Making Sense of Politics: 
TV News and Audiences’ Interpretation of Politics in Brazil

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By Mauro P. Porto

This paper has two main purposes. On one hand, the objective is to outline a new theoretical framework for the analysis of the relationship between television, citizens’ competence and democracy. On the other, the paper presents the preliminary results of an experiment conducted in September-October 1999 with inhabitants of the Federal District, where Brasília, Brazil’s capital, is located. This empirical research was aimed at testing some of the hypotheses derived from the theoretical framework. In particular, the experiment was set to investigate the ways in which the country’s main newscast, TV Globo’s Jornal Nacional, affects the processes by which audiences make sense of the world of politics. The experiment is part of a broader project that includes other programs and different methodological tools to understand the role of television in contemporary political processes in Brazil.

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The paper therefore aimed at investigating the effects of television on citizen’s interpretation of the political process. This is obviously not a new line of inquiry. The relationship between the mass media, public opinion and democracy has been object of public debate and academic research for several decades. Innumerable empirical studies have accumulated during this period, studies based on a wide range of theoretical perspectives. How then can a new study contribute to advance our understanding of such issues? Do we really need new theoretical and methodological perspectives to improve our knowledge about television’s influence on people’s values, preferences and thinking?

The study to be presented in the next pages was developed based on a strong conviction that the field of television “effects” research still poses important and unanswered questions. This conviction does not imply that the studies undertaken so far don’t offer rich and sophisticated theoretical frameworks or interesting and valuable findings. Nevertheless, empirical research on mass media effects and reception is still one of the most problematic areas of the contemporary social sciences. There are also pressing and central issues in contemporary public debates about the relationship between the media, public opinion and democracy. When looking for frameworks in the academic literature to help us engage and solve the debate about media and democracy, one may be struck by the frequent absence in media effects and reception studies of any systematic concern with questions about the limits and dilemmas of existing democratic theories and systems. On the other hand, there is an unjustifiable lack of concern with the mass media on the part of traditional political theory. This is not to say that scholars studying television do not speak about democracy or that political theorists never consider the media. The point here is that a process of debate, critique and cross-fertilization would enrich both fields and help us understand both the media and the dilemmas of contemporary democratic regimes. This paper

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1 This paper is part of my Ph.D. dissertation which is being currently developed at the Department of Communication of the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). The dissertation includes another experiment, the analysis of other television programs (the telenovela “Terra Nostra” and the variety show “Programa do Ratinho”), as well as other methodological tools (content analysis and focus groups). I would like to thank the UCSD Department of Communication and the Brazilian Federal Agency for Post-Graduate Education (CAPES) for their financial support. I would like also to thank Prof. Daniel Hallin and Prof. Akos Rona-Tas for their critical comments.

2 Both political Scientists (Bartels, 1993) and communication scholars (Levy and Gurevitch, 1992) support this evaluation.

3 Elihu Katz (1980, p. 120) makes a similar argument in relation to media effects research.
attempts to contribute to this process by linking the study of television reception and effects to
democratic theory.

The argument of the paper is organized in the following way: first, I present a brief outline of the
theoretical framework of the research, its hypotheses and method; than the results of the experiment are
presented and discussed; finally, the conclusions stress the links between the results of the study and
broader issues related to the limits of existing democratic theories and political systems.

Making Sense of Politics: Are Citizens Ignorant or Rational?

We can then begin with a basic question: What should be the role of the media in a democratic
regime? One answer tends to be dominant among journalists, scholars and the general public: the media
should provide information so that citizens can make consistent and rational decisions, mainly during
electoral processes. According to this point of view, the media affect the political process by
transmitting information in an objective and impartial way, or manipulating and distorting the facts. To
serve the democratic process well, it would be enough for journalists and other media professionals to
portray the facts in a neutral way or “reflect” accurately political and social reality. One of the central
arguments of this paper is that such traditional point of view is insufficient for the study and the
consolidation of democracy. Moreover, the reduction of the communication process to the transmission
of information obscures several problems about the role of the media institutions and professionals.

The traditional focus on the field of information becomes even more problematic when one
considers the conflict between democratic theory’s expectations about citizens’ competence and their
real performance. One basic assumption of classical democratic theory is that well-informed citizens
elaborate and express their preferences, elect representatives and effectively influence the decision-
making process of the state. Nevertheless, research has generally found very low levels of information
among the mass public, leading to the “paradox of mass politics:” the gap between the expectation of an
informed citizenry put forward by democratic theory and the discomforting reality revealed by surveys
(Neuman, 1986). This paradox may also be expressed in terms of the “democratic dilemma:” the fact
that the people who are called upon to make reasoned choices may not be capable of doing so (Lupia
and McCubbins, 1998).

