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The Limits of Politics and the Deflation of Conflicts: Journalism as a Manager of Consensus

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Abstract

This article discusses the political activism of journalism building upon a critical analysis of the effects of the distinction between partisan and professional journalism. Journalism actively expresses a situated political stance or position that is not circumscribed to conjunctures in which it must choose sides or electoral disputes. It is an expression of *one part or party* in disputes, even when stable political or partisan alignments are inexistent. The notion of impartiality or the capacity to transcend disputes is embedded, and not an alternative, to partisanship. Journalistic activity will correspond to the naturalized expression of an understanding of politics that define the boundaries within which controversy unfolds, the agenda and the actors to be regarded as politically legitimate. By reproducing in newscasts the boundaries of democratic politics in its current configuration, journalism promotes the deflation of fundamental conflicts that are essential to achieve greater political pluralism. At the same time, it positions itself as a “manager of consensus”.

Keywords

Plurality, partisanship, democracy, conflict, consensus.

There is a general understanding that journalism is partisan when its activities coincide with those of a party or political faction. In other words, partisan journalism is defined by the advocacy of a platform, cause or set of interests related to a party or a particular political/partisan position¹. The notion of “political parallelism”, understood as the correspondence between orientations adopted by the media and positions in the political spectrum (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), is one of the most well established in the field of media-politics relations. One of its normative assumptions is that there is an opposition between ideological journalism and objective journalism, despite the many critical statements on objectivity. It is a common place that it cannot be achieved, that journalism cannot be taken apart of ideas and concepts and, also, that there is a conceptual misunderstanding when ideology is reduced to choosing sides. The historical matrix of this opposition, though, remains largely untouched: it is the distinction between partisan journalism and professional journalism. This is seen, for example, in Hallin and Mancini’s differentiation between the tradition of advocacy and the tradition of neutrality in political journalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 26-27).

The distinction between partisan and/or political journalism and professional and/or business journalism has been important for analyses of Brazilian journalism. The rise of commercial media, along with the professionalization of journalism, redefined how the media worked and contributed to a new arrangement of media-politics relations in the course of the twentieth century (Abreu, 2002; Bahia, 1990; Sodré, 1977). Studies stating that Brazilian newspapers, such as *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Jornal do Brasil*, were already organized as businesses by the end of the nineteenth century have also pointed out that these were partisan newspapers, organized to state a political position. In such cases, “the business-oriented organization was a material framework used to achieve a political target” and profit was not an objective goal nor more important than conveying “the message” (Taschner, 1992: 30-31).

In these analyses, political orientations are not cast aside, but the main focus is on the institutionalization of journalism (Ribeiro, 1998), defining a culture and logic of its own.

Now, journalistic technique and ethics would be imperatives mobilized by newsmen, and profits and the requests and judgment by the public would gain centrality for businessmen (making the distinction between newsroom and management much simpler than it actually is). And one of the characteristic elements of this logic is that it is not situated, at least, *a priori*, within the political-partisan spectrum. This absence of a stable positioning has drifted analysis to an understanding that non-partisan journalism is altogether a *potentially distinct* form of journalism, removed from political positions and disputes. This does not mean that non-partisanship is effectively the case, or that it always is, but what it does mean is that any positioning could be considered a deviance. That's why some studies express surprise when they realize the fact that professionalized journalism is still not capable of acting as "a neutralizing force acting upon the particular and partisanship of the locutions of different social and political segments" (Ribeiro, 1998: 319).

In this sense, the fact that Brazilian journalism "reconciles an active political role with the claim that it is exercised from a transcendental place, above particular political forces, typical of the American model of *objective journalism*" (Albuquerque, 2010: 101), is not, from my point of view, a distinguishing factor. For this to be true, one would have to be able to find, within the model guided by the ideal of objectivity (that of transcendence in relation to particular positions), a retreat or suspension from politics. Yet the fact that objectivity is in fact part of the deontology of journalism does not eliminate political orientation, even though it has reconfigured and produced a special place for journalism, one distinct from political disputes (Biroli and Miguel, 2012; Carpentier, 2005; Deuze, 2005; Ettema and Glasser, 1998).

In his analysis of journalism in the United States, Schudson (2003, 2001) traces the evolution of journalism from a partisan voice to its claim to neutrality, and then objectivity, as defense mechanisms for journalists as an occupational group. The analysis does not rely upon objectivity as a principle; it rather analyzes its realization as a normative ideal, situated within a specific context of the practice of journalism and politics. The bias exhibited by journalism is, in this case, mostly a reflection of the very professional culture of journalism, establishing a *continuum* between work routines, professional ethics and the social standing of journalists (mostly white and middle class), leading to the understanding that "today's news is shaped much more by a professional patina and is much less inflected by partisan hopes or fears than a truly political press" (Schudson, 2001: 9).

