

***Framing the World of Politics:
How Governmental Sources Shape the Production
and the Reception of TV News in Brazil***

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Framing the World of Politics: How Governmental Sources Shape the Production and the Reception of TV News in Brazil

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One often-neglected feature of the political process is the fact that competing actors frequently struggle over which interpretation about political events or issues will prevail. Politicians, official sources, representatives of social movements, among many others, are always embroiled in controversies about these issues and events and attempt to provide the public with compelling interpretations that make sense of political reality in particular ways. These actors also know that the success or failure of the efforts will largely depend on the role of the media, especially television. Newscasts, in particular, have a central role in framing political controversies in particular ways and in including or excluding interpretations in their coverage.

The study presented in this article shows that official sources have a privileged position in the political coverage of Brazil's main newscast, TV Globo's *Jornal Nacional*. It also provides consistent evidence showing that the interpretations promoted by such authorities shape both the production and the reception of TV news. Based on the results of content analysis and of a controlled experiment, the research suggests that the newscast *Jornal Nacional* plays an important role in sustaining the perspectives and points of views that emerge from the executive power, especially the presidency.

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The article is organized in three sections. The first presents the theoretical framework of the research, the "interpreting controversies model." The second section presents the results of the content analysis of *Jornal Nacional's* political coverage. The third and last section presents the results of a controlled experiment conducted with inhabitants of Brazil's Federal District, where Brasília, the country's capital, is located.

1. The *Interpretive Controversies* Model

The analysis that follows is based on the *interpretive controversies* model that I have proposed as theoretical framework for the analysis of the political role of television (see Porto, 2001, for details). Based on the concept of framing (see Entman, 1994 and Scheufele, 1999), I define interpretive controversies as political disputes that are immune to resolution by appeal to the facts and are carried out instead primarily through interpretive frames. Facts are not irrelevant for the solution of interpretive controversies, since agents cannot make interpretations at their will. These interpretations have to be able to make sense of information and explain events with some coherency. Yet, according to the interpreting controversies model, political disagreements are not resolved simply by recourse to evidence and argumentation. These controversies depend instead on the ability of actors to build interpretive frames that will work as cues or shortcuts for citizens when they attempt to make sense of the world of politics.

In the development of interpretive controversies, television presents specific "interpretive frames," which can be defined as frames promoted by a sponsor that offers a specific interpretation of a political event or issue. The

interpretation that is promoted by this type of frame usually involves one or more of the following areas: (1) Problem definition; (2) attributions of responsibility and causes; (3) assessments about the significance of political events or issues; (4) arguments about consequences; (5) treatment recommendations. Interpretive frames are made up of arguments such as: “Government inefficiency has led to the crisis of the health care system” (responsibility attribution); or “The health care reform approved by Congress reflects the interests of business, not of citizens” (assessment of significance); or “The health care reform approved by Congress will increase the deficit and lead to inflation and therefore harm citizens” (argument about consequences). Interpretive frames like these ones have two important features. First, these statements are not aimed at conveying information. They contain instead easily understood “persuasion cues” that can allow citizens to become supportive of the position without actively thinking about it (see Lau, Smith and Sears, 1991, p. 648). Second, they cannot be tested, accepted, or dismissed based on factual evidence. Even if one had access to relevant data, the quantity of information required to make such assessments is too large, the time available to attend is too limited, and the calculations required too complex (Smith, 1984, p. 44).

In news coverage, interpretive frames are usually presented by quoted sources, soundbites, or commentators, since the norms of objectivity and balance tend to prevent journalists from presenting explicit interpretations about the topics they cover. In this context, soundbites become particularly relevant, since they are the segments where the chances of finding an interpretive frame are higher. Journalists frequently quote others to promote specific interpretations of political

events and issues. In this way, they frequently avoid presenting interpretations directly and get others instead to say what they themselves think (Tuchman, 1972, p. 668; see also Sigal, 1973, p. 67).

To understand how frames are organized within media messages, the interpreting controversies model also proposes a classification of the different “forms” of media content. I modify Schlesinger et al.’s (1983) typology to classify the “form” of news stories according to the following four categories:

1. *Restricted*: when only one interpretive frame of the political event or issue is presented by the report;
2. *Plural-Closed*: when more than one interpretive frame of the political event or issue is presented by the report, but are arranged in a hierarchy so that one is preferred over the other(s) and presented as more valid/true;
3. *Plural-Open*: when more than one interpretive frame of the political event or issue is presented by the report, but treated within a more indeterminate relation where no interpretation is preferred;
4. *Episodic*: when no interpretative frames are presented and the report has a descriptive tone.

With this more complex understanding of how the media content is structured, we can overcome a key shortcoming of the literature on framing: the tendency to treat media content as homogeneous. These studies tend to identify a single frame in news stories and have difficulties in dealing with the fact that media content is often contradictory (see Cappella and Jamieson, 1997, pp. 111-112). Postmodern critique of the concept of framing has correctly pointed to the functionalist tendency in this literature to identify a “dominant frame,” therefore neglecting the contradictions embedded in the news narratives (Durham, 1998). Although postmodern notions about the indeterminacy of meaning construction

and sense making are themselves problematic, the contradictory and complex nature of these practices should not be ignored.

A final question refers to how the interpretive controversies model defines the influence of interpretive frames presented by television on the process by which audiences make sense of political issues and events. The main hypothesis of the model is the following:

When television segments present more than one interpretive frame about political events and issues, adopting therefore a plural-open or a plural closed form, viewers have access to a broader set of cues and will develop more varied interpretations about these events or issues. Conversely, when television segments present only one interpretive frame, adopting therefore a restricted form, more members of the audience will interpret the events or issues in terms of the interpretation promoted by this frame.

But before testing the hypothesis about framing effects, I present the results of the content analysis of the political coverage presented by the newscast *Jornal Nacional* in the period of analysis.

