Political Engagement and Democratic Quality:

The Role of The Media in Brazil

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Abstract

The democratic ideal involves citizen participation as well as some knowledge of public affairs. Recent surveys have shown that Brazilians' involvement with politics is disturbingly low, when considered levels of participation and interest in politics. Practical knowledge about public affairs varies depending what issues are considered, but is, overall, also low. The consequences for the survival of democracy in such an environment might not necessarily be in question, but the quality of the Brazilian regime certainly is, considering these levels of involvement. In this sense, the media are a fundamental institution to be considered for the quality of democracy. Different messages contained in the various media have the potential to foster or undermine citizens' orientations towards their own role as political actors. This paper explores how the media matter for a culture of political involvement necessary for democratic consolidation, in the Brazilian case. Using data from the national surveys "Citizens' Distrust in Democratic Institutions" (2006) and "Latin American Public Opinion Project" (2008); we explore how media (exposure to news on *newspapers*, *TV*, *radio* and *Internet*, and total *TV exposure*) are relevant for Brazilian citizens' orientations towards themselves as political actors (political participation, interest in politics and political knowledge).

Introduction

A democratic political culture is fundamental to the understanding of the quality of democracy. In this sense, the democratic ideal involves citizen participation as well as some knowledge of public affairs. Recent surveys have shown that – although Brazilians' adherence to democracy on a normative level have increased that past decades – involvement with politics is disturbingly low, when considered participation and interest in politics. The consequences for

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the survival of democracy in such an environment might not necessarily be in question, but the quality of the Brazilian regime certainly is, considering these levels of involvement. Since experience with the political system is, to a large extent, a mediated one, the media are a fundamental institution to be considered for the quality of democracy. After democracy spread to most countries of the world, scholarly attention has turned more to this aspect than to the analysis of the transitions themselves (Diamond & Morlino, 2004).

Some of the perspectives concerning media impact on democracy point to a growing cynicism of the press in dealing with public issues, leading to the belittlement of politics and politicians in general (Patterson, 1998; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). On the other hand, studies based on surveys indicate that news media exposure is associated with more democratic attitudes and trust in the regime (Norris, 2000; Newton, 1999). Regardless of the perspective adopted on the subject, the information about institutions in the media is an element available to citizens to form their opinions, beyond the concrete experiences they may have. Therefore, what can be said about the role played by the media in the quality of democracy? More specifically, how are attitudes of citizens toward themselves as political actors affected by media exposure?

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the interrelationships between exposure to different media and civic engagement, measured by political participation, political efficacy and interest in politics, in the Brazilian case. The main objective of this study is to evaluate how different mass media are relevant for citizens' orientations toward themselves as political actors. Is this exposure beneficial or detrimental to a democratic political culture? This paper focuses its analysis on five media variables: exposure to news on *newspapers*, *TV*, *radio* and *Internet*, and total *TV exposure*. We want to know if these media variables are associated positively or negatively with civic engagement. The chosen methodological approach to the problem was statistical analyses of national public opinion surveys. Using regression models for prediction purposes, it is possible to evaluate what set of variables (media exposure) affect dependent variables (citizens' attitudes toward themselves as political actors). We use data from the survey "Citizens' Distrust in Democratic Institutions" (2006), and from the "Latin American Public Opinion Project" (2008).

The paper initially discusses the issue of civic engagement as an aspect of the quality of the regime, reviewing the literature on the debate about the effects of mass media on the

democratic process. Next, from the singularities of the Brazilian case, we present the hypotheses that orient the research. Then, we show the results of Brazilians' main media source (TV), followed by secondary news sources (newspapers, radio and the Internet). The final considerations try to reflect on the role played by the media in the quality of democracy.

1. Media and the Quality of Democracy

A democratic political culture is essential for the quality of the regime. Studies on democratic quality intensified after the Third Wave of democratization, and also after signs of growing discontent with actual regime performance of older democracies. Therefore, a greater academic effort was made to investigate *how* regimes really work, instead of questions of *why* the transitions occurred. Diamond and Morlino (2004) defined the rule of law, competition, participation, accountability, freedom, equality and responsiveness as crucial dimensions for democratic quality. These authors suggest that the quality of the regime varies as much as these dimensions interact between themselves.

We turn our attention here to the participation dimension. In a democracy, it is expected that all citizens are able to influence in the decision making process. Although participation is largely measured by voter turnout, it also includes membership and participation in social movements, political parties and NGO's. No less important is also the dimension of citizen expression on public issues.

