

Media and democracy: false convergences¹

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Abstract: This article discusses the false convergence between the role of the media in promoting democracy and political theories of democracy. With this purpose in mind, we propose critical reflections on arguments that: 1) naturalize the fact that "the news" is a commodity; b) focus on the (supposedly) public goals of the media, in spite of the reality that their agencies are largely private; c) link these agencies to liberal- democratic values. Thus, the text attempts to show both the absence of and need for shields – personified in the theories of weights and counterbalances – against the powers that be, particularly those of the media. We point to the paradox involved in the media's role as intermediary between public and private spheres and question the degree to which the media permit fulfillment of the idea that those have control should be controlled, particularly in a world in which communication has extended its action to the planetary level. We conclude that democracy can only be made effective if democratic controls over the media are exercised; this means the creation of national and international level public information media that would be neither privately nor state owned and managed.

Keywords: media; democracy; democratic theory; democratic control.

I. INTRODUCTION

Both the political theory of democracy and the dynamics of democratic regimes take as a basic premise that “freedom of expression” is a crucial element of the notion of democracy –bringing with it both the plurality of opinions and the responsibility taken for their emission. This paper proposes to reflect on the historical and theoretical consequences of such an assumption. We have chosen to start from a methodological acceptance of the premises – which the media themselves have not hesitated in asserting– that *news are a commodity*, part and parcel of the capitalist nature of the vast majority of contemporary societies, and that *liberal democracy allows for freedom of expression* through private property over the means of communication. Given the media’s self- definition as the pillar of liberal democracy, we intend to question the validity of the connection that is made between *democracy and media*, through the implementation of a theoretical perspective in which controls over all forms of power must be maintained.

In order to discuss these elements, it is fundamental to emphasize that the media work to *mediate between public and private spheres*, which implies reference to the actions of private actors, whether mediating other private interests or (primarily) public, collective interest. This represents serious ambiguity, since the media belong to the sphere of private interests, as demonstrated by their entrepreneurial nature. Furthermore, in light of the fact that, on the one hand, there is a theoretical and historical consensus that the media are powerful – they form opinions and images, influence constituted agendas and powers - and that, on the other hand, all powers must be submitted to some forms of control, the question must be raised as to what types of democratic controls over the power of the media actually exist. It must be kept in mind that democratic political theory was heavily constituted by a republican tradition that asserted the need for *checks and balances*, which in turn had a decisive influence on the constitution of the State of Law and the way in which we think about modern politics.

All of these factors converge in the pressing need for the establishment of democratic controls over a power that is increasingly uncontrolled – that of the media, which for some time now has been considered a *fourth power* – and has, furthermore, become increasingly more complex as a result of the new information technologies that widen the public sphere (“global society”) while simultaneously increasing media power by making it transnational.

II. THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND NEWS AS COMMODITY.

Private media organs are capitalist enterprises of communication², which means that making profit is their objective. In the following passage, Max Weber explains why the relationship between capital and ideological function must be taken into account:

It has been said that the obvious change of opinion in particular French daily newspapers [...] can be explained simply by the fact that the important fixed capital invested by these modern capitalist enterprises justifies their increased anxiety, and makes them dependent on their public, detecting any little worry that it has that may turn into the cancelling of subscriptions and thus create a commercially intolerable situation [...]

[...] We should ask: what does capitalist development *within the press* mean for the sociological position of the press in general, for its role in the forming of public opinion?” (WEBER, 1992, p. 255; emphasis in original).

Thus, the *mercantile* character of the media has become different from that of other economic sectors: as if its power to shape opinion were not enough, its particular commodity – the news item – is subject to more complex and subtle variables than those that can be found in ordinary commodities. The need for high investments of fixed capital, particularly resulting from the nature of new information technologies, makes the eventuality of a loss of readers and advertisers quite pernicious in this “high risk” business of the production of information. Media power thus implies an unstable imbalance between: a) opinion-shaping, b) the influence of consumers (readers, listeners, television viewers, internet users, etc.) and above all, of the whole range of suppliers and advertisers, and even the State (insofar as issues of taxation and regulation come to play), c) profit

provision and d) functions of a private apparatus of hegemony establishment.³ The investment of fixed capital that Weber discusses becomes, in this light, a key factor in establishing this balance

Having observed this central element, we can go on to discuss the power of the media, in light of the stubborn insistence - particularly on the part of its owners - of the legitimacy of the commodity nature of the news item, as well as communications organizations' adoption of republican (liberal democratic) theses. The news item, therefore, taken *per se* and insofar as it can be seen as a "productive process", is considered to be practically the same as any other commodity – as agricultural, industrial and service industry products – and thus making its "immaterial" character irrelevant. As we stated above, we will accept this premise for the time being, in order to proceed with the analysis of its consequences.