2. News and Official Sources: Results of Content Analysis

In this section, I investigate how the newscast *Jornal Nacional* covered the political process and which interpretive controversies it presented to viewers. This investigation will be carried out through a content analysis of all news stories broadcast in a period of eight weeks, between September and November 1999. I will also discuss some of the factors that shape the choice of interpretive frames by journalists based on interviews I have conducted with the main news producers from TV Globo. At the time of the fieldwork and of the content analysis presented in the next pages, *Jornal Nacional* was presented by William Bonner and his wife,

Fátima Bernardes, with Bonner acting as editor-general of the newscast. TV Globo's journalism department was headed by Evandro Carlos de Andrade, while Mário Marona commanded the news desk in Brasília. I interviewed three of these key news producers (Carlos de Andrade, Bonner and Marona) to discuss some of the constraints that shape the news production process at TV Globo.² In this way I attempt to overcome one of the main limitations of research on media frames already identified: the lack of attention to the processes that influence the creation of frames by journalists (Scheufele, 1999, p. 115).

To identify the interpretive controversies to which viewers were exposed during the fieldwork, I developed a content analysis of all editions of *Jornal Nacional* that were aired in a period of eight weeks, between September 20 and November 13, 1999.³ The analysis focuses on 201 news stories that dealt with political topics. First, I identify which political topics were covered by *Jornal Nacional*. Table 1 below presents the classification of the reports about politics according to their topic. The data shows that the most frequent political issue was corruption and political scandals, which took up 37% of the news stories and almost half (45%) of the total time of the political coverage. This strong predominance of corruption as a theme in *Jornal Nacional* was related to the work of two Investigative Parliamentary Committees (or CPIs) that were created by Congress to carry out specific investigations. In the period of analysis, the CPI that

² The interviews were conducted in November 1999. All quotes from Carlos de Andrade, Bonner and Marona to be presented in the next pages are from these personal interviews. It should be noted that the access to these professionals by scholars is not a common occurrence in Brazil. I thank them for their contribution to this project.

³ Four of the editions aired in the period were not recorded because of technical problems and are not included in the analysis (September 21, October 2, 11, and 14).

attracted most media coverage was the one created to investigate the links between drug traffickers, politicians and other authorities. The investigations of the “Drug Trafficking CPI” (*CPI do Narcotráfico*) led to the arrest of several politicians, members of the judiciary, policemen, as well other authorities in several states of the Republic. Another CPI that also attracted media coverage in the period was the CPI of the judiciary power, created to investigate irregularities and wrongdoing of judges and other authorities. Most of the news stories in this category refer to the activities and findings of these two investigative committees of the legislative power.

The data in Table 1 also shows the ability of the executive power to influence the media agenda. If taken together, the news stories about specific governmental initiatives and the reports about the activities of the president account for 22% of all political items. Finally, only 9% of the news stories were dedicated to the organizations of civil society, 8% to the activities in Congress (CPIs excluded) and 7% to the decisions of the judiciary. Thus, although politics received a lot of attention on the part of *Jornal Nacional*, most of this coverage was negative in tone, since the emphasis was on corruption and wrongdoing. The executive power had a privileged access to the news agenda, while civil society, Congress (with the exception of the CPIs) and the judiciary attracted less coverage.

Table 1 – Classification of *Jornal Nacional*'s News Stories About Politics According to their Topic by Frequency and Length in Seconds

Subject:	Frequency of news stories	Length in Seconds
Corruption/political scandal	37 %	45 %
Specific governmental initiative/policy	15 %	15 %
Civil society/social movements/NGOs	9 %	10 %
Congress	8 %	7 %
President	7 %	5 %
Judiciary	7 %	5 %
Foreign policy	3 %	1 %
Other	15 %	12%
Total:	100% (n=201)	100% (n=15,584)

The episodic nature of the political coverage

Which form predominated in *Jornal Nacional*'s coverage of politics? To answer this question I classified all news stories about political topics according to their form. I also divide the news stories according to whether they presented soundbites or not. Table 2 presents the results. It shows that the great majority (80%) of the news items about politics presented by *Jornal Nacional* adopted an episodic form. Thus, most of the news stories adopted an “episodic media frame” (see Iyengar, 1991). The descriptive style of these news stories and their heavy focus on events work to exclude the presentation of specific interpretations about these events. Because of its strong reliance on the episodic media frame to report politics, *Jornal Nacional* did not always create the necessary conditions for the emergence of interpretive controversies in the news.

Table 2 – Classification of *Jornal Nacional*'s News Stories About Politics According to their Form.

Form:	All News Stories About Politics	With Soundbites	Without Soundbites
Episodic	80 %	63 %	95 %
Restricted	10 %	16.5 %	5 %*
Plural-Closed	7.5 %	15.5 %	0
Plural-Open	2.5 %	5 %	0
Average Length:	78 seconds	117 seconds	40 seconds
Total:	100% (n=201)	100 % (n= 97)	100 % (n=104)

* In all the news stories (5) without soundbites that had a restricted form, the interpretive frame was presented by commentator Arnaldo Jabor.

But Table 2 also shows that, as expected, interpretive frames predominate in the news stories with soundbites, which are also longer. While only 5% of the news stories without soundbites presented interpretive frames, 37% of the news stories with soundbites included such frames through restricted, plural-closed, and plural-open reports. Thus, although the news coverage was predominantly episodic, more interpretive controversies emerged when soundbites were presented. As Table 2 also shows, news stories with soundbites were almost three times longer than the ones without outsider speakers.

