

ARTICLE

THE SOCIAL LEGITIMACY OF JOURNALISM IN BRAZIL:

theoretical elements for an analysis
guided by Journalism Studies¹



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DOI: 10.25200/BJR.v21n2.2025.1693

Received in: 17/10/2024

Desk Reviewed in: 17/01/2024

Desk Review Editor: Lia Seixas

Revised on: 26/03/2025

Revised on: 21/05/2025

Approved on: 22/05/2025

ABSTRACT – This article proposes theoretical considerations aiming to help explain the current public questioning of journalism's social legitimacy. The methodology is based on Weber's Comprehensive Theory, especially the ideal type, social action, and legitimacy concepts. A three-level notion of journalism's social legitimacy is outlined. From this, theoretical and empirical evidence are mapped, indicating that the legitimizing journalism process is based on the validity claim of its relationship with democracy. In this context, the implications of mobilizing different readings of journalism and democracy are discussed. Journalism is analyzed as a discourse, a professional practice, a social institution, and a form of knowledge. The variations of the concept of democracy dialogue with the minimalist, pluralist, deliberative, and radical models. The results demonstrate that conceptual variations imply different attributions to the news media in different democratic models.

Key words: Journalism. Legitimacy. Democracy. Journalism theory. Democratic theory.

A LEGITIMIDADE SOCIAL DO JORNALISMO NO BRASIL: elementos teóricos para uma análise orientada pelos Estudos do Jornalismo

RESUMO – Este artigo apresenta considerações teóricas que objetivam colaborar para a explicação do questionamento público da legitimidade social do jornalismo na atualidade. A metodologia se alicerça na Sociologia Compreensiva de Weber, especialmente a partir dos conceitos de tipo ideal, de ação social e de legitimidade. É delineada uma noção de legitimidade social do jornalismo de três níveis e, a partir disso, são mapeados indícios teóricos e empíricos que apontam que o processo de legitimação do jornalismo se baseia na pretensão de validade de sua relação com a democracia. Nesse contexto, discutem-se as implicações da mobilização de diferentes leituras do jornalismo e da democracia. Analisa-se o jornalismo enquanto discurso, prática profissional, instituição social e forma de conhecimento. As variações do conceito de democracia dialogam com os modelos minimalista, pluralista, deliberativo e radical. Os resultados demonstram que as variações conceituais implicam atribuições diferentes à mídia noticiosa em modelos democráticos diversos.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo. Legitimidade. Democracia. Teoria do Jornalismo. Teoria democrática.

LA LEGITIMIDAD SOCIAL DEL PERIODISMO EN BRASIL: elementos teóricos para un análisis orientado por los Estudios de Periodismo

RESUMEN – Este artículo propone elementos teóricos para ayudar a explicar el cuestionamiento público de la legitimidad social del periodismo en la actualidad. La metodología se fundamenta en la Sociología Comprensiva de Weber, basándose especialmente en los conceptos de tipo ideal, acción social y legitimidad. Se esboza una noción de legitimidad social del periodismo en tres niveles y, a partir de ella, se mapean evidencias teóricas y empíricas que indican que el proceso de legitimación del periodismo se basa en la reivindicación de validez de su relación con la democracia. En este contexto, se discuten las implicaciones de movilizar diferentes lecturas de periodismo y democracia. Se analiza el periodismo como discurso, práctica profesional, institución social y forma de conocimiento. Variaciones del concepto de democracia dialogan con los modelos minimalista, pluralista, deliberativo y radical. Los resultados demuestran que las variaciones conceptuales implican diferentes atribuciones a los medios informativos en los distintos modelos democráticos.

Palabras clave: Periodismo. Legitimidad. Democracia. Teoría del periodismo. Teoría democrática.

1 Introduction

Although the debate surrounding the responsibilities of journalism in contemporary democracies has gained ground in Brazil in recent years, the phenomenon is not local and cannot be explained solely by the argument that Brazilian democracy is recent and, therefore, immature or incomplete. Even in countries with a long democratic tradition, such as England, France, and the United States, journalism

is being challenged by different groups in society as an institution capable of collaborating with democracy. On the other hand, some defend journalism, seeing its importance and relevance. Therefore, the legitimacy of journalism is in dispute, and it takes place in different social spheres, such as the legal and political spheres. The mediatized one is of interest here, as it takes place in a space of public visibility.

Criticism of specific coverage comes from individuals and organizations positioned at different points on the political spectrum, based on variations of the argument that journalism is not fulfilling its duties. In some cases, these criticisms are directed at specific media outlets and/or professionals; in others, they are generalized and encompass journalism or, more commonly, the entire media.

