

# CONFLICT AS A STRUCTURING CATEGORY OF THE POLITICAL NARRATIVE

the case of the *Jornal Nacional*<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the hypothesis that the meta-category “conflict” centralizes and structures newscasts based on a bipolar framing. Characters from the political scene are placed successively against each other, interweaving the narrative texture. Conflict is taken as a pre-category preceding that which will become news, from which other subcategories (protagonist, antagonist, enemy) derive. Thus, news coverage not only represents political reality, but delimits and institutes it as well. The empirical analysis presented in the article focuses on the coverage of a recent political scandal by the *Jornal Nacional*, the main television newscast in Brazil.

**Key-words:** political conflict, political narratives, framing, journalism and politics.

## CONFLICT AS A META-CATEGORY OF THE NEWS

Conflict as an analytical category is present in the theory of journalism as a news-value, although this value is not always clear in the literature. Traquina (2005, p. 84), for example, identifies conflict as physical or symbolic violence: an oral dispute between political leaders, but does not develop the concept. In other authors, conflict seems related to values identified with them, such as “deviation” or “infraction”. Some include conflict in the negativity category, which is related to abnormality or rupture of stability. Negative events would be more distinguished and significant and therefore more easily apprehensible by journalists<sup>2</sup>. Gitlin (1980, p. 15) emphasizes that the news favors conflict, and on highlighting deviation, the professionals implicitly support society’s norms and values. Adding to these comments, in the case of television newscasts, television itself leads to dramatization because it is dependent upon the competition (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 25-27).

The principal hypothesis of this article suggests that conflict is the

structuring category of the journalistic narrative concerning politics. The hypothesis proposes that conflict is a dramatic category which centralizes the journalistic narrative and interweaves the threads which link the actions of characters on the political scene. Placing the characters against each other in the journalistic narrative, conflict establishes the episodes which project logical-temporal sequences and link plots of more or less complex virtual stories, although the focus falls on the characters who take on prominence in the episodes.

In his introduction to political science, J. P. Vallés maintains that conflict is the essence of politics, a collective practice whose purpose is to regulate conflicts between groups. Conflict is situated in the existence of differences which are converted into inequalities of resources and opportunities. Those who enjoy an advantageous situation do their best to maintain it and those who feel prejudiced hope to change it. From these asymmetric relations tensions are born which necessitate political management. Conflict, therefore, does not derive from its representation, but the latter structures and institutes it to the extent that it presents conflicts, tensions, disputes, antagonisms.

Conflict does not result only from dramatic representation; it is not an innate category to journalistic discourse. Its origin is the eventful world of politics; it is a specifically political category, making up the essence of politics. For Schmitt (1996), a German political scientist who insists on the importance of conflict for political science, differentiation is the prime source of political manifestations, generating collective confrontation and the inevitable friend/enemy antagonism. This duality is the distinctive criterion of the politician, according to the author. This antagonism goes through several stages which “give meaning” to friend/enemy antagonism, confers meaning on confrontation and on conflict as a mechanism for differentiation, an issue relevant to the topic of this article<sup>3</sup>.

A similar position is taken by P. Bourdieu (2007, p. 178-82) in his theory concerning the political field. He says that nothing in the political field makes sense outside the field of relations. Everything occurs as if the distribution of political positions implied in a distribution of roles in which each actor is placed in his position by the competition which threatens him. The political actors, he concludes, tend to organize in the opposition between two poles and can only be comprehended in the conflict with their antagonists and competitors.

The journalistic narrative takes over this dualistic view of conflict in the communicative world of politics and adapts it as a structuring category of its dramatized rhetoric, as in dramaturgy and literature. In journalism,

the political conflict is made textual. As a dramatic category, conflict became the trademark of the theater and of literature, “constituting its high point” (Pavis, 2007, p.67-68). In dramaturgy, conflict constitutes the dialectic of the characters and actions. It originates the character and the latter’s opposition (its “other”). Every episode only makes sense related to the main conflict, which weaves the plot. For this reason scriptwriters take conflict as the essence of action. “Every drama is conflict. Without conflict, there are no characters; without characters, there is no action; without action, there is no story; and without a story there is no script”, declares the highly regarded Hollywood scriptwriter Sid Field (2001, pag. 5). While maintaining its communicative character, the journalistic narrative follows a scheme analogous to that of dramaturgy in order to frame the complex play of political reality. This is the hypothesis which we uphold in this article.