Analytically, the concept of participation is connected with political culture. Studies of political culture emphasize aspects like political values or normative orientations of citizens. In this sense, this variety of shared attitudes and beliefs - like political interest, tolerance, national pride, political efficacy, and institutional and interpersonal trust – are supposed to influence the conceptions that inform people's involvement with public life. Although this theory postulates that these orientations are long lasting, changes are expected to occur. That is the case of processes of economic and social modernization, for example (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Therefore, aspects such as political orientations and values are seen as influencing citizens' choice to accept the democratic regime as their preferable alternative (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 2002).

To analyze the role of the media for a democratic political culture, it is useful to distinguish attitudes of citizens toward the system and toward themselves as political actors

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(Schmitt-Beck & Voltmer, 2007). Attitudes toward the system can be translated into political support, and the multidimensional framework used by authors like Pippa Norris (1999). Therefore, support for the political community, adherence to democratic values, satisfaction with democracy, trust in institutions and evaluation of political actors compose the framework, from the most diffuse, to the most specific support. The effects of the Brazilian media for these sorts of orientations have been analyzed elsewhere (Mesquita, 2010; 2012a, 2012b). Therefore the focus here is on the second type of attitudes, those related to orientations of citizens toward their own political competencies, and that can be measured by *political participation, interest in politics* and *political knowledge*.[2]

       *Political Participation* is related to those actions citizens undertake with the objective of influencing political outcomes, voicing demands and holding political elites accountable and responsive. Usually, indicators used for this kind of political attitude are voter turnout and other ways related to representative democracy. Other forms not related to representation are also used, such as contentious politics (political protest) or organized groups of civil society. In Brazil, voting being mandatory, our focus will be on the latter.

       *Political Knowledge* is a form of cognitive involvement. Having minimal knowledge about what is going on in politics is a precondition for citizens to perform their democratic role. Since in the surveys used there were no variables to test factual knowledge about politics, another kind of involvement was used as a proxy: *political efficacy*. It refers to the affective side of involvement with politics, being measured by the perception of politics seen or not as something incomprehensible, its opposite being political apathy (Neuman, 1986). Therefore, this proxy still maintains its connection to the dimension of orientations related to citizens' own role in the political system. *Interest in politics* is also a form of involvement, albeit more passive, usually measured buy a self-reported level of interest. This kind of involvement with politics is also crucial in a democratic regime. Those more interested in the affairs of the state are more prone to keep informed and monitor political life.

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[2] This is the chosen framework, although there are other conceptions of civic engagement. Norris (2002), for example, includes political participation, political knowledge and institutional trust (instead of political interest), as dimensions of civic engagement. However, the distinction between dimensions related to the system and to political actors was considered analytically more powerful.

If these dimensions are crucial for a democratic culture, what is the connection between media exposure and these orientations of citizens? The literature has given different answers to this question. During the 1990's, media criticisms became common, reflecting a climate of "(...) angst about the vitality of democracy at a time of widespread cynicism about political leaders and government institutions (...)" (Norris, 2000: 6). Patterson (1998) states that political parties and representative institutions have weakened in the post-industrial era. The media are increasingly expected to compensate for the defects of political institutions. They are not required just to inform citizens about current affairs or to watch for wrongdoings. It is also expected that they take a preeminent position in setting the public agenda, organizing public discussions and instructing citizens on relevant values in policy problems and issues. Nevertheless, proposes Patterson, the media are not suited for organizing public opinion and debate because of the restricted amount of time they have. Patterson (2000) also states that American journalism depicts politics as a game – in which politicians, as individuals, struggle for power – instead of as an issue. Furthermore, there is American media's adversarial stance, with a greater proportion of negative in relation to positive news. The consequence would be the disenchantment of citizens with their leaders and political institutions.

Television is also blamed for civic disengagement in contemporary society, as is the case of the disappearance of "social capital" (Putnam, 1995). Interpersonal trust - a central variable in studies of social capital - is associated with trust in democratic institutions (Moisés, 2007; Rennó, 2001). Thus, television has the potential to undermine, even if indirectly, trust that citizens place in public institutions.