With data that reveals a decline in news trust (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Mick, 2019, p. 245; Newman et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2015) paired with those pointing to the increase in violence against Brazilian journalists – including new modalities, such as “discrediting the press” (National Federation of Journalists, 2020) – these discussions signal a crisis time in journalism, which transcends the business model and structural changes in the way journalistic content is produced, distributed, and consumed. This crisis is also one of legitimacy (Christofolletti, 2019; Gurleyen & Hackett, 2016; Nadler & Vavrus, 2015) and affects not only journalism. In Carlson et al. (2020, p. 3) words, we live “at a time of anti-intellectual, anti-science, and anti-journalism sentiment across the world”.

When groups are willing to prevent journalists from reporting on specific events, as occurred in Brazil during the street demonstrations known as the June Journeys, and in the coverage of the covid-19 pandemic, for example, it is made evident a dysfunction in the often-repeated relationship between journalism and democracy. In the understanding defended here, for journalism to reinvent itself as a political actor that promotes civic commitment to the collective construction of the democratic experience, it is necessary to denaturalize this relationship and qualify the analysis.

2 Theoretical-methodological frame

The research from which this article derives is positioned in the field of Journalism Studies and has the methodological orientation of Max Weber's Comprehensive Sociology. In the Weberian

sense, understanding is a process of identifying connections of meaning, which is only possible concerning rationally oriented social actions. The primary analysis tools are ideal typologies, historical contextualization, and comparison.

The assumption determining theoretical and methodological choices is that journalism is a specific phenomenon with a communicational and, more broadly, sociological dimension. With this in mind, a conception of the social legitimacy of journalism must encompass these different levels.

a) Sociological level:

It starts from a classical notion of legitimacy: the idea that all domination or authority is only stabilized, in the long term, based on the belief in its legitimacy (Weber, 1991, p. 139). This logic is displaced from discussions about exercising political power – Weber's focus – to journalism. Thus, by accepting that journalism holds, to some degree, the authority to represent social reality discursively, it is assumed that its exercise demands a basis of legitimacy.

For Weber (1991, p. 16), legitimacy is within the social relationship scope, which relies, on some degree, on reciprocity. In other words, it can only be claimed by those who exercise authority. Its recognition is up to the subjects to whom the claim of legitimacy is directed.

Furthermore, the Weberian conception connects individual actions and the associations or institutions in which they take place. The action is inherent to the individual, but bureaucratization and the consequent institutionalization coordinate these individual actions, which, through repetition, come to be characterized as typical actions of that association.

In journalism's case, the individuals who come together through institutionalization practice the action of doing journalism which, in Fonseca's (2016) interpretation – based on Weber's (1991, p. 15) typology of social actions – has the particularity of being rationally guided both by ends (obtaining profit, prestige, maintaining the institution itself, etc.) and by values (ethical and moral principles).

b) Communication level:

The second layer of meaning related to journalistic legitimacy is the particularity of its communicational nature. Based on Weber's typologies of social actions, Habermas proposes that there is one that is typical of the communicational process: communicative action (Habermas, 2004, 2012a, 2012b). He defines it as an action-oriented

towards consensus through language and, therefore, established by interaction, “through acts of understanding” (Habermas, 2012a, p. 496).

The concept connects social action to language (Habermas, 2012a, p. 182). “The concept of communicative action presupposes language as a *medium* for a type of understanding process in which participants, when referring to a world express, on both sides, validity claims that can be accepted or contested” (Habermas, 2012a, p. 191, author’s emphasis). For him, “claims vary according to the contexts of action” (Habermas, 2012a, p. 72).

By taking legitimacy as a claim of journalists and media outlets, it is plausible, by transposing the Habermasian notion, that they claim it through arguments directed at their audiences.

c) Journalistic level:

At this level, the objective is to focus on the context of action in which the journalistic legitimacy claim is displayed. Perspectives are used to indicate that arguments are presented discursively in journalistic content itself (Lischka, 2019) and metajournalistic discourses (Carlson, 2016, 2017; Carlson et al., 2020). The latter is how “various actors inside and outside of journalism compete to construct, reiterate, and even challenge the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practices” (Carlson, 2016, p. 349).

Summarizing, based on the contributions described, legitimacy is an attribute granted to journalism within the scope of social relations. It enables the production and consumption of journalistic information to be carried out in a relatively stable manner over a period of time. For their claim to legitimacy to be socially validated (including by peers), journalists and other social actors present arguments, and reasons that justify this claim, which are evaluated, accepted, or rejected in public argument exchanges through the journalistic content itself and metajournalistic discourses.

Based on this understanding of the ideal type of “legitimacy of journalism”, theoretical and empirical evidence were mapped, which reveals the main arguments mobilized in the public and academic debate to validate or invalidate the claim of legitimacy of journalism in the current Brazilian context. The choice of public events analyzed respected the criterion of having occurred in the last decade, fostering a public discussion about the work of journalism that could be isolated and analyzed, and that was not directly linked to electoral disputes, potentially more contaminated by the partisan positions of the agents involved in the debate.

