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The prism of the public sphere: The COP15 coverage by the Brazilian media system

Abstract

Current studies of political communication offer valuable contributions to assessing and measuring mediated deliberation. But in our understanding of the news media's role in a deliberative system a number of questions remain unanswered, especially concerning problems posed by social complexity. This paper aims to contribute to closing this gap by conducting an empirical analysis on how distinct contributions to public deliberation – namely the provision of *publicity* and *intelligibility* – are articulated via outputs offered by different types of media outlets, specifically in the case of the Brazilian coverage of the 15th UN's Climate Change Conference (COP15). Our results suggest that this coverage seems to have fostered citizens to search for more information about this Conference and augmented the visibility of UN's climate negotiations. This gives support to the idea that news media system works like a prism of the public sphere, promoting accountability of complex governance processes by offering information and public scrutiny adequate for a heterogeneous citizenry.

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Keywords

media system, social complexity, deliberative system, mediated deliberation, COP15

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Introduction

In studies of political communication, news media are often regarded as a locus for what Page (1996) calls “mediated deliberation” (for an up-to-date overview, see Rinke, 2016), i.e. the sphere in which “communication professionals convey information, values, and diverse points of view to the mass public, which then deliberates vicariously through the give-and-take and to-and-fro of these various professionals” (Gastil, 2008, p. 50). Based on this paradigm, increasingly sophisticated methods and analyses have been developed to assess the “deliberativeness” of media content (cf. Wessler & Rinke, 2014; van der Wurff, Verhoeven, & Gadellaa, 2013).

This strand of literature offers valuable contributions to comprehending in a more nuanced way the different conditions under which the quality of deliberation in the media system might improve or decrease. But in our understanding of the news media’s role in the division of labor in modern societies’ “deliberative systems” (cf. Mansbridge, 1999; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012) a number of questions remain unanswered, especially when it comes to problems posed by increasing social complexity (cf. Bohman, 2007). This is because while most studies concerned with mediated deliberation have been focusing on deliberativeness of media content, its *mediation* dimension (or systemic function) has received less scholarly attention.

This seems to be problematic since mediation between different discursive arenas and perspectives is crucial for making the concept of a deliberative system — and its core principle of deliberative division of labor — empirically plausible. This becomes clear when one takes into account one of the main obstructions that increasing social complexity brings to the normative idea of public deliberation. Such an increasing complexity poses a formidable challenge to holding specialized discourses and institutions accountable to the public sphere (cf. Bohman, 2000, 2007; Christiano, 2012; Fischer, 2009) which is one of the crucial normative ideals of public deliberation.

This paper aims to contribute to closing this research gap by conducting an empirical case study in which we operationalize a systemic view of mediated deliberation. Our emphasis is on the mass media’s functional dimension of *mediation* in the deliberative division of labor within a deliberative system. We investigate how distinct contributions to the deliberative systems – namely the provision of *publicity* and *intelligibility* – are articulated via outputs from different media types. In doing so, this study aims to shed light on how the media system contributes to an articulation and exchange of ideas between civil society and administrative powers in contexts of highly complex governance processes.

In order to explore this articulation, we propose the idea of *mediation* as an *epistemic operator* (i.e., a truth-tracker between different discursive arenas) of the deliberative system. By using this operator in terms of its communicative power, it becomes possible to interpret modern democracies and their decision-making processes in a way that identifies a consistent and systematic bridging of the increasing gap between the administrative power and the public sphere.

The main theoretical purpose of this work is to explore how journalistic practices might build this kind of bridge, specifically in situations characterized by high regulatory complexity, such as those triggered by international or transnational governance regimes. These regimes are paradigmatic in this regard since political debate and negotiations in these situations adopt a language far removed from the language of everyday life. Thus, they are disconnected from the lifeworlds of most citizens. In this context, we argue that the media system is able – to some extent – to facilitate the communicative exchange between international governance regimes and a national citizenry. This bridge consists of a preliminary mediation that journalistic practices produce of the social complexity involved in these decision-making processes.

In order to assess this *preliminary mediation* and, therefore, a relevant dimension of the mass media's role in the deliberative system, we conducted a case study about the Brazilian coverage of the 15th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15), which took place in December 2009 in Copenhagen, Denmark. For this, all fact-based articles (n=86) about the COP15 published or broadcast in two central media outlets of the Brazilian media system were selected. One is the nightly TV newscast *Jornal Nacional* (JN) and the other the quality daily newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (FSP).

We selected these two central instances of the Brazilian media system in order to test the reasoning that each one of these media outlets would fulfill normative criteria (or principles) of a deliberative system to varying degrees. Despite both being central elements of the Brazilian media system, they are also rather distinct in terms of modality, presentation style, and target audience, to name but a few. We selected these different media types because of their distinct features, assuming they would fulfill different deliberative functions. So it's not a case of trying to find differences in similar cases, but to uncover how different modalities, presentation styles, target audiences, etc. lead to distinct contributions within a deliberative system. With the purpose of controlling the difference regarding the relevance of opinion-oriented articles (which is much more pronounced in quality newspapers), we analyzed only fact-based articles and developed a multimodal content analysis suitable both for newspaper articles and for TV newscasts.

In the following chapter, we explicate the idea of *mediation* as an epistemic operator of the deliberative system. We then present our case study and explain the reasons why the COP15 and the selected media outlets are adequate for assessing the mass media's role in the deliberative system in view of the problem posed by increasing social and regulatory complexity. The third section explains the operationalization of the normative principles of *publicity* and *intelligibility* for a content analysis of the selected news material. After presenting and discussing our research results, we indicate how conceiving the media system both as a prism of the public sphere and as a gateway to the informative system improves our understanding of the mass media's role in the deliberative system. We also reflect about the systemic adequacy of our empirical observation by highlighting media systems' role in actually involving citizens with different levels of political knowledge in an active engagement of comprehension and interpretation of complex governance processes. In order to improve this engagement, we also devote a section to point out implications for media professionals and public officials. Finally, we outline how future research may improve our understanding about how journalistic mediation works differently depending on the media outlet and the distinct normative principles of deliberative democracy in question.