Contemporary social scientists have developed different answers to this basic dilemma between
the high expectations of democratic theory and the “limited” competence of citizenry. For analytical
purposes, we can divide such explanatory attempts in two main groups (see Porto, 1998b for details). In
one hand, we have the “ignorant citizen” model. According to this approach, the fact that most
individuals do not have much information about public affairs would put serious obstacles to the
democratic process, or at least question their competence for effective political participation (Lippmann,
1922; Schumpeter, 1976; Berelson et al., 1986; Campbell et al., 1960; Converse, 1964, 1975). One of
the answers to the democratic dilemma is, therefore, the acknowledgement that the low levels of
information among ordinary citizens present important obstacles to the consolidation of democratic
regimes. Not accidentally, the solution presented by such perspective has frequently been the adoption
of elitist institutions, or the development of a concept of democracy centered on the elite. (see Porto,
1998b).

The second attempt to solve the democratic dilemma has led to what can be called the “rational
citizen” model. According to authors in this second group, citizens can make coherent and reasoned
choices in the field of politics, despite their low levels of information on public matters (Key, 1966;
Lane, 1968; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Sniderman et al., 1994). One of the central ideas of this second
group of authors has been the notion of “low-information rationality,” which is based, to a great extent,
on Downs (1957) path breaking work. One central aspect of Downs’ argument is that the search for
information has its own costs (in time, attention, effort etc) and that to make rational choices with the least effort possible, people use shortcuts in their search for information. For example, identification with a political party or the adoption of an ideology replaces the need to search more detailed information about parties and candidates. Based on Downs and other sources, several authors have been stressing the fact that low levels of information don’t prevent people from making reasoned or coherent decisions (e.g. Popkin, 1994). Therefore, the authors who insist that low levels of information do not prevent people from taking rational choices conclude that the electorate is capable of fulfilling, at least in relative terms, the expectations of democratic theory. The main problem of this approach is the implicit and problematic assumption that democratic regimes work well and reflect citizens’ preferences in an effective way. Not surprisingly, these authors propose only small and marginal changes to the existing political institutions and systems, or do not propose changes at all.

Going Beyond the “Informed Citizen”: the Role of Interpretation

The two models of citizenship briefly outlined (ignorant and rational citizen) have one feature in common: both inherited and are based on the “informed citizen” ideal. In the case of the “ignorant citizen” model, it shares with classical democratic theory the assumption that citizens should be well informed. In the case of the “rational citizen” model, it assumes that citizens can perform the tasks that democratic theory expects them to perform, even when they have low levels of information. The rationalistic approach disagrees with the “informed citizen” ideal only in what concerns the level of information needed for good deliberation. It inherited several of assumptions of this ideal of citizenship and did not present an alternative framework.

Since the idea of citizenship is not fixed or unified, facing important transformations due to historical processes and social struggles, particular notions of the “good citizen” are established by specific institutions and political practices. In the case of the “informed citizen,” this ideal was promoted by the reforms of the Progressive Era and since then has acquired a dominant position in political and popular discourses (Schudson, 1998). Nevertheless, this model failed to solve the relation between popular and expert knowledge and needs to be modified to make sense nowadays (ibid.).

We need therefore a model of citizenship and democracy that revises the “informed citizen” ideal, going beyond the focus on information and individualistic or rationalistic assumptions. The new model should also incorporate the dimensions of identity and interpretation of political reality, analyzing how preferences are formed, sustained, and transformed within broader social and cultural contexts. But what are the specific features of such a model? How can it contribute to the solution of the democratic dilemma? John Keane’s (1994) critique of the classical theories of liberty of the press proposes a fruitful path to answer these questions. According to the author, such theories relied upon unsophisticated accounts of the complex process of producing, sending and receiving information, in which communication is sustained and produced by interpreting subjects acting within contexts which are themselves structured by the media of communication. In other words, the early modern protagonists of a free press failed to recognize that individuals are ‘situated interpreters’ and not all-knowing subjects (Keane, 1994, pp. 37-38, emphasis added).