The collection of content where the arguments of legitimization and delegitimization were mapped followed a thematic focus. Using news search tools and open-access digital archives, there was a selection of the materials found where the journalistic procedures were discussed. For each case, it was agreed that the search would cover approximately one month from the peak of the public discussion.

Given the need for synthesis, figure 1 presents the stages, some concepts, and details about the sample of journalistic and metajournalistic materials compiled in the research.

Figure 1

Theoretical-methodological synthesis



3 Analysis: theoretical evidence

Studies addressing the legitimacy of journalism in Brazil, as an object of study or as a relevant analysis category, show that despite the ambiguous relationships with democracy and governments that

have historically marked Brazilian journalism – especially that of large media conglomerates –, arguments of legitimacy have been constructed that are recognized, at least, by part of its audience.

Dias (2019, p. 473) states that major Brazilian media outlets, such as the newspapers *Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Globo*, achieve or intend to assume “in their discourses a supposed status of authority in the political scene” due to how they have historically appropriated journalistic practices. They would have achieved legitimacy by presenting themselves as exponents of “good” journalism practiced in the country” (Dias, 2019, p. 475).

The author historicizes the arguments presented in this construction and demonstrates that newspapers mobilized the defense of “democratic legality” to justify different political positions: support for the 1964 civil-military coup, movements to distance themselves from the military regime, and the political actors engaged posture in the period of democratic reopening.

This connects with the “intersections of economics and politics in the journalistic field”, which Pontes and Pismel (2018) address. Champagne’s (2005, p. 58) competing legitimization principles (intellectual and political economy) are central to the discussion. The defense of democracy would be linked to the first of these.

For the authors, serious journalism would have its legitimacy “truly sustained by the intellectual principle and journalistic rigor” (Pontes & Pismel, 2018, p. 381). When referring to hegemonic Brazilian journalism, they point out that “in moments of political crisis and acute economic needs, the Brazilian media conglomerate puts its journalistic legitimacy at risk” by renouncing the intellectual principles of journalism in favor of a specific economic and ethical-political project (Pontes & Pismel, 2018, p. 377).

This perception is in line with the research developed by Guerreiro Neto (2013). He analyzed editorials that somehow addressed journalism, published in *Folha de S.Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* newspapers. Among the most general features of the discourses of legitimization of journalism, Guerreiro Neto (2013, p. 101) mapped two currents: one that sought to delegitimize the ‘other’ – understood as the agents who, in the newspapers’ interpretation, criticized or attacked journalism, especially politicians – to legitimize itself; and legitimization through exaltation and reinforcement of the roles that journalism plays in society.

These currents are directly related to another research

result: mapping units of meaning or signification (semas). Guerreiro Neto (2013, p. 145) identified the main semas claimed by the discourse of self-legitimization of journalism: democracy, freedom, civil society, public interest, and monitoring. On the other hand, their opposites are rejected: authoritarianism, control, state, political interest, and evaluation.

The evidence found by the researcher indicates that legitimization discourses are encouraged, mainly, “in the face of external shocks, with the clash with the political field being the most frequent, and demands democracy, freedom of the press, the defense of society, the public interest and the oversight of powers as the basis for the search for reiteration of the social legitimacy of journalism” (Guerreiro Neto, 2013, p. 11).

The mentioned studies demonstrate that, at least concerning the country's major corporate news outlets, the defense of democracy is an argument constantly used to justify their editorial choices and professional practices, even if this action, at different historical moments, is reversed. The defense is not always direct (the word democracy is not necessarily present); values and practices linked to democracy are also mentioned. Another highlighted issue is that the motivation for actions, especially those institutionally bundled, is not always driven by values or goals strictly linked to journalistic rationality (in terms of an ideal type) but is also permeated by political and economic interests from other social spheres.

3.1 Analysis: empirical evidence

Aligned with what Guerreiro Neto (2013, p. 11) considers, the empirical evidence mapped here was selected from cases that unfolded due to “external shocks”. Three public events were selected in which debates about the legitimacy of journalism gained momentum in the political and journalistic fields, on digital social networks, and in academia itself: the coverage of the street protests that took place in Brazil in 2013, known as June Journeys; the publication of leaked conversations between members of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office and former federal judge Sérgio Moro by the website *The Intercept*, an episode known as *Vaza Jato*, in 2019; and the attacks suffered by journalists during coverage of the first spike in cases and deaths caused by the covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, in 2020.

Based on the analysis of the arguments used by different social actors in 70 journalistic and media criticism pieces (op-eds, notes, text, audio, and video news and reports), 55 groups of arguments criticizing and defending the work of journalism were reached. It was subsequently observed that these groups could be grouped into two axes: a) one with arguments for evaluating the procedures for investigating and disseminating journalistic content, and b) another with arguments related to adherence to certain ethical, moral, and legal principles.

