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## The role of the media in the processes of impeachment of Dilma Rousseff (2016) and Michel Temer (2017)

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## Abstract

The tense relationship between media and politics in Brazil is well known by specialized literature. Getúlio Vargas, João Goulart and Fernando Collor are examples of presidents who did not finish their mandates and who suffered resistance from the press. This article argues that this history of the media in destabilization processes remains current. The hypothesis was tested from the observation of 34 editorials of Brazil's main print newspapers, during Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and the opening of Michel Temer's investigation in 2017. The first case had a certain unity between these newspapers; in the second case, there was divergence in the press

## Keywords

Impeachment; Media; Democracy.

## Introduction

The tense relationship between the media and politics in Brazil is relatively well-known in the specialized literature. On the one hand, there is the recurring practice, on the part of media companies, of defending their interests via political agenda-setting (Biroli & Mantovani, 2010; Biroli & Montovani, 2014; Fonseca, 2011; Miguel & Coutinho, 2007). In addition, through their outlets, they express their preferences and strive to influence electoral results, which invariably displeases one or another of the actors in dispute (Feres Jr. & Sassara, 2016a; Feres Jr. & Sassara, 2016b; Mundim, 2012, 2014; Mundim & Bezerra, 2011; Aldé & Mendes & Figueiredo, 2007). On the other hand, politicians oftentimes are the very holders of radio and television concessions in their areas, [a fact] that part of the literature has labeled as "electronic coronelism" (Costa & Brener, 1997; Santos, 2006, 2008; Lima, 2015). Though the latter is obviously unconstitutional, the former is not. Freedom of expression, a liberal achievement found in modern constitutions since the eighteenth century - see the French and American Constitutions - occupies a very prominent place in the 1988 Brazilian Charter, and very few are the voices that, in a democratic regime, call for the return of censorship. The problem under discussion is not exactly how to avoid the positioning of certain media outlets, but rather how to ensure that there is cultural diversity and plurality of information among them. In Habermasian terms, how to elaborate a rational deliberation that results in consensus and qualitatively informs the production of public policies, if the information guiding the process is biased or asymmetrical? This is the dilemma of a society such as the Brazilian one, often characterized by part of the literature as prone to the occurrence of media monopolies or oligopolies (Azevedo, 2006; Canela, 2008; Borges, 2009; Martins, 2014; Mielli & Damasceno, 2015; Lima, 2015).

Ruiz (2010, p.37) understands that "this tension between the media and politicians is democratizing insofar as it strengthens the democratic quality of the media system." [It is] democratizing as long as three indicators are respected: the amplitude of voices; the ability to criticize all instances of power; and the strengthening of the common informative base, i.e., "providing credible information, at the same time, for the different sectors of political antagonism" (Ruiz, 2010, p. 38). But it is hard to argue that this democratizing scenario is exactly what is found in Brazil today, where political polarization has undermined the trust of political actors in certain media outlets. For instance, José Szwako and Fabiano Santos (2016, p. 115) argue that, among "the ingredients that make up the current Brazilian socio-political framework", there is "an oligopolized media that is increasingly partisanized and aligned with specific sectors of the power

structure." According to Luis Felipe Miguel (2017, p. 115), "the central point is that printed newspapers and magazines, as much as radio and television broadcasters, are controlled by a small number of business groups, which, with very few exceptions, align themselves with the same political interests". Domingues (2017, p.1750) is even more incisive when he states that today group *Globo* is "the leading 'organic' intellectual for a large portion of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, and indeed it is their main political party."

In the case of Brazil, there is a certain history in this tension between the media and politics (Albuquerque, 2000; Sodré, 1983). The role of the press in the political crisis that led to the suicide of Getúlio Vargas in the 1950's is rather well-known. In his classic book about the União Democrática Nacional (National Democratic Union-UDN), Benevides (1981, p. 88) exposes how Julio de Mesquita Filho himself, owner of the *Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper, sought the then commander of the Superior War School, General Juarez Távora, "to probe him on the possibility of a coup against Getúlio." But it was not only *Estado de São Paulo*. According to Alzira Alves de Abreu (undated), the opposition against Vargas was led by "the journalists Carlos Lacerda, owner of the *Tribuna da Imprensa* newspaper, and Assis Chateaubriand, owner of *Diários Associados*. In addition to his newspaper, Carlos Lacerda made use of Radio Globo and *Rede Tupi*, a television network." Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos (2017, p. 34) recalls how the denouncing of Getúlio was "masterly modeled by the oppositional press, spearheaded by *Tribuna de Imprensa* and *O Globo*". The same can be said of what occurred in the mid-1960s, when João Goulart was deposed. In his research work on press interference in politics, Arêas (2015, p. 75) recalls that among those who "worked toward the destabilization and overthrow of the Goulart government, (...) there were the main press companies such as *O Globo*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha de S. Paulo*."

