

# **The influence of media on the New Brazilian Republic: From the 1989 elections to the January 8th attacks**

By Elisa Oliveira

## **AUTHOR BIO**

Elisa Oliveira, Born in Recife, Northeast Brazil, is a gap year student dedicated to the studies of social sciences and humanities. Passionate about languages, education, and journalism, as well as literature, music, and the arts. She is a member of the Latin American Leadership Academy and seeks to promote social transformation in the Brazilian landscape through education.

## **ABSTRACT**

The Brazilian media wields significant influence over popular thought and ideals, a substantial portion of the population regards the information provided by the mainstream media as absolute truth, granting them near-absolute power over shaping popular thinking. What stands out is that the Brazilian media is funded by major businessmen, politicians, and oligarchs who manipulate information for their own benefit. Much of this can be traced back to the country's political history. The media played a crucial role in shaping this new political phase in Brazil, influencing election outcomes, supporting protests, and inciting popular thought to align with their ideals.

*Keywords: Influence of Brazilian Media, History, Brazilian Republic, Impeachment and Fall of Dilma and PT, Rise of Bolsonaro, Democratic Attack.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the military dictatorship of 1964-1985, institutional acts imposed strong censorship on the press of the time. Journalists could only publish articles that aligned with what the dictatorial government preached. Nevertheless, the Brazilian press managed to strengthen itself during this period. The economic dependence that media owners had on the State led many to submit to censorship, weakening any opposition.

*"The obstacles to solidarity were not created, reinforced, or exploited by the regime. The lack of solidarity was a disadvantage generated by the press itself,"* says political scientist Anne-Marie Smith in her book "A Forced Agreement."

With the "Diretas Já" movement that began in 1983, in which the people advocated for direct presidential elections and the end of the dictatorship, and intensified in 1984 when the people took to the streets, the media gained significant prominence in the Brazilian political and social landscape by aligning with public opinion and supporting the movement.

Sociologist Alzira Alves de Abreu argues that the media played a crucial role in the country's democratization: *"The press, by disseminating facts and events, triggers reactions that tend to quickly expand the participation of political actors in the process. When censorship was lifted, the press became a key element in uniting social forces in the struggle for democratization."*

## FIRST DIRECT ELECTIONS IN 1989

In the wake of the 1988 constitution, which heralded the restoration of freedom of the press in Brazil, the influence wielded by the media assumed an even more pronounced role during the landmark first direct presidential elections in 1989. This election, conducted in two decisive rounds, brought forth Fernando Collor and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as the final

contenders, who would then engage in a pivotal debate broadcast by TV Globo. However, what truly stands out about this debate is the revelation made years later by Armando Nogueira, the director of journalism at Rede Globo during that period. He boldly asserted that there had been manipulative actions at play in the broadcast orchestrated by the network. Nogueira disclosed that the manipulation had been carried out by individuals occupying lower rungs in the organizational hierarchy, and he only became privy to these machinations after the broadcast had already reached the public domain.

The Marinho family, who were the proprietors of Rede Globo, maintained significant business ties with the Collor family in the state of Alagoas. Consequently, the manipulative tactics deployed transcended the mere enhancement of a candidate's public image; they were driven by the vested interests of those operating behind the corporate façade. The Former General Director of TV Globo, José Bonifácio de Oliveira Sobrinho, exerted his influence over Collor's election. *"We managed to take Collor's tie of , put a little sweat on him with some glycerin, and we put all those folders there with supposed allegations against Lula - but the folders were entirely empty or contained blank papers."* José Bonifacio's admission underscores that the entirety of the debate's formal proceedings had been meticulously orchestrated by the media conglomerate, while the content itself remained the domain of Collor.

Fernando Collor did succeed in winning the election. However, in a shocking turn of events in October 1992, with just two years into his presidency, he faced impeachment proceedings. These were instigated by none other than his own brother, Pedro Collor, who accused him of fraud and corruption. What becomes patently evident in revisiting this pivotal first election is that the Brazilian media, during this epoch, invariably assumed the characteristics and leanings of its corporate magnates. Notably, in Brazil, these business owners often harbored political biases aligned with the tenets of liberal right-wing ideologies.