The first of these axes refers to issues objectified in the journalistic product. For example, equity is materialized in the approaches and similar spaces granted to the actors involved in the news. Ethical, moral, and legal issues are not always objectified in the content, but that can be inferred from journalists' use of specific procedures. For example, balancing the approaches and spaces granted to the different parties involved in a news story is related to moral, ethical, and legal principles such as the right of every citizen to inform and be informed, the presumption of innocence, and the right to defense.

Therefore, the "connection of meanings" (Weber, 1992) between journalism and democracy is not only directly manifested, through "arguments of legitimacy claim" (Habermas, 2012a) that attribute to journalism the defense of democracy, citizenship, and the Democratic Rule of Law although this has been observed on occasion. When, for example, the arguments mobilized indicate that journalism is responsible for disseminating what is essential and relevant, the parameter for defining what is essential and relevant is democracy. Likewise, when journalism is expected to be balanced and fair, the assumption is that everyone should have the right to present their arguments in public debate fairly, which is only truly possible in democracies. In other words, journalists and specialized critics link their practices and principles to democracy.

When mapping the arguments mobilized by journalists, media critics, researchers, and sources who had a voice in the content, it was noted that, regarding the same coverage, there are opposing assessments about the relationship between journalism and democracy. From a Weberian perspective, this apparent inconsistency in the meanings of the actions of journalists or journalism indicates that divergent actions are not rationally motivated or that the meanings of the actions have different motivations. As it has already

been established that journalistic action, in general, is rationally motivated by ends and values (Fonseca, 2016), it is necessary to investigate the last of these hypotheses, for which it is essential to define what journalism and democracy we are talking about.

4 Discussion: “journalisms”

For this study, five influential readings in Journalism Studies in Brazil (ideal typologies) were selected: journalism as discourse, from the French perspective (Benetti, 2008; Charaudeau, 2013) and the critical perspective (Fairclough, 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Van Dijk, 1990); journalism as a professional practice (Davis, 2010; Schudson, 2010; Witschge & Harbers, 2018); journalism as a social institution (Guerreiro Neto, 2013, 2015; Lowrey, 2018); and journalism as a form of knowledge (Genro Filho, 2012; Meditsch, 1992, 1998; Pontes, 2015).

Based on the analysis of the mapped authors' works, a range of characteristics common to all readings and a series of particularities of each theoretical approach were reached. In other words, the data point to a minimum conception of journalism, which could be called a generic definition. Among the elements common to the readings of journalism studied are some attributions (table 1). The first is that journalism should deal with reality, with facts. Each reading links journalism to its own concept of fact/reality, but all present this issue as fundamental.

A second common role is that journalism regulates power to a certain extent. Whether through surveillance, contestation, agreement to hegemonic practices, scrutiny of abuses, monitoring, or the possibility of giving visibility to worldviews that challenge hegemonic powers. In this sense, journalism's role would be to help achieve a certain balance in the distribution of power in society, especially political power.

Finally, all the analyzed theoretical perspectives establish that journalism must disseminate useful information for exercising citizenship. Still, not just any information: recent information, especially of a social and political nature, that is comprehensive, reliable, and allows the public to orient itself in an increasingly complex and interdependent world.

Table 1

Common attributes of different readings of journalism

Connecting meaning with...	Journalism readings				
	Journalism as discourse		Professional practice	Social institution	Form of knowledge
	French perspective	Critical perspective			
Reality	Describing in a credible way (discursive reality)	Representing the world, reality	Producing a report based on facts (facticity)	Searching for the truth and reporting it; defining reality	Producing knowledge about reality
Power regulation	Monitoring the exercise of power	Taking a stand in the face of hegemonic practices and relations	Being a counterweight to power; scrutinizing abuses; monitoring the actions of governments and markets	Functioning as a fourth power	Giving visibility to non-dominant worldviews
Useful information	Make people aware (civic logic of informing citizens)	Entertaining and keeping people politically and socially informed	Providing a comprehensive report of recent events and issues	Collecting, producing, and disseminating reliable information quickly	Guiding people and organizations in a complex and ever-changing world

Therefore, the analysis carried out indicates that if we consider a more generic concept of journalism – which only provides the identification of what constitutes such and what cannot be included in this category – this “umbrella” concept should consist of, at least, these three attributions: dealing with reality, participating in power regulation, and reporting on issues that are useful to citizens.

It was also possible to map the characteristics that differentiate the theoretical approaches. They were identified based on the evaluation of their specific presence in one of the journalism readings and the authors’ emphasis on this aspect.