In analyses more preoccupied with the impact of journalism on democracy, the understanding that objectivity is the normative substance of journalism is accompanied by the preoccupation with characterizing new forms of political activity. Schudson himself discusses the transformation of the political culture of journalism at the same time he attempts to show new paths to render journalism more compatible with democracy — which in his analysis some times is akin to the Dahlsian model of aggregated interest groups while at others suggests a more republican vision of democracy in which private interests must be overcome in order to achieve the public good. If the media cannot remain on the sidelines of the disputes between distinct interests, assuming an objective position, it could, alternatively, "promote a more comprehensive view of politics than many of the single-issue groups have", instead of "unconsciously and unintentionally, disseminate and reinforce the view of the interest groups" (Schudson, 2003: 222).

News is defined by the author as the "pawn of shared presuppositions" (Schudson, 2003: 15), as social practice and literary form that "reflect, incorporate, and reinforce structures and values of a particular social world in ways that testify both to the structure and

values of journalism and to the 'world' it presumes to cover" (Schudson, 2003: 15). This is what makes it possible to consider journalism as a complex social and cultural institution that "could not be reduced to an articulate political ideology" (Schudson, 2003: 16). The expression that best describes this complex practice is "public knowledge". It is important to observe that once this route is taken, the problem of the practical impossibility of objectivity shifts towards a form of public action that would span the range of interests and positions socially represented in a given context. Hence the vision that journalism could – or at least should – represent social plurality.

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For the approach I propose in this article, the point is that in historical and normative analyses there is parallelism between the overcoming of partisan journalism and the transcendence of (professional) journalism relatively to political disputes and social interests. This is the main target of my critique. I rather define journalism as partisan because it actively expresses – and not only during electoral disputes – a situated political position. By using the notion of *partisanship* I underscore that this situated position is inevitable and question the *partisan vs. professional* duality. I thus emphasize the fact that journalism is the expression of a *party* in disputes, even when there is no stable partisan-political alignment.

This article is the outcome of researches on the practices and values that guide Brazilian journalism (Biroli, 2003, 2004, 2007; Biroli and Miguel, 2012; Miguel and Biroli, 2010b and 2011) and the low level plurality of this journalism (Miguel e Biroli, 2010). It seeks to consolidate hypotheses that are at the base of a research agenda on the political orientation of conventional journalism, especially the main vehicles in Brazilian press. However, my intention here is not to empirically test these hypotheses or gauge their reach through empirical research, but rather to discuss them proposing and reinforcing paths for analyses on media-politics relations in Brazil. In turn, it is also important to make clear that the focus on values and practices that structure conventional journalism excludes here a specific attention towards online journalism, as the challenge of analyzing local journalism or the disputes among framings that are established based on, for example, the frames proposed by social movements in strategically mobilized media and spaces. These are variables and aspects that could be returned to in order to consider specific situations and interactions.²

Online journalism can, though, be understood as yet another link in the chain of information connecting journalists to each other, journalists to public relations, that is discussed here. Dissonant opinions on the internet tend not to stand out as much as the blogs and twitters of well-positioned journalists and politicians. The conventional media still are somewhat impermeable to discourses that have not been previously incorporated to their logic. This is one of the ways the boundaries of politics on the media are defined today: discourses must be coherent with the prevalent representations of politics in journalism if their chances of being incorporated in the news are to increase. Thus reflecting on the frontiers of politics in journalism also seems to be necessary in order to recognize alternative communication spaces and dynamics.

This text discusses the journalistic values and practices that tend to reinforce the limits of democratic politics by naturalizing and enshrining them. This point will be discussed in the second section of the article. The hypothesis that serves as the backbone of this analysis will be discussed in the third section, namely, the understanding of politics that is corroborated by the news entails a deflation of conflicts that is fundamental to the understanding of the dynamics of politics as a whole. The fourth section characterizes

journalism as a “manager of consensus” and is followed by a brief discussion on the impact of journalism, thus understood, in the reproduction of assumptions and practices that actualize the frontiers of politics

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Selective permeability

There is a significant relationship between the organization of different social and fields and the boundaries in the news. This includes both internal and external boundaries. In the case of the former, I refer to the distribution of issues and social actors performed by the different parts or sections of the news. As there are hierarchies among these sections (in terms of prominence, “seriousness”, and attributed relevance), this distribution corresponds to the attributing differentiated relevance to issues and actors. Moreover, there are varying degrees of politicization according to the issues and actors shown in the news, supported by the established boundaries. The clearest example, in this case, is perhaps the distribution of news in the politics and local (the exact heading varies) news sections in daily printed media. This applies as well to the differentiation between the political news and the miscellany sections in television newscasts and in the weekly press.