It should be noted that descriptive news coverage, adopting an episodic media frame, is not conducive for the development of interpretive controversies. This type of media content hinders viewers' comprehension of news stories. Empirical studies have demonstrated that facts without interpretation make little sense for the audience (Graber, 1994, pp. 334-336). And since episodic news

stories are much shorter, they tend not to play a significant role in the process by which viewers make sense of the world of politics. Research conducted in several countries has consistently demonstrated that longer stories are comprehended in a higher rate than shorter ones, no matter where they are placed in the newscast (Robinson and Levy, 1986, p.193; Gunter, 1987, p. 158). Taking into consideration all these factors, the analysis that follows will focus only on those stories that were longer and that presented some type of interpretive frame. The aim will be to identify which interpretive controversies *Jornal Nacional* presented to its viewers and which interpretive frames were offered by the newscast to solve such controversies.

The actors who participated in interpretive controversies

I also compared news stories with different forms in relation to the soundbites appearing in each category. One of the aims of this comparison is to verify whether there are significant differences as far as “who” participates in, or is excluded from, interpretive controversies. Table 3 presents the results. The first column, which refers to all soundbites that appeared in the political coverage, shows that the average soundbite lasted in average 7.6 seconds. The length of soundbites in *Jornal Nacional*'s news coverage appears to be diminishing, a trend that might contribute to restrict the presentation of interpretive frames in the news.⁴ Table 3 also shows that the most important actors were common citizens, who accounted for one out of three (32%) of all soundbites that appeared in the period

⁴ My previous study about *Jornal Nacional*'s news coverage of political, social and economic issues in 24 editions aired in 1995/1996 showed that soundbites lasted in average 9.5 seconds (Porto, 1998a).

of analysis. How to explain such predominance of ordinary Brazilians in the political coverage of *Jornal Nacional*?

Table 3 – Classification of all Soundbites appearing in *Jornal Nacional*'s Political Coverage, According to the Form of the News Stories.

Who in soundbite:	All News Stories with soundbites		News stories with an episodic form**		News stories with restricted, plural-open, or plural-closed forms**	
	Frequency	Length*	Frequency	Length*	Frequency	Length*
Official Sources***	16 %	11.4	11 %	12.1	22 %	11.0
Member of Congress	20 %	8.4	17 %	8.8	23 %	8.1
Politicians****	10 %	8.0	8 %	6.1	13 %	9.6
Members of Judiciary	7 %	8.6	8 %	6.5	5 %	14.2
Rep. of trade union, NGO, social movement or protester	4 %	3.9	4 %	3.2	4 %	5.0
Common Citizens	32 %	5.4	41 %	5.9	20 %	3.7
Businessmen and other Professions*****	12 %	7.5	11 %	7.6	13 %	7.3
Total:	100 % (n=270)	7.6	100 % (n=159)	7.2	100 % (n=111)	8.1

* Average length of soundbites in seconds.

** Peason's chi square value = 18.401 (p<.005). Refers to frequency distribution only.

*** President, Ministers of State, other government officials.

**** Politicians who are not members of federal government or Congress.

***** Lawyers, business owners, experts, scholars, military personnel, etc.

The answer lies in the recent changes that took place in the newscast. When I asked William Bonner, the anchor and editor-general of *Jornal Nacional*, about their policy for the soundbites, he explained their legitimating role. According to Bonner, the “soundbite, first of all, legitimates the journalistic discourse of the news story ... It is our incontestable proof that we went there and heard the characters of that story. And if a story has characters it captivates. If it doesn't have characters it does not captivate.” When I asked him about the existence of norms or

guidelines about who should be heard in the political coverage, he explained that the new orientation is to focus less in the “bla-bla-bla” of politicians (or “fru-fru,” as he called it) and to give more space to ordinary citizens. According to Bonner’s argument, this personification of the news coverage through soundbites with ordinary citizens would make the reports more meaningful and interesting for the audience. Evandro Carlos de Andrade, the head of TV Globo’s journalism department, confirmed the new policy. He explained that the changes in the journalism practiced by the network included the reduction of the “excessive space” that the network’s newscasts used to give to politicians and their boring type of talk (*conversa fiada*). Carlos de Andrade argued that there was no need to listen to representatives of political parties because they are too weak in Brazil.

This policy on the part of news producers works to exclude interpretive controversies from TV news. Ordinary Brazilians are not included in the news to interpret events and issues in particular ways. They are introduced instead primarily to “illustrate” the topic, to legitimate a story line that is built by the journalist in advance, and to make the reporting more interesting. As we can see in Table 3, the soundbites of average Brazilians were extremely brief, lasting for 6 seconds in the episodic news stories and decreasing to only 3.7 seconds in the reports that presented interpretive frames.⁵ They were also more frequent in episodic news coverage, which tends to be more descriptive and to avoid political controversy. It is hard to imagine how citizens can present any coherent interpretive

⁵ In his study about the significance of soundbites in American television news, Hallin (1994) also found that their length varies depending on whether the actor is a member of the elite or not. Thus, in coverage of the 1988 presidential election, the average soundbite for candidates and other elites was 8.9 seconds, while it lasted only 4.2 seconds in the case of voters (p. 140).

frame in less than four seconds. In contrast, official sources and politicians spoke for an average of 10 seconds or more in the news stories that presented interpretive frames.

Trade unions and other organizations of civil society could provide citizens with more effective cues, but they accounted for only 4% of the soundbites and their representatives spoke, in average, for only four seconds. The news stories that presented interpretive frames were dominated instead by the soundbites of official sources, members of Congress, and other elites, including businessmen and other professionals. These elite sources not only appeared more frequently than representatives of civil society, but they also spoke much longer utterances. The last column of Table 3 also shows that, in the news stories that presented interpretive frames, the soundbites of official sources and members of Congress were more frequent and lasted longer than those of ordinary citizens. Thus, although *Jornal Nacional* political coverage had an important presence of average Brazilians, it was symbolically dominated by official sources and other elites.

It is important to note, though, that elite sources, particularly members of Congress and other politicians, can present a plurality of interpretive frames that allow citizens to elaborate better and more varied understandings of political events and issues. This is particularly true in the case of political environments like the Brazilian one, which includes 17 political parties with representation in Congress. It is therefore important to identify which interpretive frames were made available by the newscast that could work as cues for viewers. The analysis that follows will pay special attention to the issue of whether the interpretive frames of the government were consistently supported in the news coverage.

