THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN STATE-SOCIETY RELATIONS: THE CASE OF BAHIA

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In this paper, I seek to assess the scope of ongoing democratization processes at the subnational level beyond electoral and institutional reform. I do so by drawing from Dahl's procedural definition of democracy (1971) and analyzing two critical dimensions: pluralism and access to diverse and independent sources of information. I study how developments in these dimensions constitute an ongoing struggle for social domination, with substantial consequences for subnational democratization.

According to Dahl, pluralism is a central value of democracy. More than the simple expression of social diversity, the recognition of pluralism empowers all citizens to participate effectively in politics. Pluralism is directly linked with diversity of opinion and other dimensions of democracy, since freedom of expression gives it a concrete, demonstrable existence. Beyond simple freedom of expression, increasingly (albeit not unproblematically) guaranteed and enforced in most Latin American polities, access to alternative sources of information is a critical dimension of a consolidated democracy, allowing individuals and groups to identify their interests, evaluate their environment and weight the chances of effectively pressing their issues (Dahl 1971, Wolton 1998).

Paradoxically, media ownership is also a significant source of power that can have major effects on the struggle for domination, potentially constraing both pluralism and the diversity of information channels (Mills 2000 [1956], Savoie 2010). These features point out to the double nature of the media as both a public arena and a political actor, a dimension that needs to be further explored in assessing the political role of the media.

According to Max Weber (1972 [1922]), social domination is a hierarchy system that determines the origins and the nature of the governing class in a given polity as well as the general features of how authority is exercised. Within this system —and its margins— the various actors involved compete for precedence. Such an approach should allow us to identify and appraise the evolution of deeply-seated political practices and dynamics, as well as their meaning for subnational domination structures (Eisenstadt 1971, Bach 2011).

The State-in-society perspective (Migdal 1994, 2001) posits that while States are critical elements of the domination system, their performance cannot be understood without reference to

the social environment in which they evolve. States are not homogeneous, rational entities, capable of imposing deep transformative projects on their polities, but rather that they are fragmented, deeply embedded in their societies and need to forge complex alliances and engage in significant compromises in order to move their political projects forward. By focusing on the media, a large and potentially fragmented field, I assess the evolution of a largely private channel of State-society interaction.

In this paper, I evaluate how different media participate in the struggle for subnational domination. To do so, I assess ownership and social access to the media, the media's capacity to act as an independent political channel (that is, its autonomy from the State and other political actors) as well as how potential conflicts between public interest and private profit are solved. I will thus be able to assess the evolution of social and political pluralism as well as the role of subnational media in demanding and obtaining governmental accountability (Gingras 2009, Savoie 2010).

Federalism —with its multi-level governance— provides yet another cleavage line for State-society interaction (Wheare 1964). Subnational States —just as any other State— do not necessarily possess single-mindedness and clarity of purpose. While their reduced territorial and demographic dimensions enhance State unity and coherence, subnational political and administrative subdivisions closely mirror federal and unitary States. Furthermore, the permanent presence of federal actors in subnational politics increases the heterogeneity of State action at the subnational level (Durazo Herrmann 2010).

Media dynamics follow this territorial fragmentation, thus creating multilevel systems. As their counterparts, subnational media retain and develop strong links with national actors (Chakravarty and Roy 2013, Araujo Pinto 2014). They thus create complex interaction patterns that must be better investigated in order to further our understanding of State-society relations.

The empirical basis of my analysis is the state of Bahia in North-Eastern Brazil. Until 2006, Bahia was a classic example of a subnational authoritarian enclave, where the largest media group was owned by the incumbent elite (Dantas Neto 2003). That year, however, a, opposition coalition consisting of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT), several other centrist and left-wing parties and numerous social organizations, managed to defeat the authoritarian elite and elect a new governor, Jaques Wagner, who made political communication a central element of the democratization process (Durazo Herrmann 2014).

The media and the struggle for domination

Like the Roman god Janus, States have a double nature that plays into their complex relationship with society. On the one hand, States, embodied by their leadership, wield the monopoly of legitimate violence and may thus engage in social extraction and transformation processes. If their leadership is cogent and coherent and sufficient resources are available, States may be able to profoundly influence their societies (Weber 1971 [1922], Evans 1995). On the other, States are the broadest public sphere at a society's disposal, and the one that potentially commands the most important resources. As such, the State is an arena in which social struggles for domination play out (Skocpol 1979).