When we are dealing with what I am calling the external frontiers of the news we get closer to the discussion concerning agenda setting and how the media acts as a gatekeeper. In this instance the focus is directed towards the filters that define what is or is not news, what is a newsworthy fact and what is the grammar that organizes events and reports as news on a daily basis. It also concerns the production of newsworthy facts by agents outside the media in order to put the spotlight on events and actors, but mainly with the aim of controlling the forms assumed by this visibility. Thus, while internal boundaries can mirror the forms of organization that are not haphazard, they are the product of daily actions of newsmen and women. External boundaries, on their turn, are at the same time the effect of the power of journalism professionals, who define who and what can enter “their” realm, and the work of external agents, motivated by the effects that visibility (including negative or over exposure) can have on their image, positions, and interests. However, there is a third angle from which to discuss these filters – which I am distinguishing from the previous for analytical purposes. The fact that issues and actors enter the news have a meaning and impact in several spheres and relation networks that encompass media and journalism, yet goes beyond them. From this point of view the juxtaposition of external and internal boundaries is what must be emphasized rather than the distinction between them. What defines the impact is not only access to the media, and the achievement of exposure (the external boundaries). Its variations also correspond to the filters that define movement between distinct media territory, which establish hierarchies and politicize, or deflate politically, issues and actors (the internal boundaries) as they become visible – and, in this specific sense, public.³

It is mostly in the relation between the political agenda and the media agenda that is being focused here. That is why it is so important to understand how the actors participate in building them day-to-day, in the political field and the media – certainly through disputes but also with room for accommodation. From this third angle, internal and external boundaries are inseparable. Access (overcoming external boundaries) is access focused on specific territories within the news (internal boundaries) that assert themselves based on pre-defined meanings that may or may not be labeled as political. This is slippery territory. It is not possible to affirm that the dispute over the definition of what is deemed politically relevant occurs outside the media or that they are a direct result of media discourse.

Labeling, rather, is the result of long term interaction between professional journalists and political actors, daily nurtured. And the *guided inclusion* of issues and actors in the news is one of its main aspects in contemporary societies.

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Issues become visible at the same time based on the approval and efforts of political actors to attain prominent exposure, which includes the work of media professional in politics and the forms of bringing together and regulating news journalists (in order to distinguish them from public relations professionals) and the daily stamp of approval by journalists, in the different roles that organize the daily productions of news. Highlight and placement of issues in the news is inseparable from the highlight and placement of political actors in the news. As stressed by several authors, the logic of journalism tries to anticipate that of politics and the logics of politics tries to anticipate that of journalism establishing a dynamics of reciprocal affirmation (with varying degrees of emphasis and implications, this correlation has been noted by Cook, 2005; Ettema and Glasser, 1998; Gans, 2004; McCombs, 2009 ; Miguel, 2002). The fact that control alternates back and forth between journalists and political actors in different stages of the process of news making suggests reciprocity and dependence, even if at times disputes arise. Agreements, accommodations and anticipations constitute the “constant but implicit series of negotiations over who controls the agenda, what can be asked, where and how, and what a suitable answer will be” (Cook, 2005: 12).

This does not mean that *journalism* and *politics* are in harmony, but that at least one functioning of journalism and one mode of realization of politics are complementary in democracies. Neither does this imply an absence of disputes. Disputes among political actors regarding agenda-setting – and I am referring here to political actors in a wider sense which includes social movements, for example, and not exclusively, actors in the political field in a narrower sense – would allow us to observe how filters applied by the media, to the extent they define the subjects and actors who have access to the news, situate us first and foremost in relation to the boundaries of politics, more than in relation to specific political parties. From this point of view, disputes among journalists and politicians (which nowadays are expressed, first and foremost, in terms of control over information related to scandals and over the public image of politicians and parties), are less accentuated than the fundamental agreements concerning what politics is, what it encompasses, where it takes places and who are the politicians.

Building upon the three angles that have here defined the internal, external and overlapping boundaries, it is possible to discuss the forms of accommodation among the configurations of the narrower field of politics (concentrated mostly around party disputes and the actions, behavior and agreements/disagreements in the realms of the executive, legislative and, lastly judiciary branches) and the organization of the news. The concentration of the news in some actors and insulation of politics within the limits of institutions which constitute the Executive, Legislative, and, to a lesser extent, Judiciary, produces a vision of politics that is divorced from other social spheres and dynamics, and, most importantly, distant from the ordinary citizen. This is why even when some conflicts, such as conflicts between parties and the government, or between the government and the opposition, set the tone of the news, there is still the suspension of conflicts that can be understood as fundamental – corresponding to the link among the divisions in the sphere of politics, in a narrower sense, and socially relevant distinctions.