Interpretive controversies and official sources

In this section I focus only on the 36 news stories that presented interpretive frames, those with restricted, plural-closed, and plural open forms. As we have seen, these reports account for only 18% of the total political coverage. Nevertheless, they were much longer, lasting in average almost two minutes (117 seconds), while all other remaining news stories about politics lasted in average 69 seconds. And contrary to episodic reports, these news stories contextualized political events and issues in terms of some type of interpretive controversy. Thus their relevance in relation to the total news flow.

With the aim of verifying how interpretive frames were organized by the news coverage, I compare the distribution of soundbites according to the form of the reports. Table 4 presents the distribution of the soundbites according to the form of the news stories. The data shows that restricted news stories were dominated by the official sources of the state (36%). In 71% of the cases when officials appeared speaking in *Jornal Nacional* they were shown in reports that presented a single interpretive framework!⁶ Common citizens came in second place, with 25% of the soundbites in restricted news stories. But as we have seen, they spoke for an average of only four seconds in the reports that presented interpretive frames. Chances are that they were included only as illustrations and not to present a specific interpretation of the issues or events discussed by restricted reports.

⁶ Of the 24 soundbites with official sources, 17 were in restricted news stories, 5 in plural-closed, and 2 in plural-open.

**Table 4 – Distribution of Soundbites in the News Stories About Politics
with Restricted, Plural-Closed and Plural-Open Forms.***

Who in soundbite:	Restricted	Plural-Closed	Plural-Open
Official Sources**	36 %	10 %	13 %
Member of Congress	8 %	25 %	67 %
Politicians***	19 %	10 %	7 %
Members of Judiciary	0	6 %	13 %
Rep. of trade union, NGO, social movement or protester	2 %	6 %	0
Common Citizens	25 %	21 %	0
Businessmen and other Professions****	10 %	21 %	0
Total:	100 % (n=48)	100 % (n=48)	100 % (n=15)

* Total number of soundbites = 111. Peason's chi square value = 40.798 (p<.000). Eleven cells have expected count less than five.

** President, Ministers of State, other government officials.

*** Politicians who are not members of federal government or Congress.

**** Lawyers, business owners, experts, scholars, military personnel, etc.

The analysis of soundbites appearing in restricted news stories, reported in the first column of Table 4, shows a clear predominance of the interpretive frames promoted by the federal government (see Porto, 2001, for details). Representatives of the opposition and other challengers were included in these reports *only when agreeing with the interpretations of officials*. There was no plurality in the way issues were represented in these news stories. And as we will see in the next sections, restricted news stories, which tend to be consistently dominated by official sources, have an important impact in the process by which viewers make sense of the world of politics.

3. The Effects of Governmental Frames: Experimental Results

Having identified how interpretive controversies were carried out *in Jornal Nacional's* news coverage, in this section I present the results of one of the experiments conducted with inhabitants of the Federal District in Brazil. The experiment was designed to verify whether the form of the news reports affects the process by which viewers interpret the world of politics. More specifically, I compare the effects of news stories that present a single interpretive frame (restricted) to those reports that present more than one point of view (plural-open). As we will see, the form of news content has a significant impact on citizens' understandings of political events and issues. Before introducing the design and the results of the two experiments, I present the hypotheses that will be tested and the methods used in both studies.

Method

The hypothesis tested by the experiment, which was presented in the first section, is the following: *When television segments present only one interpretive frame, adopting therefore a restricted form, more members of the audience will interpret the events or issues in terms of the interpretation promoted by this frame.* To test the study's hypothesis, a controlled experiment was conducted between October and November 1999 in the Brazilian Federal District, where Brasília, the country's capital, is located. The controlled experiment was chosen as a research method because it allows a more precise investigation of how media content variables affect the process by which individuals interpret the world of politics. In the case of this study, the aim is to identify how differences in the form of

television news stories affect audiences' interpretation of political events and issues.

To recruit participants to the study, I adopted the procedure of “stratifying before randomizing” (Westley, 1981, p. 210). To increase the representativeness of the samples, the experiments took place in three different regions of the Federal District, with different income levels. The downtown area of *Plano Piloto* was chosen as a high-income area, the city of *Taguatinga* as a middle-class town, and the city of *Ceilândia* as a low-income area. The sample of the experiment included 63 subjects, 21 from each of the three regions. Inhabitants of the three areas were randomly chosen and invited to participate in a “research about people’s opinions and about television.” Once subjects agreed to participate and came to the designated location, the procedures of the experiment were the following: upon their arrival, subjects signed authorization forms and filled a questionnaire with some basic socio-demographic information (age, income, education, etc.). Subjects were then randomly assigned to one of the three treatment groups of the experiment. The first treatment group watched a version of the news story with only one interpretive frame of the event and/or issue (a restricted news story). The second group watched a version of the same news story with two interpretive frames of the same event and/or issue (a plural-open news story). Finally, the third group was the control group and people assigned to it watched a different news story, not related to the subject of the one used in the two treatment groups. Immediately after the news story was shown, a member of the research team conducted an individual “focused interview” (Merton & Kendall, 1962) with each participant. This interview was audio taped and later transcribed. After the

interview was finished, participants received R\$ 10 Reais (about 6 US dollars) and were debriefed.

Is the Supreme Court right? Frames in the news content

The theme of the news story chosen for the experiment was the Supreme Court, namely its decision to consider unconstitutional the government's proposal to tax retired public functionaries and increase the taxation of those still working. This was an important event, which provoked varied reactions from different political actors. A key question in this context was how the media would frame the conflict between the federal government and the Supreme Court. In the case of *Jornal Nacional*, the coverage of the decision was completely restricted to the sources of the federal government. No other point of view got through the newscast. The arguments of the Supreme Court were not presented and the public functionaries and their representatives were not heard. Nevertheless, TV Globo's late evening newscast, *Jornal da Globo*, constructed a very different coverage of the same episode. It not only showed a short soundbite of a trade union leader, but it also presented the point of view of the Supreme Court based on an interview with the Justice who wrote the opinion.