Beyond their capacity to pursue their own agenda —be it commercial or political—, the media parallels the Janus nature of the State insofar it is also a public arena, a channel of expression for numerous and diverse social and political actors and a social actor on its own right (Habermas 1978, Gingras 2009). Just as with the State, social actors —whether economic elites, labour unions or territorial organizations— may attempt use, bypass or even confront the media to further their own power agendas.

In a critical difference, while all aspects of the State belong to the public sphere, the media is divided between public, private and community dimensions. The media does not therefore have an inherent advantage over the State or other social actors in the struggle for social domination.

Just as the State, the media —and other social actors— are beset by fragmentation and incoherence. Different outlets speak with different voices and pursue different, potentially contradictory goals. Social actors —whether economic elites, labour unions or territorial organizations— may use, bypass or even confront the media to further their own power agendas. The media are thus simultaneously powerful, but equivocal channels in State-society relations

In order to analyze the role of the media in the subnational struggle for domination, I study their interaction with the State and with other social actors. Beyond their size, weight and number, I assess the legitimacy the media elicit and their role in the political decision-making processes and in other local forms of social control. I seek to identify how this interaction produces political conflicts and how they are solved (Migdal 2001).

In this paper, I present three case studies, each embodying a dimension of the media in State-society relations: *Rede Bahia* represents the big private media conglomerate; the *Jornal da Chapada* represents a small, regional paper; and the *Boletim do Grupo Gay da Bahia* represents alternative, community-based media. After a brief overview of Bahia and its media system, I address each of these case studies. Taken together, they enable us to assess the role of the media in the struggle for domination in Bahia, which I discuss in the conclusion.

Studying the role of the media in State-society relations in Bahia

Bahia is an ideal arena to study the role of the media in State-society relations. With 14 million inhabitants, 565,000km^2 and 417 municipalities, it is one of Brazil's most heterogeneous states, home both to Brazil's third largest metropolitan area (Salvador, with over 3 million inhabitants) and to one of the highest ratios of rural-to-urban population (38%). Bahia also has Brazil's second highest proportion (76%) of population of African descent. In economic terms, Bahia has Brazil's eighth largest state GDP, but one of the most unequal patterns of wealth distribution (*Censo* 2010).

The structural heterogeneity that, at one point, allowed for the emergence and consolidation of a subnational authoritarian enclave in Bahia survived regime change and makes for multiple, potentially contradictory points of social engagement with the State, including both conflict and cooperation. In terms of the media, large media conglomerates, small commercial media and interest-based media all coexist in Bahia. Political dynamics are necessarily complex and reinforce, rather than reduce social heterogeneity (Durazo Herrmann 2014).

An analysis of the role of the media in State-society relations should thus reveal the deep currents at work in the struggle for subnational social domination in the context of democratization. Translating the State-in-society perspective into media terms, I test Schudson's hypothesis (2002), that forms of ownership are less important than regime type in determining the type of interaction between media and political actors.

I also adapt Hallin and Mancini's concept of media system (2004) to subnational analysis. If media systems are the set of actors and relations providing communication and information services to a given polity, through political symmetry, the relations they establish amongst themselves and with other social and political actors lead to the emergence of distinct, albeit not entirely independent subnational media systems (cf. Araujo Pinto 2014).

In Brazil, the federal framework places important constraints on subnational media systems. Communication is federal jurisdiction (arts. 8 and 220-222 of the Brazilian Constitution) and the telecommunications code currently in force was initially adopted in 1962 and thoroughly reformed in 1967 under the military regime. Thereafter, legislative change has been haphazard and tended to favour incumbent actors over innovation (Amaral and Guimarães 1994, Whitten-Woodring and James 2012, de Lima 2015).

As research criteria, I use the indicators of democratic communication proposed by *Intervozes*, a Brazilian NGO, in conjunction with UNESCO. While media regulation and control are not subnational jurisdiction in Brazil and infrastructure development is beyond this paper's purview, I assess pluralism and transparency in media ownership, the role of the media as both a platform for democratic debate and as a training channel in political communication for social actors (Intervozes 2010).