One of the main aspects of politics that reaches the news is its concentration in a small number of actors, in detriment of others. An example is the scarce presence in political

news of actors who have a strong influence in the State, such as businessmen. It is significant, that this absence occurs at the same time the news excludes actors who represent activities, and, in some cases, interests that are distinct from those who have a seat in the more exclusive political spaces, such as social movements. A research carried out in 2006 and 2007 showed that businessmen were 3.2% of the characters in the political section of the news in the main Brazilian TV news broadcasts (*Jornal Nacional*, *Jornal da Band* and *SBT Brasil*), while social movements were represented by less than 3% of the characters seen in these same media (Miguel e Biroli, 2010b). Similarly, a research about the *Jornal Nacional* carried out in 2007 showed that the political newscasts, especially at the nationwide level, concentrates mostly on actors occupying posts and elected tenures especially at the federal level, thus reproducing internal political hierarchies (Gomes, 2008). The absence of businessmen corresponds to the absence of important links to the comprehension of differentiated means of exercising political power and the, also differentiated, forms of pressure over the State and the public agenda. It also means the absence of aspects that would be crucial to understanding issues highlighted by the news, such as corruption scandals. On the other hand, the absence of social movements can correspond to the silencing of tensions that are not extraneous to politics. The presence of these actors could possibly allow for a more complex comprehension of political positions, the relationship between partisan positions and social conflicts. The analysis of the presence/absence of actors in the news allows an approach to the limits established by the consensus in place – in the news as well as in the political field. Ultimately, this implies focusing on the current limits of democracy, from this specific aspect of politics – *who has access to politics and who has access to the political news*.

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Well-behaved politics and partisanship

The comprehension of the politics that actualizes these filters, that is, that naturalizes the criteria of selection for those who attain visibility in the political news, *is positioned*. The partial view that is thus defined is not biased because it grants greater visibility to one or another political party. The point I would like to bring attention to is the reproduction of the limits to democratic plurality. In this sense, the partisan activity of the media consists of its participation in the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion of subjects and actors in the sphere that is delimited as properly political. This confirms the selective permeability of politics and themes and actors, subjected to scrutiny. Therefore, a central problem concerning the critical analysis of democracy – restrictions to the access of some issues and actors to the political field per se and to public debate – is not subjected to scrutiny.

It is thus possible to consider that journalism chooses sides even when there is not a straightforward identification – or a stable identification – between certain media and a specific political party or interest group.

But what is this partisanship an effect of? I am not championing here analyses that reduce the news to an alignment between media businessmen and political groups or, in a broader sense, between businessmen and the *status quo*. Even if this is not untrue, it however does not serve as the end point for an analysis of the news, which is, to a great extent, defined during the day-to-day grind of newsrooms, based on routine criteria and journalistic values. Yet, on the other hand, the fact these criteria and values can be expressed in a body of technical-normative guidelines does not preclude its ideological character. The news is ideological in at least two senses of the notion of ideology, which are complementary (defined here based on Eagleton, 1997:33 and 38): as a network of meanings which include empirical and normative elements, in which empirical material is

defined based on the prerequisites of normativity, that is, in which facts can be mobilized for the confirmation of positions that are independent and precede them. And, in the second sense, as a statement that can be true in the sense that it corresponds to the reality of present-day society, but that however thwarts transformation. According to this second definition “the truth itself of this statement is also a fallacy of its implicit negation that [something] better could be formulated” (Eagleton, 1997: 38).

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The fact that the news are constructed based on choices that are implicit in journalistic routines, or that they are a reflection of journalistic culture (Schudson, 2003), does not diminish its ideological and partisan character, if we are to understand partisanship and ideology in this way. The accommodation between political news and the frontiers of politics is an ideological positioning and not an “objective” reflection. It is translated in a functioning of the political field that define which issues and actors may have their access to the field granted.

The acceptance of the limits of politics structures the news. It is complemented and incentivized by the forms of mutual dependence among these spheres. Even if tensions exist between journalism and politics (and among the news and the government), there has historically been a relationship of increasing codependence between the press and the government, whether it be by way of subsidies to the press and radio and television concessions that are defined in this context (Cook, 2005), or by the dependence of journalists on information that is authorized and confirmed by institutional positions. If, based on these transformations, it was no longer possible for parties and politicians to directly control the media, it was no longer necessary either for politicians in prominent government posts that this control was direct: “their views were guaranteed access to all the major media – and protected against ‘irresponsible’ attack – by virtue of the authority of their position, not their particular party or politics” (Hallin, 1989: 70).

There is a two-way flow that is complementary between what news media and journalists seek from politics and how professional politicians and high-rank bureaucrats in the three branches of government, but especially in the Executive – on its turn, supported by their own journalists (those in public relations) – understand politics. Taking the cue from Timothy Cook (2005), these choices are reproduced “naturally” because: (a) journalists share one same repertoire, (b) journalists share a restricted number of formulas in the quest for information and in the production of texts.

It is in this sense, and only this sense, that I believe it is possible to understand journalism as a product of naturalized routines, more than political attitudes (Cook, 2005: 71). Routines do not exclude political attitudes, but rather confirm them without the need to act in a way that is identified as political, that is, explicitly or tacitly expressing a link to political parties or positions in electoral political disputes, for example. The naturalized routines actualize political conceptions that have, allow me to be deliberately circular and redundant, political effects.