In the reading of journalism as discourse from the French perspective, the attribution that marks its difference from the others is “authenticating the facts” (Charaudeau, 2013, p. 88), that is, making people believe in the coincidence between what is said and the facts described. This attribution refers directly to the concept of reality of this approach: discursive reality; therefore, it is intersubjective.

In reading journalism as discourse from a critical perspective,

the characteristic of this approach is to provide a general projection of social, political, cultural, and economic models. It refers to the cognitive issues involved in interpreting information, which is typical of this approach.

When reading journalism as a professional practice, the characteristic trait is deciding which information is important and what their audiences should know. Although journalism generally makes this selection, from the professional practice perspective, this aspect is central, as it justifies the profession based on the knowledge accumulated as a group.

In journalism understood as a social institution, the characteristic feature is that it works as a fourth estate. In itself, this attribute equates journalism to other social institutions, such as parliament, government, and the judiciary. This comparison makes sense only when it is also constituted as an institution.

From the perspective of journalism as a form of knowledge, its distinctive attribute is producing knowledge about reality. This characteristic presupposes a high level of complexity in journalistic work, which can only be achieved through a method-guided practice (from singular to particular and universal).

The variables mentioned so far delimit spaces of political action or, in other words, specific connections of meaning between journalism models forged by theoretical approaches and democracy. Given that this connection underlies its claim to legitimacy, the definitions of journalism, which may or may not be appropriated by common sense, delimit a space of legitimization.

Table 2

Comparison between journalism readings and mapped aspects implying the relationship with democracy

Journalism as discourse		Journalism as professional practice	Journalism as a social institution	Journalism as a form of knowledge
French perspective	Critical perspective			
Journalists have a level of autonomy delimited by a social structure that determines them (Benetti, 2008).	Journalism is a particular form of social, institutional practice (Van Dijk, 1990), whose product operates as a cultural commodity (Fairclough, 1995).	Professional ethics are extremely important to keep journalism legitimacy, and this involves linking it to society's core values, such as democracy (Tong, 2018).	Journalism being understood as an institution presupposes a constant tension between agency and structure, autonomy and restriction (Lowrey, 2018).	Journalism must contribute to the formation of enlightened public opinions. It collaborates with social transformation and democracy based on the knowledge it produces.
Institutional interests limit the fulfillment of socially relevant purposes (Benetti, 2008).	On the one hand, journalism contributes to social reproduction and control, and on the other, to changes in cultural values and identities (Fairclough, 1995).	The implications of professionalism and the relative autonomy it generates for democracy are ambiguous. On the one hand, professional journalism is better insulated from citizens than from powerful market interests or political sources. On the other hand, professionalism is necessary to counterbalance the permanent efforts of powerful actors to impose narrow market and partisan logic on the news (Waisbord, 2013).	As an institution, journalism is characterized by a certain stability of standards and values, which are reproduced almost automatically (Guerreiro Neto, 2013).	The practice/ method of producing journalistic knowledge has the potential to counter-hegemonic worldviews (Genro Filho, 2012).
Reality is understood in the discursive (it is intersubjective) terms (Orlandi, 2015).	Journalistic discourse is socially formed and also forms the social, constitutes social identities and relations, and systems of knowledge and beliefs (Fairclough, 2001b).		The journalistic institution is guided by both ends and values (Fonseca, 2016).	
The sense of reality (Benetti, 2010), and therefore of democracy, is linked to ideology.	Journalism is partly autonomous in its form of cultural reproduction and partly dependent on and controlled by wider structures and ideologies (Van Dijk, 1990).		It needs to meet certain social expectations to guarantee its legitimacy. Journalism fulfills essential functions for democracy, such as informing citizens about public issues (Lischka, 2019).	
The objective text is merely the journalist's intention (Benetti, 2010).				
The communication contract that socially legitimizes journalism is based on idealized representations (Charaudeau, 2013).	The representations of facts in journalistic discourse function ideologically insofar as they contribute to reproducing social relations of domination and exploitation. However, they can also be the locus for contesting hegemonic practices and relations. The processes of journalism are complex and often contradictory (Fairclough, 1995).		News dissemination is a ritual through which a society reaffirms and repositions shared beliefs and norms. The presence of journalism at the institutional level reinforces a society's collective faith in its institutions (Lowrey, 2018).	

As can be seen, the different readings of journalism imply quite different relationships with democracy. One aspect that deserves to be highlighted is the issue of journalistic autonomy, which varies considerably between theoretical perspectives. For example, in journalism understood as discourse from the French perspective, the social structure limits autonomy. As subjects of discourse, journalists are, therefore, historically determined by their place and time and by the structures to which they are linked. In essence, they are ideological subjects, subjected to ideology and capable of guiding interpretation in one direction. Still, there is no guarantee of convergence, since the meaning is created intersubjectively between the subjects of the discourse.