Consequently, the concept of impartial journalism, which is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, was compromised, and this tendency became progressively more conspicuous in the subsequent electoral processes. It is a stark reminder of the intricate interplay between media, power, and politics in shaping the trajectory of a nation's democracy.

### **MEDIA MONOPOLY**

The Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988, in Article 220, paragraph 5, stipulates that "The social communication media shall not, directly or indirectly, be the object of monopoly or oligopoly." However, there is a clear divide between what the constitution mandates and what actually occurs. In reality, the monopoly of media production is growing within media conglomerates that control nearly all forms of media, including TV channels (both public and private), online portals, radio stations, internet and telephone service providers, and even streaming services, which characterizes an oligopoly where a few companies and families dominate the production of communication services. Consequently, the monopolization of a unilateral discourse becomes increasingly prevalent in the Brazilian mass communication landscape. The inclinations of these media groups often hinder the existence of a plurality of voices, the clash of opinions, and the coexistence of different values and worldviews, especially given that the majority of the Brazilian media is controlled, directed, and edited by an economic elite composed mainly of white men.

The press, as a shaper of public opinion, plays the primary role in influencing society. Sociologist Darcy Ribeiro, in his book "The Brazilian People," argues that the capitalist owners, aligned with the oligarchy where political power is concentrated, control the media, which consequently shapes public thought. *"They [the patronage] employ the most competent technocrats and control the media, shaping public opinion. They elect parliamentarians and leaders. They rule, in*

*short, with increasing audacity."* Thus, the press is one of the main agents of control in our society.

Researcher and scholar Jorge W. Queiroz believes that we are currently experiencing an information war, which can affect how citizens process news. *"We are currently experiencing a global information war that is growing openly and secretly far beyond what the general public is aware of. The presence of propaganda and manipulated information in news and social media is a threat to our democracy and our ability to make well-informed decisions."* This thought contributes to the concept of Fake News, as with propaganda and manipulated information being inserted into the media daily, more people are susceptible to falling for fake news.

Considering that we live in a media society where our social and power relations are mediated by various media activities, from print newspapers to online websites and social networks, the Brazilian media becomes a political-ideological actor that uses its instruments to manipulate tendencies in the social lives of its audience, which largely reproduces opinions that align with its points of power.

Mostly, it's crucial to note that media organizations are capitalist businesses, and therefore, their primary aim is profit rather than a commitment to truthful information. As analyzed by political science professor Francisco Fonseca in a study for the 'Instituto de Pesquisa Economica Aplicada (IPEA): *"Their mercantile role is, however, distinct from companies in other business sectors, as, in addition to the power to shape opinion, their commodity (news) is subject to more complex and subtle variables than those found in common goods and services. This is because their operation implies an unstable balance between: shaping opinion; receiving influences from consumers and, above all, from a wide range of advertisers; interacting with the State - through renegotiations of tax and social security debts, exemptions, loans, as well as regulatory*

*issues, among others; and making a profit."*

As discussed in the above passage, the Brazilian media, controlled by major business figures, recognizes its role as a more persistent opinion within Brazilian households and leverages this power for the benefit of its owners.

All the elements lead to a fundamental point: the owners of the Brazilian media. The Media Ownership Monitor Brazil, or MOM, claims to have contacted 50 media outlets with the highest audience in Brazil, requesting information about their shareholder composition, and none of them responded. However, what MOM found was that *"The 50 outlets analyzed belong to 26 media groups or companies. Of these, all have more than one type of media outlet, and 16 also have other businesses in the sector, such as film production, book publishing, advertising agencies, cable TV programming, among others. In addition, 21 of the groups or their shareholders have activities in other economic sectors, such as education, finance, real estate, agriculture, energy, transportation, infrastructure, and healthcare. There are also owners who are politicians or religious leaders."*

As mentioned in a few paragraphs above, the media oligopolies with the highest audiences in the country are made up of five groups that control more than half of the media outlets. This includes 9 outlets belonging to the Globo Group, 5 to the Bandeirantes Group, 5 to the Macedo family (considering both the Record Group and IURD outlets, which are owned by the same proprietor), 4 in the regional-scale RBS Group, and 3 to the Folha Group. [Data provided by Media Ownership Brazil.]

