

The Role of the Media in the Civilian Oversight of the Police in Brazil

Aziz Filho

This year Brazil celebrates two and a half decades of free press. The absence of official censorship, the investigative vocation of the press and the requirement of specific academic qualification in order to exercise journalism have stimulated professionalization of the media in the country. These are recent happenings, since Brazil lived from 1964 to 1985 in a dictatorship whose effects are still felt by the new generations, especially the lack of ideological and strategic discussions on themes of public life. Obscurantism deprived society of instruments to evaluate the extremely negative impacts of concentration of income and rural exodus, two processes that resulted from the public policies implemented by the military regime under the pretext of promoting development.

In 1940 the first demographic census in Brazil revealed that only 31% of the population lived in cities. Industrialization without land reform raised this percentage to 80% by the end of the century, when the country reached a population of 187 million. Thousands of needy communities spread all over the peripheries and urban ghettos, forgotten by investments in infrastructure and social actions. They became the scenario *par excellence* of the action of drug lords. The dispute for drugs outlets near the rich neighborhoods mobilized a spectacular amount of heavy arms by smuggling or robbing from barracks. State police and the Army, so effective in dismantling armed groups of the Left during the dictatorship, have proved unable under the constitutional regime to patrol the borders or deter the proliferation of arms. The situation soon developed into a scenario that combines war confrontations and a great deal of corruption and complicity between the police and the drug trade, thus contributing decisively and almost irreversibly to the explosion of the homicides rates in big cities.

Brazilian democracy has worked well as far as public institutions are concerned. The political crises have found solutions within the rules of the game, as in the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello in 1992. Elections are free and freedom of expression is guaranteed. Censorship is residual and practically restricted to business pressures and retrograde political practices in areas in the interior that are more refractory to the circulation of information. But the restoration of democracy has yet to produce significant advances as regards introducing most of the population to the consumer and labor markets.

One percent of Brazilians hold the same amount of wealth as the poorer 50%. It is not hard to imagine the negative effects of such a radical concentration on the culture and morale of individuals and communities. The gigantic public debt consumes the Union Budget and drains the resources of social actions and proper training for State agents. In spite of the oversight exercised by the free press on the public power, corruption resists and erodes the State apparatus in several areas. In the police, the corruption finds fertile ground fermented by precarious remuneration, lack of investments in intelligence and the high power of seduction used by the drugs and arms dealers. The public image of the police in Brazil is very bad because the police are not seen as protectors of the citizens, and their internal control systems are generally ineffective.

The prison system has not received proper attention from Brazilian society. The prison population, composed basically of poor and black individuals, is victim of abuse and the absence of instruments for social rehabilitation, which turns the penitentiaries into schools of crime and headquarters of the drug lords. At the edge of this flawed system, the judiciary power is characterized by slowness and the Brazilian criminal justice system has one of the lowest clearance rates in the world. Impunity has become the great stimulant of corruption and crime.

The gap between citizenship and State, made possible by the authoritarian nature of public power at decisive moments of the Republic, has always inhibited academic reflection on public security in Brazil. Identification of the police as a merely repressive force, an arm of the old military regime, has created prejudice among opinion-makers on the matter, inhibiting the formulation of policies and jeopardizing oversight of police practices. Only as of the 90s, with the increase of the third sector participation, did public security begin to arouse the attention of the media and the academic community. One of the big challenges in promoting peace is to bring the police back close to the citizens, especially in poor communities, which are the most affected by the violence that has altered the profile of Brazil's cities.

This gap often frustrates attempts at social control of the police. The Security Community Councils set up in some States so that neighborhood residents could interfere in actions in the struggle against violence have had their credibility shaken by phenomena ranging from lack of interest of the population to police agents having excessive control over forums of discussion, as well as shop-owners supporting the material needs of the police, abuse of power on the part of some representatives and the lack of interest of young people, who are the main victims of the most violent crimes.

The unwillingness to deal with security as a priority in Brazil affects all instances of power. Taking advantage of the media's perception of violence as being the responsibility of local state governments, the national Executive and the Legislative wash their hands, a negligible percentage of crimes investigated reaches a historically slow criminal justice system and the Public Prosecutor's Office acts timidly as the inspector of the police forces. The instances of internal control, such as the *Corregedorias*, are still discredited due to the high degree of political influence and corporative bias in the way they function.

Changing the profile of security policies in Brazil by strengthening their instruments of formulation and control requires a deep cultural change. Transparent rules must be created to collect and publicize data on violence and raise the status of the topic in the academic community, the media and in all instances of political representation. Reducing the time for processing disciplinary actions in police institutions could contribute towards diminishing impunity, which is the favorite fuel of crime. More commitment by public administrators to continuing security projects would be another considerable reinforcement in the struggle against criminality, together with more investments in studies on the complexity of the expansion of violence in Brazilian society.

THE MEDIA

The trajectory of the big Brazilian newspapers is filled with picturesque examples of promiscuity between police stations and newspaper editorial offices. In the stories of these newspapers up to the 60s, the professional who works two shifts - as a reporter and as a policeman - is a common figure. This dubiety may explain the tendency of Brazilian journalism to make specific but poorly contextualized coverage of violence and criminality. Another determining factor in understanding this profile is once again the gap and distrust between the *intelligentsia* and the police following the military *coup* of 1964, which naturally had a special impact on the media.