In order to explore the hypothesis of conflict as a structuring category of the journalistic rhetoric, we intend to give conflict a denser status than a simple news-value. We will consider it to be a structuring dramatic meta-category of that which will become a news item concerning politics. In our opinion, conflict is a pre-category not referenced to these or those contents, a meta-category precedent, pre-existing to that which will become news, by means of which the journalist frames reality in a bipolar way. If the conflictive reality of politics fits well into the frame, so much the better.

We agree with Traquina (2005, p. 47-8) when he says that journalists have the habit of seeing the world in a bipolar way, that is, through opposite poles of the type good vs. evil, pro vs. contra. Objectivity, rapidity and the desire to simplify reality, says the author, contribute to seeing the world in a bipolarized way. This view leads journalists to naturally dramatize the perception and the report of the facts and develop a taste for dramatization and the rhetoric of conflict, or for the opposition between ideas and sources. Traquina develops a convincing argument, but insufficient to comprehend conflict as the structuring pre-category of the news.

We are going to find this category preliminarily developed in Motta (2005). He states that conflict is the structuring category of any narrative, the axis around which everything else gravitates. But it is in the social anthropology of conflict of the Spaniard Morato (1988) that this pre-category is more resolved. According to him, in journalism conflict is a category which informs less with respect to the innumerable happenings than the category of conflict in itself. That is, the category

conflict (confrontation, dispute) and its derivatives (adversary, opposed) more than represent, they form the base of political reality in the news. The category reproduces itself, is in today's newspapers and newscasts and will be in those of tomorrow, he says, just as it was in those of yesterday and in those of last month, instituting politics, dispute, the successive confrontations.

Newspapers and television newscasts, the author continues (p. 162/3), are always pursuing tension; they seem to be at the service of conflict as a category which incessantly seeks a reference converted into news in order to survive as content. They look for and gather up conflicts of all kinds in the available references of conflictive behavior. Journalists are interested in antagonism and dispute.

More than content or even news-value, it is conflict as a journalistic meta-category - as Morato defines it - which is interesting for us to highlight and explore in this article. Conflict would function as a cognitive frame utilized for organizing the activities of the political actors, defining situations and delimiting events. It is a pre-existing category in journalists' culture, by means of which they frame reality, especially political reality. In the communicative world of politics, this dramatic pre-category adapts ideally to friend-enemy antagonism (Schmitt).

### **Conceptual and methodological notes**

In this article we will observe conflict as a structuring category of political coverage by means of an exploratory study of the political newscast *Jornal Nacional* of the Globo Television Network during the period of the so-called "*mensalão*" (large monthly payment) scandal. We will focus on the especially tense period which runs from the first denunciations made by former federal deputy Roberto Jefferson up to the time of the fall of the then Chief of Staff of President Lula's administration, José Dirceu (from June 6 to 20, 2005). We will check our hypothesis in this empirical *corpus*.

The period in question was marked historically by five main events: the denouncements of the "*mensalão*" made by the then president of the PTB party, federal deputy Roberto Jefferson, in an interview given to the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* (FSP) on 6/6/05; Jefferson's new denouncements on 6/11/05, also made to the FSP, of the payment of the "*mesada*" (monthly allowance) to deputies in suitcases full of cash; Jefferson's testimony before the Ethics Board of the Chamber of Deputies on 6/14/05; the disputes between the leaders of the government and the political opposition regarding the establishment of the *CPI dos Correios*

(Congressional Inquiry into the Postal System) which was installed on 6/15/05; and the resignation of the then Presidential Chief of Staff, José Dirceu, on 6/16/05, as the government's response to the crisis. We have chosen, therefore, a period characterized as the beginning of the "*mensalão*", a time of high political tension.

The empirical material analyzed comprises the reports, notes, editorials and comments (by Franklin Martins and Arnaldo Jabor) directly related to the topic during the period mentioned. The animated political cartoons produced by cartoonist Chico Caruso were not included. In total, 13 editions of the *Jornal Nacional* and 97 items were followed<sup>4</sup>.

In all the editions, the "*mensalão*" topic received at least one main headline of the television newscast. All in all, during the period 57 headlines were devoted to some matter relating to the denunciations. The topic was the main highlight in most of the editions during the period.