### **THE PT GOVERNMENT 2002-2016**

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva stood out and gained political strength and visibility for leading labor movements and strikes in the late 1970s, which were crucial for the reorganization of unions and the breaking of the military regime. Thus, with the support of left-wing

entities, labor unions, and popular forces, he was elected, despite being the opposite of all his predecessors in the presidential office, in 2002, 13 years after losing the election to Collor. What made Lula successful, after 3 failed elections, can be divided into 3 points:

- Lula sought support from other political parties. Since the other presidential candidates were facing political and fiscal problems, including his opponent, José Serra of the PSDB, from the same party as the previous government, several parliamentarians and members of other parties, including parties that supported FHC's government, lent their support to Lula.
- The second point was the marketing strategy, which was previously against him but now started working for him. Duda Mendonça, his childhood friend who managed the campaign's propaganda, transformed the PT's propaganda into a television program that was clear, light, friendly, and emotional, without compromising the political-ideological content, the trademark of the Workers' Party. Duda demonstrated that the PT was doing very well in the municipalities and states it governed, always emphasizing the principles that had always accompanied the PT: honesty, hard work, and the fight for the poorest.
- Furthermore, Lula began to adapt to the situation. In other words, he followed the system, abandoned radical unionism, and started sympathizing with big business owners. He created more comprehensive policies that helped the working class without upsetting the patronage. Thus, he shifted from a candidate with a left-wing political bias to a centrist political bias.

With Lula's government, Brazilian

politics entered a new historical era, known as "Petismo." Historian Mary del Priore described Lula's victory as the rise of a revolutionary generation, not just of an isolated individual. *"Once in power, changes in the old political projects were recorded. In fact, the world has changed, and with it, the political perspectives of left-wing parties."* Lula's government was marked by improvements for the poorer population, reducing poverty and social inequality, removing the country from the hunger map, and achieving favorable economic growth with the best GDP in two decades. Lula was a natural diplomat, and with charisma, he made foreign policy a significant part of his government. Brazil assumed the leading role in BRICS, and the expansion of Mercosur gained more relevance and visibility during Lula's government.

The crisis during his government came with the "Mensalão" scandal in 2005, an investigation into various allegations against the government's top officials who were buying legislators from the Legislative branch to get projects approved. The allegations reached José Dirceu, then Chief of Staff, and from that moment on, things started to get complicated for Lula's government. Nevertheless, Lula managed to build the political career of his successor: Dilma Rousseff, a militant who was tortured and imprisoned during the military dictatorship. She had a background in economics and got involved in politics by helping her husband found the Workers' Democratic Party (PDT) and assisting various political campaigns. In 2002, she was invited to be part of Lula's government transition team. Then, in 2005, with José Dirceu out of the Chief of Staff position, she assumed the role and eventually became Brazil's first female president in 2010.

To govern Brazil, Dilma had to form alliances with the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), which had a majority in Congress, and appoint Michel Temer as her vice-president. A decision that would later turn against her. By the end of her first year as president, Dilma began to clash with the Federal Supreme Court (STF) and the PMDB, who were

demanding a salary increase for the Judiciary and court members. Early in her second year of office, in 2012, Dilma began to sever ties with the PMDB, removing key positions from the party, which, in turn, started opposing the president.

In her address on Labor Day in 2012, Dilma discussed banking rates and compelled banks to reduce interest rates in favor of the Brazilian economy, which did not please big business owners. *"It is unacceptable that Brazil, which has one of the most solid and profitable financial systems, continues to have some of the highest interest rates in the world. These values cannot remain so high. Today's Brazil does not justify this. Banks cannot continue charging the same interest rates for companies and consumers while the basic Selic rate drops, the economy remains stable, and the vast majority of Brazilians honor their commitments with diligence and honesty. Therefore, the financial sector cannot explain this perverse logic to Brazilians. Selic is low, inflation remains stable, but interest rates on overdrafts, installment payments, or credit cards do not decrease."* [Excerpt from Dilma Rousseff's Labor Day address]

Then the Brazilian political landscape changed, the period of post-economic stability began to collapse as the economy lost power and President Dilma Rousseff's popularity declined. It was in this context that a historic phenomenon took place in the country: the 2013 protests, considered by political scientists to be one of the most important in recent Brazilian history, with consequences that continue to reverberate to this day.