This is a descriptive approach that, in a way, points to the limitations of journalism's potential in democracies. Although, from the idea of a social contract, ethical and moral principles, that link their mission to the public interest and citizenship, are paired with the discourse concept, it is not very clear how journalists act to fulfill this mission beyond ensuring polyphony.

From the perspective of journalism as a critical discourse, a strong normativity presupposes journalists' engagement against inequality and injustice. However, although professionals are encouraged to take advantage of gaps in the content production structure to collaborate with these objectives, journalists' autonomy is considered relative. Institutional and cognitive restrictions are emphasized. As a result, the impact on democracy is ambiguous. Journalism can both contribute to the reproduction of social relations of domination and exploitation as well as challenge them. It can be, concomitantly, a commodity and a social transformation agent.

In journalism understood as a professional practice, autonomy is also relative. While the closure of the professional field provides greater autonomy in relation to external agents, it limits the practices considered acceptable by the professional group. Furthermore, most journalists produce informative content within or for private companies (in freelancers' cases), and professionalism is less effective in guaranteeing autonomy regarding the interests of these organizations.

For democracy, journalism as a professional practice can be seen as positive or negative, depending on the chosen perspective. On one hand, professionalization standardizes work and guarantees, at least in theory, a higher quality; on the other hand, it can isolate

professional groups from ordinary people and the complexity of broader social contexts.

The interpretation of journalism as an institution similarly affects journalists' autonomy. In this case, journalism acquires the typical characteristics of these material and symbolic structures, such as the stability of standards of conduct and values, resilience to sociocultural turbulences that threaten it, and a barrier that, in a certain way, protects journalists from attempts to influence by governments or market organizations external to the institution. Nevertheless, institutions exercise, by nature, a relative degree of control over the actions of the individuals within them, which can threaten journalists' autonomy.

This means that the relationship between journalism understood as an institution and democracy is paradoxical. While it contributes to social stability, it also acts following its own institutional interests. Furthermore, from this perspective, journalism tends to be relatively inflexible to changes in democracy itself.

Ultimately, journalism understood as a form of knowledge also sees journalists' autonomy as relative, although it considers gaps that professionals can exploit to produce knowledge. In this case, there is also a blatant normativity, attributed to journalism's collaboration for social transformation by producing more critical and complex informative pieces.

There is an assumption in this approach concerning the belief that societies and democracies tend to become fairer, more inclusive, and more supportive if knowledge is socialized. However, the dissolution of modern utopias in the face of the 20th century's conflicts and crises, added to the beginning of the 21st century's denial of rationality and scientificity, put this assumption in check. In theory, journalism as a form of knowledge is a step towards an inclusive and emancipatory democracy. Still, we must better understand what type of knowledge can mobilize society in this direction.

Lastly, it is worth highlighting that, at the same time that journalism delimits its democracy field of action and builds arguments for the social legitimacy of its practices and values, democracy concepts also attempt to frame it based on its demands.

4.2 Discussion: democracies

About democracy, we sought to integrate relevant approaches into the research that, at the same time, ensured a plurality of social conceptions. We then delimited four theoretical perspectives based on specific works by authors who are references in their approaches: (a) minimalist democracy, mainly based on the ideas outlined by Schumpeter in the work *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (2017); (b) pluralist democracy, primarily based on Dahl's ideas in the works *On Democracy* (2001) and *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (2005); (c) deliberative democracy, with an emphasis on Habermas' contributions in *Three Normative Models of Democracy* (1995) and *Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere* (2022); (d) radical democracy, along the lines proposed by Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: For a Radical Democratic Policy* (2015).

The discussion on the different readings of democracy requires an initial observation: the differentiation between the idea of democracy, democratic models, and emphases (Gomes, 2010). The idea represents the widely accepted notion of minimum conditions for a democratic government. Models specify how this idea is implemented, while emphasis concerns specific issues where a government, primarily adhering to one model, may employ tactics, strategies, institutions, or actions typically associated with another.

With this in mind, it is possible to see that, like journalism, democracy can also be understood from a generic, broader concept that unfolds into specific models, which, although having a common core, have particularities that influence the spaces reserved for journalism. In other words, despite the distinction between what can and cannot be considered a democracy being fundamental, this general notion does not say much about the extent of popular participation in political decisions and, consequently, the complexity of the information regarding public affairs necessary for such participation.

Although all analyzed models of democracy incorporate journalism as an essential element for their full functioning, the level of relevance, diversity, and complexity of the attributions for it varies. It is worth noting that the attributions mapped here do not represent all those that a more detailed analysis of the models could infer. Using the methodology adopted here, it was possible

to point out the model in question’s most prominent or typical characteristics, differentiating it from the others.

