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Commentary

Brazilian society and politics post-World Cup 2014: *Global and local media narratives for democratisation*

A critical evaluation of the media coverage of the Brazilian 2014 World Cup by both the national and international press shed light into all the nuances of an emerging democracy in the making. The scenario depicted in the international (and even national) press in the run up to World Cup painted disaster and chaos in a country that still tends to be understood, after three decades of a gradual political democratisation and the rise to the position of the world's 7th wealthiest economy, through a postcolonial lens of football lovers, semi-naked women in beaches, corrupt millionaire elites versus shanty town dwellers. After all, 2014 was a year in which Brazil was in the global spotlight and where national tragedies, from losing 7 to 1 to Germany in the semi-finals to witnessing the death of the presidential candidate of the Socialist Party of Brazil (PSB), Eduardo Campos, in a plane crash in August, have helped to expose the many challenges that the country still faces, ranging from media reform to wider social equality and investments in public services.

The Brazilian government has presented some impressive numbers of the global public's engagement with the country and the football tournament. According to official reports, more than 60.000 stories were published about Brazil throughout the world during the World Cup. It beat records in the social networks, being one of the most talked about events throughout the world: *Twitter* saw the circulation of 35.6 million messages about the infamous Brazil versus Germany game whereas *Facebook* announced that the World Cup culminated in more than 3 billion network interactions. More than 10.000 journalists of 84 countries also travelled to Brazil to cover the tournament, with 96.5% of the international journalists recommending a trip to the country.

Notably, most of the stories published across the world started to move away from the traditional stereotypical images to present a much more complex view of a nation that lives beyond football, one of economic growth and falling unemployment, but with the need still to improve basic public services available to various segments of the population. Before the start of the World Cup in June, newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* underlined the negative atmosphere of the country, with others like the Chilean *El Mercurio* pointing to a "state of war". The Brazilian press also provided their share of "colonial" images of European foreigners dazzled by a tropical country and friendly people. For example, the German player Miroslav Klose appeared dancing alongside 20 members of the indigenous tribe *Pataxo de Coroa Vermelha*, in the

south of Bahia.¹ Moreover, in the months leading to the World Cup, the obsession with taking pictures of buses on fire and angry poor people screaming was also pointed out by journalists as a “must have picture” for foreign news agencies to distribute widely.

Evidently the negativity of much of the initial coverage reflected the mood of disillusionment and discontentment of Brazilians with the excessive governmental spending on the tournament of \$ 11.3 billion to the detriment of the same level of engagement with the investments in public transport, hospitals and schools, in a country where citizens pay high taxes and money tends to be badly spent by public administrations. However, it also reflected the urge of many for social change to be quicker than has been the case in the last governments of Lula and Dilma, which have seen an expanding middle class now composed of 108 million people, with extreme levels of poverty falling down to 6% of the population.

Thus the black and white international media narratives are slowly making room for more sophisticated analyses and sheds of grey, permitting the articulation of a wider empathy and understanding of the *roots* and causes of the structural inequalities in Brazil and the suffering experienced by Brazilians, many who are seeking emancipation from *both* oppressive global structures and discourses (i.e. it is estimated that *Fifa* made a profit of \$ 4 billion dollars from the Cup) and local powers. This included the state police authorities who cracked down on protesters in the months ahead of the June 2014 tournament, with the July 2013 demonstrations being the emblem of the national urge for faster and quicker change.

Another phenomena that is having a growing impact on Brazilian politics and democracy is the Internet. Since the turn of the century, Internet access in Brazil, similarly to other Latin American countries, has grown considerably, with the 2013 *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicilios* of the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) stating that the number of Internet users went up to 83 million people, or 49.2% of the country’s total population above the age of 10¹. Moreover, the Internet has slowly but certainly emerged as a *political blogosphere*, with social media facilitating and enabling many of the protests. This started well before the notorious July 2013 demonstrations, and were very much a consequence of the political democratisation of the country in the last three decades and the result of the expansion of communication outlets since the 1990s, including cable and satellite TV growth. The Internet in Brazil has also permitted the appearance of previously under-represented groups, many of which are slowly gaining a voice and

¹ See Couri, Norma’s “O Brasil aos olhos do mundo” (“Brazil in the eyes of the world” in *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 17/06/2014)

debating various issues in the *blogosphere*, ranging from objectivity in journalism, to public services and political reform of the party system, to corruption.

Many citizens took advantage that Brazil was occupying the centre global media stage to express anxiety for a better future with a “Fifa standard” of public services, including not just more political participation but also demands for a more democratic and better quality media. In this context, the world saw the tube strikers in Sao Paulo and various other smaller but not less significant protests. In the run up to the presidential elections in October 2014, where the re-election of Dilma Rousseff is cast in a shadow of doubt and is dependent on a second run off and dispute with rival oppositional candidate Aécio Neves, of the PSDB (Social Democratic Party) , the question that seems to be on everybody’s lips is “where will we go from here”? The 2014 presidential elections will be historical, and for the first time look likely to be an intense competition between two rival female candidates, the current president Dilma Rousseff of the Worker’s Party (PT) in her bid for re-election, and Marina Silva, former vice-presidential candidate of the PSB before the death of Campos in August.

