

## THE LEGISLATIVE MEDIA AND THE REDEFINITIONS OF POLITICS NEWS VALUE IN BRAZIL<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

Criteria of newsworthiness and news values of political journalism in Brazil were re-defined with the rise of legislative media, among other institutional outlets created in the 1990s. Journalism produced by these media brings information directly to the citizen, besides feeding journalistic outlets and companies. But it is questioned as a paternalistic practice of State, which appropriates journalistic techniques in order to influence public opinion. This article debates the informative impact of that model, which resulted in the creation of the so-called “source media”, characterized by the offer of news ready to the public, avoiding that facts related to institutional action pass through the filters of private media. It concludes that a public communication system, although it is also a public service, should operate independently of the State, both from the bureaucratic point of view as from the production and broadcast of content.

**Keywords:** Legislative, political information, newsworthiness, news values, civic journalism, public journalism.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

More than a decade ago, the Brazilian Parliament began to implement specific communication systems for each of the two legislative houses: Chamber of Deputies and Federal Senate. The two systems are mainly composed of journalistic media -print newspaper, cable and broadcast TV channel, radio and online news agency- in addition to advertising and public relations initiatives, such as institutional campaigns, public services, public visitation programmes and reception of students, among others.

The institutionalization of a communication policy to approach the Legislative branch to society and to citizens is a new process in Brazil and their frames were the creation of *TV Assembléia de Minas Gerais* in 1995, and of *TV Senado*, of federal field, in 1996. The two stations were developed from the space opened by TV Cable legislation (Law 8977/95), which allowed the creation of channels of the Legislative branch along with university and community stations. These tools, which are called *sources media or corporate media* (Sant'anna, 2006, p. 3), are referenced to the initiative of the U.S. Congress, which in 1979 had the first legislative session of the House of Representatives aired on television (Cook, 1989, p. 1). We note, however, that in the American case the transmission is made by an independent channel, an organization maintained with funds provided by cable operators and not by Congress itself, as it often

happens in Brazil.

The Brazilian Chamber of Deputies -which already had a broadcasting service since 1961, responsible for reporting the Chambers' work in the program *Voz do Brasil* since 1963, and a printed newsletter, published since 1971- followed the path of other legislative bodies and delved into electronic communication with their own tools in the 90's. In addition to *TV Câmara* and service 0800 (toll free), created in 1998, the organization changed the newsletter and transformed it into the *Jornal da Câmara* and also began the work of *Radio Câmara* in 1999. In 2000, the latest vehicle began to work: *Agencia Câmara*. Public contests have been made to hire professionals in journalism, advertising and public relations.

The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, by institutionalizing journalism systems, with radio, TV, newspaper and an online news agency, based on the constitutional principle that the citizen has the right to the publicity of actions, decisions and activities of the Government. According to the 1988 Federal Constitution, the work of all public institutions must be accessible to society. The creation of the media of the Brazilian Chamber also based on the diagnosis that the institution should complement the action of the press in the dissemination of parliamentary business, to compensate for perceived deficiencies in the private media, once it is understood as an instrument of public communication.

The media were created, therefore, with the aim of bringing to the citizens the maximum amount of information on parliamentary action, in order to allow more visibility to the Legislative branch and to provide the electorate and civil society institutions information on the issues discussed and voted by the Federal Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The principle is that the greater visibility, the greater the possibility of popular participation and of strengthening political representation, as the dissemination of legislative information is considered a major element in enhancing the relationship between members of the parliament and their constituents. Studies on the subject show that, to some extent, positive effects begin to appear: today there is information available to the public that was not accessible before, which is the result of the performance of these media (Matos, 1999; Santos, 2005; Paz, 2006).

## **2. THE VISIBILITY OF PARLIAMENT**

The institutionalization of the legislative media was based on analysis that diagnosed deficiencies in the coverage of commercial media. When evaluating the information managers of Parliament, it was found that although the private media have freedom of expression they contribute more to the debilitation of democracy than to its improvement, since they have an agenda based on stereotypes that reduce the role of Parliament. Internal diagnostics are supported by studies of political scientists. Among these studies, highlights the one of Alessandra Aldé (2004) that identifies in media discourse about politics three major trends: the centralization of journalistic production in the cognitive mechanisms of the essence of the facts; the visual status of the politics; and personalization (p. 175). Thus, voters and politicians are customized, drawn from the social context and inserted into narrative structures that frame them as characters in specific conflicts. Moreover, conflicts are reduced to practical issues, with sides easily identifiable by readers. Images that identify the politicians as characters with electoral conflicts or conflicts with the law gain strength, and voters are individualized in examples that are not representative of the whole population, but have the symbolic power of portraying life situations.