The crucial factor that must be observed here refers to the fact that the *news item as commodity* has a specificity that cannot be found in other types of commodities. After all, its utilization may cause damage to persons, institutions, social groups and societies, to the extent that the news has the ability to fabricate and distort images and stories dealing with events and phenomenon, while at the same time exercising an information function. Certainly this does not mean we are treating the process of "informing" as neutral, since the process itself is subordinate to a series of variables (such as the points of view of those who consume news, those who witness it and provide its sources, as well as the very process of "producing the news item", which is intrinsically complex.) But between this intrinsic impossibility and the political, social and economic interests of the private owners of the means of communication and the groups that they represent (and here we emphasize: interests augmented by the absence of social controls over the commodity news item) there lies a veritable abyss.

In this regard there is a dual risk to be avoided, which is to consider as possible an absolute neutrality that if carried to an extreme would be considered inhuman. It would also neglect the existence of a excessive and largely out-of-control power over opinion (in)formation, a power that is not subjected to (democratic) controls and is, as should be emphasized, increasingly concentrated at an international level. The question to be asked is thus, as follows: who has effective and democratic control over the power of the media. What institutions are at work in providing counterbalances?

Thus, if the news item is, in fact, a commodity, it is one of a special sort and as such should also be treated in a special way, taking the numerous consequences that this can have – consequences that increasingly take on global proportions – into account. As an illustration of the social repercussions that the news– in a strict sense or as rumors, versions, insinuations and such – may have, it is enough to mention here, as examples, the rise and fall of the stock market and of currency values in response to speculations that have been initiated or stimulated by the media. Furthermore, the public exposition of the private life of public figures has, frequently and increasingly, caused moral damage to their image, which has sometimes gone as far as the interruption of careers and stigmatization. This is the reason why the figure of the *paparazzi* has become emblematic both of the invasion of privacy and the advent of a society – in this sense, global – that is hungry for spectacle, even within the political realm. Although we do not adopt here post-modern assumptions that imagine contemporary societies as "simulacrum", the notion of a "spectacularization"

of politics and society – which is not the same as the concept of the simulacrum –occurring via the media, is an element that is crucial to the power of the means of communication..

Therein comes the often intentional combination of “fact” and version, of “real” and imaginary, of “event” and fiction, in detriment of something or someone (individual or collective). Thus, this media “conflation” is, in all regards, pernicious to democratic society. It should be noted here that we are not advocating the idea of one sole “truth”, for which no observable evidence can be provided, but of a press that expounds multiple “truths”, that is, multiple (and therefore plural) interpretations of “the facts”.

Therefore, if these consequences of media power are, among others, real; and, furthermore, if all other types of commodities, their productive processes and their owners are, in diverse ways, subject to governmental and societal mechanisms of control, why should the *commodity news item* be any different? We note that in Brazil, the production and trade of goods and services is controlled by distinct organs, such as the Consumer Protection Agency (PROCON, Procuradoria do Consumidor), the Secretariat of Economic Law (SDE, Secretaria de Direito Econômico), organs for sectoral regulation (such as the National Agency of Telecommunications, ANATEL, and the National Agency of Electrical Energy, ANEEL) among others, as well as private non-profit organizations such as the Institute for Consumer Defense (IDEC) to mention only a few.

It is undeniable that, as far as information is concerned, the temptation to establish authoritarian forms of control and censorship is great, and has been common throughout the nation’s history. Therefore, concern for freedom of expression should guide any control mechanisms that are generated, both at the national and international levels, repelling any attempts at censorship (some alternatives for the implementation of democratic forms of control over the media are discussed below). Yet we should not be complicit with mass media permissiveness, if we do not want to legitimate uncontrolled power and one-dimensional thought; this permissiveness, in the name of freedom of expression, acts as a veritable **consensus-producing machine**, which is at its worst capable of suppressing dissident voices. As an illustration, we can see how neo-liberal propositions (which I prefer to call “ultraliberal”, because of the radical nature of the proposals and of their forms of operation), such as privatizations, the diminished role of the State, the flexibilization of the labor market, and individualism, among other things, became as of the 1980s, the one sole and uncontested form of thought, translated into the program implemented by numerous national states, functioning as the underlying premises of multi-lateral organization and accepted by the vast majority of the mass media at an international level⁴. For those disagreeing with the so-call “market-oriented reforms”, the label of “neolithic” was applied, disqualifying them for standing up to the tide of neo-liberalism.⁵ Thus, the constitution of a hegemony which worked to block all other forms of thought and therefore was highly anti-democratic came into being. It is worth noting here that this uniformization of thought runs contrary to what we have known as the liberal tradition, one which claims to promote the pluralism which has historically been a key liberal political concern.

On the other hand, we cannot forget that during the twentieth century, to own or hold a means of communication, particularly one with reasonable outreach or scope, has required enormous financial resources, a fact which has worked to effectively exclude the vast majority of social groups and thus to stir the fears of democratic liberals.