Thus the media coverage of the World Cup shifted between narratives, the first a highly catastrophic and stereotypically charged one² to a more emphatic, complex and sophisticated discourse. This resembles the Brazilian media coverage that occurred in 2013 with the July protests, when the media switched from condemning the demonstrators on the basis of a *law and order* framework, to providing more balanced (or politically motivated) stories that served citizens better by underlining the legitimacy of their demands, pressured also by the successes of the online citizen journalism coverage of alternative media outlets such as *Mídia Ninja*. The empathic media frame saw reports where various international journalists praised the natural beauty of the country and the safeness of Rio (in spite of the high cost of living), as well as the hospitality of its people, as commented by Chinese journalist Fang Hou of *HBETV*³.

UK-based newspapers like *The Guardian*, and even the tabloid *Daily Star*, also provided more sophisticated analyses which shed light to the causes of all this anxiety. The latter pointed out the intersection of security measures (57.000 military personnel were deployed), with the corruption of *Fifa* and the lack of enthusiasm of many Brazilians, including the displacement of

² See Felício, Cesar “Brasil na Copa: ‘Welcome to the jungle’ in *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 17/06/2014.

³ See Amorim, Bruno “Jornalistas estrangeiros e a realidade carioca” (“Foreign journalists and the carioca reality” in *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 17/06/2014).

200.000 from their homes due to construction work⁴. A highlight from *The Guardian* was the story on the reasons for rooting for the protesters⁵. Thus a key legacy of the protests seems to have been their capacity to contribute to changes in perception, and more (positive) sympathetic understanding of the daily struggles of a whole population.

This is in a context where the mainstream Brazilian media is still highly politicised and concentrated. It is represented by organisations such as *Globo* and *Folha de Sao Paulo*, which have shown signs of improvement in terms of professionalism and balance in their political coverage in the last decades (i.e. Lins da Silva, 1990; Matos, 2008; Waisbord, 2000). *Globo TV* for instance had the monopoly rights over the transmission of the events. Meanwhile, *Globo TV* was at the centre of the July 2013 protests, which among others depicted protesters demand media democratisation alongside quality public services. Many argue nonetheless that the mainstream media, represented mainly by *TV Globo*, *Estado de Sao Paulo* and *Folha de Sao Paulo*, continue to be partisan, and in fact represent the opposition to the centre-left wing government of Lula and Dilma. Critics from the PT camp and other civil society representatives argued at the time that they used the protests and the World Cup for political gain, being quick to point out the delays in airports and stadiums whilst ignoring Fifa's impositions as well as their own profit with the event. Some accused the media of trying to undermine Dilma's government, and gain support for the opposition in the 2014 October elections.

In sum, the 2014 Brazilian World Cup proved to be a mixed blessing, with both positive and negative implications. On one hand it exposed the fragility of Brazil's democracy, its levels of corruption and the lack of preparation before the World Cup, affecting its image and claims to "super-power" status. The end result was a lively, vibrant and lucrative World Cup that not only brought profits for *Fifa*, but contributed to the growth of the country's *soft power* potential and position globally, followed by the contestation that, in the end, the tournament went just fine. Thus on a positive note it led to shifts in perceptions, which also underlined the increasing political and social consciousness of its people.

Nonetheless, changes in Brazilian society and politics have been slow, making it evident that it is more deep-rooted problems that are a cause for concern, including structural inequalities and wealth distribution, political corruption and police repression, concentrated mainstream media and

⁴ See Frederico Pereira da Silva Gama, Carlos "A Copa que nao teremos" em *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 17/06/2014.

⁵ See Boykoff, Jules "Why you should root for the World Cup protesters" in *The Guardian*, 10/06/2014.

the need to upgrade public services, improved public education and healthcare for all. This is not to mention that there needs to take place a better debate in the public sphere on precisely these crucial needs, as the current level of discussion in the mediated public sphere is usually heated, highly partisan and not always rational and respectful of diverse viewpoints. However the country has seen various social changes in the last decades, including the approval of the Internet draft bill, which safeguards net neutrality and liberty of expression, and is being seen as a model for other Latin American countries, as well as further discussions on media reform, including broadcasting legislation and a series of other measures (Matos, 2012) anticipated to occur throughout the year. Only time will tell what the legacy of the World Cup will be. But what is emerging is a new Brazil, a more complex and fascinating one that is not passive and is pushing forward for more change and equality.

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ⁱ "Acesso Internet alcanca 83 milhoes de brasileiros", diz IBGE" in www.computerworld.com.br , 27/09/2013.