However, it was certainly after the impeachment of Fernando Collor de Mello, in 1992, that the specialized literature further developed its knowledge on the dynamics of media interference in politics. *A imprensa faz e desfaz um presidente* (The press makes and unmakes a president) - a book by Fernando Lattman-Weltman, José Alan Dias Carneiro and Plínio de Abreu Ramos - became a classic, not only because it was one of the very first to delve into this context, but also due to the depth of their approach. Published in 1994 after research carried out by the CPDOC of the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, the book describes how "the media became an analytically autonomous and occasionally decisive factor both in making up the electoral scenario from which Collor emerged with a victory and also (...) in conducting the process of mobilizing the political forces that deposed him"

(Lattman-Weltman et al., 1994, p. 2). Among the printed press agencies analyzed by the authors were the newspapers *O Globo*, *Jornal do Brasil*, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *Estado de S. Paulo*, and the magazines *Veja* and *Isto É*. Fausto Neto (1995) also stands among those who perceived that tendency immediately after the fall of the former president. In his study on the role of television in the impeachment of Fernando Collor, the author states that media outlets "not only report on, but they act upon the political space, either by steering it towards themselves at certain moments, or, in other situations, by working as a 'parallel power'" (Fausto Neto, 1995, p.10). On that same note, Sallum Jr. and Casarões (2011) argue that the actions of Congress, of the press and the "organized civil society" were responsible for preventing Collor from reaching the end of his term. The authors even defend the thesis that, at the time, there was a "coalition of the left and center parties, aided by the press and extra-parliamentary organizations, which conducted the investigations and all the initiatives and negotiations that ended up in the impeachment" (Sallum Jr. & Casarões, 2011).

The present article argues that this historical course of action of the main media outlets in destabilizing presidents in Brazil remains current. The hypothesis was tested by analyzing thirty-four editorials from the main printed Brazilian newspapers published during the process of impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the investigation on Michel Temer, 2017. The former event was marked by a certain unity of those newspapers; during the latter, there was greater divergence of stances among the press. The media outlets under analysis include the newspapers *O Globo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Estado de S. Paulo*, *Estado de Minas*, *Correio Braziliense* and *Zero Hora*. The criterion adopted for choosing such vehicles was simple: those are the printed newspapers that, besides having a vast circulation, also exert influence on the national political debate. There was also the region factor. For instance, *Correio Braziliense*, though it does not figure among the ten largest newspapers in circulation, is an important outlet when it comes to the public sphere because, being from Brasília, it directly informs the main political actors on the national scenario.

The choice of editorials as research objects seemed intuitive. It is through editorials that press vehicles present their opinions to the readers (Melo, 1994, 2003). According to the *Folha de S. Paulo's* writing manual (1992), their editorial "should concisely present the theme to be addressed, develop the arguments defended by the newspaper, refute opposing opinions and conclude by condensing the position adopted by *Folha*". The writing manual from Group Globo (2011) says that its editorials must "mirror the vision of its editorial board, composed of members of the Marinho family and the journalists who run the newsrooms."

Zanotti (2017, p. 74) goes even further by defending that the point of view expressed in an editorial is not only that of the newspaper, but also "of the groups of interest that gravitate around the publication, such as shareholders, advertisers and a contingent of its readers". Therefore, editorials seem to be rather privileged research objects. Of course, the specialized literature knows quite well that the opinions of press outlets are not only present in their editorials, but also in the way that headlines are written, experts are selected, information is filtered or images are chosen. Such a study could be very useful to understand the indirect stance-taking of the press. However, we prefer to select only editorials as our research objects, in order to figure out what is the direct stance - with no in-between lines or subterfuges - that those media vehicles want to present.

In the first section, we analyze twenty-seven editorials published between 2015 and 2016 and focused on the possibility of removing Dilma Rousseff from office. At first, nine editorials from *Estadão*, seven from *O Globo*, five from *Folha de S. Paulo*, four from *Zero Hora*, two from *Estado de Minas* and one from *Correio Braziliense* were analyzed. In the second section, seven editorials published between May and August 2017 are examined, focused on the accusation of passive corruption that could lead to the impeachment of Temer. Among them, there are three [editorials] from *Estadão*, two from *O Globo*, one from *Folha de S. Paulo* and one from *Zero Hora*. The conclusion is that the very same scenario from cases past, which had already been exposed in the literature, was repeated against Dilma and, to a much lesser extent, Temer.