Therefore, it is a paradox that it is precisely communications enterprises that are the least subjected to controls (of the democratic sort, that is) in relation to other types of capital. After all, obtaining hegemony was always the goal of power-holding groups in the societies in which a “widened” State existed.⁶ Furthermore, one of the strongest criticisms paid to socialist regimes had to do exactly with the impossibility of dissent therein, which was linked to state control over means of communication. Or, in other words, one sole form of thought prevailed, in the wake of a one-party system and State monopoly over production, suppressing private initiative among which the freedom of the press was included.

Now, we may want to ask whether the situation in countries like Brazil does not bear some similarities to the one described above. After all, these are societies in which veritable monopolies and oligopolies, formal and informal, prevail in the communications industry, and the State and society are lacking in efficient instruments – beyond the inefficient play of the market and the judicial system –⁷ to curtail them. In spite of the existence of a multi-party system and of a certain range of media entrepreneurs, and of the fact that the State is not omnipresent nor omniscient, it may be possible to say –from a historical perspective – that a certain production of consensus has been forged⁸ on the part of a society that is not an effective “polyarchy”.

“We can say that the big media industries, which can be conceived of as a political and ideological actor, should be seen [...] primarily as an instrument for the manipulation of interests and intervention in social life.” (CAPELATO & PRADO, 1980, p. XIX). After all, the media, through their organizations, represent one of the most efficient institutions that exist in terms of indoctrination that favors groups that are strategically placed as opinion reproducers – the middle and upper strata of the Brazilian social hierarchy. In this regard, media organizations can be seen as poles of power.

Thus, once again the question emerges as to what mechanisms exercise control over the “fourth power”, especially in countries like Brazil, a question that becomes all the more meaningful in a world in which the public sphere has been expanding on a planetary scale, beyond the power of communication oligopolies.⁹

III. THE PRIVATE ROLE OF THE MEDIA VERSUS THEIR PUBLIC FORM OF ACTION.

In addition to the commodity character of the news item, from a theoretical perspective, the bourgeois revolutions were a real watershed for a distinction between public and private spheres, controversial concepts **par excellence**. Particularly significant in this regard was the French Revolution, which inaugurated a new notion of freedom as identified with the private world – initially, through the market – and in “politological” terms, defined as pertaining to the **negative** character of the idea of freedom. This was emphatically asserted by the classical liberalism of the 19th century, as exemplified by figures such as Benjamin Constant, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, all of whom (notwithstanding the important distinctions that can be made between them) are key figures in its development.

These authors represent the tradition that best expressed the dilemmas –from a liberal point of view – about what could or should be contained in each of these spheres. ¹⁰

After all, according to this concept of freedom, the private sphere, which would be fundamentally protected by a State of Law, enables individuals - who are all equal **before the law** - to act as they so desire, or not to engage in actions against their will, as long as in acting or not acting they do not infringe upon the rights of others. Therefore, the condition for the fulfillment of either of these possibilities is directly related to the line that separates the public and the private. It refers to the existence of rights that have been defined **a priori**, although not in a static manner (to the extent that they are historically shifting) and thus define what is public and therefore belongs to the domain of common (though not necessarily same) interests, as well as that which concerns only individualities. ¹¹ As Bobbio has observed, in search of an understanding of modern politics, in the manner of Benjamin Constant: “The fundamental theme of modern Political Philosophy is the theme of the limits of the modern State as organizer of the public sphere, limits which are sometimes stricter and other times more flexible, varying according to authors and schools, whether in relation to religious society or in relation to civil society (understood as bourgeois society or that of private individuals).

Now, during the 19th century, this very Constant, in his famous work on *The Liberty of the Ancients as Compared to the Modern*, showed us the privatized meaning that freedom took on for the modern man after the bourgeois revolutions – in fact, that very privatism which would lead to the exacerbated degeneration of the public sphere. ¹² These reservations notwithstanding, Constant not only diagnosed the meaning of modern liberty but he defended it; in his view, it was the citizen’s responsibility to demand “[...] that the authorities remain within their boundaries. That they limit themselves to being just, and we ourselves worry about being happy.” (CONSTANT, 1982, p. 24).

If the separation between public and private spheres, on the one hand, and privatism, on the other, are features of the modern world that result in a separation of powers and thereby prevent the tyranny of State power, authors such as Stuart Mill and Tocqueville feared another sort of tyranny. This tyranny would not come from the State but from society itself, to the extent that the power of the majority, above all of majority opinion, could just as easily result in another sort of tyranny, the *tyranny of the majority*, with effects that are similar to the historically -feared state tyranny, so central to republican and liberal thought¹³.

In his classic work *On Liberty* Stuart Mill, in relating the moralist rage with which unusual behavior was persecuted (as was the case of Mormon polygamy in 19th century England), worried about the negative effects that majority opinion could have. In his view, “[...] the opinion of such a majority, imposed as law over the minority, where pertaining strictly to matters of individual conduct, may either be right or wrong. In these cases, public opinion, at it’s best, means the opinion that some people hold over what is good or evil for others.” (MILL, 1991, p. 149)

This assertion certainly remains valid today, especially regarding the media which sometime make a significant contribution to this persecutory nature of majority opinion, although perhaps in a more sophisticated manner in the contemporary world ¹⁴. It is

something that acts to put pluralism in check. Mill cited these attitudes in relation to the Mormons: “[...] a manifestly persecutory language that is used by the press in this country when it is called upon to cover the notable phenomenon of Mormonism’.” (idem, p. 161)¹⁵.