Keane’s criticism about classical theories of liberty of the press suggests a good alternative to the “informed citizen” ideal that shapes much of the debates on citizenship and democracy. Of special importance is the author’s notion of “interpreting subjects,” which I borrow to develop the “interpreting citizen” model. In such a model, individuals rely not only on information, but also, and more importantly, on interpretative and cultural frames that allow them to elaborate a reasonably consistent conception of the world. I believe that the new model I propose, the “interpreting citizen,” allows us to advance in the development of an answer for the democratic dilemma. Ordinary citizens are able to
fulfill the expectations of democratic theory if two conditions are met: a) such expectations are understood in terms of the citizens’ ability to interpret the political reality, instead of the demand of being well informed; and b) a plurality of cultural frames is available in the public sphere, particularly in the mass media.

One of the assumptions of the “interpreting citizen” model is that citizens with low levels of information may have access to shortcuts that allow them to develop coherent preferences about public matters when there is a wide range of cultural frames in the public sphere. But how is such a perspective different from the “rational citizen” model? Doesn’t it also emphasize how people with low levels of information use shortcuts to make decisions? A major difference is how both models conceptualize the use of cues or shortcuts. To understand this difference, it would be useful to draw from more recent studies that have constituted a “new look” in the study of public opinion (see Sniderman, 1993). The “rational citizen” model argues that citizens manage to compensate for information shortfalls by taking advantage of shortcuts, but this is only a partial solution to the democratic dilemma. The important question then becomes: how do people manage to come up with clever shortcuts to compensate for the low levels of information? (p. 221). The answer provided by new studies in public opinion is that citizens “can organize and effectively simplify political choices just insofar as those choices are organized and simplified for them by the political process itself” (p. 222). This is an important contribution to the debate, since it shifts our attention from the cognitive abilities of individuals to the characteristics of the political environment. It allows us to study political choices in terms of the interaction between situationally defined alternatives and individual characteristics (ibid.).

The problem with this important contribution of the “new look” in public opinion research is that it takes the simplicity of some features of the political environment as relatively effective cues for the establishment of satisfactory political choices. It does not address the problems related to the process by which advantaged groups may shape the political environment in ways that harm the interests of the disadvantaged and maintain their own privileged position in the social and political structure. The emphasis on the interaction between individuals and situationally defined alternatives is important, but it is also necessary to investigate how social groups and institutions may harm democracy by controlling or shaping the cues or cultural frames available in the public sphere that may be used by citizens to build their preferences and world views.

In this paper, I investigate a particular problem: Which particular frames does television news present to their audiences and how these shortcuts or cues contribute to shape viewers’ interpretations of political themes and events in Brazil? The focus is therefore on how television contributes to enlarge or restrict the range of alternatives and interpretations available in the public sphere, and how such processes relate to broader political conflicts and hegemonic forces. The struggle for political power cannot, therefore, be reduced to the access to information, but must also include the struggle over the interpretation of political reality. In this context, the concept of interpretive frames becomes a key analytical tool.

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4 For a discussion on how democratic deliberation may be distorted by hegemonic and dominant groups, which frequently succeed in building identities that work against the interests of bearers, see Stokes, 1998 and Przeworski, 1998. On how the media mediate and distort democratic deliberation, see Page, 1996.

5 Kuklinski and Hurley (1996) discuss the often neglected problem of the “potential pitfalls of cue taking,” stressing in particular how citizens translate and are persuaded by elite cues.
Media Frames and Political Conflict

The concept of framing developed in different fields and disciplines, including psychology (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984, 1986), anthropology (Goffman, 1986), and sociology (Gamson, 1995). The concept has also become an important analytical tool in the field of political communication, although the concept has not led to a coherent theory and much work is necessary to refine the paradigm (Entman, 1994). One of its main applications has been the analysis of the process by which news content is organized and presented (Tuchman, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Entman, 1991; Pan and Kosicki, 1993; Hallin, 1994). These studies tend to define framing primarily as part of the process by which news stories are produced and encoded, stressing in particular the role of professional routines and norms. Media frames are then defined as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (Gitlin, 1980, pp. 6-7, emphasis in the original). This definition stresses the patterns of cognition and interpretation presented by news stories, but other scholars went on to investigate the influence of media frames on audiences’ interpretations and on the process of public opinion construction (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gamson, 1995; Corner et al., 1990; Iyengar, 1991; Neuman et al., 1992; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). In these studies, greater emphasis is put on the reception of media messages, particularly on how media frames shape peoples’ conversations and understandings.