We investigated in what way the narrative was being structured to the extent that the television newscast's political news continued from day to day, as the threads of politics were gradually being woven. We sought especially the construction of the "narrative effect": dovetailing pieces which stimulate virtual logical-temporal links and project possible outcomes of the story (the *diegese*). We moved, therefore, in the domain of narrative syntax (organization and mounting of a coherent story). But we did not intend to reconstruct the complete scheme of the "*mensalão*" during the period, nor chart all the conflicts. *Our effort is not to organize the entire plot, but rather to comprehend the logic and the narrative strategy of the narrator/newspaper in the construction of a report on the political conflict.*

### **Political conflict and journalistic framing**

Conflict as a journalistic meta-category is especially present in the political newscast because politics is, by its very nature, an activity focused on symbolic disputes. Political confrontations are similar to games. Politics is a competitive activity in which individuals, groups and parties are involved in tense oral disputes, congressional or electoral. For this reason the meta-category of conflict is useful for journalists in framing the complexity of politics. In reality, political journalism survives from the confrontation between individuals and political parties. The report of the conflicts makes political journalism more heated, more attractive for the audience. Conflict attracts attention, is easily understood, both by the journalist as well as by the audience.

But the political coverage by journalism not only represents conflicts,

it simplifies, activates and delimits these disputes. To the extent that it amplifies, puts the parties in antagonistic situations, provokes tensions and generates new confrontations which will fill up new pages and screens. And in this way, successively: the feeling of exasperation with the adversaries' declarations makes politics even more heated than it ordinarily is, making the media not only the mirror of politics, but also an agent that provokes conflicts (although the media can also function as agent that conciliates and regulates tensions).

Conflict (of interests, of positions) as a cognitive frame structures the plot of the journalistic narrative, making isolated events into comprehensible stories. Continuously placing actors against each other, the narrator-newspaper weaves the plots, promotes the conflict which it needs to stimulate in order to maintain the journalistic narrative always "heated up" and attractive for the recipient.

We now go on to our exploratory observation of conflict as an empirical category organizing the political coverage of the *Jornal Nacional*, on the Globo Network, during the period from June 6 to June 20, 2005, part of the period of the "*mensalão*" scandal.

### **Identifying the main conflicts**

The narrative concerning the "*mensalão*" should be understood as a sequel of prior events followed by the *Jornal Nacional* regarding the denunciations of corruption in the Postal System, initiated on May 15, 2005. The television newscast divulged the images of the hidden recording, which became famous, of the then post office employee Maurício Marinho supposedly accepting money for benefiting a certain businessman, including with regard to denunciations that Marinho was probably recommended by or was a political protégé of Jefferson. Since then the television newscast began to talk about "political crisis", placing the episodic narrative of the "*mensalão*" as a chapter of a larger narrative of the crisis.

Therefore, in the sequel to this coverage, on June 6<sup>th</sup>, the first day of our analysis, the newscast opened with the headline that Jefferson, "*accused of corruption, goes on the attack and aggravates the political crisis in Brasília*". For the newscast, Jefferson aggravated the crisis, deciding to "attack" after he himself had been "*accused of using political protégés in key positions of the government in order to collect money for his party.*" On that day, referring to Jefferson, the use of the expression "goes on the attack" reveals how the conflict category focuses the narrative.

On June 7<sup>th</sup>, on highlighting in the opening headline that the

government and the Workers' Party (PT – the party in power) decided to support the establishment of the *CPI dos Correios*, the emphasis is that both “*have changed their strategy*”, since they were previously trying to avoid the CPI. The language is military; the framing is that of war (conflict). In other editions, words such as “defense”, “retreat” (of the government), “offensive”, “truce” or “surrender” are utilized, a lexicon characteristic of military manuals.

Many times words are utilized which recall the television soap operas or series and their narrative resources, such as “chapters of the crisis”, mentioned in a note at the beginning of the 6/11/05 edition, in order to create suspense and capture the attention of the audience: “( ) *The details of the most recent chapter of the political crisis and the reactions to what Roberto Jefferson said, you will soon see, here on the Jornal Nacional*”.

In addition, the narratives are fragmented. The stories are produced based on declarations by the characters involved and by those who comment on and repeat the events emphasized in the reports, besides the repercussions of the coverage by print newspapers and magazines. The *Jornal Nacional* draws support from the news from other media, giving legitimacy to their reports, in the same way in which they refer to this newscast, gradually constructing an increasingly “mediatic” story. One example is the frequent use of the resource of showing photographic images of the newspapers in order to illustrate the stories about Jefferson's interviews and of utilizing the audio tapes of the interviews, with the help of subtitles.