Since *Jornal Nacional's* coverage was radically different from the one provided by the late evening newscast, it became possible to edit the news story so as to create very different news forms. The second experiment was set up to investigate how two very different versions of the same news story (restricted and plural-open) would influence the process by which viewers interpreted the decision of the Supreme Court. The first treatment group watched the restricted news story,

which had two parts. The first part was broadcast by *Jornal Nacional* on September 30, 1999, the day of the Court's decision. The second part was broadcast in the following day, also by *Jornal Nacional*. In both editions of the newscast, only the point of view of the government was presented. The summary of the restricted news story used in the second experiment is the following

Restricted News Story about the Supreme Court:

PART I

ANCHOR (Chico Pinheiro) – “The Supreme Court considered unconstitutional the social security tax for retired public functionaries and rejected the increase in the contribution of active functionaries. The loss in the government's income will be in the order of 2,5 billion Reais.”

REPORTER (Heraldo Pereira) – “It was an unanimous decision of the Supreme Court, 11-0. Even Justice Jobim, nominated by President Fernando Henrique, voted against the government” (The reporter then gives the details and the figures about the decision of the Supreme Court. Total length of the utterance: 65 seconds).

SOUNDBITE 1 (Rep. Arnaldo Madeira, Leader of the Government in the Chamber of Deputies) – “The Supreme Court is transferring to society as a whole the payment of the Federal government's huge deficit.”

SOUNDBITE 2 (Aloysio Nunes, General-Secretary of the Presidency) – “This decision was, in our point of view, outrageous. But it only reinforces our determination in taking all measures needed to maintain our objectives in the fiscal policy.”

PART II

REPORTER (Heraldo Pereira) – (Continues for 23 seconds. He comments on how the President reacted to the decision of the Supreme Court: he was surprised by the decision and thought that it would harm the country's economy).

SOUNDBITE 3 (President Fernando Henrique) – “The decision of the Supreme Court was a technical one. What happens is that now those who retire will receive more than those who work. Those who work pay 11 % but when they retire they stop paying. It is an incentive for people to retire. This is not right.”

Total length of the news story: 2 minutes and 27 seconds

The restricted news story presented only the interpretive frame put forward by the federal government. In the opening statement, the anchor defines the problem. According to him, the Court's decision will cause a loss of 2,5 billion Reais (approximately 1,6 billion US dollars) for the government's budget. Based on this problem definition, the three official sources of the government presented a particular assessment of the significance of the Court's decision. According to the official interpretative frame, the decision of the Supreme Court was outrageous. It was a "technical decision" that transferred to society as a whole the payment of the federal budget's huge deficit. The Supreme Court's ruling would lead to a "loss" of 2,5 billion Reais for the federal government and harm the country's economy.

The second treatment group was exposed to a plural-open version of the same news story that also had two parts. The first part was the same used in the restricted version. The second was taken from *Jornal da Globo*, the late evening newscast. The summary of the news story is the following:

Plural-Open News Story about the Supreme Court:

PART I

The same as in the restricted news story.

PART II

SOUNDBITE 3 (Antonio Nogueira, Representative of the public functionaries' trade union) – "We will go to the Courts to defend this right that the government wants to take from us again."

REPORTER (Carlos Monforte) – "All this could have been avoided if the government had paid attention to the Constitutional Amendment 20. As a matter of fact, this amendment was created by the social security reform that was proposed by the government itself and which was put into effect in December of 1998." (The reporter then comments on an interview with Justice Celso Melo, who wrote the

opinion of the Supreme Court's decision. The Justice refers to two articles of the Constitutional Amendment and the reporter shows and reads article 195 which states that no taxes can be charged from retired public functionaries. The reporter finishes by showing the Constitution and by saying: "The Supreme Court just enforced the Constitution." Total length of the utterance: 31 seconds).

Total length of the news story: 2 minutes and 28 seconds.

The form of this news story was classified as plural-open. It presented two main interpretations, one put forward by the government and the other presented by the Supreme Court, while none of them was preferred over the other. Although two soundbites with official sources of the federal government appeared in the first part, the second part presented a soundbite with a trade union leader and the interpretive frame of the Supreme Court. The second part of this version of the news story, taken from *Jornal da Globo*, presents a very different assessment of the significance of the Court's decision. It suggests that the Constitution did not allow the taxation proposed by the government and that such restriction was included by the constitutional reform promoted by the federal government itself the year before. Thus, the alternative frame presents a different attribution of responsibility. It suggests that the confusion with the new tax was due the government's own actions, since it was the President's proposal that included in the Constitution the prohibition of taxation of retired public functionaries. The journalist summarized this interpretation by presenting a very difference assessment of the significance of the Supreme Court's decision, according to which the high court had just enforced the Constitution.

The factors that shape the choice of frames

How to explain such an important difference between the coverage of the prime-time newscast and the coverage of the late evening newscast? Why did *Jornal Nacional* presented only the position of the federal government, while *Jornal da Globo* presented a very different interpretation of the same episode? Why would journalists of the same media company frame the same event in quite different ways? To answer these questions, it is necessary to focus again on the news production process through the interviews with TV Globo's news producers. I asked Evandro Carlos de Andrade, the head of TV Globo's journalism department, about the coverage of the Supreme Court's decision. He answered in the following way:

Question: Wasn't there a huge difference in the coverage [of the Supreme Court's decision]?

Andrade: Yes, there was. But I am not in the condition to make such kind of comparison. I imagine that one of the factors was time, but I am not sure. I confess that I don't know how to position myself about this news story you are speaking about. *Jornal Nacional* should have heard the other side.