Tocqueville, in his classic *Democracy in America*¹⁶, took note of the fear that societies, even those that were institutionally democratic, could come to produce “tyrannies of the majority”. According to him, in the USA, the “[...] majority [...] exercise a prodigious real authority and power of opinion almost as great; there are no barriers that can stop, nor even slow down their progress, in order to make them listen to the complaints of those they crush on their course. This state of things is in itself pernicious and dangerous for the future. (TOCQUEVILLE, 1969, p. 132-133)¹⁷. From a contemporary vantage point, these are prophetic words!

The expression “public opinion”, referred to directly in Mills and indirectly in Tocqueville, continues to be widely used in current public debate, especially in the large scale press which represents itself as its vehicle. This in fact is a false concept, for as Mills points out: a) there is a broad range of conceptual interpretations. This turns the concept into a veritable battle field, so wide are the divergences regarding its premises and b) “public opinion”, for major Brazilian newspapers, means the “opinion” of its readers, that is, approximately 15 million persons (from an overestimated point of view) out of a universe of 170 million inhabitants. In other words, it includes only the middle and upper classes, which thus means it is of very limited social expressiveness¹⁸ and c) most importantly, this expression is invoked by the newspapers, in diverse situations, used simply to identify *their own opinion* (just as Mill pointed out in the 19th century), that, although private, they try to pass off as “public. e c) Furthermore, as in Pierre Laborie’s illuminating discussion, the indiscriminate (and popularized) use of this expression should be rejected, since it represents a veritable snare. Thus, for the latter, “[...] *élucider clairement et justifier l’usage retenu de la notion d’opinion ou d’opinion dominante, préférable à opinion publique car moins restrictive, moins contraignante et moins sujette à chicane. [...] La pluralité d’expression de l’opinion n’est pas incompatible avec l’existence d’un mouvement dominant, de durée et d’amplitude variables. [...]*

L’opinion est perpétuellement en état de changement, avec des rythmes saccadés, des régressions, des balancements, sans la progression linéaire d’une direction logique. [...]

[...] Les représentations mentales, articulation essentielle entre le fait, les réactions provoquées et leurs conséquences, doivent donc devenir un objet d’histoire. Elles s’avèrent d’une importance primordiale dans l’étude de l’opinion”¹⁹ (LABORIE, 1991, p. 161-164; no emphasis in the original).

As can be observed in this passage, “public opinion” implies movement, dynamism, transformation, and not the crystallization of a particular opinion. Given the influence of the groups that make up “dominant” opinion, its “public” character truthfully means the expression of such dominance and not the uncompromised discussion of topics that aims at arriving at the “best position”. Thus, “public opinion” functions as a strategic expression that is fundamentally geared much more toward hiding - of private and particular interests - than toward “revealing”. This convinces us that it should be dispensed with as an analytic concept, similarly to Habermasian arguments.

Finally, it should be said that the media represent an institution in which “ [...] public and private are fused, the rights of citizens are confounded with those of the newspaper owner [in the case of the press]. The limits between the one and the other are extremely tenuous.” (CAPELATO, 1988, p. 18; 1989). In other words, the media are moved and nourished by this undefined environment constituted by private interest and opinions which are represented as public. To whatever extent that they can *also* act in public perspective, they will always be imprisoned by private means of communication and interests and private and mercantile commitments . Furthermore, there is yet another essential problem to be dealt with in their regard: the fact that civil society and the State lack effective controls over them.

IV. THE MEDIA AND POLITICAL THEORIES OF DEMOCRACY.

Since we do not intend to sketch the entire panorama of political theories of democracy here but to raise an issue that is a common concern in all of them, it is enough to emphasize that these theories, to a large extent, drink from the authors and historical experiences summarized in **The Federalist**, as well as in Stuart Mill and Tocqueville, whom we have already discussed. For this reason we can understand Madison’s famous phrase on human nature, which certainly can, and should, be extended to the media: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government [...] the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. [...] This policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests [...] might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public.” (MADISON, 200, p.163)

This mistrust of human nature, which Madison expresses so well, is not new to political theory and philosophy. After all, since Machiavelli and especially since Hobbes, skepticism regarding the possibilities of solidarity among men has become a trade mark of a variety of currents of thought, culminating in that which Montesquieu’s “the spirit of laws” and **The Federalist**’s “theory of checks and balances” summarize as a form of control over those who are in power, whether through the (more visible) power of the State, or the power of society, as groups that become a majority and are able to impose their opinions to a considerable extent. In other words, if on the one hand the common citizen must be controlled by authorities, on the other hand, authorities should also be controlled, both by other powers –thus the famous division between the three powers – as well as by individuals themselves. This, as is well known, is what is meant in modern terminology as the “democratic” and “republican” nature of institutions²⁰.