The fragments are acquiring unity throughout the editions and in the media culture based on connecting threads which link the characters. One of the connecting threads is the word “*mensalão*” itself, which is continually repeated and finally adopted by the newscast and by the characters heard who refer to the “*scandal*”. The word was initially utilized by Jefferson, but the highlighting of it comes from the media, adopting it as a rubber stamp, a symbol of the coverage.

On June 6<sup>th</sup>, for example, the denunciation concerns a “*mensalão scheme*”. On the following day, June 7<sup>th</sup>, the second main headline emphasizes that “the denunciation of the *mensalão*” is receiving attention in the international press. On June 16<sup>th</sup>, the “*mensalão*” is mentioned as “scandal of the *mensalão*”. Always related to corruption, either among those defend themselves, those whose accuse or those who demand an investigation, the lexicon of the media is thus adopted and becomes part of politics, reverberating on reality<sup>5</sup>.

## The Protagonist

Let us return to the edition of 6/6/2005. The *Jornal Nacional* highlighted the character Roberto Jefferson as the main protagonist, placing him in the conflict right away in the first headline:

*“Deputy Roberto Jefferson, accused of corruption, goes on the attack and aggravates the political crisis in Brasília”.*

The narrative of the newscast, on this day and on the following days, is focused on this character, who becomes the protagonist of the plot; the description of his actions binds the narrative together. Sometimes this focus on the protagonist is more explicit. On June 18<sup>th</sup>, for example, after the fall of Chief of Staff José Dirceu, Jefferson is characterized in one report as the *“central figure of the crisis”* - needlessly so, since the narrative develops based on him. We will draw brief conclusions regarding this character below.

The narrative portrays the protagonist as the accused who reacts and attacks. One notes here the focus on the conflict category in the chronological concatenation of cause and effect which retrieves the past and brings it into the present. Simultaneously, it places the protagonist in the conflictive confrontation: the current action is explained by a prior reason which must have generated a reaction. Cornered, the protagonist reacts and attacks.

Five of the eight headlines of the newscast on that day were devoted to accusations made by Jefferson. Of the edition's total number of stories, seven (the equivalent of about 23 minutes) dealt with the topic. Throughout the coverage during the period analyzed, Jefferson was characterized as someone *“accused of corruption”* who *“went on the attack”*.

The ambiguous nature of the character Roberto Jefferson (accused and accuser) was much exploited in the descriptions presented by reporters and newscasters, as in this story also on June 6<sup>th</sup>:

***“Fátima Bernardes: The president of the PTB Party, the target for denunciations of corruption, went on the attack. Roberto Jefferson made serious accusations against the government”.***

That day's news stories reproduce the content of the *Folha de S. Paulo* in which Jefferson counterattacks, revealing the so-called *“esquema do mensalão”* (large monthly payment scheme). Overall, the newscast treats the character with distrust and emphasizes his contradictions. For example, in the story regarding the interview, the reporter begins by emphasizing the political earthquake which Jefferson caused in Brasília and says that the former federal deputy *“began by defending himself*



from the accusations of involvement in the denunciations of corruption in the Reinsurance Institute of Brazil'. Therefore, he acted under pressure. In the narrative, the accuser seems to choose his antagonists. The newscast highlights excerpts in which Jefferson narrates how he tried to warn ministers of the "scheme" and how he told President Lula what was happening. At this point, the former deputy insists on the President's innocence. In his comments on June 7<sup>th</sup>, Franklin Martins justifies Roberto Jefferson's action, emphasizing his contradictory nature:

*"Cornered by the denunciations, deputy Roberto Jefferson accused a good part of the Federal Chamber of Deputies of receiving a monthly allowance, a 'mensalão' for supporting the government. It can be true, but it can also be a desperate maneuver".*

As time goes by, more denunciations are being added to the story, but the newscast's mistrust of Jefferson remains. The report emphasizes, right in the beginning, that "A new interview of Federal Deputy Roberto Jefferson in the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo brings new accusations against members of the government, of the PT Party and of the allied parties. He himself accused of corruption, the president of the PTB Party now talks of suitcases full of money coming from government-owned companies and from private companies delivered to members of Congress. In the conversation, Jefferson says he does not have any proof".

The emphasis on the accusations and on the lack of proof is taken up again in the beginning of the story:

*"It was the second time that Deputy Roberto Jefferson made accusations regarding the payment of a monthly allowance to deputies, after having been pointed to as the commander of the corruption scheme in the Postal System and in the Reinsurance Institute of Brazil. Now, Roberto Jefferson makes new accusations. He said that he does not have any proof (...)".*

In the June 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> editions the newscast's headlines are the disputes regarding the *CPI dos Correios* and Jefferson's testimony before the Ethics Board of the Federal Chamber of Deputies. Again the lack of any proof is a form of identifying the character.