The Deliberative System Under the Lens of Mediation

Public deliberation embraces many normative principles such as publicity, justification, reciprocity, intelligibility, inclusiveness, mutual respect, truth, and sincerity (Habermas, 1985, 1996, 2005; Mansbridge, 1999; Maia, 2012; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012; Parkinson, 2006; Wessler, 2008). Nevertheless, these normative principles neither provide the same conditions for measurement nor for comparative analyses due to the myriad of communicative interactions and discursive settings that form the public sphere.

In view of these constraints, Mansbridge's (1999) first elaboration on the idea of a deliberative system opened up new and enlightening analytical strategies. Mansbridge (1999) argues that not every communicative interaction and discursive setting has to exhibit all the normative principles in question, but that the larger system of public deliberation, i.e., the deliberative system, should. This suggests that rather than measuring "deliberativeness" in each discursive setting of the public sphere by applying all these normative principles, we could look for specific contributions of these settings to public deliberation. The main analytical challenge turns out to be finding out which of the several normative principles of public deliberation one should consider as adequate in order to identify the most relevant contributions of a given social system or discursive setting to the deliberative system.

Around this concept, other empirical challenges to public deliberation are: (a) to demonstrate the potential of different social systems or discursive settings for being complementary to each other in the formation of public opinion (Habermas, 2005; Neblo, 2005; Parkinson & Mansbridge, 2012); and (b) how to alleviate the obstructions that social complexity and social differentiation pose for an inclusive public deliberation (Bohman, 2000, 2007; Christiano, 2012; Fischer, 2009).

These obstructions become critical in the context of globalization and its international governance regimes since their “social complexity and interdependence affect not only justice, but also the capacity of the *dêmos* to exercise control over social processes” (Bohman, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, elaboration on the concept of the deliberative system needs to solve the problem of how to avoid that social complexity hinders the capacity of ordinary citizens to exercise their political rights. For some scholars (Habermas, 1996; Bohman, 2000, 2007; Mendonça, 2008; Fischer, 2009; Christiano, 2012), this requires, among other things, making the increasing influence of experts and non-elected representatives (e.g., diplomats, non-governmental organizations, envoys) on public policies accountable to ordinary citizens.

To better understand how such accountability might take place in contemporary democratic societies, we approach the deliberative system using the notion of *mediation* as its epistemic operator. This use is decisive for our exploring and analyzing of some functions of the media system in the deliberative system. This use is derived from a constructivist appropriation of the reasoning used by Habermas (1996) in the first two chapters of *Between Facts and Norms* to explain how within modern law:

Both media of systemic integration, money and power, are anchored via legal institutionalization in orders of the lifeworld, which is in turn socially integrated through communicative action. In this way, modern law is linked with all three resources of integration. (Habermas, 1996, p. 40)

One may claim that within media systems there is tension between these three resources of integration, i.e., money, power, and communicative action. Furthermore, a modern media system may also function “as a hinge between system and lifeworld” (Habermas, 1996, p. 56). In this regard, we propose ascribing to the media system a crucial role in mediating these instances (system and lifeworld), especially in contexts of decision-making processes marked by high levels of complexity. It means that the more large-scale, complex, and specialized a decision-making process is, the higher the

importance of the media systems as a factor of legitimization of these processes (cf. Bohman, 2000, pp. 55-56).

This importance increases with higher complexity of the decision-making process since lay citizens do not possess the required background for a direct and straightforward comprehension and, therefore, effective participation in this kind of process. In order to facilitate this comprehension and participation, we argue, as did Collins and Evans (apud Fischer, 2009, p. 158), that the *mediation*¹ produced by media professionals becomes crucial:

Collins and Evans [...] identify the need for ‘translation.’ For different groups to talk to each other, they argue, the non-empirical function of translation is often necessary. Toward this end, people with the special ability to take on the position of the ‘other’ and to alternate between different social worlds in order to translate across them are needed. Such translation, they explain, involves the sort of skills possessed by ‘the journalist, the teacher, the novelist, the playwright, and so forth, skills notoriously hard to explain – as qualitative sociologists know all too well.

Aware of this difficulty to describe and explain this mediation or *translation* (see [note 1](#)) in empirical terms, this study proposes to face this challenge by analyzing the Brazilian coverage of the COP15 through a multimodal media content analysis (cf. Wozniak, Lück and Wessler, 2015). This will allow us to identify how and to what degree journalistic mediation fulfills different normative principles of the deliberative system depending on the media type. Piecing together the output from different media types helps to approximate a bigger picture of the media system’s role in the deliberative system. This picture is quite similar to a prism since it shows a mediation/translation of social complexity by scaling down this complexity in different publicly accessible strata of information (which run the gamut from highly specialized sources of information to general-interest mass media channels). Since these strata present a specific balance between different normative principles of public deliberation, they allow different kinds of audiences to find more information and to get involved in rather complex governance processes. We argue that without this prism, these processes would become even more elitist and (cognitively) opaque for direct observation than they already are.

In the next sections, we will lay out why the coverage of the COP15 is a suitable case for investigating contributions of journalistic mediation to the

¹ For us, the idea of “translation” used by Collins and Evans is a subset of the possible operations that the idea of *mediation* might encompass. For a more comprehensive account of this concept as epistemic operator of the deliberative system, see Lycarião (2012).

consistency of the deliberative system, and along which normative principles and methods these contributions will be evaluated.

The Brazilian Media Coverage of the COP15

As pointed out above, the importance of the media system as a factor of legitimization increases depending on the complexity of decision-making processes. The COP15 is a clear example in this regard. During its sessions, the Brazilian representatives' statements were mostly in English, not in the native Portuguese language of the country².

More importantly, understanding the topic of climate change requires *per se* some background in terms of scientific information. Actually, climate change only exists as a serious *political* problem because climatologists have been able to conduct complicated analyses that present statistical estimations (likelihood scenarios) about what is going to happen with the earth's climate system because of the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the entire debate around COP15 – and the Brazilian representatives' statements as one part of it – shows a structural deficit of *intelligibility*.

Not only is the topic hard to understand for a lay citizen, but the institutional framework that organizes the COP15, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is, in its own words, an “intimidating” and “multifaceted process”³. This seems to be very problematic for proper public accountability of this kind of political regime since most citizens have no knowledge about such a complex decision-making process. Thus, we also assume a structural deficit of *publicity* regarding the details of political content reproduced by mainstream media outlets during the conference.