The concept of framing can fill important gaps in political and democratic theories. For example, several authors have insisted on the importance of the often neglect processes by which the social and political environment, mainly the structure of alternatives available for consideration by the citizenry, may bias or determine preferences and opinions (Schattschneider, 1975; Riker, 1983; Simon, 1985). The “interpreting citizen” model suggests a framework for political analysis that links cognition, media frames and political structure. In this context, when “people are exposed to competing symbolizations of observable events and actions, it is possible to think in more complex, abstract, and original ways about the situation” (Bennett, 1981, pp. 96-97). In other words, the political struggle centers, to a great extent, around how information is interpreted or symbolized. When people are exposed to several competing “symbolizations” or frames, they are able to think about the political situation in more complex and original ways. On the other hand, when there is a very narrow range of interpretations in the public sphere, the capability of developing original and critical interpretations is limited.

The concept of frame can be an useful analytical tool for identifying the processes by which the media in general, and television in particular, shape the structure of alternatives, and how this structure may bias the interpretation of the political reality by audiences. Nevertheless, one of the most important shortcomings of the literature on media frames is the tendency to treat media content as homogeneous and transparent, ignoring the contradictions that are inscribed within media messages and how these contradictions may affect the ways audiences interpret messages and issues. 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 problematic, I do think that we cannot ignore the contradictory and complex nature of these practices. The new model proposed in the next section attempts to account for some of this complexities.

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6 As Bennett (1975, p. 48) puts it, since any event can be subject to many interpretations, political success involves the ability to construct a compelling public definition of events and issues.

7 In a similar way, Yankelovich (1991) argues that the development of “public judgment” is best accomplished when people have choices to consider (p. 166).
The New Model and Its Hypotheses

To operationalize the theoretical framework in more concrete terms, I build on an interesting study on how the British media dealt with the issue of terrorism (Schlesinger et. al, 1983). The authors of *Televising Terrorism* developed an innovative approach to the study of television and also provided a framework to understand the complexities of media content. The authors identified four main ways of talking about terrorism in British society and concluded that the “presentations of terrorism on British television were a good deal more diverse and complex than simpler assumptions about television’s relation to the state and to dominant ideology predict” (p. 32). According to the authors, “closed” programs operate mainly or wholly within the terms of reference set by the official perspective of the state, while “open” programs provide spaces in which the core assumptions of the official perspective can be interrogated and contested and in which other perspectives can be presented and examined. The open-close dimension is based on whether the program deals with one or more viewpoints. To this the authors add the dynamic distinction between “tight” and “loose” formats, which focuses on the internal organization of programs. In a “tight” format, arguments offered by the program are organized to converge upon a single preferred interpretation, while other possible conclusions are marginalized or closed-off. In “loose” formats, ambiguities, contradictions and loose ends generated within the program are never fully resolved, leaving the viewer with a choice of interpretations (ibid.).

This typology of the four dimensions of television programs is of enormous importance for the study of the political role of television and its reception. It allows us to contextualize the communication process in terms of broader social processes, mainly the struggle over the interpretation of political and social issues, and offers a new approach to the analysis of media content. It also raises a series of questions that have been frequently neglected in audience and media effects research. For example:

What are the implications of these differences in television content to the process by which audiences make sense of politics?

To answer this question, I propose to classify media content in general, and news stories in particular, in the following way:

1. Restricted: when only one interpretive frame of the fact/event/action or issue is presented by the news story;
2. Plural-Closed: when more than one interpretive frame of the fact/event/action or issue is presented by the news story, but are arranged in a hierarchy so that one is preferred over the others and presented as more valid/true;
3. Plural-Open: when more than one interpretive frame of the fact/event/action or issue is presented by the news story, but treated within a more indeterminate relation where no interpretation is presented as more valid/true.
4. Episodic: when there were no interpretative frames in the news story but only a descriptive report on some fact/event/action.

Based on this scheme, the main assumption of the research is the following: “plural” and “open” news stories provide more conditions for audience members to question dominant frames, leaving them with a broader choice of interpretations; on the other hand, “restricted” and “closed” news stories

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8 For an application of this model in content analysis, see my previous research on the newscast *Jornal Nacional* (Porto, 1998a). As far as reception research is concerned, one of the authors of *Televising Terrorism*, Graham Murdock (1989), stressed how the typology developed by the book could be applied to the analysis of audiences' interpretations. Nevertheless, these issues remained largely ignored in audience research.

9 This classification is based on Schlesinger et al., 1983, and Murdock, 1989.
promote particular interpretation patterns and the use of particular frames by audience members when they make sense of political issues and events. The following hypotheses result from this assumption:

**H1.** When exposed to a news story with a restricted form, the audience will tend to interpret the event or issue covered by the story in terms of the frame it presents; on the other hand, when exposed to plural-closed or plural-open news stories, viewers will tend to develop more alternative interpretations of those themes or events.