Capella & Jamieson (1997) argue that the structure of political news has direct effects on public cynicism regarding politics, the government, political debates and campaigns. This happens as a result of the predominance in the media of what they call strategy coverage, which emphasizes the winning and loosing, the language of war, games and competition; the emphasis on the performance in opinion polls and candidate styles, and the great influence of opinion polls in the evaluation of candidates. This type of journalistic coverage would promote sensationalism and the simplification of complex issues, creating a "spiral of cynicism" in the public, fomenting disengagement both from the political process and from the press.

However, this negative view about the effects of mass media on the democratic processes is not unanimous. There is a theoretical perspective that argues that a combination of

higher educational levels and increased access to political information have helped to mobilize citizens, both in terms of behavior and increasing knowledge. It is not that the media have only positive effects. Watching television may even be associated with less knowledge and understanding of politics. Nevertheless, reading newspapers and watching television news have an inverse relationship, fostering trust in institutions and satisfaction with the functioning of democracy (Newton, 1999). News media represent a "virtuous circle" where attention to news gradually strengthens civic engagement, while civic engagement encourages the consumption of information (Norris, 2000).

Although both perspectives converge on the concern about the harmful effects of total television exposure, it's not possible to say that the *content* watched has negative effects. As television programming is plural, each message has different meanings in terms of positive or negative stimuli for democratic quality. Studies on the impact of different programming have shown how the results are not unidirectional. Variables such as interpersonal trust and civic engagement, for example, may be fostered or undermined by TV viewership depending on the type of programming (Shah, 1998; Uslaner, 1998).

In Brazil, there is a gap in studies on the relationship between media and civic engagement. There is a greater interest in the effects of the media on electoral processes (Straubhaar, Olsen & Nunes, 1993; Porto, 1996; Miguel, 1999, 2003 and 2004). There is also an interest in content analyses, which have a common and unanimous interpretation of an antipolitical bias in Brazilian media. Journalistic coverage of politics – especially of the legislative power – is frequently characterized as being negative, focusing on themes like corruption. Even if necessary in a democracy, this investigative journalism and its antipolitical stance would have the potential to disseminate distrust and aversion to politics, creating serious obstacles to the legitimacy of the democratic regime (Chaia & Azevedo, 2008; Porto, 2000a; Chaia & Teixeira, 2001). Notwithstanding, there is also the standpoint that this antipolitical bias, although negative in relation to politicians as individuals, does not question the system per se, having an acquiescent character in regards to the political system and its main institutions (Miguel & Coutinho, 2007).

Although these studies might suggest interesting hypotheses, we understand that the media cannot be studied solely on the basis of content analysis, since the public does not interpret messages homogeneously. Individuals are capable of critically interpreting what they

consume in the media. The relevance that they have, as well as other sources of information, is given in a wider context, where other interpersonal sources – such as friends, family and organizations like the church and unions – play an equally important part (Straubhaar, Olsen & Nunes, 1993).

Therefore, even if the antipolitical stance of Brazilian media is taken as a given, it is questionable that they represent an obstacle to democracy, through the depiction of corruption cases that could lead to distrust in politicians and an aversion to politics or public issues. First, we need to further analyze the content of the media itself. There is a certain consensus over the fact that the media's negative attitude is restricted to a critical appraisal of public officials. The media is not accused of being cynical of the system or of its institutions. The claim is that this negative individual characterization represents, by extension, also a negative view of the system (Porto, 2000a; Chaia & Azevedo, 2008). In a different perspective, it could also be argued that the emphasis on conflict and negative news coverage is a democratic function of the media, which should also act as a *watchdog*, holding governments accountable for their actions (Schmitt-Beck & Voltmer, 2007).

Contrary to what these content analyses suggest, studies based on survey statistical analysis point to more modest and positive effects of the media on perceptions of the political system in Brazil. Meneguello (2010) found a modest association between information consumption in the media – especially broadcast – and critical evaluations of the functioning of democracy and institutional distrust. Mesquita (2012a) found a plural role played by the media on political support, depending not only on the medium in question, but also on the dimensions of political support analyzed. Even though news media in Brazil seems to be somewhat positive for political support, as the case of other countries, the picture seems a little more complex for the former. Brazil's main news source, *Jornal Nacional*, and attention to news on the radio, seem to foment a better view of democratic institutions. On the other hand, probably because reaching a more segmented elitist public, newspaper consumption and attention to news on the Internet have a more complex picture. In General, it foments more normative views of democracy, while, at the same time correlated with a more critical pragmatic assessment of the functioning of democratic institutions. Even television, that international literature has constantly found negative effects, played a more plural role in Brazil. Even though associations were in fact negative with most political support variables, watching TV

