basic public services could be changed in order to change government.

The use of personal sources is explored below. These may be public officials or private officers, or government organizations that are part of the executive branch. Graph 2 illustrates the percentages of these sources in reports on the impeachment:

Graph 2 – Use of government sources, public officials and private officials



Source: authors, 2019.

As Graph 2 demonstrates, official public sources predominated in all newspapers. The highest index was registered by *Zero Hora* with 58.2% of its sources being official public ones, followed by *A Tarde* with 52.3%. The three national newspapers (*Folha*, *O Globo* and *O Estado*) all had similar index numbers for official public sources in their reports with 32.3%, 35.1%, and 34%, respectively. In second place are official government sources. The index numbers are similar between the national newspapers *Folha* and *Estado* and the regional newspaper *Zero Hora*. The regional newspaper *O Liberal* had a lower index with 5.7%.

The large difference between official public and government sources is noticeable. The data seems to suggest that this difference is due to the congress's support (including its deputies and senators) of the impeachment process. In this case, the news seems to be follow a top-down approach, as defined by McQuail (2012), in which the newspapers only divulge to the public what the official sources want them to say. What is frustrating about this is the lack of questioning about what was officially said. Passive acceptance of statements from official sources exists in the news, where statements are passed on to the public with no argument, questioning or opposition to the ideas. The normative formula for evaluating news production follows the idea that if we have one source supporting a particular position and another source opposing that same position, then the news would be balanced, even if those sources do not dialogue between each other. However, this is an element known

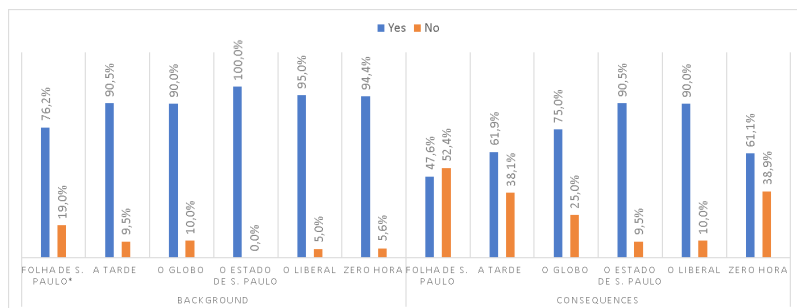
as non-normative quality which needs be verified since having opposing statements does not always lead to a balanced out point of view.

The official private sources almost go unnoticed in all newspapers, varying from 1.4% (*O Liberal*) to 5.1% (*Zero Hora*). The larger circulation newspapers maintained similar rates, ranging from 2% to 5%. These private sources were mainly political scientists and lawyers, one example being political scientist David Fleischer's statement in *O Estado de S. Paulo*, in which he says: "nobody is going to eliminate these programs; even Congress approved the continuation of Mais Médicos". He said this on August 28th, on the eve of the president's removal from office, while discussing which social programs the Michel Temer government would continue to support. Among the lawyers who appeared as private sources were Miguel Reale Júnior and Janaína Paschoal, both of whom filed the impeachment request against Dilma Rousseff.

Out of all these subdivisions of sources, there is a glaring lack of citizens who do not hold official positions expressing their opinions, their anxieties, or even asking questions. The "people speak" resource, still used in some newscasts, is nowhere to be found in political news coverage of the impeachment in the newspapers we analyzed.

The presence of backgrounds and consequences in the reports, on the other hand, helps to understand the depth with which the impeachment agenda was covered. Graph 3 compares backgrounds and consequences in newspaper reports. These data showed whether there is the presence of elements that constituted the story, and highlighted the consequences.

Graph 3 – Backgrounds and consequences in news reports



Source: authors, 2019.