In the face of these deficits, we propose to investigate how journalistic mediation of the media system might *attenuate*⁴ them. Most importantly, we will try to demonstrate how journalistic mediation organizes itself systemically in deliberative terms by carrying out a functional differentiation

² See <http://unfccc4.meta-fusion.com/kongresse/cop15/templ/ovw.php?id_kongressmain=1&theme=unfccc>. Last accessed on October 26, 2014.

³ Source available at: <https://unfccc.int/essential_background/bare_essentials/items/6145txt.php>. Last accessed on May 14, 2014.

⁴ It is important to stress that the media system only may provide a temporary and limited compensation for these deficits. They only will be comprehensively solved when the other social systems involved, including the political one, also fulfill their normative demands in this regard.

of media content and, consequently, of discourses. This functional differentiation is crucial for the deliberative system because it provides information and public scrutiny in accordance to a heterogeneous citizenry, which, by definition, requires a diversified and, therefore, internally differentiated media system.

In order to grasp this functional differentiation, we selected two central components of the Brazilian media system. The first one regards *the public visibility center*, which, according to Gomes (2009), corresponds to the TV newscast *Jornal Nacional* (JN). The second regards the *quality press center*, which to our understanding corresponds to the daily newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* (FSP)⁵.

Since these central instances of the Brazilian media system operate with different modalities, target distinct sets of audiences, and present different journalistic formats (or *genres*), it is reasonable to assume that they will perform different contributions to the deliberative system.

JN is TV newscast that covers a large variety of issues in a very short timeframe. As a result, the time devoted to politics and public affairs is quite limited (see Gomes, 2009; Porto, 2007). Moreover, JN is broadcast nationwide to a large audience (*high visibility*) and, for the sake of reaching out to this audience, eschews the use of complex terminology ordinary citizens are unfamiliar with.

FSP is a regional elite-oriented newspaper, which allows for a more cultivated language and a journalistic style with longer news reports and more in-depth political analyses (cf. Azevedo, 2006, p. 96).

Based on these basic facts, it is possible to assume that JN tends to present less information about public affairs, but in a more comprehensible way than FSP does, while FSP affords more room for brokering information and analyzing decision-making processes and, as such, provides more publicity for the intricacies of the COP negotiations. Thus, this paper proposes the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): The FSP fulfills the principle of *publicity* to a higher degree than the JN.

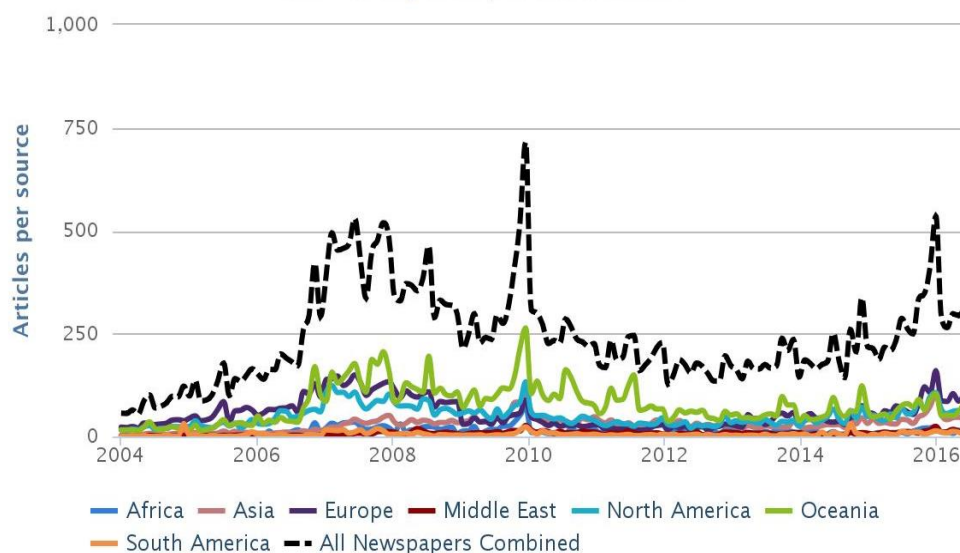
Hypothesis 2 (H2): The JN fulfills the principle of *intelligibility* to a higher degree than FSP.

⁵ See “Os maiores jornais do Brasil” at: <<http://www.anj.org.br/a-industria-jornalistica/jornais-no-brasil/maiores-jornais-do-brasil>> Last accessed February 6, 2014.

Method

The advantage of analyzing COP15 in Copenhagen instead of other UN Climate Change Conferences relates to the theoretical framework of this study. It indicates that journalistic mediation assumes greater importance as a legitimation factor the more it contributes to the visibility of decision-making processes. It means that when the media system gives little or no visibility to a specific decision-making process, then it offers little or no contribution to the legitimation of such a process. Since the COP15 was the most visible Climate Change Conference up to this point (not only in Brazil, but in many other countries, as [Figure 1](#) shows), it presents itself as a suitable case for exploring the potential of the media system to operate as a legitimation factor of highly complex decision-making processes.

Figure 1. 2004-2016 World Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change or Global Warming



Source: Daly et al. (2016)

Next we will briefly explain the categories of analysis and the respective variables with which we measured the performance of each media outlet in terms of *publicity* and *intelligibility*. For a detailed account of these categories, analyses and variables, see this research's codebook (Lycarião, 2014)⁶.

⁶ It is to a large extent based on the codebooks by Wessler, Wozniak and Lück (2014) as well as Eilders (1997). Moreover, it is noteworthy to clarify that this paper's principal author was the single coder for all the 86 news articles, except for the composite variable "news factors," which was coded by the main author and a research assistant. For this variable, an intercoder reliability test was done. The overall score (Krippendorff's Alpha) was 0.87. In order to achieve this, we had to exclude two variables (surprise and facticity) that persistently did not

Publicity

According to our first hypothesis (H1), FSP will cover the COP15 with a higher level of publicity than JN. This assumption is based not just on previous studies that demonstrate severe limitations of the TV newscast JN in providing comprehensive information on public affairs (Gomes, 2009; Porto, 2007), but also on the well-known differences that exist between the different types of mass media outlets. As Parkinson (2005, p. 177) points out: “each medium has strict physical limits which mean that only a small part of any given story can be told. Television and radio are very much more limited than print media in this respect.”

In order to test our assumption, we measured the normative principle of publicity by integrating a number of categories (see [Table 1](#)) into the following three variables:

- (a) *official transparency*;
- (b) *augmented publicity*;
- (c) and *public scrutiny*.