The choice of sources is a product as much of an understanding of politics shared by journalists (and, by and large, among journalists and professional politicians) as it is a product of conventional journalistic routines (with their shared repertoires and formulas). Journalists resort to official positions – who are in a position that confers information provided by them with authenticity, or, as in the expression coined by Cook (2005: 76), “the same persons-in-position-to-know” – all of which results in news that is rather homogenous. The occupation of posts and the position of the sources of institutions and

organizations, especially government agencies, thus serve as a source of authority for journalism itself. On one hand, from political hierarchies, journalism loans authority, while on the other one, its distance presumably ensures impartiality, since the reasons to listen to these sources seem to be obvious – their previously consecrated positions, that are perceived as a given reality and not as the product of a selection made by journalists.

This relationship between journalists and politicians (both as sources and as characters in the news) is an important aspect regarding how the logic of journalism and the logic of politics adjust to each other, despite the importance of the hierarchies and values inherent to each one of these realms. This does not exclude disputes but **tends towards routine accommodation** for the motives listed above – which certainly do not encompass all the incentives and reasons for this accommodation, yet are the most influent from the perspective of this analysis:

(1) **hierarchies support each other reciprocally** in both fields, that is, there are correspondences between the efficient actions in each field, between the performance considered competent of the function in each field. Recognition among peers, one of the facets of the internal hierarchies of fields, is crosscut in this case by relation between both groups. The reporter that has granted access to the “right” sources is one of the faces of this activity – the politician who is acknowledged as a valuable informant is the other one. Even considering these tensions (the journalist’s quest for information whose disclosure politicians might find undesirable is one example and the journalist’s previous bias concerning the competence of politicians and policies, including their communicative skills, can be another one) their loyalty to each other can be explained by this reciprocal support;

(2) **there is an overlap between hierarchies in politics and journalism.** The current topography of politics determines its treatment in the news or, stated otherwise, newscasts *pay reverence* to the topography of public power, in addition to using it as a *reference*. This corresponds to the naturalization of positions of power (especially based on the value attributed to official positions and posts), but also of the prominence given to issues and “scripts” – common examples in the news vary from political crises to successful agreements. Also part of overlap is the way such subjects are mirrored. Thus, the exclusion of certain issues from debates in Congress, reduces their chance of inclusion in journalistic agenda, especially in the sessions labeled as politics. Considering that entrance in the news can provoke reaction in the political field, the exclusion of issues from coverage can be one factor in the perpetuation of its exclusion from debates in the Legislative or becoming the object of initiatives in the Executive. This means that the marginalization of issues and actors in one of these fields will reinforce its marginalization in the other one. The shared understanding of who are the legitimate political actors structures the news and defines access to the windows of visibility. This access, on its turn, is distributed unequally within the news, considering that different issues and sections are attributed varying visibility and relevance in the news;

(3) **visions are shared** concerning structural aspects of democratic politics and also which actors, spaces and issues should be politically relevant, even when they do not parallel the positions of political parties. One of them consists of the division between politicians and “ordinary citizens”, being that the latter is further subdivided into knowledgeable sources, deemed competent to explain what happens in the political scene, and outraged citizens, to whom ample opportunity is given to vent off their indignation, usually in terms that confirm their marginality relatively to the dynamics of politics and its imperatives. Another such vision consists of the definition of where political affairs would take place

“properly”, further subdivided into the reasonable and codified political territories, distinguished from spaces of conflict and emotional and noisy manifestations. And there is yet a third one, which is the acceptance that relevant issues are those that defined as such in the more restricted political spaces (first and foremost the federal Executive and Legislative branches) and in newscasts. This would be a *matter of fact and merit* exempt from discussion. The circuitousness is the defining trait of this shared vision;

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(4) **references are shared** in the sense that newscasts are, for journalists, the main source of information as to what happens in the world. It is from them, and not from a direct experience of politics, that even those political journalists who spend hours in Congress or in press rooms in ministries on a daily basis extract the central elements of their vision of *what* and *who* is politically relevant and worthy of being part of the news. Recently, this sharing of references has been accentuated by the advent of press rooms, press conferences given especially by political and government entities, by the circulation of material produced by the public relations apparatus simultaneously to several media and, in a differentiated but also important fashion, by the impact of the internet in journalists routines – especially blogs and websites by renowned journalists. But there is also a sharing of references that is due to the fact that journalists are, in their majority, of the same socioeconomic extraction (white, middle-class Brazilians, in this case) and their training and perspective has been homogenized by journalism schools.⁴

In this context of relationships, politics is represented as the territory of professional politicians. For this reason it is possible to say that their *topos* are the positions and offices within the field of politics. There is a mutual reinforcement among the modes of practicing journalism and politics. The differences among fields and occupations are not cast aside – their imperatives and *nomos* are distinct, but harmony prevails over tensions and disputes. This would be laudable were this analysis based upon an ideal of complementarity between distinct elements. From the perspective of a critical theory of the limits of democratic plurality, however, this sharing of assumptions and criteria is problematic.