As the economic crisis escalates, Brazilians face a significant boost in fuel prices due to the strengthening dollar, which in turn affects the cost of public transportation, including buses, subways and trains, essential modes of transport for the working class. Fares increased from R\$3.00 to R\$3.20, causing the rise of the Free Fare Movement (Movimento Passe Livre or MPL), which protested these fare increases in Brazil's major urban centers. MPL

quickly received support from a majority of people who were deeply dissatisfied with widespread corruption and growing problems in the health and education systems. These events marked the beginning of the first phase of the protests, which quickly gained momentum and became a platform for various ideals and demands. On June 20, 2013, the largest mobilization took place, with approximately 1.25 million protesters gathering in each Brazilian state. It was at this time that the slogan "The giant has awakened" appeared, symbolizing the scale of the protests and the awakening of a new political consciousness among the people.



In this context, the media play a fundamental role in daily coverage of the protests, while social networks also play an important role in mobilization. Twitter and Facebook have become platforms to organize protests and express demands. What started as a protest against rising public transport fares quickly evolved into a series of demands, covering a wide range of issues.

It is important to note that digital media played a mobilizing and disseminating role in the protests, but traditional media, especially the mainstream press, also had a significant impact to the course of events. Media coverage shifted focus, especially after the second phase of the protests. This change was largely due to documented cases of violence by military police, who also began targeting journalists covering the protests. Furthermore, the nationalization of

the protests, with growing public support, led to a change in the media framework. Protests began to be considered legitimate actions, while cases of vandalism were attributed to isolated groups.

*"If, on one hand, digital media played a mobilizing and disseminating role in the protests, traditional media, primarily through formal journalism, also had their role in the evolution of events. [...] There was a shift in the focus of coverage, especially after the second phase. This was mainly due to records of violence by the Military Police, which also began to target reporters covering the protests, and due to the nationalization of the protests gaining public support. There is thus a change in media framing, which began to portray the protests as legitimate actions and cases of vandalism as the actions of isolated groups. At this point, the volume of stories about the protests increased across the country, and formal journalism also became a disseminating element: readers, viewers, and listeners began to have their daily dose of news about the protests, making the topic the primary topic of media agenda-setting." [Vozes Silenciadas, Intervezes, 2014, p.15]*

On June 21, 2013, President Dilma Rousseff announced measures in response to the protests, including improved health care and education, fiscal responsibility, transportation system reforms, and political ways. However, even with these measures and the brief pause in protests, polarization of ideas and dissatisfaction with the government persist in Brazilian public opinion. Surprisingly, a year later, in the 2014 presidential election, Dilma was re-elected, demonstrating the complexity and depth of the political issues that arose during the 2013 protests.

### **THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN THE FALL OF DILMA AND THE RISE OF BOLSONARO**

In an attempt to combat corruption, Dilma enacted Law No. 12,850, which defines criminal organizations, introducing plea

bargains as a means of investigation to obtain evidence, allowing for a broad investigation that would directly affect her stay in government: Lava-jato (Car wash) Operation. The leader of the operation, Judge Sérgio Moro, used the media to his advantage, and the media embraced his narrative without questioning. Lava-jato became a spectacle, with suspects held in detention without trial until they implicated more prominent figures in the political and business scene. The Brazilian people, thirsty for justice, saw 'Lava-jato' as a hunt for the corrupt, and Moro became the nation's hero.