Table 1. Composite Variables for Publicity

	COMPOSITE VARIABLES	VARIABLES	RELATED WORK
PUBLICITY	Official Transparency	Soundbites + Direct and Indirect quotations	Hallin, 1992; Parkinson, 2005; Tresch, 2009
	Augmented publicity	Extraofficial + Political Backstage + Scandal	Gomes, 2004: 121-125; Thompson, 2005
	Public Scrutiny	Positive (praise) + Negative (criticism)	Gurevitch & Blumler, 1990; Benson, 2010

Whereas *official transparency* identifies utterances⁷ on political proposals or demands made by Brazilian representatives or representatives of collective

achieve acceptable scores. Moreover, this papers' authors achieved acceptable intercoder reliability scores (also Krippendorff's Alpha) for all the variables from the codebook developed by Wessler, Wozniak and Lück (2014). Many of these variables — especially those related to intelligibility — were adapted and simplified for this investigation, and others variables — especially those related to publicity — were produced exclusively for interests of this study.

⁷ We operationalized the following utterance definition by Ferree, Gamson, Gehards and Rucht (2002, p. 50): “n utterance is a speech act or statement by a single speaker. A single

actors including Brazil (e.g., a speaker on behalf of the G77 and China⁸), *augmented publicity* and *public scrutiny* identify non-official utterances and opinionated utterances, respectively.

In order to establish whether a published or broadcast utterance was “official” or “non-official,” the coding also analyzed the COP15 sessions in which representatives (Brazilian diplomats, envoys, or President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, etc.) spoke on behalf of the Brazilian government. For this, we used the UNFCCC webcast⁹. By doing so, we could assess whether the *content* of each utterance from any JN or FSP news report was quoted from these official sessions. If that was the case, we coded the utterance content as “official transparency,” and, if not, we established whether this utterance should be coded as “augmented publicity” or as “public scrutiny.”

If the utterance (regardless of its source) had explicit traits of appraisal or criticism towards political actors or authorities, then we regarded it as “public scrutiny.” In case it presented explicit traits of disclosed information (e.g., leaking of classified documents) or exclusive information (e.g., off-the-record statements) then we coded the utterance as “augmented publicity.” The purpose of the “augmented publicity” variable was to identify the kind of information that becomes publicly available through journalistic investigation instead of through official channels (i.e., the COP15 sessions).

In order to compare the relative amount of each type of utterance we counted the total number of utterances in the news article and then calculated the mean value of each of the three “publicity” categories appearing in news reports from both media outlets (JN and FSP).

Intelligibility

The second hypothesis (H2) states that *the public visibility center* (the JN) will cover the COP15 with a higher level of intelligibility than FSP. The assumption is that the more visibility (i.e., a large and dispersed audience) a media outlet targets, the more its content will have to be *generally comprehensible*. Otherwise, this content will not reach out to lay citizens and therefore would be restricted to specialized audiences only.

article can contain multiple utterances by the same person or organization, separated in different paragraphs, each of which is coded separately.”

⁸ According to its own definition, the G77 and China is “the largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations”. Source available at: <<http://www.g77.org/doc/>> Last accessed October 26, 2014.

⁹ Available at <http://unfccc4.meta-fusion.com/kongresse/cop15/templ/ovw.php?id_kongressmain=1&theme=unfccc>. Last accessed October 26, 2014.

In order to measure intelligibility, we constructed five variables through aggregation (see [Table 2](#)) whose manifestations improve, according to several studies (related work in the aforementioned table), the information recall/retention as well as the *cognitive accessibility* of media content:

(a) *news factors*;

(b) *background information* (in terms of framing devices regarding the causes and consequences of as well as the solutions to the problem);

(c) *language translation* (ordinary language x specialized language);

(d) *dramatization*;

(e) and *visualization*.

Table 2. Composite Variables for Intelligibility

	COMPOSITE VARIABLES	VARIABLES	RELATED WORK
INTELLIGIBILITY	News Factors	Proeminence/influence + Personalization + Controversy + Damage/Failure	Eilders (1997)
	Background Information	Causes + Consequences + Solutions (Frames)	Entman, 1993; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006
	Language Translation	<i>Ordinary language</i> (verbalization + emotion references + clarification of specialized vocabulary) <i>Specialized language (nominalization + acronyms + specialized vocabulary)*</i>	Gotti (2005); Catenaccio (2006) Göpferich (2006, 2009)
	Dramatization	Characters (heros, villains and victims) + Conflict + Emotion Action storytelling (actant + chronological order + location)	Wolf, 2004; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Machill, Köhler & Waldhauser, 2007
	Visualization	Visualization of background information + Lead visualization + Other visualized information	Machill, Köhler & Waldhauser, 2007; Pippas et al, 2009; Buehner, 2011; Leckner, 2012; Prior, 2013

* Variables whose values decrease the Z-score of the respective composited variable and consequently of intelligibility.

These variables identify media content elements that facilitate the introduction of (new) information to recipients in an intelligible way. Specificities of how these content elements were measured will be mentioned below in the results section.

Results

Publicity

We hypothesized that FSP would present a higher level of information as regards the political process and statements voiced by political representatives speaking on behalf of the Brazilian people. Taking into account only the *absolute* amount of information that each media outlet devoted to the coverage of the COP15 (see [Table 3](#)), this prediction seems to be supported. While the JN's COP15 coverage amounted to 21 news reports comprising a total of 7.863 words, the FSP produced 65 news reports with 22.632 words. The average length of news reports from JN and FSP as measured in words was similar (374 words per report in JN, 348 words per article in FSP).

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics for Publicity*

	JN	FSP	Coverage (FSP + JN)
News articles	21	65	86
Utterances	48	213	261
Words (all articles)	7.863	22.632	30.495
Mean of utterances/article	2.3	3.27	3
Utterances/1.000 words	6.1	9.4	8.5

A more nuanced picture emerges when we take into account only those utterances that refer to at least one of the composite publicity variables (*official transparency*, *augmented publicity*, and *public scrutiny*). This type of analysis shows that FSP covered the COP15 not only with a higher level of publicity but also with a higher *proportion* of deliberative publicity (i.e., as per article) than JN (see [Table 3](#)). Whereas JN presented one publicity utterance for every 164 words (or 6.1 publicity utterances per 1,000 words), FSP offered one for every 106 words (or 9.4 publicity utterances per 1,000 words). This indicates that FSP presented almost one additional publicity utterance per article in comparison to JN.