Journalism as an administrator of consensus

The selection of issues and actors who are given access to the news produces a deflation of conflicts. I am not emphasizing that *analysis* of social and political conflicts are excluded, or that *interpretations* of the connections between social conflicts and positions manifested in the political field are also excluded. These aspects are certainly missing to a large extent. But I am referring here to the social and political conflicts in a less elaborate form, or, if we can say so, in a “pre-reflexive” form. Missing is the “noise” that is part of the social and political power in democratic societies, signs of interests that are not easily accommodated, vestiges of antagonisms that would jeopardize the predominant frames used in politics and journalism.

The dehydration of politics achieved through the deflation of conflicts also takes us to analyse the forms of accommodation between the news and a mode of organization of the political field. In order to affirm that “political journalism relies on the confrontation of different sides and parties” (Motta and Guazina, 2010: 136), considering conflict as a category organizing the news, it is necessary to qualify this conflict. It is necessary to analyze the shared assumptions that lie at the basis of the identification and hierarchical arrangement of conflicts in the news and a mode of organization of the political field. One way of doing so is precisely to observe whether this correspondence exists in a context of political and partisan conflict. This is, roughly, what is already present on the notion

of “political parallelism” in Hallin and Mancini (2004), which is actually one of their axes for a comparative analysis of media systems. One of the problems with this approach to conflicts is that political conflicts are broadly reduced to the conflicts among political parties – or among those who concentrate greater power and polarize partisan politics at a given moment. This means leaving aside the “general political tendencies” that are not necessarily expressed by political parties (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 27). Guided by this slightly broadened definition compared to a vision in which cleavages correspond to partisan disputes, or those between the government and the opposition, it would necessary to consider that news concentrated on the occupants of posts in the Executive and Legislative⁵ is capable of expressing the totality of political relevant positions and interests. The problem becomes more complex when this definition is further expanded and plurality is considered as involving social positions and interests that are not necessarily identified as “political tendencies”, given the boundaries of what is considered politically legitimate.

The conflicts in press, including the ensuing buzz in websites and blogs managed by media and journalists occupying central positions in Brazilian media, do not go beyond disputes among political actors who have already been formally recognized as such. The cleavages in the news are predominantly defined *in relation to constituted governments* and to potential or actual electoral disputes (more than in relation to topics problems and policies). There is in this sense, a reverence not only to the hierarchies of politics, but to conflicts such as they have been codified in the field of policy – even in cases in which political actors are damaged by the visibility of conflicts, such as in corruption scandals, the news reinforces frames that do not question structural aspects of political activity and that could, in reality, reinforce them insofar as they define scandals as deviance (Miguel and Coutinho, 2007).

In similar fashion, the disputes orbiting around subjects and problems that stem from filtering processes define the political agenda, in the political field and in the media. This means that, potentially, the subjects already identified as politically relevant, building upon filtering processes linked to interests that then refer to constituted hierarchies (of actors and subjects), will be considered “obviously” relevant. On the other hand, access to the level of being classified as a relevant subject is necessarily related to predefined frames – receiving the stamp of relevance is one aspect, frames associated to it, are another one. The criminalization and social condemnation of violence against women and the right to carry out an abortion are two example of subjects that faced enormous difficulty before reaching political and media relevance, in the first case (this subject is still more often than not exposed in the crime and general affairs sections), or that reached this level when they are mobilized in politico-electoral disputes, as in the second case, being that they are quickly forgotten in the news after the “political facts” that opened the door for them run their course.

The disputes in the news therefore tend to orbit around cards that have already been put on the table. They correspond to the limits of a restricted conception of politics –the spaces where it takes places, the issues considered properly political and political actors. For this reason, what appears as an object of dispute of political posts and resources that are not identified with positions in the conduction of specific policies, to ideological positions and/or social cleavages that go beyond politico-party disputed and between the government and the opposition.

There are at least two effects of the restriction of conflicts to the dynamics, spaces and already mentioned actors. Restricted to the inner folds of politics, or the day-to-day life

of political and partisan disputes, conflicts in political news do not work as a pressure on the *modus operandi* of democratic politics, especially the current forms of concentration of power. They actually endorse the distance between politicians and ordinary citizens, the criteria that justify this distance and reinforce the obstacles for the existence of true alternation between these positions.

This is how some of the ambiguities in the news are accommodated. It is possible to defend greater participation in politics, sporadically condemning the lack political interest of Brazilians, or the prevalence of self-interest in detriment of a more noble vision of politics, at the same time the structural limits to greater participation are naturalized. It is common in the news, but even more so among political columnists that the championing of greater participation arises as a criticism of a supposed “apathy of the people” of to misinformation, not even barely touching the factors that produce them.

The second effect of this restriction of conflicts in the news is that, as they are limited to a restricted comprehension of what is at stake in politics, the disputes present in news coverage expose conflicts that have had their social significance deflated. Politics in the news is but a narrative of the successes, failures, agreements and disagreements which exposes the *ups and downs* of politicians. It is therefore the narrative that confirms politics as a sphere disconnected from strong social division that have a true impact on the opportunities of individuals (class, gender, race divisions, disparities in terms of access to rights, income, education, higher standing and culture).