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proved to be positively associated to pride in nationality, possibly related to the great dissemination of this medium countrywide, with diffusion of common values.
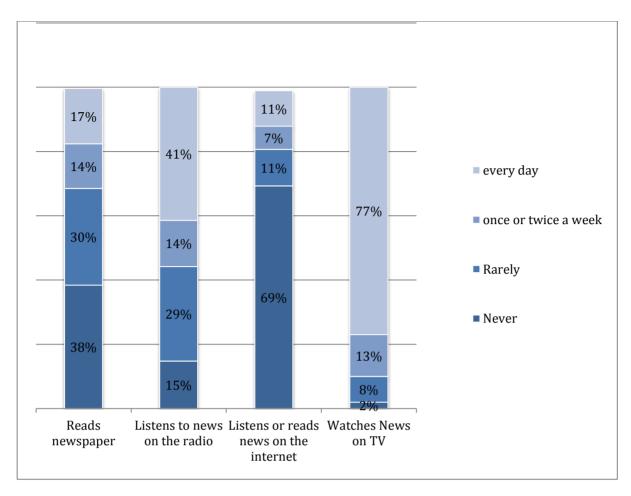
Furthermore, other results defy the viewpoint of powerful and deterministic media effects. Previous attitudes and characteristic of individuals, such as political interest, education level, or trust in media, affect the way that citizens relate to messages, suggesting an interaction effect between these characteristics and media exposure (Mesquita, 2012b). Even if we consider the uncertainty about the direction of causality, these results defy the assumption that an antipolitical stance of the media can undermine confidence that citizens have in their institutions.

Differently from what part of Brazilian literature on the subject states, therefore, citizens seem to differentiate individual misconducts from failures in the working of the institutions. Publicizing irregularities and, at the same time, the institutions responsible for investigating them, confront citizens with control and accountability mechanisms present in the democratic system. The public has, thus, conditions to evaluate positively these regime instruments. News media, furthermore, seems to be positively associated with political participation is some social movements (Rennó, 2003). Therefore, it is crucial to further analyze the role of attention to different media for different dimensions of civic engagement.

In Brazil, broadcast media use is widespread, while there are both low educational levels and significant illiteracy rates. Brazilian TV and its newscasts are a privileged source of political information. Although less Brazilians use the radio, this medium still survives as a "niche" for obtaining news. Of those who use it for this purpose, 71,5% are from Brazilian smaller countryside cities and 62% are older than 35 years old (Meneguello, 2010).

Newspapers, for their part, are characterized by low readership, cumulativeness and overlapping. Of those who read newspapers at least once a week, 83% also state they watch *Jornal Nacional* at least once a week, while the opposite is not true. Only 45% of those who state watching JN at least once a week, read newspapers the same frequency (Meneguello, 2010). Despite its low circulation, the press performs an active role in denouncing corruption scandals and in setting the agenda for other media, like TV, in addition to being a "niche" for more instructed citizens and opinion formers.

**Figure 1. News consumption in Brazil**

Source: Lapop (2008)

Civic engagement in Brazil is low. In terms of political participation, although voter turnout is relatively high (usually surpassing 80% of electors), this number should be seen critically. Electoral legislation in Brazil considers voting a right, but also a duty, which makes voting mandatory. It is true that that sanctions for those not voting are almost symbolic, but the idea that people have to vote somewhat affects turnout. On the other hand, other forms of participation display inverse results. Around 80% of the population state never participating in politics, being in organized movements or around issues regarding their community.

Levels of political efficacy go in the same direction and, somehow, explain these low levels of participation. If you consider those who agree a lot or a little with the statement, over 70% of citizens feel they cannot influence the government, while around 85% believe politics is something too complicated for them to understand. The same can be said for interest in politics. Only 20% of Brazilian report being somewhat or very interested in politics.