[Images from *Veja* magazine during 'Lava-jato' Operation 2014-2016]

As previously mentioned, the Brazilian press wields significant influence in shaping public opinion within the Brazilian political landscape. At this critical juncture, it played a pivotal role by supporting the 'Lava-Jato' Operation and by portraying Judge Sérgio Moro as a kind of national savior, while simultaneously targeting the Workers' Party (PT), especially former President Lula and then-President Dilma Rousseff. Another noteworthy factor contributing to Dilma's downfall was her main rival in the 2014 election, Aécio Neves. Following his defeat in the election, his party called for an audit of the voting machines. When the results remained unchanged, he began advocating for Dilma's impeachment.

The flaws in the president's administration became increasingly evident as the economy deteriorated, unemployment rates surged, and more than four million people fell back into poverty. Consequently, a portion of the Brazilian population began clamoring for Dilma's impeachment. Furthermore, the 'Lava-Jato' scandals cast shadows over Lula's government, and these allegations became

linked to President Dilma, intensifying calls for her impeachment. Dilma continued to assert her innocence and claimed she had committed no crimes, but her words alone were insufficient.

It's essential to note that the impeachment proceedings against the president did not stem from accusations of corruption. Instead, they were based on charges of fiscal mismanagement, primarily involving the withholding of funds meant for public banks to cover budget shortfalls. The Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), the party of the vice president, with whom Dilma had clashed shortly before the 2013 protests, resurged with renewed strength to oppose her. Eduardo Cunha, a PMDB member who had previously been opposed to impeachment, initiated the impeachment process against Dilma when he himself became embroiled in a corruption scandal.

"(...) Without a doubt, a victory for impeachment this Sunday (April 17th) will signify, for the overwhelming majority of Brazilians, the just punishment of a government that, through incompetence, arrogance, and the delusion of its own isolation, destroyed the economy, sank into corruption, and mocked the institutions." [FOLHA, April 17, 2016, First Section/A2, p. 2].



As seen on magazine covers, sensationalism dominated the print media, as well as social media and Brazilian television news. According to a study conducted by political scientist Maria Lúcia Moritz, published in *Intercom*, a Brazilian communication science journal, the media tended to support impeachment. In the 146 days of observation, 56 editorials were published, with the majority by *O Globo* (34 published), an average of almost

one editorial every four days. Folha de S. Paulo published one per week, totaling 22 editorials in the period mentioned. Despite this slight variation in the frequency of editorials, both newspapers maintained a critical and negative tone toward President Dilma Rousseff's government, and this opinion section was always used to advocate for the President's removal. (Moritz, 2020, p.211)

Amid protests against Dilma, an important figure emerged, Jair Messias Bolsonaro. A conservative right-wing politician, Bolsonaro harnessed the growing hatred towards the PT to promote his presidential candidacy. With his slogan "God, Homeland, Family," reminiscent of fascism, and open support for military intervention and civilian gun ownership, Bolsonaro became the savior of Brazil, enjoying popular support.

While some politicians called for democracy, claiming that impeachment was a coup, others chanted "Tchau querida" (goodbye, dear) ironically in support of Dilma's departure from the presidency. In her speech on August 29th, Dilma expressed fear of the coup not out of a love for power but out of concern for the death of democracy. *"Despite our differences, I suffer once again from the feeling of injustice and the fear that, once more, democracy will be condemned along with me. And I have no doubt that, this time as well, all of us will be judged by history. [...] Today, I only fear the death of democracy, for which many of us here in this chamber have fought with our best efforts."* Thus, after six days of televised trial, Dilma was removed from office on August 31, 2016. The next day her vice president, Michel Temer (PMDB), assumed the presidency.

The Lava-jato investigations continued, and Lula was identified as the leader of the corruption scheme. But it's essential to note that Moro, in addition to being a judge, also took on the role of an investigating prosecutor. In other words, he not only handed down sentences but also gathered evidence to support his case. As the investigations neared former President Lula, a question arose: was Moro a defender of the

Brazilian nation or was he merely trying to eliminate Lula from the political game?

Lula had 35% of the intended votes for the 2018 elections, followed by Bolsonaro with 15%. With Lula out of the picture, Bolsonaro's popularity continued to grow. Using Facebook and live broadcasts to promote his candidacy, Bolsonaro presented himself as a hero who used modernity to his advantage. In 2019, Lula was released from prison due to a lack of evidence for the accusations. Lula had only been incarcerated long enough for Bolsonaro to be elected.