Now, it is often reiterated that the media, upon constituting a “**fourth**” and **extra-institutional power** – albeit republican – were gradually recognized as a political institution and particularly as a premise of democracy. That this is so is demonstrated by the fact that the adjective “democratic” can only be used in reference to societies in which there is free expression of opinion, particularly through the media. With these presuppositions in mind, we should then ask again: who controls this “fourth power”? We give salience to the fact that this query is an heir of the republican tradition and, as we have

seen, is concerned with “control over those who control”. Thus, it can be seen as a two-way street.

In turn, the constitution of a polyarchic society fundamentally implies the democratization of political institutions, among which the media necessarily figure. According to Robert Dahl, in his *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, one of the pre-conditions of societies that want to be democratic –that is, those at the top of polyarchy – is that “All individuals possess identical information about the alternatives” (for example, in electoral periods, regarding those involved in electoral races) (DAHL, 1956, p.70). In Brazil, this condition is certainly very tenuous. The problem with the democratization of institutions, especially those of the media, thus remains crucial to theories on democracy, although still insufficiently developed²¹ by them²².

Finally, a central theme that mobilizes contemporary Political Science that is perfectly applicable to the problem of the power of the media refers to the issue of accountability. A term that is politically hard to translate, it implies on the one hand, both the transparency and responsibility of those who are in power, and on the other, the possibility of keeping watch over power and, above all, controlling it. Now, if this is true in relation to the three constituted powers (Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary), why should this not be the case regarding the power of the media and even of other poles of power, such as the military, capital, scientists, the Ministry of Public Affairs, etc.?

V. ALTERNATIVES FOR THE DEMOCRATIC CONTROL OF THE MEDIA.

In light of the uncontested power of the media, the consequences of which are felt directly and indirectly by groups, social classes, individuals, organizations, firms and countries, a discussion of measures that would permit democratic control – in political, economic, and social terms – over communications organizations at a national and international level becomes imperative.

In the case of Brazilian society, the now consolidated initiatives of the *Observatório da Imprensa* and of the *Revista Imprensa* play an important fiscalizing role which nonetheless represents a necessary but not sufficient condition for effective media control. Furthermore, the scope of these initiatives – for the exposure of oligopolies, in providing visibility for alternatives to the viewpoints of the large mainstream press, and most importantly, for the validation of dissent - remains quite limited. At a global level, attempts to constitute independent centers of information, such as the Brazilian sites *Carta Maior* and *Ciranda*, and the international *Media Watch* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*²³, among numerous others, not only employ the Internet as a vehicle of global information but mainly function for the evaluation of large newspapers, magazines, news agencies and television stations. They seek to demonstrate other facets, other voices and other interpretations of phenomena that tend to be portrayed in a homogeneous way by large communication enterprises. These new organisms have stimulated the emergence of newspapers and magazines not associated with big business – this is the case for two Brazilian periodicals, *Carta Capital* and *Caros Amigos*. These developments are linked to the notion that

“another world is possible”, the motto of the World Social Forum, and its seminal theme of plural sources and forms of information.

In relation to the political and legal aspects of democratic control, some of the most relevant examples are the initiatives that have been taken regarding the way in which radio and television licensing is obtained, which has dealt with the need to widen societal participation in decision-making processes. This has been carried out through a number of measures, among which the following are noteworthy: the strengthening of the recently created Council on Social Communication; licensing and government incentive of credit that can be obtained by free (community-based) radio and television broadcasting stations which in Brazil had been to a large extent taken over by Evangelical groups that were basically not committed to democratic values; the rigorous banning of stockholding concentration among vehicles of mass communication and the prohibition of the concentration of ownership of several different types of mass media enterprises, as had already been the case in several European countries.

With regard to initiatives that are more emphatically political, we can cite as possible – given the fact that they are initiatives open to inventiveness – the creation of pluralist councils that emerge from society. Some of these have arisen through the national Congress, and others in thematic forums that have had a consulting character. Most important are those that have emerged within television and radio broadcasting, which could potentially take the exclusive power of making oneself “heard and felt” out of the hands of “social communications” (as they are called) enterprise owners. Furthermore, the existence of print press and all public modes of communication that are not state-run – such as educational television stations and the BBC – often provide services that are relevant for public debate, providing a space that private media agents often refuse to make available. Lastly, the experience of the “*ombudsman*” that was created for the news daily *Folha de São Paulo* could certainly contribute toward a more democratic media if this professional service were transformed into a *public ombudsman*, that is, one that is tied not to an organization but to society, from which this spokesperson would be chosen; it would nonetheless be financed by the organizations themselves, which is justifiable given the public impact of the presses’ private activities. After all, just as is the case today in the major newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, this journalist is only given a two year appointment, fact which has strong implications regarding his/her autonomy after the term has finished. This means that it is a high risk job, and thus, while constituting a step forward in the democratization of the press, ends up structurally legitimating practices that are in truth hardly democratic, which in fact occurs frequently in the above-mentioned news daily²⁴.