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**Table 1. Civic Engagement in Brazil (%)**

| Political Participation | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Very Frequently | Frequently | Almost never | Never | dn/da |
| Works for a candidate or political party | 0,2 | 1,7 | 11,1 | 86,9 | 0,0 |
| Works for an issue that affects you community | 1,0 | 6,3 | 13,9 | 78,7 | 0,0 |
| City or neighborhood association | 0,9 | 5,9 | 15,5 | 77,6 | 0,0 |
| Attends social movement or cause meetings | 0,9 | 5,1 | 12,2 | 81,6 | 0,0 |
| Local participative budgeting councils | 0,3 | 2,5 | 10,2 | 86,8 | 0,1 |
| **Political Efficacy** | | | | | |
| | Agree a lot | Agree a little | Disagree a little | Disagree a lot | dn/da |
| Politics is something complicated | 58,6 | 27,0 | 6,6 | 5,7 | 2,1 |
| People like me can't influence the government | 48,2 | 24,1 | 12,2 | 13,8 | 1,7 |
| **Political Interest** | Very interested | Interested | A little interested | Not interested at all | dn/da |
| | 4,9 | 16,4 | 46,0 | 32,5 | |

Source: "Citizens' Distrust in Democratic Institutions" (2006).

With the objective of investigating the role of the media in aspects of democratic quality, we examine here three dimensions of civic engagement: *political interest*, *political efficacy* and *participation*. These are the dependent variables of our study. The independent variables are: news consumption on TV (measured by viewership of Brazil's main newscast, *Jornal Nacional*), *newspapers*, *radio* and *Internet*, and total TV *exposure.* Through statistical analyses of two national surveys ("Citizens Distrust in Democratic Institutions", 2006 and "Latin American Public Opinion Project", 2008), the study aims to assess the impact of exposure to the media in question on Brazilians' orientations towards their role as political actors.

Both mobilization and media malaise theories interpret total TV exposure as having negative effects on the public, competing with the time needed for social interactions, which would strengthen civic engagement and interpersonal trust (Putnam, 1995, Shah, 1998). Thus, it is expected that in Brazil:

H₁: Watching TV has a negative relationship with civic engagement variables.[3]

Mobilization theories argue that exposure to news, increasing information citizens have, help mobilize citizens in the political system. Therefore:

H₂: News exposure variables increase political knowledge and foster Participation,

interest in politics and political efficacy

Since our independent media variables aren't all included in one single survey, we used two surveys. For total TV exposure and JN viewership, we used "Citizens' Distrust in Democratic Institutions" (2006).[4] For the rest of media variables the "Latin American Public Opinion Project" (2008) survey was used.[5] Although the language of causality is used in this text, at times, it is implicit that what we talk about is correlations, since it is not possible to attribute cause and effect relationships with this type of data.


2. TV and Civic Engagement: television and newscast exposure

The first results, obtained with the 2006 "Citizens Distrust in Democratic Institutions" survey show how Brazilians' main media source affects civic engagement. Since dependent variables are ordinal, we opted for performing a categorical regression procedure.[6] In all models we included socioeconomic variables as control variables. While total TV exposure was expected to have negative associations with civic engagement, Brazil's main evening news, *Jornal Nacional* (hereafter referred to as JN), was expected to display associations in the opposite direction, i.e., having a mobilizing effect.

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[3] In the 2006 survey, it is only possible to test the variable representing the total number of hours that individuals are exposed to television. However, except for the newscast in question, it is not possible to know what other programs are being viewed. Thus, it is only possible to test the hypothesis that the total number of hours spent in front of the TV would somehow be damaging to social interactions of individuals, which, by extension, could also adversely affect civic engagement.

[4] Coordinated by professors Dr. José Álvaro Moisés (USP) and Dr. Rachel Meneguello (UNICAMP).

[5] Statistical treatment and interpretation of the data, however, are my own. Both surveys used national probability sample design of voting-age adults. "Citizens' Distrust Survey (2006)": 2004 interviews. Lapop survey (2008): 1,497 interviews. The sample was stratified by regions (north, northeastern, mid-west, southeastern and south) and by urban and rural areas. www.lapopsurveys.org.

[6] (*Optimal Scalling* in SPSS). Categorical Regression quantifies categorical data ascribing numerical values to categories. This results in a linear optimal linear equation for the transformed variables. All variables in the study were recoded for a positive coefficient (Beta) to always represent greater engagement. Therefore, for dependent variables such as "I feel I understand well the most important political issues of the country", a positive Beta would represent greater **agreement** with the phrase. For phrases like "people like me have no way of influencing what the government does", a positive coefficient represents greater **disagreement**. Therefore, all positive coefficients of the study refer to a positive impact for the dimension in question. See Methodological Appendix for formulation of variables.