## The impeachment of Dilma Rousseff

The process of impeaching President Dilma Rousseff began on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2015, with the admission, by the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, of the complaint of crime of responsibility filed by lawyers Hélio Bicudo, Miguel Reale Junior and Janaína Paschoal. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the impeachment was approved in the Chamber of Deputies and, on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, the Senate condemned Dilma Rousseff to removal from office. Vice president Michel Temer took over after her.

There is a growing consensus in the literature about the active role played by the media in Dilma Rousseff's impeachment process. According to Luis Felipe Miguel (2017, p. 113), "the media bias was obvious to anyone who followed (...) the journalistic coverage in the period that stretches from the proclaiming of the election results in October, 2014, to the final removal of the president from office, in August, 2016." José Szwako and Fabiano Santos (2016, p. 116-117) state that

"it was the concerted and articulated action - what sociologists call 'agency' - between parties, social movements of an elitist stratum and supporters among the media and the judiciary, that culminated in the impeachment." In other words, Marcus Ianoni (2017, p. 143) presents the same evaluation: "the coalition for impeachment" brings together "parties, parliament members, elites of the public bureaucracy of the state apparatus and actors from the civil society, especially the organized sectors and agents from financial markets, including, obviously, the great oligopolized media." Melo and Nunes (2017, p. 289) defend the thesis that it did not matter much whether the technical arguments in favor of the impeachment were convincing, because the fundamental [factor] was that a large majority in Congress, in society, in the media and in finances had reached the conclusion that it was necessary to remove the president. The most scathing critic of the process of impeachment against Dilma Rousseff, Jessé Souza (2016, p. 122-123), argues that "the front line of the reactionary coup" was formed by the "articulation between the media - as the arm of the wealthy that is in charge of the symbolic violence - commanding and stimulating street demonstrations of the more conservative portion of the middle class, and the more conservative and corporate fraction of the legal caste." On the other hand, Feres Jr. and Sassara (2016a, p. 183) point out that "Dilma's impeachment was the product of several factors, (...) yet it is difficult to imagine how all these elements came into synergy without the active collaboration from the media."

The international literature also turned its attention to the participation of the Brazilian press in the process of impeachment. Teun Adrianus van Dijk, a researcher at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, published an article in the *Discourse & Communication* magazine, where, by analyzing the discourse of *O Globo* newspaper between March and April, 2016, he noticed how the media "played a decisive role in the coup by manipulating both the public opinion and the politicians who voted against Dilma" (Van Dijk, 2017, p. 199, translation by the authors). Van Dijk's thesis may exaggerate the power of *O Globo* newspaper to mobilize political actors, but the exaggeration does not invalidate the point. More cautious, Ariel Goldstein, from the University of Buenos Aires, saw something similar: "the conservative-liberal press provided legitimacy to the advance of the conservative impeachment of Dilma Rousseff from presidency in August, 2016" (Goldstein, 2016, translation by the authors).

The first of the most incisive *O Globo* editorials was published on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016. Its title alone was enough to convey the message: "The impeachment is an institutional way out of the crisis." It read that "with the ongoing process of impeachment, a relief valve was opened" for the economic and political crisis and

that "Congress and Justice (...) are the only ways for the nation to overcome the crisis without institutional shocks." i.e., in the newspaper's opinion, the technical grounds for impeachment were not that relevant; the crucial thing was to overcome the crisis, and the impeachment was the path to that. On the same note, on May 12<sup>th</sup>, the editorial "New milestone for the defense of social responsibility" argued that "filling the case against Dilma means a consolidation of the civilizing principle of fiscal responsibility". Later in March, the newspaper began to hint on its concern over the narrative that impeachment would be a coup. In "The farce of the 'coup' made up by *lulopetismo*", the editorial of March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2016, sought to demonstrate how "the process of impeachment against Dilma, in its turn, is being dealt with by our institutions with no missteps", differently from what had occurred in the 1964 coup. On April 18<sup>th</sup>, the day after the Chamber of Deputies approved of the admissibility of the impeachment process, the newspaper reaffirmed the idea already defended on March 19<sup>th</sup> that "the economic crisis and the political knot could be solved before 2018, after the departure of the Workers' Party (PT) from the *Planalto* Palace, where it has been for 13 years, the longest period of a political group in power, via direct election, in our Republic." By stating in this editorial that "there is no reasonable justification for the Senate not to initiate the trial of the president with maximum urgency," the newspaper gave a new hint: its pressure would now be in the Senate. At the same time, it was necessary to ensure that the impeachment would not be mistaken for a coup. In an editorial dated May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, entitled "Impeachment shows that Brazil is not Venezuela", *O Globo* tried to legitimize the impeachment procedures, comparing the Brazilian institutions to the Venezuelan ones. According to the newspaper, a campaign was under way "to spread the delirious version that the impeachment process of the now-suspended president Dilma Rousseff is a 'coup.'" In fact, a significant part of the international media expressed doubts regarding the impeachment perpetrated in Brazil. What *O Globo* argued was that this version of the coup should not be spread, since "the republican institutions - more stable than in 1992, when there was the first impeachment of a president, Fernando Collor - are working well, and the typical checks and balances of a representative democracy are working satisfactorily". Under the title "Accelerating the impeachment would not hurt the right to defense," the August 4<sup>th</sup> editorial once again proclaimed the urgency of the impeachment: "It does not matter whether or not accusations will emerge against Temer. Dilma's impeachment process cannot be blocked in the name of that. The best for the country is to rush the impeachment verdict." And on the final stretch, on August 25<sup>th</sup>, the newspaper was already taking the outcome for granted: the impeachment "today enters its final stage, with *lulopetismo* and the president's lawyer, José