Thus, the struggle over the control and democratization of the media takes on the shape of a true *war of positions* – as in Antonio Gramsci’s teachings. This means that struggles must be carried out in all possible arenas of social life, without exception. After all, the media’s self-congratulatory position in relation to its own ability to investigate the State and social authorities is perfectly expressed, for example, in the Ministry of Public Affairs’ own ability, as a legal and technically capacitated entity, to promote investigations where suspicions arise, or even as a preventive measure. In other words, the “watch dog” and investigative powers that the media claim to have can and should be exercised by public institutions (in the case of the Ministry of Public Affairs, by civil society non-profit

organizations and by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), among other social actors. We should not forget that the media are private actors driven by the profit motive.

These alternatives are justified by the fact the media *are quite often not what they claim to be (liberal and democratic) nor do they do what they claim to do (provide all sides of the issues)*. This explains their common role, in particularly important junctures, in which parallel to their structural role of trying to influence what is referred to as “public opinion”, they famously disseminate and even vulgarize ideas that are simplified, generalizing, and unilateral. Such is the case of the introduction of the ultra-liberal agenda in the country; we emphasize here how debate on the reversal of a model of development was simply vetoed. This is a striking example since the overarching goal of the media was, during the 1980s and 1990s, fundamentally that of gaining ultraliberal hegemony. This example, however, is just one among many²⁵.

Finally, we should keep in mind that those who receive media messages are not automatons, as the wide range of theories of reception that have been elaborated show us. Although this paper considers such work to be of fundamental importance, we have chosen to concentrate here on a parallel theoretical concern, that of the theoretical and historic complexity of those actors and institutions who are responsible for message emission²⁶.

VI. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

A world that is truly democratic must exercise control (democratically, we reiterate, even at the risk of seeming overly repetitive) over the media at the national and global levels. A fundamental objective would be to attenuate the paradoxical private-public simultaneity that it contains and that has proliferated in a world that is rapidly becoming more homogeneous in terms of values, notwithstanding the exponential growth of social and political inequality.

After all, classical modern authors all shared a theoretical concern for the theme of “the human passions” which, unfettered by checks and balances, would drive us to the brink of tyranny. These passions can be translated into more modern terms as *interests* which in turn, are wholly present in the enormous power that the media has, *de facto* and at world scale.

Therefore, many would agree that the “fourth power” really represents a “first power”, given its ability to influence the political agenda while acting simultaneously as capitalist firms (conglomerates). The news item, as we have explained above, has become a commodity, but one that is different from all others, given the consequences that it holds for social groups – a theme that has paradoxically been little developed by political theories of democracy for which the issue of access to information is crucial.

In light of all that we have argued above, with the media playing a public role within a private and commodity-oriented world, in order for democracy to materialize, urgent action must be taken in terms of effective control over its power as well as with regard to attentive reflection on the part of political theories of democracy. In this way, we may perhaps revitalize the dream of the modern classics, that is, of mutual controls over all

those who engage in the exercise of power. Thus, we argue that democratic control over the media has a direct effect on the notion of democracy itself, that is, over the checks and balances that are so necessary, yet so scarcely implemented.

Received on Nov 1, 2003.

Approved for publication on May 8, 2004.

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1. This article is the result of the critical revision of my own research project "A agenda da transformação" (The Agenda of Change"), dealing with the construction of a neo-liberal agenda in Brazil. It was financed by the *Núcleo de Pesquisas e Publicações (NPP) Fundação Getúlio Vargas*.(FGV-SP),(Center for Research and Publications of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation) São Paulo.

2. In fact, especially as of the 1990s, communications firms have widened their scope of action through mergers and acquisitions and have become communication and entertainment businesses with a significant impact on what has been referred to as the "spectacularization" of politics. Furthermore, these firms have been increasingly diversifying their activities over a wide range of markets, both at the local and international level. This implies that there is an intricate web of related entrepreneurial interests (commercial and financial) involved, leading the commodity character of the media to paroxysm.

3 Above all, it is the large press (particularly the print media) that acts as a private apparatus of hegemony. I applied this analytic category (which is linked to the corporate nature of the media) in the study of major Brazilian newspapers that was published in 2005 under the title, *O consenso forjado – a grande imprensa e a formação da agenda neo-liberal no Brasil* (Forged Consensus: Large Scale Press and the Formation of a Neo-liberal Agenda in Brazil). (FONSECA, 2005).

4 The paradigmatic critique of this position can be seen in numerous issues of the French newspaper *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

5 As I have observed elsewhere (FONSECA, 2005), major Brazilian newspapers have served as vehicles of an ultraliberal agenda, engaging in forceful stigmatization of all those who oppose either the agenda itself or the ways in which it is being implemented.