At the same time, the crisis of credibility of political institutions, especially parliaments,

shows that there is a greater demand of citizens for transparency in governments (Jardim, 2006) and of the representatives themselves of having greater visibility of their work (Cook, 1989; Freitas, 2004). The lack of information from citizens about the functions and operation of the legislative houses can even lead to question the validity of the costs of maintaining them (Freitas, 2004). In similar direction, it is highlighted that "the recovery of representative mechanisms depends on greater understanding of the sense of self-representation" (Miguel, 2003, p. 123).

The political importance of the media is highlighted by several studies. Many investigations indicate that the rules themselves have an altered worth with the growing social influence of media on the political field (Lima, 2001; Rubim, 1994). Giovanni Sartori uses the term "videopolitics" to define the new political power of television in contemporary societies, to disclose a fact and thus make it happen (2001). A type of "transferred capital" begins to be important to legitimize the actors, i.e., in the political dispute characteristics, qualities and recognition obtained in other activities such as the artistic field or in the own field of action are now important (Bourdieu, 2006, p. 189-190; Miguel, 2001, p. 8).

In the same line of thought, the dissemination of government action has been defended by Norberto Bobbio, according to which "political power is the public power" (2005, p. 28). For Bobbio, the Republic is different from the authoritarian or absolutist regimes precisely because there is public control of power and the freedom to form a public opinion (p. 28). The public nature of a representative government is highlighted by the author, who argues that if the assembly is the meeting of representatives of the people -but its decisions are public just for them and not to all the people-, the meetings of the assembly should be open to the public so that any citizen can access them (p. 30). Thus, Bobbio agrees with Carl Schmitt and the idea that "the representation can only occur in the diffusion sphere" (p. 30), that democracy needs to exercise the rights of freedom and can only work when the actions of rulers are "detailed, judged and criticized when they become public" (p. 30).

To comply with the mandatory diffusion of actions, and at the same time ensuring a favorable coverage of information, governments have developed a series of strategies ranging from the traditional media advice to the new institutional media, to other communication tools. Unlike the commercial media, the motivation for legislative stations is not economic but political, sheltered in the dispute for social visibility among interest groups, organizations and institutions.

### **3. - NEWSWORTHINESS IN LEGISLATIVE MEDIA**

The Brazilian Legislative branch opted for a system of information that defines as its objective to contribute to the formation of critical and participatory citizens. For that, information tools are not limited to fragmented and episodic diffusion about the Parliament. The objective is the systematic and continuous broadcast of content on the same subject, in a contextualized and detailed way, in order to provide elements to the citizen receiving the information to understand the legislative process and the political situation, as well as factual news.

That is the peculiar way of the Legislative branch to implement some of the principles of the so-called civic journalism or public journalism. The American movement called civic journalism is an attempt to abandon the notion that journalists and their audiences are "spectators" of the political and social process: "At the heart of the notion of civic journalism is the belief that journalism has an obligation with public life, as it goes beyond the simple news story or the

detection of facts<sup>2</sup>." According to Traquina, this new journalism emerged in the 90's to reverse the increasing lack of credibility of commercial media around the world, especially in the United States (2001, p. 171). The author chooses the name of civic journalism by the emphasis that the followers of the practice give to the concept of citizen. However, Traquina recognized that the practice is also called "community journalism", "public service" and simply "public."

One of the main differences, therefore, between public journalism and conventional journalism is in the definition of the criteria of newsworthiness. Newsworthiness –a set of requirements that are needed for a fact to become news, i.e., to have public existence (Lalinde, 1990)- is an important component in studies of journalism, especially those identified with the theoretical perspective of newsmaking. Newsworthiness is made up of criteria, operations and instruments with which news organizations face the task of choosing the news (Wolf, 1995) and is linked to the process of routinization and standardization of production practices, leading to criteria such as available space and editorial policy, approval of the advertiser and the reader's appreciation (Berger, 1996).