Eduardo Cardozo, unconvincingly rebutting the accusation that she has committed crimes of responsibility in the tax field."

*Folha de S. Paulo* exhibited a more complex stance. Between 2015 and 2016, the newspaper varied its repertoire of opinions about the impeachment. The editorial "No Steps Behind", dated April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015, celebrated the fact that the Federal Court of Audit (TCU), had concluded "that the federal government has failed to comply with the Fiscal Responsibility Law (*LRF*) by adopting maneuvers aiming to artificially improve the results of public accounts in 2013 and 2014". According to the newspaper, the *TCU* could "recommend to Congress the rejection of the Rousseff administration accounts, which would be unheard of and would, in theory, allow for the opening of the impeachment process against the president." Interestingly, in an editorial on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, entitled "No Bananas", *Folha* opted to act more soberly. In condemning the political action of opposing parties in favor of deposing Dilma, *Folha* stated that the impeachment, "being a mechanism that is always traumatic, cannot - contrary to what part of the opposition wants to make believe - be employed without deep reasons that would require it." For the newspaper, "a deposition based on banal reasons would bring internal instability and would tarnish the image of the country in the eyes of the international community." But this parsimony was set aside in the editorial "Last Chance" from September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015. According to *Folha*, if the president did not correct the economic policy direction, society would force her "to abandon her presidential responsibilities and, eventually, the office she occupies". In 2016, *Folha* found a new narrative to boost. While agreeing with the need to interrupt Dilma Rousseff's administration, it disagreed that her ousting should be via impeachment. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, the editorial "Neither Dilma, Nor Temer" proposed the solution: "Dilma Rousseff must resign immediately to save the country from the trauma of impeachment." According to *Folha*, "her resignation would impart, as a gesture of detachment and realism, the mandatory's conscience that conditions other than her will are preventing her from fulfilling her mission." Michel Temer should follow the same path and resign alongside Dilma. On April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the voting day in the Chamber of Deputies, the newspaper once again made this position clear in the editorial "The Decision of the Chamber": "Instead of such an extreme instrument, it would have been better to hold presidential elections already this year. Under the terms of the Constitution, [elections] would be convened in the event of the president's and her vice-president's resignation - a joint attitude defended by this outlet." Unlike *O Globo*, for whom the impeachment would be the solution to the country's economic and political crisis, for *Folha de S. Paulo* the process would not be as simple as that: "If the president's deposition is confirmed, however, it will not

immediately represent a solution for the political, economic and moral crisis in which the country is mired", *Folha* stated in its editorial. According to the São Paulo newspaper, "the impeachment process is a traumatic measure, projecting into the future divisions and nonconformities that do not contribute at all to the - possibly long-lasting - journey through this difficult economic moment."

