

INTRODUCTION

# ADVANCES AND SETBACKS TO THE CONTRIBUTION OF JOURNALISM TO DEMOCRACY

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The intersections between Journalism and Democracy are becoming increasingly complex and multifaceted. The speed at which they are developing has placed specific demands on the production of scientific knowledge. At the time these articles were being selected for this report (the beginning of 2016), the growth of political conservatism in Latin America, and the increase in European migration and political extremism were issues of concern across the world, and eventually led to the publication of this periodical. A few months later, there were more dramatic developments with the impeachment of the president of Brazil and the post-Brexit position.

A noticeable link to these events, journalism's role in forming public opinion and maintaining democracy has generated controversy and lively discussions. The topic brings attention to the gaps between certain standpoints. On one side, we have the private perspectives of economic groups run by traditional media, demanding the importance of the public voice. On the other side, there are hundreds of *loci* where a wide variety of groups on social networks discuss information and news, often having enough power to organize demonstrations and rallies, yet lack any real economic support.

The articles selected for this report must tackle some important questions. How does (or should) journalism respond to the challenges of new agendas and social actors, problems in representation, media involvement in politics, re-articulation of the increasingly global elite, and the fragmentation of political forces related to social movements? To what extent has journalism in different countries contributed towards maintaining or renovating democracy? Have the plurality of points of

view and diversity of voices been represented in political coverage? Do new social actors have a space in political news or do they repeat the traditional agenda of issues and negative approaches regarding politics? Have new approaches – problematic, contextual, opinionated, less biased or somewhat explicit ideological positions – been covered? Or are they still focused on the behind-the-scenes conduct of the elite, the dealings between partisan groups, political folklore and complaints of all types? Has democracy been valued in journalistic discourse and practice?

The articles included in this report provide some important insights on these questions.

James Curran revisits, in an article of collaborations from his conference at the 13th National Meeting of Research Journalists on November 2015 in Campo Grande (MS), recent evidence about the role the internet has in renovating the public sphere in the weak state of current democracy. Curran says “governments are less able to govern; political power is becoming more centralised; and the unelected influence of big business is becoming greater”.

These factors led to “are contributing to a growing sense of alienation from the political process”. The internet’s ability to reverse the event is limited. The “the frequent claim that the internet has replaced top-down communication with horizontal communication between citizens” is overstated. Even with the facility of technology, information sources do not necessarily expand on their own, “independent news websites have made only a limited impact” as “legacy news organisations have much greater resources”. They are “established oligopolies from the past account for the large majority of the most visited news websites around the world”. But there are also positive effects; particularly the increasing impact social activism has had due to the organizational and distribution capabilities that the internet provides. Yet the internet only provides moderate advances, which leads to another interesting point – there is evidence that public broadcast radio, especially in Western Europe, is more capable of producing more serious and responsible journalism, in terms of plurality, context and reach.

Another equally provocative approach is the one put forth by Diogenes Lycarião and Rafael Cardoso Sampaio. They examine the complexity of the current state of the media constitution. They claim that transmitting political agendas into *media* and public agenda makes it possible to predict and identify agents who are strong at holding public debates. Lycarião and Sampaio trace scientific literature to find evidence that supports the hypothesis known as *reversed agenda-*

*setting*, in which the public influences the media agenda, contrary to the traditional hypothesis of *agenda-setting*. Even though there is no conclusive evidence supporting either direction of agenda-setting, when analyzed in conjunction, the available studies at the very least support the idea that influence is not always one-directional; that, under certain circumstances, the public has the power to influence media coverage.

The empirical evidence collected by Lycarião and Sampaio is mostly taken from European and American realities, which means there is a lot of research still to be done in Brazil on how the vectors of certain agenda-setting are built in its media, both through opinion polls or handling a large amount of data. The reasons behind this insufficient research are the lack of national opinion surveys and big data research, which appear to us to be strongly connected to the limited Brazilian research. These reasons, given by Lycarião and Sampaio, are known by researchers working for funding agencies. They are forms of assessing teacher performance in Brazilian universities and post-graduation systems. "This kind of investigation is expensive, financial resources to Human Sciences are relatively low and insufficient to realize this kind of project". Furthermore, there is "the prevailing of a traditionally individual structure of research, which only recently watched the creation of research centers with their staff working jointly, not in a isolate way".

Despite these limitations, the studies gathered in this edition suggest that the obstacles might be looked at as challenges and opportunities that other research areas use to evolve. Rogério Christofoletti suggests in one of his articles included in this edition that research journalists' attention might be drawn to the impacts of a particular relationship they use as contemporary sources, especially plea-bargaining and selective leads. Christofoletti lists a set of ethical risks behind putting "informers and selective leaks as important Brazilian news engines. caused by the distance between journalists and their sources, "passivity and lack of motivation in newsrooms, lack of control in the journalistic input, delegation of trust and the transference of the reporter's responsibility to the source".

There is also the risk of large amounts of data being leaked by anonymous sources. Christofoletti states that this "colossal volume of data can lead to the inability to check it, biased coverage, prejudgments and occasional inequities, misuse of focus and hermeticism, the withdrawal of practices of caution, basic ethics and loss of interest in longer coverages".