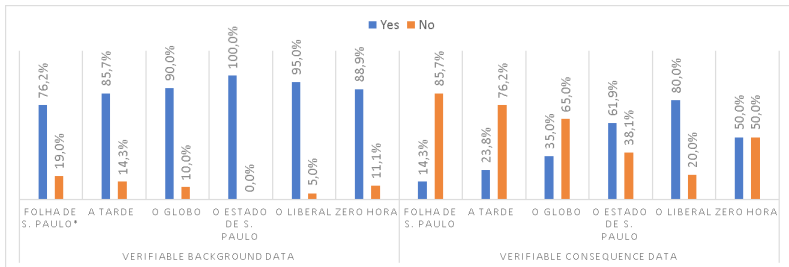
* *Folha de S. Paulo* had one report (4%) that did not match the Yes element, as it dealt with a future event.

As Graph 3 illustrates, all newspapers have data in backgrounds and consequences. There was a high index of background data in all the reports from the newspapers we analyzed. The lowest index of verifiable background data was from *Folha de S. Paulo*, with 76.2%; an index even lower than regional newspapers *A Tarde* and *O Liberal*. The highest index of consequences was registered in the newspapers *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *O Liberal*, which were practically tied with 90% of reports pointing to some kind of consequence.

All the analyzed news reports contained verifiable data of the fact, which is why the percentage value was not included in the graph. This is normal media behavior for a news report since one of the founding principles of the profession is the validation of verifiable facts.

In Graph 5, we can see that verifiable background data predominated in all newspapers, with the lowest index belonging to *Folha de S. Paulo*, with 76.2%. *O Estado de S. Paulo*, on the other hand, had a verifiable background in 100% of its reports. This result is consistent with journalism relying on past events in order to present such data.

Graph 4 – Verifiable data for background and consequence



Source: authors, 2019.

Regarding verifiable consequence data, this situation is reversed, with most of the newspapers neglecting this information. Comparing the total data for consequences to the proven percentages reveals that the data is actually less. Only 14.3% of the consequence data in *Folha de S. Paulo* was able to be verified, compared to the 47.6% it presents in the graph. For *A Tarde* that number drops from 61.9% presented in the graph to 23.8% verifiable. *O Globo* has less than half of the data cited, dropping from 75% to 35%. *O Estado* goes from 90% of the consequence data to 61.9% that can be verified. *O Liberal* maintains a good index; only 10% of the consequence data

cited was not able to be verified, dropping from a total of 90% to 80%. *Zero Hora* had the same 10% drop, going from 64.1% of consequence data cited to 50% that was verifiable.

As demonstrated, *O Liberal* has a higher index of reports with consequence, even still, it is important to note that this newspaper does not go in-depth with this data, demonstrated in the following excerpt:

Yesterday, the Senate's special impeachment committee approved, by a vote of 15 to 5, against Senator Antonio Anastasia's report (PSDB-MG) to go forward with the process of removing President Dilma Rousseff. The report will now be put to vote in the Senate's main plenary. (*O Liberal*, 7/05/2016).

Here, the information tells us that after the Senate's special commission approves the impeachment, the report will then be subject to a vote in the plenary. This information can be verified; however, it does not shed more light on the effects and consequences after the approval stages.

6 Final considerations

In this article, we discussed the multidimensionality intrinsic to the quality of journalism and presented an analysis of four elements which are central to quality. This was applied to six Brazilian newspapers and their coverage of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. The analysis was performed using an adapted application of the VAP methodology. We focused on verifying: a) the influence of sources on what is reported; b) the lack of thematic diversity; c) the officialism and anonymity of the sources; and d) the absence of verifiable temporal consequences on post-impeachment.

As our analyses demonstrated, the information in most newspapers originated from the source (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 85.7%; *O Globo*, 75%; *Estado de S. Paulo*, 95.2%; and *Zero Hora*, 83.3%) or reproduction (*A Tarde*, 71.4%; and *O Liberal*, 70%). The reports centered on the congress and the government/political parties, they preferred using official public and government sources, and did not point out the possible consequences of the impeachment to the public.

In relation to sources, Santos e Guazina (2017), in their study of sources used by the *Folha de S. Paulo* and *A Tarde* newspapers, indicated that "the problem seems to be in the difficulty of adding

value to the content through the presence of sources of different aspects and positions in society” (p.634). Newspapers are not designed as a space for sources to debate, but as a space for merely presenting what is said (or declaratory journalism).