Bolsonaro did not participate in televised political debates, citing health problems due to a stabbing incident during one of his rallies in August 2018. Nevertheless, he received support from some TV networks, granting him significant airtime on Brazilian national television, which went against electoral law. In the first round of the election, while other candidates debated their proposals on Rede Globo, Bolsonaro gave a 26-minute exclusive interview to Rede TV and a 45-minute interview to Bandeirantes.

Once elected, Bolsonaro invited Sérgio Moro to serve as the Minister of Justice of Brazil. However, in 2021, with the worsening COVID-19 pandemic and the crises in Bolsonaro's government, marked by increasing authoritarianism, he began to have disagreements with Moro, leading to Moro's departure. *"Just like Lula, Bolsonaro lies. Nothing he says should be taken seriously. He lied about supporting Car Wash, lied about being against the Centrão (a group of centrist political parties), lied about vaccines, lied about Anvisa (the Brazilian health regulatory agency) and Barra Torres (Anvisa's president), and now he's lying about me. He's not worthy of the presidency,"* Moro stated in a tweet about Bolsonaro.

## 2022 ELECTIONS

Bolsonaro's government, characterized by erratic behavior, turned the congress into a real circus. He feuded with his party and distanced himself from it, halted investigations into his family, dismissed ministers who disagreed with him, and, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, ignored public health precautions, encouraged gatherings, and allowed the country's death toll to reach 690 million.

Even indirectly, the media gave Bolsonaro the rise he needed to be elected, with its anti-PT discourse inadvertently fueling Bolsonaro's ideals and promoting political dualism. Political scientist Steven Levitsky explains that democracy can be undermined by elected leaders: *“Democracies can die at the hands of elected leaders—presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power.”* One could say that Bolsonaro's government made one of the most objective attempts to undermine Brazilian democracy.

With Lula eligible to run for president again, political dualism takes on a new face: Lula and Bolsonaro and the polarization of ideas. Brazil divides; families quarrel, friends drift apart, and violence from Bolsonaro's supporters escalates. As Steven Levitsky pointed out, *“Extreme polarization is capable of killing democracies.”*

Lula was elected with 50.90% of the votes in the second round, but the polarization did not end there. Bolsonaro's supporters took to the streets on October 1st, immediately after Lula was declared president, to camp outside military barracks, continuing until January 1, 2023, when Lula assumed power.

Then, on January 8th, while Lula was fulfilling his presidential duties in the interior of São Paulo, political terrorists in support of Bolsonaro stormed the central government buildings, destroying national property, with no police intervention to prevent the attack on democracy. It is estimated that the damages caused by the attack amount to 26 million,

according to the Advocacia Geral da União (Attorney General's Office). Historical artifacts and material heritage were lost in the attacks, with historical paintings from the collection being damaged and official documents torn apart. The investigations would continue for a long time, but the damages to the nation are irreparable.

## METHODOLOGY

The information contained in this article is based on research from secondary sources, including books, articles, studies, and documentaries published between the 2000s and 2020s concerning the connection between media society and historical political events in the new Brazilian republic (1988 to the present day). The events covered span from 1988 to January 2023. One of the main challenges of this research was precisely the subject matter addressed in this article; with media manipulation, there are few studies that reveal the face of the Brazilian media. At this point, the study becomes valuable for its updated perspective as of 2023 on how the power of the media politically influences public thought.

## CONCLUSION

Through this research, we conclude that the media, in all its power, influences public thought, even if indirectly. It can lead to various manifestations of thoughts that may deviate from its original ideals. This influence has, for years, had a hand in shaping elections – be it the formal media with printed newspapers and television or the informal media of social networks, which gain strength with globalization – dictating the next steps in Brazilian politics.

Events such as the 2013 and 2016 protests calling for Dilma's impeachment were greatly influenced by the media, as well as the rise and fall of Bolsonaro, culminating in the fateful moment of the attack on democracy on January 8th.

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