Table 4. Multiple Comparisons (Scheffé) of Publicity in the COP15 Coverage

	FSP (n = 65)		JN (n = 21)		SCHEFFE ^a		
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	(I-J)	F	Sig.
Publicity	0,90	0,92	0,74	1,20	0,16	0,41	0,52
Official transparency	0,26	0,57	0,29	0,80	-0,04	0,06	0,80
Augmented Publicity	0,26	0,48	0,23	0,63	0,03	0,06	0,81
Extraofficial	0,22	0,47	0,06	0,21	0,16	2,18	0,14
Political backstage	0,03	0,13	0,14	0,61	-0,11	1,92	0,16
Scandal	0,01	0,04	0,02	0,09	-0,01	0,80	0,37
Public scrutiny	0,38	0,58	0,21	0,42	0,17	1,49	0,22
Positive	0,11	0,29	0,02	0,07	0,10	2,25	0,13
Negative	0,26	0,47	0,19	0,40	0,07	0,37	0,54

(I-J) = mean difference between means of FSP and JN; F = Force of the difference; SD = standard deviation; Sig.= Significance; a= 1 degree of freedom between groups

In order to compare the significance of this proportional difference (overall publicity per article) between the composite variables in question, we conducted multiple comparisons (see [Table 4](#) for results). For this we counted the number of each coded utterance and multiplied it by 100 to avoid results with many zeros. Then we divided the multiplied number of utterances by the total number of words in the respective news item. Thus, if a news article was comprised of 400 words and presented two utterances for publicity, the publicity ratio within this article would be $200/400 = 0.5$.

The results indicate that FSP obtained a publicity mean of 0.90 while JN obtained 0.74 (see [Table 4](#)). This is a *substantial* difference that reinforces in *proportional terms* the robust difference in *absolute terms* between FSP and JN regarding the fulfillment of the publicity principle in the COP15 coverage.

The composite publicity variable that showed the highest discrepancy between the two media outlets is “public scrutiny” (i.e., instances of explicit praise or criticism). Whereas the average mean for this variable was 0.38 in the FSP coverage, it was only 0.21 in JN news reports. This result is in line with the tradition of advocacy reporting that is characteristic of the quality press in Brazil (De Albuquerque, 2005), where journalistic practice in general “tends to emphasize opinion and commentary, and *newspapers* to represent distinct political tendencies” (Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002, p. 77, emphasis added).

As regards the composite variables for official transparency and augmented publicity, we observed similar levels in FSP and JN news items about COP15 (see [Table 4](#)).

However, both media outlets gave more space for *negative* public scrutiny (criticism) towards political authorities and institutions than for *positive* public scrutiny (praise). This is in line with Benson's (2010) results, which suggest that mass media outlets in democratic countries tend to act more like a watchdog than a lapdog of public authorities and institutions.

Intelligibility

We also hypothesized that JN would cover the COP15 with a higher level of *comprehensible* information and therefore would fulfill the *intelligibility principle* more than FSP. To test this assumption, we focused our analysis on *how* each media outlet covered this event. Different from the analysis regarding the normative principle of publicity, here the most relevant criterion was not the total amount of information, but the *potential* of this information to be comprehensible to a large and heterogeneous citizen audience.

This potential was measured by assessing content elements and presentation strategies that are known to increase either the information recall/retention or the comprehensibility of media content (see [Table 2](#)). Previous studies have not tested these elements in interaction, but only independently, so we aggregated these elements with the same weight and using standardized scores. To test our hypothesis, we measured the average mean of each variable in both media outlets (FSP and JN). For this, we conducted multiple comparisons (see [Table 5](#)). The overall results show that the mean difference regarding the level of intelligibility between JN and FSP follows the direction of our hypothesis. This is also confirmed by a t-test for independent samples ($t = -4,023$; $\text{Sig.} = 0.000$)¹⁰.

The composite variable that showed the highest discrepancy between media types was *visualization* (I-J = 1,19). This seems very obvious at first glance, but we did not consider the mere presence of images as the main criterion for coding. Our operationalization of *visualization* takes into account if the image effectively illustrates any information provided in the (written or spoken) text. This criterion acknowledges the assumption that “planned and produced images that correspond to the text improve the retention performance, whereas so-called stock news images (‘image wallpaper’) or reports where the image doesn’t coincide with the content of the text lead to lower retention.” (Machill, Köhler, & Waldhauser, 2007, pp. 188-189).

Moreover, the coding procedures established more demanding requirements for coding the presence of *visualization* in TV newscasts than in newspapers. This approach is based on the reasoning that the audience's reception of a TV

¹⁰ Additionally, the Levene’s test for equality of variances produced the following results: $F=0,665$; $\text{Sig}=0,425$. Therefore, we could assume equal variances.

newscast has another rhythm and dynamic. While the reader of a newspaper has the opportunity to scan the entire page of the newspaper at their own pace and sequence, the TV viewer usually does not have the opportunity to pause and return to some part of the news report. Considering this, we only coded for visualization in TV newscast when there was synchronicity between the image and the information conveyed in the audio text.

The other composite variable that showed significant differences in the direction of our hypothesis was *language translation* (I-J=0.77). The next level of disaggregation of this variable indicates that whereas *specialized language* was much more present in FSP (I-J = -0.63), the mean difference concerning *ordinary language* was much weaker (I-J = 0.15). It is possible to explain this unexpected result by considering methodological aspects of this research. According to our operationalization, every time a news report explained a specialized term it increased its “translation language” standardized score.