In the report about the testimony, the former deputy appears talking in an aggressive way, accusing other deputies such as Sandro Mabel of having offered money for a female deputy to change her party, and Waldemar Costa Neto, of having received "*mensalão*" money. The former deputy also emphasizes the distribution of suitcases full of money, and threatens Dirceu for having knowledge of this and for implicating the President of the Republic, should he not leave the position of Presidential

Chief of Staff. The entire edition of July 14<sup>th</sup> is edited using dramatic resources to heighten the tension, such as the highlighting of Jefferson's more performance-like moments, his gestures and expressions, interspersed with thematic headlines.

It is interesting to note that the newscast does not emphasize Jefferson's political trajectory. The description focuses on the moment, highlighting the contradictions, the gestures and the dramatic element of the accusations. At times, the action of singing is one more element of the former deputy's characterization by his folkloric side. In the June 20<sup>th</sup> edition, the report emphasizes: "*Roberto Jefferson did not miss the chance of singing in public*".

We have highlighted in these last paragraphs aspects of the protagonist's narrative in order to explore *how the newscast constructs his image*. First, the newscast portrays him as a protagonist who has antagonists. That is to say, he is in the plot as someone's adversary: accused and cornered, he reacts, is aggressive, attacks and makes accusations. The polarity, while diffuse, predominates.

The denunciative narrative with respect to the protagonist could induce connotations of positive evaluation, suggest the creation of a figure of a hero of Brazilian politics, someone who had the courage to denounce and confront power in a customarily conciliatory environment. An excessive weight given to the positive aspects of the journalistic narrative would place Jefferson in a position of supremacy, would create a hero for the story. The editors of the newscast evaluated this and strategically took a position of maintaining a distance from the protagonist. They revealed, as we have seen, contradictory and folkloric aspects of the character, balancing the narrative with positive and negative elements, containing possible stimuli for a triumphal imagery. At the most, Jefferson was put in the position of an anti-hero<sup>6</sup>.

### **The antagonists**

The analysis reveals that the newscast's coverage during the period in question was concentrated on the bombastic declarations of the protagonist and on the bipolarization: their repercussion by means of new declarations of representatives of the government, of the PT Party, of the parties allied with the government, of the political opposition or of the judiciary. The *Jornal Nacional* gave voice essentially to those who, in one way or another, provided repercussion of Jefferson's declarations or were involved in them. The main antagonists were:

### José Genoio

The president of the Workers Party (PT), José Genoio, is the main character of the June 6<sup>th</sup> newscast with the attribution of rebutting Jefferson's denunciations. Newscaster Fátima Bernardes, right at the beginning of the story lasting almost 5 minutes about the reactions of congressmen and members of the government, declares that they "*reacted to the denunciations of the president of the PTB Party, Roberto Jefferson*" and that "*the PT denied the accusations*". One party is set against another, just as the characters are placed in antagonistic positions. The verb to react, used once more, corresponds to an interpretation by the newscast. It functions as an action verb, which transmits a reactive performance by the character with relation to the other character and gives continuity to the bipolarity. In the report, there are no broader characterizations of Genoio, who is identified exclusively by his position as president of the party, which positions him in the plot. He is the accused who reacts and denies the accusation.

Genoio is also characterized as someone responsible for the PT's strategy with regard to the accusations. An example is the report of June 7<sup>th</sup> in which "the change in the PT's position" is emphasized at the very beginning. According to the report, "*the change in strategy was announced in São Paulo by the president of the PT, José Genoio. He said that the party was not going to remain only on the defensive*". The emphasis was on the expressions "change of strategy" and "remain on the defensive" in the actions involving political confrontation.

Immediately afterwards, Genoio's comments are presented, in which he declares aggressively: "*We are going on the offensive and this offensive is in several fields. We are going on the offensive whether it is in the CPI dos Correios, we are going on the offensive in the party's base and we are going on the offensive and to opposition in the political confrontation (...)*." In this case, the narrative strategy of presenting the characters in an antagonistic position is favored by the character's way of talking, which takes on military language. The repetition of the expression "we are going on the offensive" and of the word "confrontation" fits in perfectly with the lexicon of conflict.