However, it was probably *Estado de S. Paulo* that used the heaviest artillery against Dilma. The first major editorial came shortly after Eduardo Cunha accepted the accusation in the Chamber of Deputies. In "The real reasons for impeachment," published on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015, *Estadão* made an emphatic defense of the impeachment petition signed by lawyers Hélio Bicudo, Miguel Reale Júnior and Janaina Paschoal, and concluded that "Dilma must be tried for the fiscal irresponsibility of her government, perfectly exposed in the petition admitted by Cunha." The same tone was kept on the following week. Entitled "Irresponsibility as a method," the December 13<sup>th</sup> editorial began its first sentence by indicating which would be the newspaper's stance from that moment on: "Worker's Party's Dilma Rousseff can no longer remain in the Presidency of the Republic for the simple reason that she has adopted irresponsibility as a government method." On April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016, it was *Estadão's* turn to dialogue with *Folha de S. Paulo*. In order to counterbalance the famous editorial in which *Folha* preached against the impeachment - but in favor of Dilma's and Temer's resignation - *Estadão* published an opinion article entitled "Impeachment is the best way." But the counterpoint was not only directed to its competitor on newspaper stands. The editorial also presented criticism against the novel proposal of anticipating presidential elections, by means of constitutional amendments, that some politicians were calling for as an alternative. "Common sense thus recommends the process of impeachment as the best way," argued *Estadão*, because "the remedy for this crisis does not have to be invented: it is in the Constitution and it is called impeachment." In a certain way, the newspaper began to hint that it would support Michel Temer, differently from *Folha* and *O Globo*. In fact, that was the alliance that would consolidate itself, as we will see in the next section. On May 11<sup>th</sup>, the day the Senate agreed to initiate the process sent by the Chamber of Deputies, the editorial "After the disaster, oblivion" presented one of the heaviest criticisms, with a personal attack against the figure of the president. For *Estadão*, "Dilma Rousseff ended up losing whatever remained of her dignity before losing her mandate as president of the Republic" and she should "get ready for the destiny that Brazil has generously reserved for her: oblivion." The next day, May 12<sup>th</sup>, in the text "Return to Irrelevance," the newspaper suggested that "Dilma's impeachment became imperative," because "it was about putting an end to a trajectory that ruined Brazil and Brazilians and threatened

democracy." On May 31<sup>st</sup>, another scathing editorial under the title "Why Dilma cannot return." It read that Dilma's return "to office would be a cataclysm, because the administration would be handed back to [the one] who divorced [herself] completely from reality." Under the title "One step to impeachment", published on August 9<sup>th</sup>, the newspaper argued that impeachment "is the only way to put an end to the irresponsible populism that plunged the country into crisis, by scheduling and carrying out expenditures greater than budget availability". The approval in Senate of her deposition on August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, was not enough to satisfy *Estadão*. In "The Aftermath of Impeachment," published the following day, the newspaper declared its abhorrence against the fact that the president of the Federal Supreme Court, Ricardo Lewandowski, allowed for Dilma to maintain her political rights, and the Senate approved of that despite the impeachment. "This immorality opens a precedent for a cascade of scandals," warned the indignant text. On the same day, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016, the newspaper published yet another editorial, "Can we look ahead?", where it claimed that the process finished the previous day, "more than putting an end to a dark period of the political history of the nation, should mark the beginning of a time of hope for the definition and construction of the path that could lead Brazil to the political pacification necessary to the building of its future."

The leading newspaper of the southern region, *Zero Hora*, controlled by the RBS group, also presented its official stance on the impeachment, but in a much more timid manner than the other outlets. At first, the editorial "Impeachment, a mistaken thesis" from April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 - thus prior to the process admitted by Eduardo Cunha - indicated that *Zero Hora* would be opposed to Dilma's deposition. "In the current Brazilian political crisis, the most sensible thing is to reject both options: impeachment, at the moment, no; and a coup, never", the newspaper stated. But this stance seems to have changed over the course of 2016. On March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the editorial "One more step to impeachment" presented the idea that the streets were clamoring for impeachment. "The crowds who wore green and yellow to protest on this second Sunday in March unequivocally manifested against President Dilma Rousseff's permanence as head of state, against the hegemony of the Worker's Party and of its allies in national politics," the newspaper declared. According to *Zero Hora's* own words, it was "an explicit and loud endorsement, from part of the Brazilian population, to the process of impeachment." On April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the editorial "Democracy is not under threat" argued in favor of the procedural legitimacy of the impeachment. According to the southern newspaper, "the government's supporters try to confuse public opinion when they say that democracy is under threat by the impeachment process of president Dilma Rousseff". Just like *Estadão*, *Zero Hora* also considered, in the editorial "Legal

Insecurity" from September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2016, that the decision to allow for the maintenance of Dilma's political rights was wrong: "The senseless political agreement that ended up in separate voting for former President Dilma Rousseff's loss of mandate and her incapacitation to hold a public office can only be seen with unrest, as it is a direct blow to the Constitution," the newspaper stated.