In the typology created by Hallin (1989: 117), the news can be positioned predominantly in the spheres of consensus (of objects and issues that are not deemed controversial) and of legitimate controversy (which the author refers to as “the province of objectivity”, the sphere of electoral disputes and legislative debate). For Hallin, this second sphere includes political parallelism in distinct degrees, according to context and historical patterns of the relationship between the media and political system.

On the other hand, the news rarely enters the sphere of deviance, “the realm of those political actors and views which journalists and the political mainstream of the society reject as unworthy of being heard” (Hallin, 1989: 117). Journalism can be considered, in this sense, as a regulator of political and social plurality. Its role would not be, as Hallin suggests, that of exposing conflicts, but rather of “excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge political consensus,” establishing “the limits of acceptable political conflict” (Hallin, 1989: 117).

Since the limits of acceptable political consensus are permanently redefined, reinforced and redrawn, it is my understanding that journalism acts as an administrator of consensus. Its centrality in the reproduction and diffusion of representations of politics stem from the known fact that the majority of the population has access to institutional politics, especially at the national level, through means of communication. But its place is special in relation to political agents. And this is not only due to the capacity of wide diffusion of these representations – possible for political agents in different manners, from conventional activism to its broadening through the use of the internet and other forms of communication with the potential of reaching a broad and differentiated public. Its differential is due as well and especially to its supposed transcendence relatively to the parties in dispute in politics. This transcendent character would allow journalism to represent politics from a morally free perspective – free from bias, pettiness, and self-interested discourse.

In this sense, and unlike what Hallin and Mancini claim, the correspondence between political parallelism and a journalism more strictly political in “style” (Hallin e Mancini, 2004: 29), that is, partisan journalism, is not necessary. Broadening the notion of political parallelism such that it involves the alignment to positioned conceptions of politics, in the sense I define it here, it is possible to think of a journalism normatively directed by the ideal of objectivity (that does not assume a partisan-political discursive style), that acts politically, though, in the definition of the limits of controversy, mobilizing a partial and oriented vision of what is politically relevant and reasonable.

In such a journalism, social conflicts directly related to the forms of concentration of power and the distribution of resources (both symbolic and material) are not mentioned or figure as a kind of undesirable shadow, which ultimately serve to reinforce the legitimate limits of politics – or, stated otherwise, the rules of the game currently honored. Hence, silence or stigmatization befalls social conflicts, whether in terms of subjects, actors and forms of political action.

The treatment reserved to poverty and the social question by political parties and by contemporary newscast in Brazil is a quite characteristics example. As an object of concern that is, supposedly, shared by different actors, poverty appears in an emptied version of the conflicts that are integral to social inequality. As an administrator of consensus, journalism mobilizes the subject determining if and when it can appear as an object of common concern, with no distinction made as to positions. Furthermore, and according to a deeply biased vision, poverty has been approached as a form used to distinguish between morally oriented voting behavior and corrupted voting behavior (Biroli and Mantovani, 2010).

The treatment conferred to agrarian reform and the landless workers’ movement (*Movimento dos Sem Terra*), a subject with a longer history in the news, is an example of the correlation between the degree of the conflicts “tolerated” by the mass media news, of the boundaries of politics and the affirmation of subjects and politically legitimate actors. Coverage fluctuates between silence and the stigmatization of the movement (Berger, 2003; Intervezos, 2010). It is an example of how difficult it is to get included in the media’s agenda, insofar as marginality in its current state, according to the meanings already defined and crystallized in the news, tends to reduce the chances that the inclusion of issues will be associated to alternative framings based on the interests of the movement (Prudencio, 2010).

Concentration of power and social justice are not underlined by the framings adopted in political news coverage. They do not serve as guides in the understanding of politics and in the assessment of institutions and the political behavior of actors. If they were assumed as problems, in this sense, they would disorganize or reorganize the boundaries of politics, becoming normative and empirical assumption for their understanding and evaluation. The obstacles that the disparities of power, representation and influence among social groups, disparities in autonomy, weight and opportunity to vocalize interests set in place for democracy could become proper issues. The conflict rendered visible would then be different in degree and nature compared to the disputes that today organize the news.

Conclusion

This article sought to consolidate hypotheses and possible directions for research on mechanisms that define the boundaries of democratic politics in the news. The main concern was to expose the dynamics of naturalization of internal hierarchies in the field of politics, with filters that guide and select actors and issues that would be pertinent to the field of politics and political debate.