Mapping the ethical risks in journalistic coverage eclipses the analytical observations made by the university and shows the author's

concern about establishing bridges between research and professional journalism. Both investigators and journalists are responsible for standards of quality. The article “can serve as a warning to the media and its professionals in pointing out occasional traps that undermine journalistic credibility, precisely in coverages of both scope and importance”. There are further deontological questions “primarily in the following of topics and issues of high, collective interest, such as citizenship, transparency of public acts, the strengthening of democracy and the development of protective devices, as is the case of journalism”.

Edgard Patrício and Leidyanne Viana also analyze the use of sources, but from another point of view. They describe and interpret the result of an empirical study on journalistic coverage in the Chamber News Agency. They observed plurality in materials produced by that particular information service despite its obligations to serve the public interest. All the research showed a lack of plurality in news coverage: “the parliamentary sources are dominant and therefore leave little space for society to participate”, state Viana and Patrício. The nature of institutional communication is clear in Chamber Agency coverage, most certainly lending truth to the criticisms of the service.

“However, there was a balance between base and opposition which points at two aspects:”, claim Viana and Patrício. The first point is “The group in charge of the vehicle does not have any privileges”. The second is that the “sources for the news are chosen by those who participate in the events in Parliament, similar to the criteria of journalism”. In other words, the material seems to follow the general guidebook for determining contradictions, but in a special way; there is a favourable and an opposite point of view simultaneously being represented for a particular voting count. Simple polarization obscures the diversity of perspectives and tends to weaken the news product. “It is obvious that by giving an advantage to “both sides” of an issue, the demand for plural representation of ideas on many topics is not met”, state Viana and Patrício.

The results confirm another type of current criticism: the material focuses on the daily goings-on at the Chamber “without attempting to dig deeper into the issues under debate between specialists and the public”. As a result, “the groups interested are outside the debate and many points of view are excluded, not contributing enough to contemplate the diversity of society and the development of public opinion”. The study suggests the production routine and professional culture of the Chamber Agency needs improving, “appears to be less likely due to the structure and lack of autonomy amongst the vehicles”.

The limited role that public mediums have within the media complicates what is an already complex structure of coexisting agents and interests in Brazilian journalism, and there is also the increase in media ownership which affects the quality of journalism (including plurality and diversity). In between these two poles are the printing press and smaller circulation papers, trying to attain some editorial independence, while the community mediums... they are just trying to survive. Julián Durazo Herrmann analyzes this situation in his article included in this edition. He looks at how current specific editorials coexist and conflict with each other in the state of Bahia. “Beyond establishing the scope and limits of the media in Bahian politics, the study of the role of the media in the struggle for subnational domination allows us to think about the evolution of State-society relations under democratization”, states Durazo Herrmann. The media being used for political means is obvious in Bahia, so much so that there is no hiding the ties of media ownership and political loyalty. “The weight of media concentration in both penetration and audience severely constrain pluralism and information diversity”.

Durazo Herrmann looks back on electronic ‘coronelismo’ (the system of machine politics in Brazil between 1889 and 1930) and how it has become increasingly used as a vector to explain media behaviour, to reveal an intriguing vision of political confrontations symbolic of the media landscape. Those television companies historically associated with certain political groups act as permanent barriers to plurality, but may be offset by successful mid-sized newspapers supported by community media. “In Bahia, the media’s contribution to democratization occurs at the margins, in the interior and in the small and alternative media, who, against many odds, became established political actors, speaking with their own voice”, writes Durazo Herrmann.

Lastly, the power of public agenda-setting potentially exercised by newspapers in the state of São Paulo (yet on a national scale) is the object of analysis for Camila Mont’Alverne and Francisco Paulo Jamil Marques, another article included in this edition. They believe the concept of “editorial criteria” is useful for assessing the importance of influential newspaper editorials and determining political directions for political coverage and public agenda-setting. “Editorials take a favored position in agenda-setting process of priority issues, as well as they can set up – in a later moment – ‘acceptable’ frames through which several topics achieve visibility”.

state Mont'Alverne and Marques. In other words, "one thing is the theme's agenda; another one is the judgement about it"

As part of the proposed research for the article, the editorials may be considered as one way streets to a subtle relationship between facts, their implications and decisions guiding its representation in public news. After all, "editorials may not only reverberate the informative coverage agenda-setting of other issues (...)address issues that have not been in the agenda of the day yet – but those the company assumes that deserve attention".

The specific nature of "editorial criteria" is the object of study because the issues chosen by the editorials might clarify the rules of hierarchy in newsrooms which are not always visible in news criteria – even though they are the preferred place for analyzing most national and international studies of journalism state Mont'Alverne and Marques. Even if a fact is considered noticeable, there is no guarantee it will achieve journalistic coverage", they write. "Specifically about the editorial genre, the issue has to "run over" several steps of filtering process controlled by journalism".

In conclusion, the initial questions raised by the articles in this edition of Brazilian Journalism Research were comprehensive and taken seriously by their authors. The responses in this short introduction are only summaries of the articles and obviously cannot cover all angles of the research problems mentioned. They can, however, contribute to ongoing academic discussions and help shed light on some less committal paths adopted by journalism, including citizenship in an ideal democracy.

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