The most important news outlet in Brasília, *Correio Braziliense*, belonging to *Diários Associados*, also did not shy away from taking a stance. "Transition without trauma" was the title chosen for the editorial of April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2016, where it strived to legitimize the impeachment procedures: "the Constitution has been respected. It is not being ripped off as the supporters of the President of the Republic have been insistently clamoring about", the newspaper declared, as its southern competitor had done two weeks before. Also administered by *Diários Associados*, *Estado de Minas* was much more straightforward in its public stance. In the editorial of May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016, we find, for instance, under the title "Populism Never Again", a celebration of the expected result of the voting that would take place that day. With Dilma's impeachment, "Brazil is preparing to write a new page in history and to put an end to a cycle that shall not be missed, burying nightmares like gender politics in public schools," the newspaper stated. In a certain way, the editorial also indirectly put pressure on the deputies from Minas Gerais to vote according to its interest: "The legitimate representatives of the Brazilian people in the highest legislative house will interrupt an inept government that was established in Brazil by the Worker's Party (PT)", *Estado de Minas* foretold.

To sum it up, it observed that the country's major printed newspapers, in varying degrees, expressed their pleasure with Dilma's departure from office. The 28 selected editorials of the period between 2015 and 2016 are an evidence to how some outlets openly defended the impeachment, as was the case with *O Globo*, *Estado de Minas* and *Estadão*, while *Folha de S. Paulo* chose to call for Dilma's and Temer's resignation. *Correio Braziliense* and *Zero Hora*, although not openly advocating for the impeachment, used their editorials to legitimize its procedural validity. In a context in which a considerable portion of society perceived the impeachment as a "coup", the legitimizing of its procedural validity can be perceived by that said portion as advocating in favor of its materialization.

## The investigation process against Michel Temer

Very little or nearly nothing has been published so far regarding the media stance about the investigation on Michel Temer, that was processed in August, 2017. With the approval of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in the Senate in August

31<sup>st</sup>, 2016, Michel Temer became the country's president de facto. Although his positive image in society was minimal - about 3% of approval according to opinion polls<sup>1</sup>, the new president managed to articulate the governability required by coalitional presidentialism with a solid base in Congress<sup>2</sup>. This parliamentary support was enough to, at first, reject the requests for impeachment that came to Congress. However, the news about the rather non-republican taped conversation between Temer and the CEO of JBS company, Joesley Batista, on the night of May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017, altered that scenario. The tapes imparted the idea that Temer had advised Joesley to keep the illegal payments that would guarantee silence from former president of the Chamber of Deputies, Eduardo Cunha, then in prison<sup>3</sup>. Thus, in June 2017, the Attorney General, Rodrigo Janot, filed a complaint of passive corruption against Temer in the Federal Supreme Court. But, for that complaint to be investigated by the Supreme Court, a prior authorization from the Chamber of Deputies was needed. It did not happen. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, Temer's broad support base decided, in the Chamber's plenary, to close the case that could have led to impeachment.

In that short period of two months, between the leaked recordings and the voting in the Chamber, the mainstream media took a stance regarding Temer's ousting from office. But unlike the events involving Dilma, there was no unanimity in the country's major newsrooms when it came to Temer's deposition. On the one hand, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Globo* openly supported Temer's ousting in their editorials; on the other, *Estadão* stood in defense of the president.

The first outlet to call for the deposition of Temer was *O Globo*. Oddly enough, the newspaper published the editorial "The President's Resignation" on the afternoon of May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Just as *Folha* had done with Dilma the year before, *O Globo* now understood that the best course of action was not impeachment, but rather the president's resignation. In *O Globo's* opinion, Temer's fall was inevitable, if not via resignation, it would be via impeachment. If he did not resign, Temer would drag Brazil "into an even deeper political crisis that, make no mistake, will nevertheless arrive at the same outcome, either by impeachment or by a complaint admitted by the Federal Supreme Court." The Rio de Janeiro newspaper sought to send a warning to those who thought necessary to keep Temer in office until the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the polling institute IBOPE, who interviewed two thousand people between September 15<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Temer's administration had only 3% of approval rates. It is the worst rating in the historical research that began in 1986. Retrieved from: <https://g1.globo.com/politica/noticia/governo-temer-e-aprovado-por-3-e-reprovado-por-77-diz-ibope.ghtml>

<sup>2</sup> "Coalitional presidentialism" was a term coined by Sergio Abranches (1988) to describe the political system that presents, among its characteristics, presidentialism, multi-partisanship and proportional voting. Since no single party alone can acquire the necessary majority to govern, a wide coalition base is necessary to support the government.