Table 5. Multiple Comparisons (Scheffé) of Intelligibility in the COP15 Coverage

	JN (n =21)		FSP (n = 65)		SCHEFFE ^a		
	Mean ^z	SD	Mean ^z	SD	(I-J)	F	Sig.
Intelligibility	2,83	4,12	-0,91	3,56	3,74	16,18***	0,000
News Factors	0,13	1,31	-0,40	0,90	0,17	0,44	0,507
Background Information	1,05	2,50	-0,34	1,57	1,39	9,12*	0,030
Consequences	0,44	1,38	-0,14	0,81	0,59	5,75*	0,019
Causes	0,79	1,18	-0,25	0,79	1,04	21,38***	0,000
Solutions	-0,18	1,09	0,06	0,97	-0,24	0,91	0,344
Language Translation	0,59	1,17	-0,19	1,55	0,77	4,41*	0,039
(+) Ordinary Language	0,11	0,97	-0,04	1,01	0,15	0,34	0,561
(-) Specialized Language	-0,47	0,46	0,15	1,08	-0,63	6,66*	0,012
Dramatization	0,16	1,44	-0,05	1,63	0,22	0,30	0,586
Action Storytelling	-0,18	1,02	0,06	0,99	-0,24	3,47	0,066
Characters	0,35	0,91	-0,11	1,01	0,46	0,94	0,335
Visualization	0,90	0,52	-0,29	0,94	1,19	30,25***	0,000

z = mean values correspond to standardized scores (z-scores); SD = standard deviation; (I-J) = mean difference between means of FSP and JN; F = Force of the difference; Sig.= Significance; a= 1 degree of freedom between groups

* Sig.<0.05; **Sig.<0.01; ***Sig.<0.001

This measurement is included in the set of variables constituting “ordinary language” (see [Table 2](#)). However, our results show that JN not only rarely employed specialized language, but also avoided its clarification much more regularly than FSP. This makes sense when one takes into account the fundamental line of reasoning of the hypothesis: Visibility will be associated with the comprehensibility of media content because media outlets with a

higher level of visibility need to reach out to a large, dispersed, and heterogeneous audience. Since the greater part of this audience is not familiar with more specialized terminologies, media professionals have two main strategies to deal with information originally produced in specialized language. Either they explain its specialized vocabulary or they simply avoid it completely. It seems evident that the second strategy is more efficient to guarantee that media content is as comprehensible as possible.

In this regard, the eschewal of both specialized vocabulary and its clarification is particularly striking in the case of JN since it gave much more attention to the consequences and causes of climate change than FSP (see [Table 5](#)). In its coverage, JN was able to report these aspects of climate change more intensely than the FSP but did so using less specialized vocabulary. An illuminating example of how this was possible regards the different discursive strategies that each media outlet used to report the main cause of climate change. Whereas FSP used terms more akin to the climate science discourse as “greenhouse gases” and “CO₂ emissions,” JN used more verbalized¹¹ constructions like “gases that cause global warming” or “gases that heat the planet.”

Besides that, our results show that FSP gave more attention to the solutions for the problem of climate change. These frame elements embrace the main topics of the political debate found in the COP15 sessions. This includes topics like “reforestation and avoided deforestation” and “adoption of a new legally binding treaty on emissions cuts” (Wessler, Wozniak, & Lück, 2014, p. 95).

This means that FSP coverage of COP15 devoted more space to the political aspects of climate change than JN. This difference reflects our results on the differences between FSP and JN regarding the fulfillment of the *publicity principle*. As we have seen, FSP not only in absolute but also in proportional terms gave more space to the political debate and information on the political process of the COP15 than JN did. Our disaggregated analysis concerning the background information also reflects this difference.

The results for *dramatization* require a more complex digression in our results and methodology in order to explain why some of them turned out to be contradictory to our hypothesis. This part regards the “action storytelling” for which JN’s mean was smaller than that of FSP. This variable measured the level of detail with which news reports explained an action. This measurement consisted of categories verifying the “where, when, and who” of this action.

¹¹ According to Göpferich (2006, 2009), verbalized sentences promote more comprehensibility than nominalized ones.

As indicated in [Table 5](#), FSP news reports were more frequently associated with the provision of *textual* information on the where, when, and who than news reports by JN. Our coding of “action storytelling” was based exclusively on the verbal text and therefore disregarded the information provided by images. In this regard, it is appropriate to remember that JN news reports presented a stronger association with our conception of visualization than FSP. After reviewing the code sheets, we noticed that in many cases much of the “where, when and who” — especially the *where* — of an action was being indicated by images, and not (only) by the verbal text. Therefore, it makes sense that news reports from JN presented a lower association with “action storytelling” than FSP because JN depicted actions using relatively more visualization than FSP.

Discussion

Many scholars of public deliberation tend to privilege the fulfillment of the publicity principle in their assessment of public deliberation. On one hand, this makes sense since publicity implies public accessibility and scrutiny of the political content produced by authorities, which is essential for a deliberative exchange between civil society and the state. Not incidentally, “publicity is the essence of deliberative democracy: it is its procedural foundation” (Parkinson, 2006, p. 99). On the other hand, overshadowing other normative principles of public deliberation might lead to an elitist approach towards it.

As our results indicate, the quality newspaper FSP made almost three times more political content about the COP15 available than JN. However, JN coverage reached out to many more citizens than FSP did and it did so in a more commonly intelligible way. This means that JN made the COP15 and political statements of Brazilian representatives more *visible* and *comprehensible* than FSP.

To disregard this contribution to the deliberative system is ultimately assuming an elitist approach toward public deliberation. An approach that, for the sake of well-informed opinions, might exclude most citizens from a real chance to hold representatives (both elected and non-elected) involved in complex decision-making processes accountable.