6 In the meaning that Antonio Gramsci gives to the "State in the broad sense", that is, "coercion + consensus".

7 In an economy that is as non-competitive as Brazil's, especially in the newspaper and television broadcasting sectors, the market is certainly not the central **locus** from which the impulse toward greater democratization of access to information can be expected to come. Furthermore, it would be hard to maintain that this could be a market function **per se**. Regarding the Judiciary, since there is no specific law for the press in the country, specific crimes of the press are judged using general codes for crimes against honor. This means, for example, that the right to rejoinder, so crucial to democracy and to the honor of those who have been hurt, is extremely fragile. Although there is a legal code for the press, dated February 9, 1969 (Law # 5520), the latter was written under the juridical guidelines of the military dictatorship's Institutional Act #5 and is therefore not actually implemented. As a result, "crimes of opinion" are submitted to civil and penal codes, which are recognized as insufficient for the punishment of "abuses of opinion", particularly on the part of communications media owners. Furthermore, the law and the judicial apparatus are necessary but never sufficient conditions for the democratization of communications media, given the need for social controls over the latter.

8 Notion that inspires the title "*Consenso forjado*" given to my own book on the role of the large scale press in the formation of an ultraliberal political agenda in Brazil (Fonseca, op.cit.)

9 For many authors, the world is currently undergoing a veritable compression in time and space which thus becomes one of the defining features of the contemporary world. In other words, information is increasingly transmitted in real time – on line – and thus drastically shortening the time needed to "generate" and then transmit it worldwide. Thus, in a world in which time has been abridged by satellites, optic fiber, cable televisions, news agencies, newspapers and magazines printed simultaneously in several countries (in English, which is increasingly used as a *lingua franca*, and translated into local languages), media influence grows rampantly, covering the entire planet. Of course we are not speaking of all media, that is, not of those spawned in the system's periphery. The large scale media, which harbors considerable influences over its national peers, is based in the home countries of international capitalism. Thus, if the public sphere has become increasingly global – to the extent that we can speak of a planetary agenda, that involves such themes as finance capital, production chains, misery, migration, the environment, human rights, nuclear weapons, drugs and numerous others – and if, in addition to this, the media, through private interest, seeks to translate and intermediate social relations in the public sphere, what kind of democratic control can ordinary citizens expect to have over them, at the international level? If the issue is complex at a national level, it becomes all the more so when we consider that today's "small world" in which certain borders have become more flexible. *Therefore, time-space compression involves a widening of the public sphere, which loses its exclusively national character in a scenario of growing "internationalization"*.

10 It is interesting to observe that, during the twentieth century, ultraliberal authors such as Von Mises, Milton Friedman and especially Friedrich Von Hayek, among others, went beyond this dilemma by associating freedom to privatism. In other words, the private sphere and, within it, the market, become synonymous with freedom. This explains the term "liberalism" that has been used to denominate this current of thought.

11 The popular imaginary has incorporated this conceptual distinction through the common expression “My rights end where yours begin.”

12 Privatism, particularly as of the second half of the twentieth century, has turned humans into a species of “homo shopping” (pardon the neologism), that is, a species that defines itself through everything that pertains to the universe of *consumption*, such as publicity and the culture of the disposable. This culminates in what Rousseau foresaw in the 18th century: the transformation of man into a being that “is what it owns.” Lastly, it is worth remembering that, in the 19th century, liberalism asserted possessive individualism as a way of expressing unlimited confidence in the idea of capitalist appropriation and possession.

13 It is interesting to note that contemporary literary production, including versions that have been adapted for film, offers two paradigmatic examples of totalitarian control. The first is the classic **1984**, typifying the post World War II period in which the state “Big Brother” sees and controls everything. The second is the contemporary **Truman Show** in which a child, while still in its mother’s womb, is purchased by the owner of a television broadcasting network and its life becomes a spectacle that television audiences can watch during the 24 hours of the day. The child’s life is contained within a city-studio in which the only real person in Truman, and is observed through 18,000 hidden cameras: capitalist control over our lives is caricaturized but real.

14 One has only to look at the image that the Brazilian media as a whole has constructed of the Landless Rural Workers Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra*). Beyond the problems and mistakes of the movement, it undoubtedly expresses a real problem and a legitimate demand. At the international level, the same can be said in relation to countries such as Cuba and Libya, and leaders such as Fidel Castro and Hugo Chaves, among others, who are stigmatized far beyond the limits of their real virtues and flaws.

15 It should, on the other hand, be noted that the Marxist tradition denies the existence of public sphere, given the class character of capitalist societies. After all, each individual is seen as inescapably tied to his/her class interests.

16 Paradoxically, this is the work that North American politicians cite most frequently.

17 Tocqueville also believed in the proliferation of organs of communication that, in this way, would socially exercise mutual control. Nonetheless, this idea does not seem to have prevailed in any part of the world.