<sup>3</sup> Right after Dilma's impeachment, deputy Eduardo Cunha, from Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), had his mandate revoked and was arrested by Operation Carwash.

very end in order to secure pension and labor reforms. In the newspaper's opinion, it was the opposite; Temer's presence would disrupt the approval of such reforms:

This newspaper has supported president Michel Temer's reform project from start. (...) Such reforms are essential to lead the country towards political stability, social peace and the normal functioning of our institutions. (...) No citizen that is aware of the obligations of citizenship should fail to acknowledge that the president has lost the moral, ethical, political and administrative conditions to govern Brazil. There are some who think that the end of this government will provoke, once again, a delay of the long-awaited stability, the longed-for economic growth, the dream of social peace. But it is exactly the opposite. (...) Besides contributing to the perpetuation of such practices that have been the misfortune of our country, [his permanence] will not hasten the reform project that Brazil desperately needs. (...) Only a government with moral and ethical conditions can push it forward. The sooner a new government is installed, according to what the Constitution determines, the better (O Globo, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

On the voting day in the Chamber, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, *O Globo* published a new opinion requesting the acceptance of the lawsuit against Temer. Entitled "The approval of lawsuit against Temer is the best alternative," the editorial stated that "the nation needs answers to its numerous doubts regarding the actions of President Michel Temer in the meanders of such subterranean hidden political finances. Also due to this, he must be prosecuted." Once again worried about the progress of reforms in pension and labor legislation, *O Globo* concluded that "a weak president, under suspicion, will not be able to lead them forward."

*Folha de S. Paulo* followed the same course taken by *O Globo*. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, it published the editorial "Without Temer", where it agreed with *O Globo's* thesis that the president's ability to push for reforms had become fragile: "Temer's administration has been pushing forward a bold list of structural reforms that are pointing to the right way. His ability to move forward with this program seems seriously hampered," the paper said. However, the simplest way to change governments would not be resignation, but the revoking of the Dilma-Temer mandate by the Superior Electoral Court. In its words, "it is with dismay that *Folha*, therefore, considers commendable to revoke the mandate and [Temer's] removal from office."

However, as mentioned, the fall of Temer was not an unanimity among mainstream media outlets. *Estadão* disagreed with its main competitors by defending the maintenance of Temer's administration. There is an interesting and incidental order in the publication of *Estadão's* editorials. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017, a day before the leaking tapes, the newspaper published the editorial "The Legacy of Temer", where it made an emphatic defense of the new government. But the

argument used for this defense could be considered uncommon, unusual to say the least. According to the newspaper, Temer's main quality would be his high rejection rate, as it would allow him to conduct reforms without aiming at reelection. In other words, the best quality of the Temer government would be its unpopularity. According to this editorial,

"In face of the circumstances of his rise to the Planalto Palace, of the bleak times that are taking over the Country and the unpopular essential measures that must be adopted by the government to correct the national trajectory - such as the adoption of a limit to public spending, apart from the reforms already mentioned - the rejection rates of President Michel Temer are no surprise. However, this is precisely a factor that allows him to carry out such projects with no risk of resorting to the populism of those who govern with their sights on the next election (Estado de S. Paulo, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

What the newspaper might not have known is that such disapproval rates would increase even more, right on the following day. In its first editorial after the tapes were leaked, entitled "Time for Responsibility" and published on May 19<sup>th</sup>, the newspaper tried to disqualify the leak. According to *Estadão*, the leak revealed the existence of a plot to prevent Temer from carrying out pension reforms.

The leak to the press of part of Joesley Batista's statement was not an accident. Certainly, in the institutions that have access to this kind of document, there are those who are interested, for whichever reasons - in generating turbulence in the government precisely when President Michel Temer seemed to have gathered enough votes for the difficult approval of the pension reform. (EEstado de S. Paulo, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

If, on May 19<sup>th</sup>, the leak was condemned, on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, the legal instrument of plea bargaining by turning state's evidence became a target of the newspaper. According to the editorial "Is this justice?" published that day, "turning state's evidence have become eminently political instruments." *Estadão's* stance was that plea bargains were being used to convict politicians with no evidence, and that was unjustly happening to Temer. "Although no evidence seems to corroborate the allegations, the damage will already be done," the paper concluded. Such thesis only began to be proclaimed by *Estadão* when the target of such statements was Temer<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Data from the Social Communications Secretariat for the Federal Government, SECOM, collected by journalist Miguel do Rosário, demonstrate that, between 2015 and 2017, *Estadão* had an increase of 677% in annual payments from the federal government for publicity services. Retrieved from: <https://www.ocafezinho.com/2017/11/17/temer-aumentou-verbas-para-o-facebook-em-mais-de-50/>

The RBS group, who controlled Zero Hora, once again decided to remain close to neutral. The editorial published on August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, entitled "A Necessary Definition", argues that "parliament members must decide immediately on the complaint against the President of the Republic, presented by the Attorney General's Office," because "this permanent state of suspense delays investments, undermines decision-making and, consequently, the recovery of employment rates." The text tries to convey the idea that the southern group was not worried with the final result of the voting that would take place that day, but rather with the rush to settle the process sooner than later, either in favor or against Temer.