The Bahia media system

Throughout the 20th century, media concentration has been important in Bahia, with a few newspapers from Salvador (such as *A Tarde* and *Correio da Bahia*, renamed *Correio* in 2008) dominating the landscape. However, until the 1970s, media owners and political elites, albeit closely related in socioeconomic terms, remained distinct and relatively autonomous from one another. This changed in the 1970s and 1980s with the rise and consolidation of Antônio Carlos Magalhães (popularly known as ACM, Bahia's authoritarian political boss between 1970 and 2006) and his political group (the *carlistas*) (Dantas Neto 2006).

ACM invested heavily in the media as a way of extending his political influence, creating the *Rede Bahia* conglomerate. While limited at first, ACM's nomination at the federal Ministry of Communications —in return for his support of President José Sarney's government (1985-1990, Brazil's first civilian government after the military regime)— allowed him to control broadcasting licensing, which became explicitly political and aimed at building a substantial support base, both in Bahia and elsewhere (Magalhães *et al.* 1995, Teixeira Gomes 2001).

The media weight of *Rede Bahia* continued to grow with the acquisition of new radio and television stations, internet services and general printing concerns. After ACM's death in 2007, the group is under the direction of his eldest son, ACM Jr. Bahia is now home to one of Brazil's largest regional media conglomerates: *Rede Bahia* controls *Correio* —the state's largest

newspaper—, numerous radio and TV stations throughout the state and, most significantly, has exclusive repetitor rights for *Rede Globo* —Brazil's largest broadcasting empire (Whitten-Woodring and James 2012, *Rede Bahia* 2014, de Lima 2015).

The remaining mass media are in the hands of out-of-state media groups, including the *Sistema Brasileiro de Televisão* (SBT), and *Rede Record*, associated with the Brazilian Evangelical movement and owner of Bahia's oldest TV station, TV Itapoan —now known as TV Record (Moreira and Helal 2009, *Rede Record* 2015). In the print media, *A Tarde*, now associated with *Folha de São Paulo* (Brazil's largest daily), competes with *Correio*.

Given Brazil's concentration of political and economic power in a few hands and the politicized nature of licensing, *coronelismo eletrônico* (broadcasting bossism) emerged, in which subnational media conglomerates used monopolistic business practices to obtain and maintain political power at the subnational level. The subnational media owners thus act as political intermediaries between the federation and their state, thereby wielding substantial political influence (dos Santos 2008, de Lima 2015).

Besides the large, commercial media, a myriad small for-profit, community and alternative media exist. In the absence of national newspaper, many Brazilian cities have their own local papers and many —but not all— of them have remained autonomous in local hands. However, their circulation and social penetration are small. This is also true for broadcasting and internet-based media. A distinct feature of the Bahian media system is the almost total absence of publicly owned media (Zanchetta 2004, Araujo Pinto 2014).

Rede Bahia

Throughout his political career, ACM took advantage of his subnational and federal positions to construct a powerful private subnational media conglomerate under his private ownership (*Rede Bahia*). ACM never hid the political logic behind his actions, going so far as to affirm that controlling the message of the media was one of his top political concerns. ACM had no qualms about using the subnational government's financial discretion to strangle opposition media through selective advertising purchases —their main source of income (Magalhães *et al.*, 1995, dos Santos 2008).

Rede Bahia and its related media constantly underscored the ACM's successes and presented all his actions in a positive light. On the other hand, oppositionists were either ignored

or fiercely attacked. When the opposition managed to win an important municipality, a common tactic was the *cerco midiático* (the media siege), in which the state government withdrew or retained most budgetary funds and initiated aggressive audit processes against the municipality while *Rede Bahia* relentlessly decried its incompetence and corruption through substantive adversarial coverage. As a result of this persecution, the opposition usually lost the municipality to ACM's supporters (known as *carlistas*) in the following election (Jonas and Almeida 2004, da Mata 2012).