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The data displayed in table 2 point to a general positive role of broadcast media for all dimensions that represent attitudes of citizens toward themselves as political actors. Notwithstanding, contrary to hypothesis proposed and to previous results with dimensions of political support (Mesquita, 2012a), both general TV watching and JN newscast viewership proved to be positively associated to this aspect of political culture. Regarding TV viewership, all tested variables proved significant for all the three dimensions analyzed, as table 2 show.

In the case of newscast exposure, it was expected that Brazil's main daily news fostered civic engagement. Those who watch JN are also exposed to several other political messages on television. For instance, it seems reasonable to suppose that there is a difference between individuals who watch JN three times a week - while watching only one hour of TV a day - and another person who watches the same amount of JN, but at the same time has a four hour daily consumption of television. Thus, we used a JN viewership rate, which corresponds to the proportion of consumption of the newscast in relation to the total hours devoted to television, created by a division between JN viewership by TV viewership.

The idea here is not only a possible "dilution" of information compared to one that is more "pure." It is expected that a viewer who practically restricts his TV consumption to the newscast is more attentive to its content, since he turns his TV set on with the express purpose of knowing the news of the day. However, a distinct pattern of viewership, in which the individual leaves his TV on from the period that he arrives from work until he goes to sleep - watching JN "between the soap operas" - may indicate a less attentive pattern. This variable created proved to be a more consistent one compared to just JN viewership in a previous study (Mesquita, 2010). When we speak of JN audience from now on, we are referring to this rate, i.e., always taking into account television exposure.

The same way as general TV watching, Globo Network's newscast was positively associated with all political interest variables. In relation to political efficacy, *JN* favors the perception that citizens can influence government actions. As for the dimension of political participation, it seems that the newscast in question foments non-representative forms of participation. The only two non-significant variables are somewhat related to the representative system ("working for a candidate or political party" and "making a request to a public official"). All other variables listed in table 2 proved to be significantly associated with newscast exposure.

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Table 2: ᴛᴠ, Newscast and Civic Engagement

| Standardized Regression Coefficients (beta) controlled by socioeconomic variables (gender, education, age, income) | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Political Participation** | | | | | |
| | Works for a candidate or political party | Works for an issue that affects you community | Makes a request to a public official | City or neighborhood association | Attends social movement or cause meetings | Local participative budgeting councils |
| TV | 0,077*** | 0,117*** | 0,056*** | 0,078*** | 0,060*** | 0,063*** |
| TXJN | ns | 0,064** | ns | 0,065** | 0,072*** | 0,059** |
| $R^2$ | 0,018 | 0,039 | 0,016 | 0,02 | 0,022 | 0,013 |
| **Political Efficacy** | | | | | |
| | Disagrees politics as something complicated | | | Perception of being able to influence the government | | |
| TV | 0,058*** | | | 0,078*** | | |
| TXJN | ns | | | 0,047* | | |
| $R^2$ | 0,045 | | | 0,033 | | |
| **Political Interest** | | | | | |
| | Talks about politics with friends | Tries to convince someone about what you think about politics | | People ask about your opinion about politics | Political interest | |
| TV | 0,150*** | 0,153*** | | 0,078*** | 0,145*** | |
| TXJN | 0,122*** | 0,080*** | | 0,063** | 0,116*** | |
| $R^2$ | 0,119 | 0,078 | | 0,064 | 0,081 | |

Significance: *$p < 0,10$, **$p < 0,05$, ***$<0,01$. Source: "Citizens' Distrust in Democratic Institutions" (2006).

3. Secondary news sources and political support: newspapers, radio and the Internet.

The next set of results concerns the role that news consumption on the radio, newspapers and the Internet represent for the same dimensions presented in the former analyses. The database used was the 2008 Lapop survey. As shown on table 3, these media also proved to be positively associated to citizens' orientations regarding their own political competencies. In general, all three dimensions of civic engagement were positively associated with newspaper readership. All tested variables regarding political efficacy and interest in politics were significant. With the exception of "Professional, merchant rural organization associations"; "Unions" and "NGO's", the press also favors all other forms of participation (see table 4).

The effect of news consumption on the radio is also positive. Like the press, listening to news on the radio favors all political efficacy and political interest variables. Only participating in "environmental movements" and "NGO's" are not forms of political participation significantly associated with this media variable. All other variables listed on table 3 were positively associated with consumption of news on the radio.