Question: But shouldn't there be a concern with the value you mentioned before, that of neutrality?

Andrade: Yes, there should be such a concern. In the particular case of the [public functionaries'] pensions, I agree with you, but I should also say that this issue caused great indignation among us and this is reflected in the kind of coverage that gets done. The obscene evocation of privileges in Brasília for this corporative caste that retires with absurd pensions (...) And we think – I admit that this was reflected in the editing – that the Supreme Court frequently acts according to corporative interests, and that is a shame.

The same questions were presented to William Bonner, the anchor and editor-general of *Jornal Nacional*. After explaining that he had not edited the news story about the Supreme Court's ruling because he was out of town, he had the following to say:

Question: Why did *Jornal Nacional* include only official sources?

Bonner: I don't know. I can't say because I was not here (...) But it is strange that we heard only official sources, that is not the general practice. But now, in the name of patriotism, I should say the following: the Supreme Court's decision – and I am very surprised with what Monforte said – was terrible for the country. And the disgust of the government is a reasonable disgust.

Finally, Mário Marona, the head of TV Globo's news bureau in Brasília, also discussed the reasons for the differences in the coverage of the Supreme Court's decision. Marona, who was the editor-general of *Jornal Nacional* between 1996 and 1999, gave different reasons to explain the differences between the coverage of the Supreme Court's decision by the two newscasts, including different time deadlines and differences in the profile of the audience of each newscast. But Marona also stresses the possibility of the influence of TV Globo's own editorial positions:

A third reason that might have played a role: may be there was an editorial position of the company – I don't know if that was the case – in favor of public functionaries paying social security taxes as all people do (...) *Jornal Nacional* has positions of this kind. Although we don't present an editorial, the way the news story is presented shows what we prefer. In a didactic and simple way, we do show a position. I can't say that the newscast is aseptic. It isn't. I think that in the case of public functionaries *Jornal Nacional* was in favor of the taxation. We will not say that because we don't want to go to war with the public functionaries – let the government do that – but the taxation was just.

To explain the reasons for the disparities in the news coverages of the Supreme Court's ruling by *Jornal Nacional* and by *Jornal da Globo*, all three news producers mention the editorial positions of journalists and of TV Globo. In this way, they indicate the circumstance when the influence of official sources in the news production process is strengthened. This happens when the editorial positions of the company coincide with the point of view of the federal government. All three admit that there could be a position of TV Globo against the Supreme Court's decision and such a position would be reflected in the news coverage. Thus, the political standpoints of the company may have shaped the kind of framing that *Jornal Nacional* presented. In the case of the news story about the Supreme Court's decision, TV Globo's news producers shared the indignation of the government and framed the event accordingly. Mário Marona suggests that such political positions of the company are shown in subtle ways in the news coverage. Therefore, *when news producers agree with the way official sources of the state frame political issues and events they tend to exclude alternative points of view from the coverage.*

Viewers' interpretations

Having presented the news story about the Supreme Court's ruling and discussed the reasons why TV Globo's newscasts presented quite distinct interpretations about it, I now turn to the results of the experiment. I begin by verifying whether participants defined the Court's decision as a problem. As we have seen, the two different versions of the news stories of the experiment included very different problem definitions. The restricted news story defined the decision

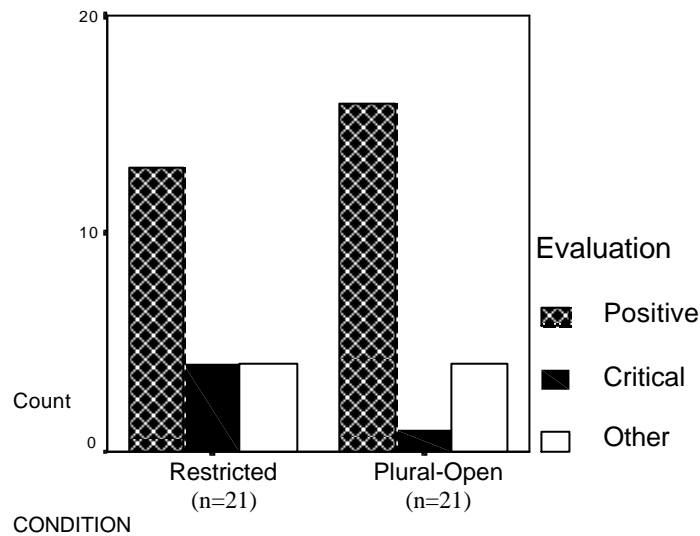
as “outrageous,” as a technical decision that transferred to society as a whole the payment of the federal budget’s huge deficit. It would also “cause” a loss of 2,5 billion Reais. On the other hand, the second part of the plural-open news story opposed this definition. It argued instead that the Supreme Court did nothing beyond fulfilling its constitutional role. Because both versions included different interpretive frames about problem definition, it became possible to test possible framing effects in this area.

To test the hypotheses of the study, subjects that participated in the experiment were exposed to different versions of the same news story. The first treatment group watched the news report with a restricted form, presenting only the frame put forward by the federal government. The second treatment group watched the news story with a plural-open form, which included the frame promoted by the official sources of the government, but also the interpretation of the events by the Supreme Court. Finally, the control group watched an episodic news story about a new formula being proposed by the government to calculate the pensions of public functionaries. This news story did not mention the Supreme Court or the ruling about the new tax.

To verify whether the two different versions of the news story (restricted and plural-open) would lead to different definitions of the event, I asked participants the following open-ended question: “What is your opinion about the decision of the Supreme Court, which considered unconstitutional the proposed new tax for retired public functionaries?” Answers were coded according to three main categories. First, there are answers that interpreted the decision of the Court in a positive way. Respondents in this group considered the Court’s decision

appropriate and frequently expressed criticism about the new tax for public functionaries proposed by the government. Second, there are answers that expressed criticism about the Court's decision. Individuals in this group considered that the new tax would create a more equal and just situation between public functionaries and other workers, who do not have the same privileges. Finally, the third category includes individuals who did not know the answer or provided unclear answers. Figure 1 presents the results of this classification, dividing answers according to experimental condition.