After ACM's death, *Rede Bahia* continued to openly support the *Democratas*[1] (DEM) and other *carlistas*, most notably ACM's grandson's —ACM Neto— successful bid for mayor of Salvador in 2012 (Vasconcelos 2012a, cf. *Correio* 2013). *Rede Bahia* also supports the Instituto ACM, created in 2010 to pursue ACM's social and cultural values on the basis of a social partnership foundation (Vaz 2011, Instituto ACM 2014, Rede Bahia 2014).

Elected in 2006, Wagner immediately sought to establish a new relationship with *Rede Bahia*, severing the group's excessive closeness to the subnational government, while avoiding direct confrontation and a repetition of the *cerco midiático*. As a result, a *modus vivendi* emerged, in which the subnational government continued to give substantial advertising contracts to *Rede Bahia* in exchange for its giving the governor a more positive treatment. Nevertheless, *Rede Bahia* always distinguished between the governor's person and his party, the PT, which continues to be the focus of substantial adversarial coverage (Cabral 2008, Vasconcelos 2012a).

Since 2007, *Rede Bahia* is more closely concentrated in its business interests and its priorities are visibility and circulation, rather than public debate. Under the cover of modernization, begun shortly after Wagner's arrival to power, it has adopted the media-as-entertainment model proposed by *Rede Globo*, offering little in-depth discussion or follow-up of public issues. *Correio*'s move to a low-cost, tabloid format reflects an attempt to increase circulation and advertising sales, but moves away from the model of professional, watch-dog journalism (Moreira and Hellal 2009, cf. Pereira and Maia 2011).

Rede Bahia's public interventions are marked by a vertical approach, in which it is the only emitter (of an ongoing *carlista* discourse) and dissident opinions are silenced. In any case,

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[1] The *Democratas* —originally called *Partido da Frente Liberal*— are a political party created in 1984 as an alliance of conservative North-Eastern governors led by ACM that went on to become a critical coalition partner of Presidents José Sarney (1985-1990), Fernando Collor de Melo (1990-1993) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002).

the defence of the group's extensive business interests is a top priority (UEFS 2014, cf. Waisbord 2013). As *Rede Bahia*'s openly political coverage decreased as a result of "modernization", its tendency to ignore and occult its political opponents is offered as proof of its claim to political neutrality (ACM Jr. 2011, Dias Bezerra 2008, cf. Hughes and Lawson 2005).

During the 2014 gubernatorial elections, *Rede Bahia* suffered a significant setback. Not only did it support the losing candidate (Paulo Souto of the DEM), but its public opinion polls consistently predicted his victory (*Correio* 2014a, *Correio* 2014b). The control *Rede Bahia* wields over subnational information is so strong that even national media close to the PT accepted its figures (see *Carta Capital* 2014). In the end, the PT candidate, Rui Costa, won the governorship in the first round with 54.5% of the vote, thereby seriously undermining *Rede Bahia*'s credibility.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that *Rede Bahia* remains a prominent subnational political actor that wields substantial authority as well as an open contender in Bahia's struggles for domination. The media conglomerate uses its popularity as sole repetitor of *Rede Globo*'s soap operas and shows together with constant references to free enterprise, freedom of expression and other liberal democratic values to legitimate both its dominance of the subnational media system and its presence in the political arena (ACM Jr. 2011, *Rede Bahia* 2014).

The *Jornal da Chapada*

An example of small, for-profit media outside the state capital, the *Jornal da Chapada* began publishing in 1997 as a family-owned and operated monthly in the Chapada Diamantina region in central Bahia. In order to avoid becoming economically dependent on a single source of income or politically indebted to a single municipality (or mayor), the *Jornal da Chapada* sought to become a regional, rather than a strictly local newspaper.

The *Jornal da Chapada* is conscious that it cannot compete with *Rede Bahia* or the other conglomerates; it thus seeks to complement them, by providing local and regional content otherwise unavailable. As other commercial media, the *Jornal da Chapada* adheres to the values of investigative journalism and political neutrality (Schultz 1998). According to its editorial coordinator, political neutrality is a condition of survival, as the *Jornal da Chapada* must obtain advertising revenue from municipalities with different political colours. Nevertheless, the *Jornal*

da Chapada has faced over 20 libel and defamation lawsuits and even a judicial seizure order over corruption coverage (Rodrigues 2012).