Table 3

Comparison between the attributions of journalism in the analyzed democracy models

Models	Attributions reserved for journalism
Minimalist democracy	Covering crises, especially those involving corrupt or incompetent leaders; covering elections with detailed accounts of campaign promises and platforms; acting as a power control, alerting citizens of problems; information must be accurate and complete (Christians et al., 2009).
	Monitoring, necessarily but not exclusively, political institutions and elites.
	Reinforcing a general sense of legitimacy in the political system (Baker, 2004).
Pluralistic democracy	Acting as a watchdog or burglar alarm; Concentrating on the history of individuals in positions of authority, and the platforms of candidates and political parties; focusing on political actors (Strömbäck, 2005).
	Society monitoring, especially on the issues that are most important to the interest group; mobilizing group members; and defending their interests (Christians et al., 2009).
	Mobilizing internally, advocating externally for the group’s demands and needs, and recruiting supporters or new members (Baker, 2004).
	Collaborating to establish fair negotiations and compromises among groups and between groups and the government. Protecting institutions of democracy, determining their maintenance, and facilitating their creation (Baker, 2004).
	Providing individuals and organized groups with information that indicates when their interests are at stake. Make policymakers aware of the content and strength of popular demands (Baker, 2004).

	Contributing to pre-structuring the public sphere by providing symbolic input with the potential to foster deliberative processes (Maia, 2008).
	Rationally processing the input that reaches the public sphere through the information channels of political parties, interest groups, public relations agencies, and societal subsystems, among others, as well as civil society organizations and intellectuals (Habermas, 2022).
	Exercising the gatekeeper function to signal key issues that need public attention and, at the same time, mobilizing a broad public and putting pressure on political decision-makers (Habermas, 2022).
Deliberative democracy	<p>Filtering the information made public by different agents to qualify it (Habermas, 2022).</p> <p>Acting for inclusive discussions; mobilizing citizens' interest, engagement, and participation in public discussions; connecting debaters; promoting discussions characterized by rationality, impartiality, intellectual honesty, and equality (Strömbäck, 2005).</p> <p>Framing politics as open to all; helps to ensure that citizens have some basic knowledge about factual issues and conditions and the functioning of society and political processes (Strömbäck, 2005).</p> <p>Identifying issues of public relevance that are ignored by government bodies and pressuring these state bodies to include these agendas in organized deliberation processes; monitoring the forums that emerge (Ferreira, 2011).</p>
	Acting as a sensor capable of identifying the political spaces from which complaints and demands emerge, especially those located outside conventional political decision-making spaces.
Radical democracy	<p>Denouncing any form of oppression, threats to freedom, and inequalities.</p> <p>Acting as a fight arena for democratic radicalization.</p> <p>Bringing social and political conflicts to light.</p>

It is clear that journalism's demands are becoming increasingly complex, with the need for a higher level of civic engagement. For example, the minimalist model requires less participation from ordinary citizens in political decisions since this occurs almost exclusively through electoral choices among political elites. Likewise, in this model, journalism has less demanding responsibilities, with an emphasis on monitoring political power exercises and covering electoral campaigns.

In a pluralistic democracy, journalism contributes to fair competition between organized groups. This is why a plurality of

information sources is so important: In this way, groups can have different communication outlets and more efficiently present their arguments.

On the other hand, deliberative democracy, which demands the involvement of citizens in public discussions, offers a broader range of contributions that journalism can (and should) make to ensure the model's functioning. Therefore, it is not enough to simply report on the different demands and proposals; it is necessary to point out ways citizens can participate in discussions about themselves and provide them with the tools to do so. This is a complex role that demands professional and structured journalism.

Journalism is not often a focus in the literature characterizing radical democracy. In the interpretation defended here, the complexity of journalists' work in this model is so extensive that it would require a reinvention of hegemonic journalism. This case differs significantly from the others and, to a certain extent, inverts some of the logic typically attributed to journalism.

Radical democracy requires that journalism perceive political issues and oppression in a wide range of spaces for debate and antagonism. In this model, politics is not centered solely on government and state organizations but is distributed across various social spaces. As an engaged institution, journalism cannot tolerate relations of inequality and oppression.

Regarding the implications of the different models' attributions for journalism, it is clear that minimalist and pluralist democracies do not significantly alter the current hegemonic communication practices, routines, and structures. In the case of pluralist democracy's case, there is a broader range of possibilities for journalism to operate, since the level of sociopolitical polarization would open up the possibility of a type of journalism that is more or less politicized, more or less linked to the interests of groups. In general, both democracy models emphasize private media companies. A commitment to journalistic pluralism necessitates the inclusion of various organizational models, such as public and non-profit media outlets.

Deliberative democracy requires some changes in the hegemonic practices of journalism, especially with the professional requirements of those who work in the field. Since it is understood as a process of high technical and organizational complexity, journalistic content must be produced by professionals dedicated to this occupation and with specific knowledge. This goes beyond writing techniques and mastery of

communication in different media outlets. Journalists need to be familiar with political processes and government structures and be able to identify what information needs to be made public so that a qualified deliberation can be triggered.