18 Data from the interview that Otavio Frias Filho (of the Folha de S. Paulo) conceded to this researcher. In his view, the limited circulation of newspapers in Brazil is not really a problem, insofar as newspapers do reach the fundamental groups, since “[...] it is a quality audience, that is, people who are opinion-shapers: the so-called liberal professions, technicians, entrepreneurs, union leaders, university professors, people whose perspectives are weighty in terms of opinion-shaping. But they are a *limited* audience. The National Association of Newspapers (Associação Nacional dos Jornais – ANJ) estimates that *daily newspaper circulation in Brazil amounts to something like four or five million copies*. According to international standards, there are an *estimated two to three readers per copy*. Thus, from an optimistic perspective, Brazil has 15 million people reading papers,

*something like 10% of the population. I would say that the universe that the newspapers usually reach is not very far from this . [...] Newspaper readership is a qualitatively significant but quantitatively small group. It is a basically middle class audience.[...] We are not engaging in interlocution with all of society but [] with a more or less well-defined segment in ideological terms: **the urban middle class with a high educational level. Newspaper readers come from this group; the social base that newspapers have is with this sort of person and that it with whom we engage in interlocution** (FRIAS FILHO, 2001; my emphasis). This exemplifies what “public opinion” is for the major press.*

19 "[...] Elucidate clearly and justify the consecrated use of the notion of ‘opinion’ or of “dominant opinion” [is] preferable to “public opinion”, since it is less restrictive, less coercive and less subject to confusion [...] The plurality of expressions of opinion is not incompatible with the existence of a dominant movement, of variable duration and amplitude [...].Opinion is in a perpetual state of change, *including turbulent rhythms and shaky moments, there being no linear progression in a logical direction* [...] The mental representation, essential articulation of fact, reactions generated and their consequences, should thus become an object of history. They reveal themselves to be of prime importance in the study of opinion. (Our translation).

20 The current, albeit incipient, experiences with what has been called “electronic government” is very interesting insofar as new possibilities of democratic control – although also of the risks of information concentration – in national states.

21 *For a position that is different from our own, especially with regard to the metamorphoses of democracy, in which media occupy a role that is different from what we consider here, see, among the works of Bernard Manin, Manin (1997) and Przeworski, Stokes and Manin (1999).*

22 *This issue was discussed by Luís Felipe Miguel, for whom "[...] a theory of democracy should be an instrument for understanding the political arena in real contemporary societies, that is, class societies, divided by deep cleavages and inequalities, within a transnationalized environment. On the other hand, according to this author "[...] access to the media is imposed and becomes one of the main strangling points of contemporary democracies – and, therefore, as one of the main challenges to those who are interested not only in understanding the functioning of democratic societies but also in perfecting them. (MIGUEL, 2000, p. 67; emphasis in original). On the other hand, it is interesting to note that even conservative theories of democracy, such as the so called “economic theory of democracy” place privilege on the theme of access to information. (cf. DOWNS, 1999).*

23 The respective internet sites of these organizations are, as follows:
<http://www.cartamaior.uol.com.br/>; <http://carosamigos.terra.com.br/>;
<http://www.cirandabrasil.net/>; <http://www.mediawatch.org/> e <http://www.lemonde.fr/>.

24 These are only a few examples of numerous, although controversial, possibilities for the democratic control of means of communication. Given spatial limitations we can not go further into depth here and have considered it to be enough to provide some illustrative examples.

25 It is important to note that all attempts at minimal regulation of television programming in Brazil in the 1990s were carried out via “gentlemen’s agreements” between the Federal Government – the Ministry of Justice in particular – and television broadcasters, since mechanisms for state and societal control over the means of communication were non-existent. The concrete results of these agreements were null, since they altered practically none of the near total freedom of the broadcasters to decide what programs the Brazilian public would see. On the other hand, initiatives that have emerged from society, such as that of the NGO Tver, are hopeful as indications of the developing consciousness of social groups regarding the need for societal mobilization around the democratization of Brazilian television.

26 So called “theories of reception” have been developing as a relatively autonomous field of research and reflection of their own. Some notorious cases among others – stemming from the whole range of communications fields – can be found in Jesus Barbero’s work. For Barbero, “[...] communication has become more a question of *mediations* than of *means*, a matter of *culture* and therefore, not only of knowledge but of recognition. Recognition that was, initially, the operation of a methodological dislocation in order *to* review the entire process of communication from its *other* side, that of reception, of the resistences that occur there, of appropriation through its uses. ” (BARBERO, 1997, p. 16; emphasis in the original). For this author, who specifically interpellates Latin American culture, reception is mediated by struggles and resistance, a fact which makes knowledge of domination all the more complex. Michel De Certeau, in turn, engages in a critique of technical reason which arrogantly imagines knowing the best ways to organize people and their lives, while common people silently escape this conforming world by “inventing” their daily lives. In doing so, they employ subtle strategies and thus alter dominant codes and reappropriate space (in the broad and particularly symbolic sense). Language itself, and all the different types of languages that exist, expressing this particular astuteness, are thus able to bypass dominant culture. As has been observed, both authors, their differences notwithstanding, place value on the ability of receptors not only to interpret but to act, which means that messages are transformed, mediated in numerous ways and forms.

Translated by Meryl Adelman

Translation from Revista de Sociologia e Política, n.22, June 2004 p.13-24.