It is clear in this sequence of actions involving journalists' and politicians' talk that the characters are successively made by the newscast to instigate the conflict, maintain and promote the confrontation necessary for the construction of tension in the plot. Tension permanently heated up is the essence of the construction of the political narrative. It is what instigates the plot and maintains public curiosity inflamed.

### **Delúbio Soares**

Also in the June 7<sup>th</sup> edition, Delúbio Soares is presented, in a meta-linguistic reference, as “*one of the main characters in this episode*”. He is described as a mathematics teacher who “*entered public life as a union member at the close of the 1970s. He was one of the founders of the PT Party in (the State of) Goiás. In 1986, the only time he ran for public office, he was a candidate for federal deputy but was not elected. Although he is not a government employee, he is considered to be an influential name behind the scenes. He became one of the preferred targets of the political opposition since last year*”.

Here it seems that the newscast desires to bring this character to the front of the scenario of the plot, wants to promote him as the main antagonist of the story’s protagonist, who denounced him as the operator of the “*mensalão*”. But the fact that the PT had “hid” its treasurer during the early days of the denunciations makes the telecast editors’ task more difficult. Who spoke for him was the president of the PT, who defended him in the same report of June 7<sup>th</sup>.

In the June 8<sup>th</sup> edition, Delúbio Soares is highlighted right in the first headline: “*The treasurer of the PT gives his first press conference after the denunciations of the “mensalão”. Delúbio Soares denies the payment of a monthly allowance to federal deputies. He said that the party does not accept blackmail and makes his confidential fiscal and banking data available to the Courts*”.

The story in which the newscast narrates Delúbio’s press conference continues to give emphasis to the treasurer’s denials, characterizing him as someone who is defending himself: “*he denied the denunciations*”, “*denied that he had commanded a scheme for payment of bribes to deputies who were political allies in exchange for political support*”, talked about blackmail but “*he did not reply*” concerning who would be the blackmailer, “*he is not afraid of investigations*”.

Reflecting what occurs in the political game, it is interesting to observe that the character Genoino is characterized by the leadership of the offensive against the accusations while Delúbio is characterized as someone who is on the defensive. This seems to be the result of the political strategy of the PT and of its directors, reflected in the order of appearance and in the position of the characters brought onstage in the plot by the newscast.

### **José Dirceu**

The character José Dirceu began to take on importance in the

narratives of the *Jornal Nacional* concerning the “*mensalão*” to the extent that the denunciations unfolded. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, for example, he is characterized as someone far from the events in a report on the repercussions of the accusations:

*“Chief of Staff José Dirceu is in Madrid, where he was honored at a dinner (...). He did not want to talk about the denunciations.”*

On June 7<sup>th</sup>, a note read by newscaster Fátima Bernardes declares that the Chief of Staff canceled a scheduled press conference and told the reporter that “*things in Brazil are fine*”. On June 8<sup>th</sup>, Dirceu appears in a report lasting 1 minute and 29 seconds in which he talks in Lisbon about the international point of view of the crisis, reiterating that the government had already decided that investigations would be made, that the Congress would investigate and that he agreed with these arrangements. There are no more references to this character, who only took on more importance in the newscast starting from the coverage of Jefferson’s testimony before the Ethics Board of the Federal Chamber of Deputies on June 14<sup>th</sup>.

Right in the first note, newscaster Fátima Bernardes states that Jefferson “*said President Lula was innocent, but said that if the Presidential Chief of Staff, José Dirceu, stays in that position, Lula can become a defendant*”. In a report of around six minutes, in which Jefferson’s testimony is narrated, Dirceu appears in the conversation of the former PTB Party deputy as someone who knew about the promise of the PT to pass on money (without any origin) for the political campaign of Jefferson’s party, made an agreement with Jefferson (to pay for the financing of the PTB’s campaigns) and did not keep his word. The main target of the accuser begins to become clearer and the journalistic narrative incorporates this antagonism because it helps to construct bipolarity.

It should be emphasized that although Dirceu was involved in Jefferson’s denunciations in that day’s edition, the one who entered into direct confrontation with the protagonist was still Genoino, who denies the passing of the money. In another report in which the reporter states that “*the government tried to act as if it were a normal day*”, and mentions that “*José Dirceu (...) denied that he had agreed to his departure from the government, as has been reported*”.