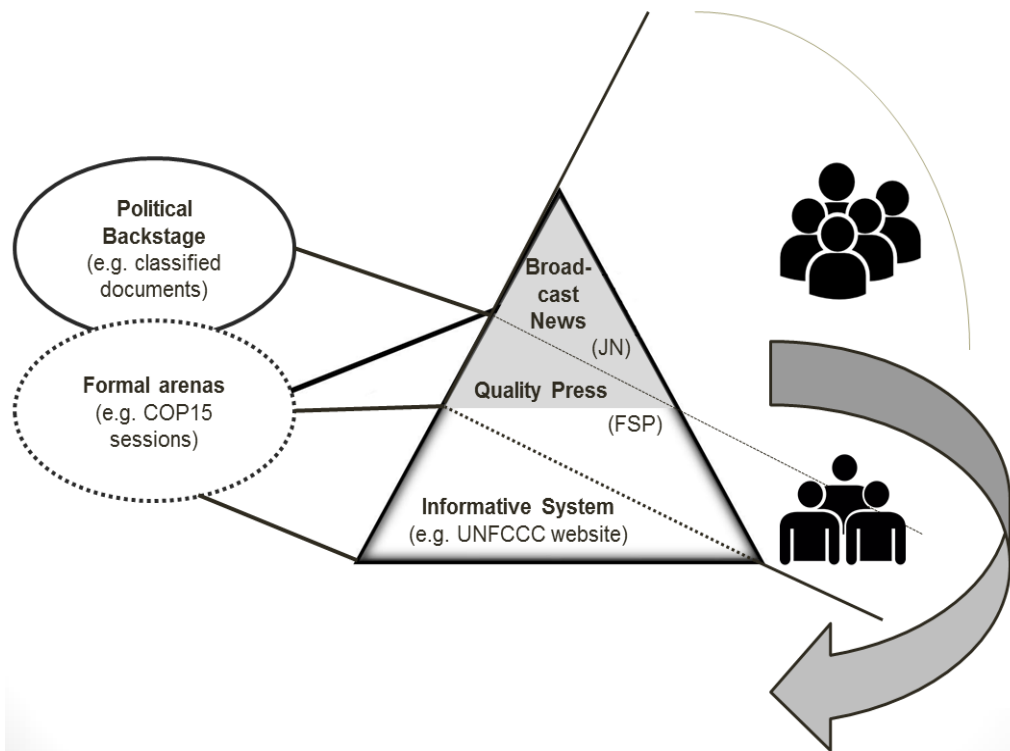
Nevertheless, it is not through decreasing the quality of public debate on a decision-making process that one should make public deliberation more inclusive and democratic. In the face of this dilemma, the most balanced and comprehensive approach to assess a media system’s contribution to public deliberation is to use the deliberative system rationale.

By using this rationale, we analyzed the Brazilian media system’s capacity to attenuate structural deficits of publicity and intelligibility regarding the

COP15. By analyzing the COP15 coverage in terms of this attenuation capacity, we can conclude that the Brazilian media system mediated the COP15 like a "prism of the public sphere" (see [Figure 2](#)).

This metaphor highlights our observation that the discursive inputs produced during the formal sessions of the COP15 were broken up by the Brazilian media system, which selected and transformed these discursive inputs in order to produce its own media-type specific outputs. These outputs (the media content) in turn were distributed in different communicative strata that seemed to correspond to different subsets of a large, dispersed, and heterogeneous audience. For the less specialized parts of this audience (ordinary citizens), this prism offered communicative strata closer to the ordinary, everyday life language; and for those recipients with a somewhat higher level of expertise and political interest, it was possible to find strata with more information, but also a more specialized (i.e., less commonly intelligible) treatment.

Figure 2. *The News Media System as Prism of The Public Sphere*



Nevertheless, the mere fact that these different media outlets fulfill distinct normative principles of the deliberative system is not sufficient for assessing whether they also serve their systemic function well. Therefore, up to this point we cannot fully answer the problem of how media systems offer the opportunity for a heterogeneous citizenry to become more skilled and well-

informed to participate in public debates on political problems that involve high levels of social complexity.

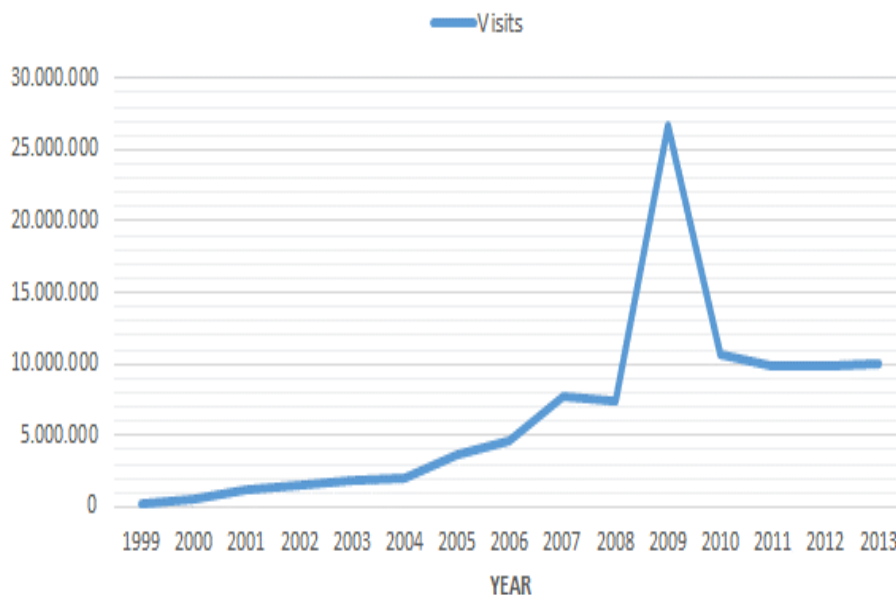
For this, we argue that the media system has to offer an internally differentiated gateway to complementary information sources about these problems. Therefore, this gateway has to invite and guide citizens to the narrower doors from the informative system (see [Figure 2](#)). These doors are narrower in terms of cognitive accessibility (because they are more specialized) but, at the same time, they also offer more dense and extensive information.

Under this conceptualization, the media gateway in question offers a *preliminary mediation* of social complexity only if it organizes a set of referential signals that ordinary citizens may use to orient themselves in their search for more complete and comprehensive information through the informative system.

Thus, more importantly than providing complete, accurate, and rigorous information about these subjects, this informative gateway fulfills its systemic function well when:

- (a) it involves lay citizens in an active search for this kind of information;
- (b) it augments the visibility of the governance process by making its political backstage publicly visible.

In our case study, both requirements seem to be achieved. Firstly, the aforementioned search for more information seems to have happened as a result of the peak of visibility that media coverage of COP15 produced on climate change in 2009 (see [Figure 1](#)). [Figure 3](#), in turn, shows that 2009 is the year with the highest number of visits on the UNFCCC official website, which is a rich, comprehensive and reliable source of information on the political process that organizes the UN Climate Change Conferences.

Figure 3. Number of Visits to UNFCCC's Website Per Year (1999-2013)

Source: <<http://unfccc.int/home/items/3358.php>>

This website is an example of the role played by the informative system in the division of labor within the deliberative system. In this regard, the informative system encompasses the entire available informational repository (from libraries to online wikipages) and offers the possibility for lay citizens to become skilled and qualified to discuss all kinds of subjects, from biotechnology to climate change.