For a definition of news-value, several authors provide good clues. Since there is no space for making news of all the facts of the social context, cultural, ideological, political and economic issues part in the selection of events that must be news.

In fact, the news-value that journalists often suggest that are intrinsic to events, to be deduced with the use of the news sense, are culturally specific codes of storytelling. (Bird & Dardenne, 1993, p. 268)

The criteria identified by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge in a study on international news -frequency, amplitude, clarity, meaningfulness, consonance, unpredictability, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, reference to persons, reference to something negative, are examples of the criteria adopted in journalism (Galtung & Ruge, 1993, p. 71; Kunczik, 1997, pp. 245-246). Mauro Wolf (1995, p. 179), in turn, brings different news value in four main areas: content, product, audience and concurrence.

Some authors emphasize the role of news-values, or news judgement, in the specific denomination of Gaye Tuchman (1993, p. 83), as a defense of the journalist, who invoke them as professional criteria and objective techniques to address the criticism. Learning these rules in the professional environment, through the journalist's socialization, serves as a facilitator of the routines, since the adoption of these criteria allows the fulfillment of the tasks within the time available, and constitutes a brake to journalists (Breed, 1993). Newsworthiness, therefore, is defined jointly by the informers through a complex process of negotiation involving the institution as a whole, professionals and information sources (Tuchman, 1983, p. 25). This negotiation defines rules and methods for collection, selection and presentation of information or news events.

Unlike the private media, which selected legislative issues according to newsworthiness criteria and unusual news-value or that privilege to denounce, information tools of the Legislative branch are governed by journalistic standards based on different news-value. What is news, according to editorial guidelines that direct the media coverage maintained by the Legislative branch, are issues related to legislative matters of institutional character, i.e., beyond the individual parliamentary sphere of action and isolated party initiatives. Thus, this category is constituted by the deliberations of the Directive Board, of the permanent committees, the pronouncements of leaders, Plenary and technical committees discussions, as voting on bills, seminars and public hearings.

While private media reported only the result of some voting evaluated as of great social impact and concentrate the coverage of Parliament in disputes between their members, the institutional media broadcast information about the whole process of processing a bill: for example, from its submission by the parliament, including changes made by the amendments and substitutions in each of the commissions by which the bill was processed, to final approval or rejection. Such coverage is based on the principle of public (or civic) journalism, which seeks that the citizen understands, rather than the mere disclosure of facts by their ability to sell news. According to the *Manual de Redação da Câmara dos Deputados*, public journalism

contributes to the organized segments of Brazilian society to participate actively in the decisions made by members of parliament, a birthright of citizens, that strengthens the democratic nature of the processing of proposals and its supervision role over the Executive branch, to ensure the proper use of public resources. "(Malavazzi, 2004, p.24)

Another difference of the legislative media in relation to the private media is how it deepens public debate on the issues discussed by the committees and the Plenary. The agenda, almost absent from the coverage made by the private press, is presented in the media held by the Legislative branch in the form of contentious debates, i.e., that they present multiple perspectives and not just the so-called "two sides of the issue". As they avoid polarization and the dichotomy of public debates, the media of the Legislative branch are based on another principle of public communication and civic journalism, which is to contribute to the political education of citizens by providing analytical tools to understand the political/legislative process in its whole complexity and thus become a more participatory and active citizen in the society. Under this point of view, the information is not treated as a commercial product, but essentially as an instrument for the exercise of citizenship and for a participant political culture.

Thus, the search for topics is encouraged by the institutional media, in order to have different visions on the same subject. As examples of such action we can highlight the content that complements the news, as debates and interviews on radio and TV, as well as the synthesis of the discussions in Plenary debates, reported by web and printed media.

Another example is the substantial difference between the coverage of private television channels and those of the Legislative branch. While private channels show only leaders of major parties, the Chairman of the Chamber/Senate and some important parliament members, the proposal of the stations of the Legislative branch is to ensure democratic space for all members of the parliament, and thus for the different currents they represent. However, other studies of the group already indicated that even in the Legislative media the preferred sources are also the party leaders (Barros-Bernardes, 2007).