Taking advantage of the internet, the *Jornal da Chapada* developed different markets: its paper version (10,000 copies) is distributed almost exclusively in the Chapada Diamatina and is concentrated in local news, whereas the web version, in an effort to attract state-level and even national readers, also features state-level and national news, blogs and political commentary. Moreover, the *Jornal*'s editorial coordinator also does consulting work in political communication, including for members of Bahia's legislative assembly (*Jornal da Chapada* 2012, 2015; Fernandes 2012). The small size and limited resources of the *Jornal da Chapada* are an important obstacle for its professionalization (Pereira and Maia 2011).

After the end of *carlismo*, alternative, web-based media flourished in Bahia. Technological innovations and new social trends —some in imitation of North American developments, such as blogging (cf. Gingras 2009)— were critical in this process. The new political climate was also an important factor, as political reprisals for unwanted coverage became less immediate and less threatening (Fernandes 2012, Gomes 2012).

While the *Jornal da Chapada*'s combination of web-based and printed version appears unique, other web-based media have emulated the combination of regional base and state-level audience (see, for instance, the *Pimenta da Moqueca* blog in Ilhéus, in Southern Bahia). These blogs offer insider information, critical analysis and the occasional scoop, thereby providing a measure of transparency and accountability to the Bahian political system (Gomes 2012, *Por escrito* 2014). These innovations, together with the claim to represent heretofore marginalized regional audiences at the subnational level, have boosted the legitimacy these media command. However, they have very little direct influence in public affairs in Bahia, especially beyond the municipal level, and remain very small players in the struggle for subnational domination.

Moreover, many of the new blogs tend to simply lift materials from other sources (*i.e.*, the *Jornal da Chapada*), without editing them, thereby producing numerous entries, but relatively little new content (cf. *Jornal Grande Bahia* 2012, *Blog do Louro Magalhães* 2012, *Portal Renato Ribeiro* 2012). Some print media also reproduce content from the blogs (see *Tribuna da Bahia* 2012). These items are most often descriptive, with little or no analysis attached. Furthermore, internet penetration in Bahia severely constrains their potential, as only 40% of the state's population —11% in rural areas— has access (IBGE 2013). The blogs' contribution to public

debate and social pluralism is therefore rather limited and their increased visibility does not increase their political clout in any way.

The *Boletim do Grupo Gay da Bahia*

The *Boletim do Grupo Gay da Bahia* was one of Bahia's longest lasting community-based media, produced by the state's oldest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) organisation. Founded in 1980, it appeared continuously as a weekly for more than 25 years. It became not only a showcase for specifically gay issues, but in its systematic denunciation of discrimination, police violence and other abuses, it was an important mouthpiece against ACM.

Because circulation was never abundant and distribution was restricted mostly to Salvador's gay circles, the *Boletim*'s political clout was minimal. It nevertheless faced significant government repression, ranging from legal harassment to outright police raids in its offices. The *Boletim* survived mostly because of its staunchly committed leadership and its outstanding, albeit small legal team (Mott 2011).

Wagner's arrival to power in January 2007 meant a radical change in subnational policy *vis-à-vis* community-based media. The explicit objective was to improve State-society relations in Bahia by recognizing and empowering pluralism in the state (Talento 2011, Wagner 2011, Cabral 2013). Consequently, the new governor placed openness and transparency among his top priorities and established grant programmes to fund small and alternative media. Moreover, small media access to government advertising was substantially broadened (Sampaio 2011, Vasconcelos 2012b).

The subsidies policy was successful in stimulating the emergence of new, small and alternative media. Nevertheless, it has also been accused of creating new forms of clientelism and of fragmenting social movements (Durazo Herrmann 2012). For instance, a new LGBT group — the *Foro baiano LGBT*— began competing with the more established *Grupo Gay da Bahia* (GGB) and its *Boletim*. The new group was vocal on social issues, but refrained from open political criticism for fear of alienating its main source of funding (Francisco 2011, Marsiaj 2012, cf. *Foro baiano LGBT* 2014).