Figure 1 – Respondents' Evaluations of the Supreme Court's Decision by Treatment Condition



Significantly different by one tailed t-test:
 Restricted from plural-open: $p < .10$ (t value = 1.430)

The data shows that, despite the report's negative evaluation of the Supreme Court's decision, the great majority of the subjects supported it (69% of the 42 participants in both conditions). But even in a context in which viewers had strong predispositions in favor of the Court, the form of the news story had a

significant effect, confirming once more the main hypothesis of the study. As we can see in Figure 1, almost all critical evaluations of the event are in the restricted group, and the difference is statistically significant. Thus, when exposed to a news story with a single interpretative frame that presented a critical definition of the Court's decision, more subjects accepted the interpretation advanced by the newscast.

A close look at the responses of the four subjects in the restricted group that provided critical evaluations of the Court's decision can help explain the framing effect. The interview transcripts reveal the importance of interpretive frames that are presented by the news to the process by which viewers develop understandings about political events and issues. Asked about their opinion on the Court's decision, these respondents said:

Otelo⁷: I think that retired public functionaries need to pay the tax.

Interviewer: They needed to pay?

Otelo: Yes, because the way things are... When he retires he receives more than when he was working. That is why I think they needed to pay (Female, 26, high-income area).

Jarbas: My opinion ... I think that they should give the pension, but not charging a tax from the retirees, you understand? They needed to do what they were speaking about, that they were thinking about charging a tax. And it was said that if they did not charge the tax an incentive for retiring would be created.

Interviewer: Do you think there should be a tax for the retirees?

Jarbas: Yes, there should be a tax (Male, 18, middle-income area).

⁷ All names are fictitious to protect the anonymity of the participants.

Agnelo: My opinion is that is that, in relation to the retirees, it [the Court's decision] is just. I don't think it is right to tax someone who has been working during all his life. Now, in relation to the tax for public functionaries, my idea is different. We see, for example, that there are people in the private sector that pay more [taxes] than the public functionaries. Thus, my position is that this should be rethought and reformulated (Male, 22, middle-income area).

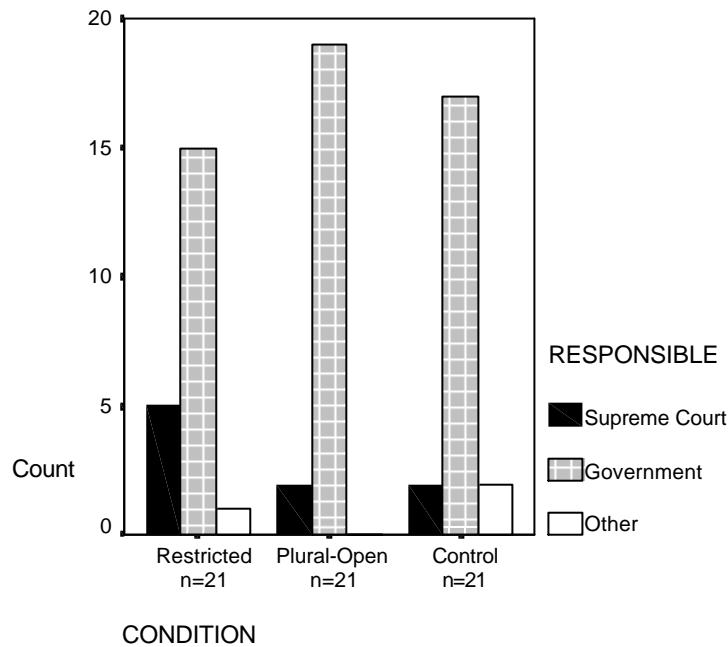
Sofia: I agree with President Fernando Henrique Cardoso when he says that when the person was working she would pay as usual. Why not to continue paying [after retiring], understand? (Female, 22, high-income area).

Looking at these answers, it appears that the interpretive frame presented by President Cardoso was particularly useful for these subjects when making sense of the Court's decision. They tended to justify their criticisms about the decision by referring to arguments that were presented by the President's soundbite. Otelo repeats the president's argument that is not fair that when someone retires he or she receives more than what they received when they were working. Jarbas argues, like the President, that this would create an incentive for people to retire, while Sofia explicitly refers to the soundbite of the President as a consideration. Finally, Agnelo justifies his criticism of the Court's decision by mentioning the unequal treatment between workers of the public and private sectors. He is the only one that does not explicitly refer to the arguments presented by the President's soundbite.

Besides the area of problem definition, the experiment also tested the main hypothesis in the field of attribution of responsibility. A closed-ended question was included in the interview guide, allowing it to be presented also to the control groups. The question was the following: "With which of the following statements

do you agree mostly: a) the blame for the confusion with the new taxation for public functionaries and for the loss in the government’s income is with the Supreme Court; or b) the blame for the confusion with the new taxation for public functionaries and for the loss in the government’s income is with the government itself.” The results are presented by Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 - Responsibility Attribution for the Confusion with the New Social Security Tax by Treatment Condition



Significantly different by one tailed t-test:
 Restricted from plural-open and control: $p < .11$ (t value=1.235).

The main hypothesis of the study is again confirmed. When exposed to a restricted news story, more individuals adopted its interpretive frame. As we see in Figure 2, the restricted treatment group was the one with more participants blaming the Supreme Court for the “confusion” with the new tax and the difference

between the restricted and plural-open groups is quite significant ($p < .11$). Thus, television news also affected responsibility attribution.