Results for the Internet were not very different from those of the other media. The only forms of political participation that did not prove to be significantly associated with consumption of news on the web, were those of a local character (PTA meetings and working for community or neighborhood issues or associations). Participation in "professional, merchant rural organization associations", on the other hand, was the only media variable negatively associated with any of the chosen civic engagement indicators. Being Internet a medium used by a more urban, well-educated public, this negative correlation is somewhat expected. All other forms of political participation, as well as tested variables of both political efficacy and political interest, are significant and positively associated with news consumption on the web.

Table 3: Newspaper, Radio, Internet and Civic Engagement

| Standardized Regression Coefficients (beta) controlled by socioeconomic variables (gender, education, age, income) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Political interest** | | | | |
| | Political interest | | Talks about politics with friends | |
| Newspapers | 0,090*** | | 0,100*** | |
| Radio | 0,097*** | | 0,061*** | |
| Internet | 0,099*** | | 0,121*** | |
| R$^2$ | 0,107 | | 0,114 | |
| **Political Efficacy** | | | | |
| | Those who govern the country are worried about what people like me think | | I feel that I understand well the most important issues of the country | |
| Newspapers | 0,087*** | | 0,113*** | |
| Radio | 0,062*** | | 0,053** | |
| Internet | 0,105*** | | 0,077** | |
| R$^2$ | 0,031 | | 0,121 | |

| **Political Participation** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Contributes an issue of community or neighborhood | Religious organization | PTA meetings | Neighborhood associations | Professional, merchant, rural associations |
| Newspapers | 0,074*** | 0,139*** | 0,075*** | 0,082*** | ns |
| Radio | 0,081*** | 0,049** | 0,074*** | 0,120*** | 0,098*** |
| Internet | ns | 0,104*** | ns | ns | -0,053** |
| R$^2$ | 0,038 | 0,064 | 0,059 | 0,04 | 0,03 |
| | Union | Political party or movement | Environmental organization | | Non-governmental organization |
| Newspapers | ns | 0,076*** | 0,066*** | | ns |
| Radio | 0,063*** | 0,068** | ns | | ns |
| Internet | 0,103*** | 0,061** | 0,075*** | | 0,106*** |
| R$^2$ | 0,037 | 0,027 | 0,035 | | 0,052 |

Significance: *$p < 0,10$, **$p < 0,05$, ***$<0,01$. Source: Lapop (2008).

Although positive associations were found between all media exposure variables and civic engagement, something can be said about causality. With this type of data, it is not

possible to say in which direction flows these correlations. While it could be assumed that information in media helps mobilize citizens, it could also be argued that previously engaged individuals turn more to media for information they are already interested in. When interpreting positive associations for news media and political support variables, Norris (2000) set forward the virtuous circle hypothesis, i.e., not preferring one directionality or another, but rather understanding an iterative and interactive process. In this sense, previously engaged citizens would turn to political news because of previous predispositions. At the same time, the consumption of news would strengthen these previously acquired orientations.

However, another interpretation of causality can be made regarding different media. Brazil is a highly TV centered society. Broadcast media reaches almost totality of the country's territory and is Brazilians' preferred source of information. Furthermore, TV is a medium that accounts for a more passive audience consumption. This means that its content reaches many people not previously interested in politics. Therefore, there is a greater probability of the causal relationship flowing from TV and newscasts to political mobilization. Although a similar argument could be said of the radio, the press could have a different effect. Newspapers reach a more elitist public in Brazil. The low circulation of newspapers in Brazil also means a larger audience segmentation, which has a higher accumulation of information obtained from other means. So, in the case of newspapers, the virtuous circle proposition of Norris seems to apply.

Lastly, the case of the Internet should be seen more cautiously. As the case of newspapers, digital media reach a more segmented public. In case of the latter, more elitist, young, well-educated and urban individuals. But compared to newspapers, the Internet is a much more selective media, which could indicate that causality flows in the opposite direction as proposed for broadcast media, i.e., more engaged citizenry turning more to political information on the web due to prior attitudes and predispositions.


Brief Final Considerations

The media are a relevant factor to be considered for the understanding of public affairs. The information they contain might help to engage citizens in democracy, or estrange them from democratic principles. To understand the role of the media for democracy, we need to consider different impacts of various sources that citizens are exposed to. The results presented

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here suggest a positive role of media for civic engagement. All media variables tested proved to be positively associated with the three civic engagement dimensions analyzed: political participation, political efficacy and political interest.