On June 14<sup>th</sup> the newscast presents a note in which Jefferson criticizes the press and refers to a dialogue which he allegedly had with Dirceu, in which he allegedly asked for help from the then Chief of Staff in “holding back” the news reports against Jefferson. According to the newscast, “*Roberto Jefferson showed irritation at the continuance of the*

*news reports*". This excerpt is important since it leads to an editorial of the *Jornal Nacional* which criticizes Jefferson and, indirectly, Dirceu, on concluding with the following excerpt: "*as Deputy Roberto Jefferson can verify, in Organizações Globo nobody holds back any information. Here, for something to be reported as news, it suffices for it to be true*". It is a clear example of how journalism can also be a protagonist of the narrative, dialoguing with the characters.

Dirceu only received more detailed characterization and emphasis in the June 16<sup>th</sup> edition, when his departure from the government is announced. The first headline of the newscast edition emphasizes that "*One of the most powerful elements of the PT government resigns after thirty months*".

Of the ten headlines of that edition, seven are devoted to the fall of Dirceu. One excerpt from the speech of the former Chief of Staff is highlighted: "*We have an ethical heritage; we have a heritage that the society is familiar with. I am going to defend this heritage*". It is as if Dirceu entered the ring now to face his rival arm to arm. The frame of conflict fits perfectly the political actions. The bipolar drama acquires more precise outlines. The main antagonist takes shape, creates the expectation of new rounds.

The report emphasizes that Dirceu "*resigned*" because in recent weeks he was the "*target of the attacks*" by Jefferson. The former Chief of Staff is characterized now as the main antagonist, who rebutted the accusations and defended the government.

Becoming the main antagonist, the character Dirceu received a three-minute biography, the longest time devoted to the reconstruction of the political trajectory of someone involved in the coverage of the "*mensalão*" crisis during the period analyzed. In it, Dirceu is characterized as "*powerful*", "*main architect of candidate Lula's victorious campaign for the presidency in 2002*", "*the articulator of the alliance of political parties supporting the presidential slate*", "*coordinator also of the main programs of various ministries*". The fact of having been a political prisoner, having been exiled and having had plastic surgery in order to return to Brazil is highlighted, constructing an image of a powerful man of action, a character without ambiguities and with a defined position, that of support of the government, but capable of anything in order to attain his objectives. The focus on the protagonist Jefferson in the journalistic narrative of the political crisis up to the present becomes divided now with an antagonist of equal weight.

A note carried live mentions that Dirceu and President Lula exchanged

letters and that the President wrote: “*only great people are capable of gestures such as that of leaving the government*”. The antagonist enters the story as a heavyweight, and from this point on, the fight becomes one between big shots.

### Final comments

In the television newscast observed in this research, a topic, corruption, became part of a hierarchical structure – the macro semantic structure – which was expressed in a hyperbole-summary, the “*mensalão*”. This expression began to define the most important information - the substance of the narrative. The thematic interpretation of the television viewers presupposes therefore a world shared, a political structure shared by journalists and TV viewers. Whoever listens to, sees or reads political news can draw a rapid conjecture regarding the topics, helped by the thematic signs of the narrator, and deductively constructs the main topic. Instead of formal rules, the users of the language apply strategies for deduction of the topics of a text (van Dijk, 2000, p. 58-59 and following).

We believe that in this way the journalistic narrative regarding the “*mensalão*” was constructed by the *Jornal Nacional* during the period analyzed, structured according to the conflict meta-category. Conflict functions as a cognitive frame, a premise or principle utilized by the newscast to organize the actions of the political actors and simultaneously define the situations of each one of them in the story. Besides organizing the complex political reality, conflict as a frame has, according to our hypothesis, an additional effect: it defines and delimits cognitively latent events. Our research is exploratory and other studies are necessary in order to refine the hypothesis and test it more rigorously. In this research, we only observe preliminarily that there are strong indications that conflict, as a pre-category or meta-category, really functions as a dramatic framing of the journalistic political narrative, positioning each contender and simultaneously situating the spectator.

Conflict is not created by journalism, obviously. It is inherent in the political game. But the journalistic language takes over the elements of the political game and categorizes them, especially at times of tension. In this case, conflict (as a basic ingredient of the drama) functions as a structuring element of the journalistic narrative, makes for a dual political world and reinforces the view that comprehends politics as a game of opposing sides. The use of the military lexicon, war, battle, board games, chess, etc. utilized in the newscast is explicit evidence of this framing, confirming C. Schmitt’s theory.