As a result of financial pressures, the *Boletim do GGB* is no longer published. It has been replaced by the GGB's website, where the traditional denunciations of segregation and violence continue to appear alongside other information items, such as tourism, sex health, commercial

advertisements, etc. It has also largely abandoned attempts at forming a broad social reform movement (Mott 2011, *GGB* 2014).

The claim to represent a heretofore marginalized community gave the LGBT movement a high degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the new PT government. Nevertheless, its not-for-profit nature and its dependence of public monies allowed for clientelistic practices to resurface and control the inclusion of new political actors, thus guaranteeing political support for the incumbent government in exchange for material goods. Thus, advocacy groups failed to promote media-driven reform in Bahia (cf. Waisbord 2010). While the LGBT movement's visibility increased, its clout in the ongoing struggle for social domination in Bahia remained stagnant at best.

The role of the media in the struggle for domination in Bahia

In Bahia's recent past, the media were considered an instrument of political control at the hands of ACM, the subnational boss. However, democratization and the election of an opposition governor have severed the organic link between State power and media conglomerate. The reelection of the PT in 2014 —over *Rede Bahia*'s open opposition— further consolidated this state of affairs. Costa, the new governor, is clearly less concerned by media issues than Wagner.

Over the past eight years (2006-2014), the role of the media in State-society relations in Bahia has changed visibly. The evolution of *Rede Bahia* is clearly ambiguous; while it is still a powerful actor, it remains tied to a political group —ACM's family and their political party, the DEM— and continues to support it unquestioningly. It thus remains a conservative element in Bahia's struggle for domination. Its primary source of influence is its oligopolistic domination of Bahia's media system, based on a media-as-entertainment model where private profit takes precedence over public affairs —market pressures thus have deleterious effects on the media-as-Janus, both a public arena and an independent actor.

Nonetheless, regime change has also opened political space for smaller and alternative media, such as the *Jornal da Chapada* and some of political blogs. However, becoming and remaining both a visible political actor and a viable for-profit media requires substantial effort and innovation, which not every media is ready to expend. In exchange, those that do have improved government publicity and accountability, thereby playing a small, but significant role in the struggle for subnational domination, and further contributing to the consolidation of

democratic patterns of State-society relations in Bahia. This state of affairs may change in the future, as bloggers evolve and internet further penetrates Bahian society.

Less inspiringly, but not surprisingly, the experience of Bahia shows that those media that put their private interests forward, rather than their public mandate, have a better chance of becoming significant players in the subnational struggle for domination because of a clearer sense of individual political agency. In other words, while the media are still Janus-faced, both private actors and public arenas, they face strong pressures towards assuming a unidimensional, private aspect. This might be the ultimate political meaning of *Rede Bahia*'s "modernization" process and of the end of the *Boletim do Grupo Gay da Bahia*.

The example of the *Boletim* shows yet another limit to the role of the media in State-society relations. By highlighting the persistence and reproduction of traditional patterns of social exclusion, the failure of the LGBT organizations to make their voice heard —whether through commercial or advocacy media— shows that social structures impose strong constraints on both pluralism and effective political action and that full democratization requires more than an opening of media channels.

Beyond establishing the scope and limits of the media in Bahian politics, the study of the role of the media in the struggle for subnational domination allows us to think about the evolution of State-society relations under democratization. In Bahia, we see how transparency in media ownership does exist, as there is no doubt as to who controls *Rede Bahia* or the smaller media. However, the weight of media concentration in both penetration and audience severely constrain effective pluralism.

Outside *Rede Bahia* (and this is a big caveat), the media in Bahia have effectively become a platform for democratic debate. However, limited penetration and, more importantly, the dominance of repetitive over innovative content (as seen in the local blogs) restrict its democratic scope, both in terms of pluralism and access to information.

As a result, the media have not been a significant training channel in political communication for social actors. Its contribution to subnational democratization by changing State-society relations is very mitigated, as —contrary to Schudson's hypothesis (2002)— the media conglomerate contributes to the persistence of closed political games, while the symbolic recognition of community media is in fact a renewed form of clientelism. We find change at the

margins, in the state's interior and in the small and alternative media, who take advantage of democratization to become established political actors, speaking with their own voice.

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