The space and groups to be monitored are significantly broader than in the minimalist and even pluralist models. This is because, with the fragmentation of public spheres, debates and social demands spread throughout society. To give a voice to the largest possible number of those affected by or interested in political decisions, it is necessary to know how to map them. Possibly, the most significant change concerns how politics is presented publicly. Politics is often seen as a battleground for competing, and sometimes questionable, interests. However, deliberative democracy understands politics as a space for seeking solutions to collective problems.

Radical democracy leaves room for militant journalism, which questions the *status quo* and does not believe in the possibility of impartiality. It is a type of journalism that is difficult to achieve in traditional media companies and, for this reason, demands new forms of journalism organization, which involve new routines, new values, and the training of highly critical professionals. This is a model that expects a disruption with the principles and languages of hegemonic journalism.

5 Conclusion: a framework for thinking about journalistic legitimacy

The main contribution of the research was to identify relevant theoretical elements for a legitimacy analysis of journalism guided by Journalism Studies. To this end, it was necessary first to formulate an ideal typology of journalistic legitimacy consistent with the journalism conception on which the study that supported this article is based.

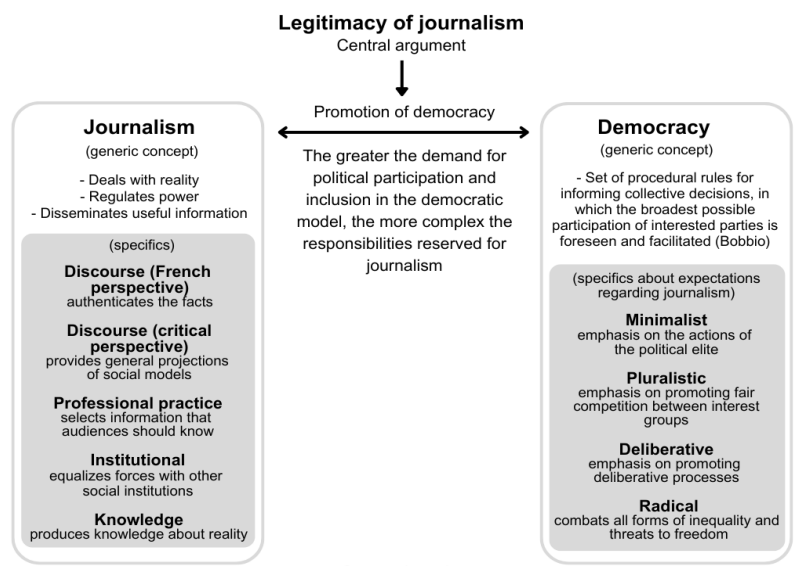
From this construction, it was possible to map the understandable elements that allowed the identification of connections of significance between the actions of defense and criticism of journalistic coverage and the democratic expectations of different social agents, in mediatized action contexts.

This allowed us to understand that, although the relationship between journalism and democracy is central to journalism's legitimacy, the arguments that support the legitimacy claims

are more subtle and complex than the simple affirmation of this symbiosis. These arguments involve, as demonstrated by theoretical and empirical evidence, the linking of a series of ethical, moral, and legal issues, as well as investigation and dissemination procedures adopted by journalism, to democratic principles that are also variable.

Figure 2

Summary of mapped theoretical elements



In light of this, it is concluded that a theoretical explanation of the current phenomenon of public questioning of Brazilian journalism's social legitimacy needs to characterize which journalism and democracy are being discussed clearly. This is because generic concepts do not explain how everyday journalism practices are linked to specific democratic demands.

Mapping attributions allows us to assess the theoretical compatibility in democracy and journalism interpretations and connect this discussion to a broader understanding of journalism's potential and limits as a democracy fomenter. In this way, mapping these elements can be a tool for a more assertive assessment of the relationship between news media and democracy, especially when generic concepts do not account for the complexity revealed by scientific research. In these cases, the statement that journalism

promotes or harms democracy only makes sense based on the definition of the specificities of both concepts regarding the analysis.

When the social legitimacy of journalism is challenged, the safest theoretical and empirical path to understanding the phenomenon is to define which journalism and which democracy social actors and researchers are discussing.

NOTES

- 1 This article presents part of the findings of the dissertation “The Social Legitimacy of Journalism: Intersections between Theories of Journalism and Democratic Theories”, defended in 2023 in the Graduate Program in Journalism at UFSC, under the supervision of Professor Dr. Carlos Locatelli.

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FUNDING: the author gratefully acknowledges the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES) – Brazil, for the scholarship granted during the period of full-time research (funding code 001).

TRANSLATED BY: MARIELA JUNG