In addition, the data showed that an average of 63.8% of reports focused mainly on congress and political parties, 66% of the information came from sources, followed by 24% of information being reproduced. This result, added to the excessive use of official public (34%) and government sources (11.7%) is alarming in terms of the quality of political journalism practiced in that period. The presence of congressional sources is in line with the role that the parties had in the Legislative Houses in the entire process of political articulation of the impediment, but it does not shed much light on the role of politically articulated social movements in the period.

This dependence on traditional institutional political sources was also found in the analyses of different Latin American newspapers by the authors of VAP. Other authors, using different methodologies, also found this result to be true; one example is a study conducted by Ripollés and Rabadán (2013) on Spanish journalism. Their study determined that this dependence on institutional political sources was not solely limited to political coverage of crises. They point to a scenario with potentially less plural possibilities of coverage, which seems not to have changed even with the new forms of participation introduced by the digital environment and the trends of pluralization of communication (Alves & Albuquerque, 2019). Added to this is an infrequent use of specialized sources, which could be used to provide perspectives of events from those not directly involved in them, as initially identified in another study by Santos and Guazina (2017).

Furthermore, this dependence demonstrates the need for new professional practices where professionals are not limited to just repeating or transcribing what sources state, but where they can include more in-depth analyses in order to contextualize these sources' statements. However, far from just trying to build an opinionated text, a more reflective *modus operandi* could be to provide an interpretive range more suited to the ethical, moral and legal challenges of political contexts strained by polarization.

All of the 121 news reports on the impeachment from the six Brazilian newspapers failed to report on any possible future political developments, that is, they did not report on the significant

consequences of removing the president; excluding the clearly direct consequences such as: “if you leave Dilma, Temer takes over” and “If Temer takes over, the new minister will be”.

Although it is justifiable for a newspaper not to show or reveal all the complex facts behind an impeachment in a single report, the failure to identify consequences de-politicizes and undermines the important nature of the political situation. In this regard, the results discussed in this paper complement the naturalization process and the factual treatment given to the event (Prudencio et al., 2017, 2018).

The editorials that did provide in-depth coverage of the risks or benefits of an impeachment, the ideological differences, or government projects between the president and the vice-president were not included on cover stories or even as main reports. In this sense, the results on verifiable data of consequence show that the journalism produced by most of the analyzed newspapers reinforced the *status quo* of the time, that there would be a change of command, and that in itself was configured as something positive, in line with the editorial positions of many newspapers. The strategic adoption of de-politicization is evident in these reports: “what you have are the facts” – as if technical choices did not have any political effects.

It is also important to mention that some results highlight aspects that are repeated in different contexts and analyses, such as the predominant use of official sources. In this case, the news coverage could have at least dissociated itself from the political positions expressed in the editorials and provided a greater diversity and plurality of viewpoints. What we saw, however, largely reinforces what current literature has demonstrated about the role of the traditional commercial press in the 2016 impeachment.

Other studies, using all the criteria in the VAP method, could help to provide a more complete overview of the news coverage of that period from a quality of journalism point of view. Our analyses, however, showed that the news production of the analyzed newspapers generally lacked the criteria of quality listed in this paper, which calls into question these newspapers' contribution to democracy during one of the most significant political processes in the country's recent history.

NOTES

- 1 FSB Pesquisas survey in 2016 with 230 federal deputies from 26 political parties. Available at: <<http://www.fsb.com.br/noticia/fsb-lanca-nona-edicao-do-midia-e-politica-2016>>. Access on: Dec. 15, 2017.
- 2 We were unable to access editions of the *Correio Braziliense* newspaper at the time of our research.
- 3 Understood here as news without factual evidence, that is deliberately misleading, partially true or with content created to confuse and manipulate the public's perceptions (Yap et al., 2018), such as satires, false content, connections or false contexts, or manipulated content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), used for purposes of advertising, commercial gain, or to influence political and electoral processes (Higgins, 2017). A survey regarding the use of disinformation in the 2018 elections can be found in Ferreira (2019).
- 4 See <https://fenaj.org.br/ataques-a-imprensa-explodem-com-bolsonaro/>.

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