Therefore, our hypothesis that news media would be positively associated with civic engagement was sustained. On the other hand, TV did not prove to be a negative factor as expected, but also favored, in its turn, attitudes of citizens towards their role as political actors. This result is somewhat consistent with the positive associations found between exposure to TV and adherence to the political community – measured by pride in nationality – found elsewhere for the Brazilian case (Mesquita, 2012a). This could be related to the great dissemination of TV countrywide, with diffusion of common values. Taking the example of the genre of soap operas, all social classes watch this type of programming, talking about their themes and plots, which makes television act as a social bond. Representing a mirror of Brazilian society, the soaps also present themselves as a structuring factor of Brazilian identity (Wolton, 1996). Thus, it seems that in the case of civic engagement, television might be playing a similar role, providing information that helps engage Brazilians politically.

Another consideration should be made regarding directionality of associations. As said before, from this type of data, it is not possible to say whether media impact political attitudes, or if citizens with certain political opinions turn to the type of media that display the worldview they already have. In this sense, it seems that different media in question might offer diverse suggestions for this relationship.

Television viewership and newscasts have a more diversified audience. Many people watch information programs because they have their TV sets on between their favorite entertainment shows. In this case, it could be suggested of an actual positive role of broadcast media, which have the potential to reach an audience previously not interested in public affairs. Conversely, secondary sources of news analyzed here – newspapers and the Internet – could suggest a different causal relationship. Since they are more selective in terms of consumers, it does seem plausible that they are read, listened to or watched by a public that has the same points of view these media convey. In the case of newspapers, although people read them because they reflect certain points of view they already have, it could be the case that they reinforce these previous attitudes. Internet, on the other hand, being an even more selective media and reaching an even more segmented public, might be a case of a directionality of

previous attitudes favoring this media exposure. The following table of causality interpretation is proposed:

Table 3: Causality interpretation

| | Characteristic of Media | Characteristic of Public | Proposed causality direction |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Broadcast media** | Low selectivity | Reaches general public | From media to political attitudes |
| **Newspapers** | Selective | Elitist, well-educated | Two-way flow |
| **Internet** | Highly selective | Elitist, well educated, young and urban | From previous attitudes to media use |

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## Methodological Appendix

**Lapop (2008) Survey:**

*Independent variables:*

Newspaper readership
"How often do you read newspapers (everyday, once or twice a week, rarely, never)."

News on the radio
"How often do you listen to news on the radio (everyday, once or twice a week, rarely, never)."

News on the Internet
"How often do you read or listen to news on the Internet (everyday, once or twice a week, rarely, never)."

*Dependent variables:*

Political Participation:
"In the last 12 months, did you contribute (once a week, once or twice a month, once or twice a year, never) to:
'solution of a problem of community or neighborhood'; 'Religious organization', 'PTA meetings', 'Neighborhood associations', 'Professional, merchant rural organization associations', 'Unions', 'Political party or movement', 'Environmental organization', 'Non-governmental organization'?"

Political efficacy
"I feel that I understand well the most important political issues of the country (Disagree a lot, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, agree a lot)".
"Those who govern the country are worried about what people like me think" (Disagree a lot, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, agree a lot)".

Political interest
"How much interest do you have in politics? (A lot of interest, some interest, a little interest, no interest at all)?"
"With what frequency to you talk about politics with friends?" (Daily, a few times a week, a few times a month, rarely, never)

**"Citizens' Distrust in Democratic Institutions" (2006) Survey:**

*Independent variables:*

TV viewership
"How many hours a day do you spend watching TV (up to 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 hours, more than 5 hours? Or you do not usually watch TV?)"

Jornal Nacional viewership
"How often do you watch TV Globo's Jornal Nacional during the week? (1, 2, 3, 4, 5 times, every day or you never watch JN?) "

*Dependent variables:*

Political Participation:
"Thinking about the past 12 months, have you ('Worked for a candidate or political party'; 'Worked for an issue that affects you community'; made a request to a public official; 'participated in a city or neighborhood association'; "attended social movement or cause meetings'; 'participated in local participative budgeting councils)?

Political Efficacy:
"Sometimes politics and the government seem so complicated that a person like you cannot really understand what is going on " (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree)
"People like you have no way of influencing what the government does" (strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, strongly agree)

Political Interest:
"We would like to know the frequency of the following activities" (Very frequently, frequently, almost never, never): 'Talks about politics with friends'; 'Tries to convince someone about what you think about politics'; 'People ask about your opinion about politics'
"And what about your interest in politics, would you say you are (Very interested, interested, a little interested, not interested at all)"