Moreover, the second requirement seems also to be fulfilled when we observe that both media outlets under study presented information that was not available in the institutional channels of UNFCCC. An important example in this regard relates to the reporting of leaked documents showing attempts by the Danish government in closing a deal “behind doors,” all of this without the participation of many countries, especially those less economically powerful. These documents were first published by The Guardian¹², and both FSP¹³ and

¹² See “Copenhagen climate summit in disarray after 'Danish text' leak,” available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2009/dec/08/copenhagen-climate-summit-disarray-danish-text>>. Last accessed on September 9, 2016.

¹³ See “Proposta de anfitriões vaza e cria celeuma em cúpula,” available at: <<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ciencia/fe0912200903.htm>> Last accessed September 9, 2016.

JN¹⁴ followed its lead. Political outrage in African and other countries immediately emerged, which was also reported by both Brazilian media outlets. Since this information was produced by investigative journalism and made available by news media at first hand, we argue that an important systemic function was fulfilled, namely the expansion of the visibility of the political process by revealing what was happening behind the curtains of the official political stage.

Implications for Media Professionals and Public Officials

A recent survey¹⁵ by the Worldwide Independent Network of Market Research (WIN) indicated that 72 percent of the population from eight American countries use the web for seeking out more information about something they have seen on television. In Brazil, this percentage goes up to 96 percent. This clearly indicates that traditional news media work as a gateway to the informative system that might and should improve the quality of how citizens search for more information about public affairs.

As a result, media coverage plays its systemic function in this process when it alerts in advance of the pitfalls (e.g., the existence of behind-doors negotiations) and shortcuts (e.g., proper and reliable sources) in the paths of this search. By offering such a map of signs via *augmented publicity* (Gomes, 2004; Thompson, 2005), *news factors* (Eilders, 1997, 2006), *agenda setting*¹⁶ and *framing* (Entman, 1993; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006), we argue that journalistic practices may produce a *preliminary mediation* of the intricate network of meanings and frames that pre-structure public debates around subjects and political events marked by high levels of social complexity.

Nevertheless, much of these practices are far from what they could achieve. The most extreme case regards the provision of proper and reliable sources. This is because even in online news, a reader only rarely finds links to the sources the journalist used to produce the news piece. The main reason for this can be attributed to commercial motivations. News media corporations do not

¹⁴ See “Países pobres não gostam da proposta sobre clima articulada por nações ricas,” available at: <<http://g1.globo.com/Sites/Especiais/Noticias/0,,MUL1408241-17816,00-PAISES+POBRES+NAO+GOSTAM+DA+PROPOSTA+SOBRE+CLIMA+ARTICULADA+POR+NACOES+RICA.html>>. Last accessed September 9, 2016.

¹⁵ See “Brasileiros navegam na internet mais do que americanos e canadenses”, available at: <<http://ibopeinteligencia.com/noticias-e-pesquisas/brasileiros-navegam-na-internet-mais-do-que-americanos-e-canadenses/>>. Last accessed September 9, 2016.

¹⁶ In this regard, more important than to find out “who sets the agenda” is to realize that agenda-setting produces those situations that “might be an integrative moment in society in the sense that people with different political preferences can at least discuss the same issues, even though they might have different opinions on them.” (Eilders, 1999, p. 318)

want their readers to seek additional information on another web page. While this makes sense in terms of a business rationale (more time spent on the page leads to more advertisement revenue), a better systemic adequacy would require a radical change in this pattern. Whereas there is little hope for commercial media to modify their current behavior, we advocate the need of public media (which have a public service and democratic commitment) to adopt a different approach. Moreover, this also indicates the importance of developing a robust public media service in countries like Brazil, where a system of oligopolistic and conservative media still prevails (see de Albuquerque, 2005, 2012).

In addition, public officials, media professionals, and public relations practitioners also need to be more sensitive to the intelligibility barriers that might weaken the complementarity between news media and the information system as a whole (as illustrated in [Figure 2](#)). Our case study gives a clear example in this regard, namely the fact that most material available in the UNFCCC website is in English, and does not offer an equivalent version in Portuguese (only in French and Spanish). Thus, while we are sure that, without this website, citizens around the World would miss an important source for making this decision-making process somewhat accountable, we are also confident that there is much room for improvement.

Conclusion

The overall results provide considerable evidence for the confirmation of our hypotheses. While JN's coverage of the COP15 fulfilled the *intelligibility principle* more intensely than FSP, the latter media outlet covered the same political event with higher levels of *publicity*.

But more important than confirming our hypotheses, this empirical analysis suggests that there is much room for improving our understanding of the association between the production of public visibility and the normative principles of the deliberative system. This potential for improvement is particularly strong when we regard those results of our study that did not meet our initial expectations. Future research may use alternative methodological procedures in order to test the predictive power of the tentative explanations presented in this paper.

Moreover, it remains inconclusive if media outlets with higher visibility also provide better intelligibility. Although we have measured elements that previous reception studies have found to be positively associated with information recall/retention and comprehensibility, it is still unclear how the *interaction* of these different elements affects the comprehensibility of media content. We do not know, for example, whether dramatization is more efficient in this regard than language translation or if it is the other way

around. Future studies may test these different possibilities, including methodological designs that try to explore how these elements may have different effects depending on the audience's profile.

The aspects discussed above show that future research can build upon and refine the line of reasoning that our study tries to introduce into the research of public deliberation. Our results offer a contribution to this field if we interpret them in the face of the problem brought on by increasing social complexity of political decision-making processes. As previously argued, the more large-scale, complex, and specialized a decision-making process is, the more important the media system becomes as a factor of legitimization of these processes.

Considering this, we decided to analyze the journalistic mediation of the COP15 by the Brazilian media system since this political negotiation process demonstrated clear deficits of publicity and intelligibility, especially in the Brazilian case. Our results show that two different normative criteria of the deliberative system (publicity and intelligibility) are fulfilled to varying degrees across two central instances of the Brazilian media system. This indicates that the same rationale grounding the concept of the deliberative system is able to describe how journalistic mediation contributes to this system, i.e., by carrying out a functional differentiation of discourses. This gives support to the idea that journalistic practices offer a preliminary mediation of social complexity like a prism of the public sphere, and, as a result, provide a gateway to the informative system. This gateway is then able to introduce lay citizens to public debates that involve high social complexity and consequently fosters their inclusion in the deliberative system.

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