The distrust of the intellectuals with regard to barracks and police stations — as well as the effects of censorship on news that denounced the failures of public policies and the fragility of those in charge of the authoritarian period — atrophied reflection on various themes of public interest, especially public security. The matter only began to appear in the principal pages of the newspapers with re-democratization and direct elections for governor in 1982. This return, however, took place in a scenario of excessive politicization which became explosive in Rio de Janeiro due to the

confrontation between Governor Leonel Brizola, a nationalist politician of the Left and one of those amnestied in 1979, and the Globo Organizations — the strongest group in the Brazilian media, holder of the world's fourth largest TV network, two big newspapers and a great number of radio and television stations all over the country. It seems fundamental to us to consider this episode in order to understand the persistent regional imbalance in news on violence.

The research project entitled "Media and violence – how the newspapers portray violence and public security in Brazil", carried out by the Center of Studies on Security and Citizenship (Cesec) at Cândido Mendes University, measures this phenomenon in details in a way never attempted before. The researchers analyzed 2,514 texts in nine newspapers of the three biggest capitals in the Southwest — São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte — published between May and September 2004. The conclusion drawn was that half the space (48.2%) dedicated to covering violence in the nine newspapers focused on facts in Rio de Janeiro, the other half reporting on events occurring in the other 26 states of the country.

The treatment of criminality in Rio de Janeiro as a national spectacle compromises reflection on a problem that has an immense effect on all the big cities in the country. Regionalizing the theme also entails political adjustments, because it exempts the federal sphere from the task of seeking answers to questions that the states in isolation lack the means to face. This is the case of the precariousness of the prison system, which takes on explosive proportions in São Paulo and only receives attention from the press in critical situations such as breakouts or rebellions that cause many deaths. A similar case is the drug trade and arms smuggling on the border, the starting point of a process that ends in tyranny and a permanent state of war installed by the drug lords in the ghettos of poverty.

The regionalizing tendency also can be seen in the tiny space dedicated to public security in the principal sections of newspapers, such as the editorials on politics and the economy. Reflection on the national security policy rarely reaches the opinion columns and editorials, as shown in the research mentioned earlier. CESeC's work pointed out that the main focus of most of the texts analyzed were the security forces (40.5%), violent acts (21%) and the consequences of violent acts (16.2%). In other words, many individualized facts and few pieces of reflection, this being the result of the unwillingness of the media to face public security as a priority, despite the alarming number of victims. Contrary to what the police claim in their permanent conflict with the media, they are the main protagonists of news on

public security in Brazil. The survey leaves no doubt about the main focus of such news being the police forces.

In June 2002 the Brazilian press started a new — and negative — phase in the coverage of urban violence. That month, journalist Tim Lopes of Globo TV was killed by drug dealers in a Rio slum that he had gone to in disguise to write a report on the circulation of drugs and sexual abuses at a funk dance. Identified by the bandits, he was tortured and assassinated. His body was torn to pieces and burned. The tragedy exposed the brutality of the methods used by the parallel power that the drug trade enjoys in the territories under its control and marked the end of a culture of free circulation of journalists in these areas. It was the end of the validity period for an illusory "free pass" for the press and caused insecurity in editorial offices, which began to discuss the advisability of going to the slums to hear versions of the occurrences reported, especially concerning the action of a police force constantly accused of abuse of force and corruption. The reporters grew even more dependent on police sources, thus jeopardizing the oversight that journalism must carry out on police activities.

The fact that society makes no demands for action, plus the indifference of the academic community, do not encourage the construction of reliable data systems on violent acts. Typifying and counting crimes are the responsibility of local governments with their police forces and are often denounced as being manipulated. What contributes to this phenomenon is the excessive politicization of public security in the media, which often explores the theme for the flagrant purpose of weakening or enhancing regional governments, thereby triggering a vicious circle of superficiality and incomprehension.

Creating a reliable data system to guide the design of public security policies is an urgent necessity in Brazil. In respect to the press, our proposal is to build an efficient site for data and exchange of information as a first step towards overcoming the low degree of follow-up on criminal events. Perhaps stimulated by the ridiculous rate of crimes solved by the police and by Justice, the media has not accompanied the development of the facts that it reports with such a stir. Recently the press professionals founded the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism. On its site, ABRAJI stimulates the exchange of information and publishes contacts with information sources for investigation, mostly concerned with overseeing the Executive Power's use of public funds. Expanding this incipient initiative and re-directing the focus towards the fight against violence and police corruption would be a valuable contribution to strengthen the presence of the media in the oversight of national or regional security agents. Drawing closer to non-governmental organizations that are active in poor communities, thus forming an agile

network of information, would also contribute to a more consequent, consistent and socially responsible press coverage.

Creating mechanisms to promote peace, especially among the communities that are more affected by violence, should feature among the priorities of the Brazilian nation. In a relatively short time, Brazil has consolidated its institutional democracy, created instruments to promote human rights, universalized its educational system, raised the world flag in the struggle against hunger, controlled its currency to attract foreign investors and demonstrated that its population is averse to corruption in public areas. These have been important conquests to credit the country as one of the protagonists on the international scenario. But no nation can be great outside if it is not great inside, if it fails to ensure a minimum of quality of life for its citizens. The Brazilian State can no longer put off paying its enormous social debt and needs - urgently and consistently – to implement policies to guarantee peace and tranquility, especially in urban areas that have become home to the population expelled from the interior. The Brazilian media has a prominent role to play in building and supervising this national goal, the achievement of which would have the power not only of improving the lives of Brazilians but also serve as a reference for other nations that, just like Brazil, live with the drastic consequences of inequality and corruption.