Every character in politics is thus positioned and repositioned as protagonist, antagonist, or secondary character in the story's conflict, depending on the variations of politics and of its coverage. Every character seems to enter the narrative of politics in order to fulfill one of the narrative functions identified by Propp (1984), or to fulfill one of the stages of Campbell's (1997) hero cycle: hero, villain, assistant, defender, etc., performing the functions of privation, proof, conquest, reward, etc. Simplifying, the accused reacts against the accuser and goes on the attack, the one being attacked retreats, but prepares a new offensive, and so on and so forth, with conflict forming indefinitely a series of chapters.

In the analysis which we have made, the protagonist is immediately brought to the forefront of the story by the *Jornal Nacional* (although the newscast has tried to keep its distance from him and tried not to portray him as the hero of the story). His antagonist does not appear clearly in the narrative of the early days of the "*mensalão*", although the utterances of Deputy José Genoíno have created a direct conflict with the protagonist, mainly when the newscast emphasizes that the PT Party president changed his strategy, reacted and went on the offensive. The antagonist only appears in fact ten days after Jefferson's first denunciation, when the newscast can finally announce the entrance into the ring of the then Presidential Chief of Staff, José Dirceu, starting from his departure from the government.

Obviously, at many times the narrative does not depend only on the journalistic framing, it is not reproduced only linguistically. Politics is a communicative game of interests in which everything goes, including reacting to the representation of politics itself. For this reason, journalistic coverage retroacts on politics, changes, delimits and institutes it. The actors begin to represent the role which is attributed to them by the media and react according to the story which is being told in order to be able to interfere in its course. That is to say, the characters are at the same time actors, they represent and improvise in accordance with the unfolding of the scene. And so on and so forth, the game between representation and reality continues, with one being confused with the other. In the last instance, political journalism is instituted also as the protagonist of the very narrative which it relates.

It is convenient for journalists to use conflict as a pre-category because in this way they frame with relative facility the complex political reality as a dispute, confrontation, opposition between friends and enemies. This facilitates the reporting task and rapid communication with the receivers. However, the excess of conflicts and confrontations present



in the newspaper pages and television screens may not correspond proportionately to what happens in politics and in the social reality, as Morato (p. 177) states. The disproportion for this type of reference can create a false reality, a dualist reality of permanent confrontations, victories, conquests, defeats and punishments. A Manichean world in which good and evil are almost absolute principles which fill the news, although the outside world's complexity does not reflect this reductionist simplification.

These are the categories which have a protagonist emphasis in the behavior of the communication media and in the cognition derived from this behavior. The narrator assumes that his text (political news) is the favored stage (scenario) where conflict develops and that he is the narrator authorized to present the unfolding of this conflict. That is to say, it is implicit in his narrative that he is the one who has legitimacy for directing the roles attributed to the characters in the conflict, ignoring or bringing out these characters according to what he, the narrator, considers hierarchically important and relevant.

In conclusion, we want to suggest for future research the hypothesis that in journalism, conflict as a dramatic meta-category classifies political reality with the same automatism that the supermarket divides its merchandise in sections and shelves, to use Morato's words (p. 170). The newspapers and television newscasts fill the shelves from one day to another, as the author says, based on bipolarity, antagonisms and oppositions, reducing politics to the individual drama, dramatizing the coverage and passing on to the audience an excessively romanticized view of politics.

## | NOTES

- 1 The first version of this article was presented to the Journalism Studies Working Group at the XVII Meeting of COMPOS at UNIP, São Paulo, in June 2008.
- 2 "Galtung and Ruge (1993).
- 3 Schmitt, Carl (1996), *The concept of the political*, University of Chicago Press. See also Agazis A. Filho, *Carl Schmitt e o antagonismo político*, in A. A. Filho and LIMA, Venício A., *Novo manual de ciência política*, Malheiros, org. S. Paulo, 2008. Schmitt, "damned author" of sociology, has been neglected in the contemporaneous social sciences because

of his support of Nazism. But his political theories have begun to be accepted in the recent literature. His main work, *The concept of the political*, was translated into Portuguese by Editora Del Rey, .S. Paulo, 2009. But there is another edition of *Vozes*, Petrópolis from 1992. For the author, the criterion which distinguishes conceptually that which is political is the discrimination between friend and enemy. The enemy is the other, the different aspect of what is foreign, which separates, disassociates.

- 4 Copies of the material utilized were obtained in clippings from the Banco de Notícias (News Bank) Site <http://clipping.radiobras.gov.br>.
- 5 Cf. Lima (2006).
- 6 In the period analyzed, the mistrustful tone which predominated in the treatment given to Jefferson and other characters does not necessarily apply to President Lula, to former Treasury Minister Antonio Palocci and to representatives of the political opposition who requested investigations.

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