The seven editorials selected from that period, between May and August 2017, demonstrate how the media role in the dynamics of the political crisis that involved the Temer administration was different from the one faced by Dilma during the previous year. There was neither unity nor unanimity when it came to Temer's deposition. While *O Globo* defended his resignation and *Folha* defended the revoking of his mandate by the Electoral Supreme Court, *Estadão* openly advocated in favor of Temer. The other outlets did not take a clear stance.

## Finals considerations

The present article tested the hypothesis that the media [act] as an "analytically autonomous and occasionally decisive factor" (Lattman-Weltman et al., 1994, p.2) in the current waves of government destabilization in Brazil. In order to prove this hypothesis, it was adopted as method the analysis of editorials of the main printed outlets in the period that goes from 2015 to 2017. It is our assumption here that the most straightforward opinion of a media company is the one presented in its editorials (Melo, 1994, 2003; Zanotti, 2017). Thus, thirty-four editorials were chosen, from newspapers such as *O Globo*, *Estado de S. Paulo*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Estado de Minas*, *Correio Braziliense* and *Zero Hora*. Out of these, twenty-seven dealt with the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff between 2015 and 2016, and the other seven had the lawsuit against Michel Temer, that was voted in August 2017, as their theme. As expected, a strong bias in favor of Dilma Rousseff's impeachment was found virtually in all these outlets - though, it does matter to say, in different degrees. Regarding the ousting of Michel Temer, results were not the same. While *O Globo* defended his resignation and *Folha* defended the revoking of his mandate by the Electoral Supreme Court, *Estadão* openly argued in Temer's favor. *Zero Hora*, *Estado de Minas* and *Correio Braziliense* did not take a clear stance.

It is not my intention to defend the thesis that editorials are enough to understand the political positioning of the press. The specialized literature is well aware that press opinion is present in the way headlines are written or photos are chosen for newspaper covers. A further study on such journalistic topics and contents would contribute to this kind of study on the political positioning of the press. In fact, research has already been successfully carried out in this direction, such as the one by LEMEP (Laboratory for Media Studies and Public Sphere), of the IESP-UERJ institute. (Feres Jr. & Sassara, 2016a, 2016b). Nor is the goal here to defend the thesis that the media positioning is the only determinant variable for the stability of a government. As we know, reality is the synthesis of multiple factors. What we can affirm with some degree of certainty is that the protagonism of the press in political life cannot be ignored. In a monopoly or oligopoly context, a favorable position of the media is one of the decisive variables for the success of a government, along with the maintenance of a solid parliamentary support, the absence of popular dissatisfaction, positive economic indexes, and so on.

Is that an unavoidable feature of the Brazilian political system? It happened to Getúlio, Jango, Collor and Dilma. Whenever a certain unity of criticism among the media was mirrored by social, political or economic disturbances, the rulers on duty were ousted even before new elections could be held. Well, not always. One exception that still needs to be further analyzed is, perhaps, Lula's government; criticized as much as the others, not only did it survive but also it managed to elect a successor. A keen interpreter of political conjunctures, Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos warns: "it is not possible to democratically govern a society with a press that is gagged by oligarchical interests like it is in the Brazilian case" (Santos, 2015, p. 185). According to Santos, the solution involves imposing in Brazil "a discussion to enable media democratization" (Santos, 2015, p. 184). A similar proposal is presented by Szwako and Santos (2016, p. 120) when they state that "democratizing the media" is among the "challenges to rebuild our democracy" after the 2016 impeachment. A difficult debate, since, as Miguel recalls (2017, p. 116), "against the democratization of the media, corporations will brandish the values of freedom of expression."

It is not condemnable that media outlets have political stances. In a democratic society, or rather, polyarchical, the press should enjoy the widest freedom of expression as an institutional guarantee (Dahl, 2012, p. 27). The problem is when, in a given society, only a few outlets that hold the same opinion can freely express themselves. The asymmetry of voices and narratives becomes evident. In this scenario, therefore, there is neither cultural diversity nor plurality of information, but rather a communication oligopoly. As we have seen, a relevant

part of the literature defends the thesis that such a context of lack of plurality is typical of Brazil. As long as this structure prevails, there will always be a threat against the stability of governments who dare to challenge this oligopoly's agendas. Altering this scenario through public policies is an imperative task for our democratization.

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