Another close look at the interview transcripts can illuminate how this process of blame attribution works. Participants of the plural-open group had access to alternative points of view and frequently used them when elaborating an opinion about the question of responsibility. When asked who was to be blamed for the confusion with the new tax, two respondents had the following to say:

The government is responsible because it should, as a guardian, know the laws in detail. The Supreme Court needed to come and say that that was not allowed (Male, 45, high-income area).

The blame is with the government. The Supreme Court has just respected something the government itself has done before. I would not call it blame, it was a lapse, a mistake, a foolish act on the part of the government. (Female, 24, Middle-income area).

Both participants made clear references to the interpretation provided by journalist Carlos Monforte in the plural-open news story. According to this frame, the government should have known the relevant laws, but mistakenly ignored legal arrangements that it had established itself in the previous year. In this sense, both participants agree with the journalist's interpretation that the Supreme Court's ruling had just enforced the Constitution and that the cause of the confusion was with the government's lapses and mistakes.

Nevertheless, it is also important to stress that only a small minority of the study's sample (9 subjects or 14%) blamed the Supreme Court, in spite of the restricted news' negative evaluation of the Court's ruling. The great majority (51 subjects or 81%) considered the government responsible for the confusion with the

new social security tax. Thus, television news cannot be seen as an omnipotent force shaping people's opinions, since participants tended to blame the government no matter how the news framed the issue. The extremely low popularity of President Cardoso in the period of the fieldwork is a very important variable to explain these tendencies among the study's participants. Another reason for the predominance of the frame blaming government is the fact that the Federal District's population is made up to a great extent of public functionaries. Most participants of the study had direct experience and something at stake with governmental attempts to reduce its deficit by increasing the taxation of its employees. Therefore, the Federal District was a setting in which the frame blaming the Supreme Court had much less favorable conditions to be accepted than in other parts of the country, where the number of public functionaries is much less significant.

Another reason why framing effects were relatively weak has to do with the fact that people actively interpret television content and are able to resist the way it frames the issues. Audience members frequently achieve this by providing new interpretations that were absent from the news report. Several of the participants argued, for example, that most problems with the social security system were due to the government's "bad administration." Three participants illustrate this interpretation:

I believe the government collects a lot of taxes, but I think that they are not well used (...) The problem is not in collecting taxes but in administering what is collected (Female, 23, high-income area).

The government does not know how to administer the money, it doesn't know ... If taxes were collected from the rich, may be we would be able to pay our foreign

debt, right? ... In sum, it is the bad administration of our government. It doesn't know how to administer the money (Female, 18, low-income area).

I think the federal government owes much more to the social security system than the loss itself. Brasília was built with this money, a lot of constructions were made with this money and the government never paid back this money for the social security system. Thus, what is being felt now is the need for this money that was taken away [from the social security system] (Male, 45, high-income area).

The recognition of the active role of the audience in interpreting political issues and media messages should not let us ignore the central role played by television in constraining the range of interpretations available for citizens. If it is true that viewers frequently resist the interpretations embedded in media frames, this experiment also provides important evidences of framing effects. The interpretations of several participants were heavily dependent on the range of frames presented by the news story they watched and the difference between the treatment groups was quite significant.

4. Conclusions

The results of the controlled experiment about the framing of the Supreme Court provide support to the main hypothesis of the study. When exposed to the restricted news story, more individuals adopted its interpretive frame, which presented a critical assessment of the Supreme Court's ruling. When exposed to the plural-open news story, participants had access to the point of view of the Supreme Court -- which suggested that the government itself was to be blamed for the problems with the new tax -- and interpreted the event accordingly.

These findings raise important issues about the long-term political role of TV news in general, and of TV Globo's *Jornal Nacional* in particular. The

analysis of *Jornal Nacional*'s content has shown that when it presents some kind of interpretive frame, the newscast tends to adopt a restricted form. Moreover, these restricted news stories were almost completely dominated by the perspectives of the official sources of the state. The fact that *Jornal Nacional* frequently presents one point of view, and that this interpretation is usually the one promoted by the government, has important consequences for the ways audiences make sense of the world of politics. In media environments like this one, citizens have access to a very narrow range of frames that could be used as cues or shortcuts.

Some of the participants of the experiment identified this tendency of *Jornal Nacional* to promote a particular interpretation, not leaving much space for the audience to reason about the different alternatives. One of the experiment's participants, for example, provided the following evaluation of the newscast:

I like *Jornal Nacional*. I think it is good, but sometimes it imposes what we have to think, not leaving us thinking by ourselves. It practically imposes its opinion, what we have to think that is right (Female, 21, low-income area).

The interpretive controversies model proposed in this paper stresses how television can work as to narrow the range of interpretive frames available in the public sphere. When television offers audiences only one frame, usually the interpretation put forward by the state and its authorities, more citizens tend to make sense of the world of politics accordingly.

It becomes than possible to investigate the role of political and media environments, especially how they can harm democracy by narrowing the range of interpretations in the public sphere. It is also possible to call attention to the

importance of establishing democratic controls over the mass media by the citizenry. As a respondent from the second experiment puts it:

I think the media in Brazil have to be reformulated. If we want to change the country, the judiciary has to discipline the networks. There are already NGOs, TV viewers associations. I think there is already a bill of former (sic) Representative Marta Suplicy proposing a way to discipline the information. Because it is our right as citizens to know what we hear, from whom we hear the versions, right? Thus, I think we need to create ...It is not censorship, I want to clarify that it is not censorship. I don't think that this is the way to go. As citizen, you fight for the quality of the product you buy. The newscast is a product and I want a product with quality (Male, 30, low-income area).

The participant calls attention to the need of some kind of regulation or public control of the media, since the quality of information citizens receive is a key factor for the country's democracy. As he puts it, such regulation should not be confused with censorship. It should be seen instead as a way to promote a better accountability of the media to citizens and their organizations. The results of the experiments provide empirical support about the rightness of this position and contribute to clarify, I believe, the reasons why such regulation of the mass media is important.

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