However, that is not always achieved. In general, professionals of the Chamber of Deputies interviewed in other studies (Paz, 2006; Queiroz, 2007) realize that there are not political and editorial criteria consistent with the basic principles of public communication, even with all efforts made to that in recent years. In journalism, especially, they question the similarity of formats and criteria with those adopted by commercial media. At the same time, paradoxically, they also question the adoption of institutional criteria despite of journalistic ones. That is, what it is questioned is that the effort of the Legislative media to define new criteria of newsworthiness drives them away from what the professionals think as journalism.

The redefinition of the criteria of newsworthiness and news-value in the media coverage of the Legislative branch is part of an editorial policy that aims to encourage citizen participation. This concept is based on the assumption that a public information system should assure to the citizen interaction mechanisms that break the traditional pattern of unilateral

release of information that conditions the exercise of citizenship to the reception of information disclosed by the media.

The public journalism, understood as providing public information services to citizens, capturing the demands and identifying the interests of different segments of audiences, is one of the differences in relation to private media. This is because public communication, in which public journalism is based, should not be confused with public administration, in its traditional sense, since the latter generates paternalistic practices that prevail in the current communication services offered by public offices. The existence of effective mechanisms for interaction with receptors breaks this paternalistic pattern, since it ceases to provide information only and starts to get responses from citizens.

In the communication systems of the Brazilian Legislative branch, interactivity is much smaller. It can be identified on free phone services, existing in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate. It is also used in some television and radio programs that have audience participation, or in seminars of the *Agência Câmara* on the Internet. It is expected that the new digital technology, under study for implementation in the television networks, favors interaction.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Political information on the Legislative branch is one of the main elements to improve the relationship between representatives and their constituents, which is indispensable to strengthen political representation. The purpose of providing new frameworks, other than those limited to stereotypes and stigmas of the Legislative branch is therefore essential.

However, it would be necessary to analyze at greater length what is the scope provided by the media held by the legislative institutions themselves. Are they really guided by the concepts of public communication to which their professionals refer? Do they get to offer new frameworks, different from the limited stereotypes about the Legislative branch? Besides, can they advance in the provision of opportunities for public participation in debates and decisions, rather than simply providing information?

From the theoretical point of view, one of the contributions of the model of public interest journalism is changing the criteria of newsworthiness and the news-value of conventional media, as was discussed earlier. With new criteria of newsworthiness, the resulting information model of the phenomenon of pluralization of the media takes part in setting the agenda of politics and legislative issues, breaking the silence built by the private media on matters relating to the performance of the Legislative branch. Meanwhile, theoretical redefinitions are also the target of criticism, beginning with the conceptual nature of these information services: journalism or institutional diffusion? Public or State information service?

In Brazil there is a historical difficulty about that difference. By definition, a State information system gives exclusive right to the State to provide citizens with information cultural and educational content. Under this system, the State should have the exclusive function of funding the system, naming its owners and have control over programming. A public communication system, although it is also a public service, should operate independently of the State, both from the bureaucratic point of view as in the production and broadcast of content. This is a form of public information service characterized as non-exclusive from the State, with editorial and administrative autonomy.

Thus, the management of a public communication system must be implemented

independently of the government, which should not interfere in the selection of executives in the media programming. In Brazil, many times, the two systems are used as synonymous or interchangeable terms when they are not. Actually, if the American channel C-Span –role model to create television media for the Legislative branch- fits into that independent model, Brazilians channels, of course, must be classified as a State, because of their structure and funding.

From a socio-political-cultural point of view, the effectiveness and fairness of the information services maintained by State institutions -such as the communication system of the Legislative branch in Brazil- is questioned. The insertion of the discourses of official media, in theory, should meet the demands of society and ensure the establishment of a democratic and pluralistic public space. Otherwise, interference in the public sphere is admittedly limited: although faced to criticism, the private media is consolidated to public opinion. State systems, meanwhile, face resistance from society because they are associated with the interest of leaders of institutions holding these institutional media.

Thus, the state media, even if they wish to be public, are recognized as informal by citizens generally suspicious of the editorial proposal of these information channels, because of what is recorded in their documents and what is said by their professionals. For many, these stations serve more as instruments of propaganda than information itself. However, the main obstacle of these channels is the ignorance of the population. In the case of the Legislative branch, there are not even researchs to identify the extent of information available on public channels or about the existence of these services and their acceptance. With these observations, the need to develop mechanisms of self-criticism by managers and workers in public information systems of the Brazilian Legislative branch becomes obvious.

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