Through these selection mechanisms journalism fulfills its role as an administrator of consensus. It is not a matter of mediation among parties or positions, but rather a form of political action that defines a common denominator — one imposing boundaries and controls — to the positions of groups and political parties in dispute at a given point in time. In other words, it cooperates in defining what is in dispute or what *can* be legitimately the object of dispute. In some contexts, this can mean smoothing over the differences between political groups, in others it can correspond to the establishment of absolute otherness, which makes it possible to stigmatize some of those involved in the dispute. For some examples in electoral coverage in Brazil, this smoothing over was predominant in the 2002 presidential elections, in which the media attempted to extract compromises from candidates, leading them to endorse similar stances with regard to subjects considered central at that moment (Miguel, 2003), while the demarcation of otherness was predominant in the construction of the image of candidates by the media in 1989 major elections (Kucinski, 1998). The presence of “consensual” discourse — which many times means diluted — on poverty and inequality in the public debate in Brazil, not allowing for a clear and distinct identification of political parties and groups and their adhesion to distributive policies, can also be a result of how the media works in Brazil: defining the boundaries of the values that would be and should be legitimately shared, without clearly exposing in which realm, beyond the routine of disputes for posts, the conflicts and differences among political actors are defined. The article advanced the hypothesis and the possible directions for a research agenda that takes into account the relationship between journalism, consensus and conflict, which will certainly require additions and redefinitions based on the analysis of concrete and determinate iterations.

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It is worth mentioning that the administration of consensus is not limited to electoral disputes. It cooperates in determining the range and ambit of conflicts among distinct political groups and parties, defining which conflicts deserve visibility — including negative visibility. Furthermore, it establishes points of contact between politicians and spectators of politics by providing the common background for the narratives concerning politics, that is, the judgments and values that lie at its root. In this sense, it goes farther than political elites and helps bridging them to “ordinary citizen”. Partisanship in the news participates, therefore, in the building of the preferences of individuals. It corresponds, moreover, to the routine of journalism in the definition of the assumptions concerning politics based on which these individuals can decide their vote or even imagine alternative possibilities of political action. The complexity of the production of preferences and the fact that media do not exert influence uniformly or in isolation does not diminish its centrality (Biroli and Miguel, 2013).

In the news, discourses that organizes the categories by means of which reality is apprehended and signified are based on naturalized assumption which do not appear as problems or topics worthy of analysis. They activate previously established consensuses insofar as they inform of judgments and values as if they were “simple facts” of politics.

The media’s participation in the construction of hegemony in complex societies can be considered in this light. More than the capacity to indicate, say, whom to vote for, the commercial media still has a relevant role in legitimating specific understandings of politics. It supports the hierarchies among actors, issues and problems, within politics or in the construction of boundaries between what is and what is not understood as properly political.

Newsmen and women exercise their control and power as newsmaking routine. In the words of Daniel Hallin, frequently this power need not assume the form of resorting to authority: the mechanisms that maintain control and “consensus” are sufficiently strong so that the media is not forced to enter conflict with other established political institutions (Hallin, 1989: 25). The focus, in this case, is not the conflict towards the actors, but towards institutions as symbolic and normative realities.

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Circumstantial conflicts towards political actors can thus coincide with an accommodation with “real politics.” The former can be understood as the expression of a relative autonomy of journalism relatively to actors and partial positions in politics. But this must necessarily be seen in combination with the latter, that is, with what can be thought of as a more structural compromise. Partiality in journalism corresponds to an activity that *aims a certain kind of politics*, that is, it cooperates to realize a determinate political configuration, and, if we are to understand the implications of this cooperation, we will conclude that it sets a limit to the debate on alternative conformations of democratic institutions.

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Notes

1. A preliminary version of this text was presented at the “Communications and politics” working group at the XXI *Compós* meeting, which took place from June 12-15 at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. I would like to thank the participants of the Working Group from their comments and critiques, in particular Alessandra Aldé and João Guilherme Bastos dos Santos, who commented the text. I also thank Luis Felipe Miguel and Marcelo Tokarski for their reading of a previous version of this article.

2. For an analysis of reductionism in studies of media and politics, focusing on the impact of the media in the production of political preferences and vote, see Biroli and Miguel, 2013.

3. Wilson Gomes's (2004: 247) definition of "public image" is helpful in this regard as it avoids incorrect comprehension of what we consider the visibility of subjects and actors: this visibility is not a visual fact, "not a cognitive, conceptual fact". It is thus imbued with concepts, values, networks of inference which build upon meanings and potentially reinforce them.

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4. The long routines and the long days spent in proximity as a result, even outside the press rooms (occupational groups also serve as personal networks), are also an element that require being considered when dealing with shared references – that go beyond exclusively political ones and also include cultural activities and tastes, moral dispositions and conceptions of life in a broader sense. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning the fact that newsmen and women work in different vehicles through their lives, as well as the specialization, among the effects of which are the routine encounters in the press rooms, leads to comingling among journalists that can be more defining of loyalties than the disputes between media (for example, competition for scoops or other forms of distinction among those responsible for news coverage). The impact of each one of these forms of sharing would have to be analyzed by empirical research.

5. Concentration in the news produced by mass media in Brazil, as the researches already mentioned in this article indicate (Biroli and Miguel, 2010b; Gomes, 2008).

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