**H2.** The role of television frames will depend on several intervening variables: the lower the levels of access to other sources, of political interest, of education, and income, the stronger will be the framing effects.

**H3.** Although citizens do not retain much information from television content, they are able to identify interpretative frames presented by such a content.

These hypotheses will be tested by an experiment, which was conducted with television audiences in Brazil. But before discussing the results of the empirical research, I present the main features of the methodological procedures adopted.

**Method**

To test the study’s hypotheses, an experiment was conducted between September and October 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 differences in media content affect the process by which individuals interpret political issues. In the case of this study, the aim was to identify how differences in television news stories affect audiences’ interpretation of political events and issues. The experiment is one of the best methodological tools available to finding out what causes what, through a setting that permits maximum control over extraneous variation (Westley, 1981). In more simple terms, experiments allow researchers to keep all variables and conditions relatively constant and manipulate only the independent variable. Through the random assignment of subjects to the treatment groups and the manipulation of independent variable, experiments allow more precise measures of cause-and-effect links.

Experiments have, nevertheless, some important shortcomings. One of the most important is related to external validity, the extent to which experimental results can be generalized. Since they rely on settings and measured behaviors that are very different from those occurring in natural environments, experiments do not always shed light on behavior of other people in other settings (Culbertson, 1981, p. 218). In the case of television reception, the experience of watching TV news in the comfort and privacy of our homes is definitely very different from the experience of watching the same media content in the artificial setting of the experimental laboratory. For example, experiments guarantee higher levels of attention to media messages and therefore “effects” can be easily overestimated. It has also been suggested that the representativeness of the samples is the Achilles heel of experimental research (Culbertson, 1981, p. 218; Iyengar, 1991, p. 21). Experiments are usually based on small samples with individuals that have peculiar features when compared to the general population, mainly college students, making it difficult to make generalizations based on its results.

To overcome some of these deficiencies, this study adopted the procedure of “stratifying before randomizing” (Westley, 1981, p. 210). To increase the representativeness of the sample, the experiment took placed in three different regions of the Federal District, with different income levels. **Plano Piloto,**
Brasilia’s central area, was chosen as a high-income region. The city of Taguatinga was chosen as a middle-class town, since the average income of its inhabitants is the same as the average income of the Federal District’s population (about 1.8 million people). Finally, Ceilândia, the biggest city of the Federal District, was chosen as the low-income region, since it has half of Taguatinga’s average income and one fourth of Plano Piloto’s average income. The sample of the experiment included 63 subjects, 21 from each of the three regions.

To recruit subjects for the experiment, dwelling units were randomly chosen in areas surrounding each location and one member of the research team visited these units. After finding the appropriate housing unit, the member of the research team would randomly choose one person living there to invite him or her to participate in the study. If the individual agreed to participate, a date and time was arranged for his or her interview. If the person refused to participate, the research team member would visit another dwelling unit, which was also randomly chosen. As an incentive, each subject was offered R$ 10 Reais (about 6 US dollars) for his or her participation.

The procedures of the experiment were the following: after arriving at the designated location, 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 frame of the event and/or issue (a restricted news story). The second group watched a version of the same news story with two frames of the same event and/or issue, although one of them was privileged over the other (a plural-closed 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 on transcribed. After the interview was finished, participants were debriefed and paid.

Thus, the experimental method was combined with a more qualitative approach, the focused interview, instead of the traditional reliance on closed-answers questionnaire. The purpose was to allow subjects more freedom to express their views and to investigate how they interpreted the news stories and made sense of the issues dealt by those stories. The results are presented in the next sections.

Framing Congress: Experimental Results

As we have seen, the main hypothesis of the study is that when exposed to a news story with a restricted form (only one frame), the audience will tend to interpret the event or issue covered by the story in terms of the frame it presents; on the other hand, when exposed to plural-closed or plural-open news stories (more than one frame), viewers will tend to develop more alternative interpretations of those themes or events. The experiment conducted to test this general hypothesis was based on a news story about the National Congress broadcast by Jornal Nacional on September 1999. The newscast

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10 In Plano Piloto, research activities took place in the public school of the SQN 104 district. In Taguatinga, the location was the school CEAB, located in the QSA district. Finally, in the case of Ceilândia, activities took place in a building that belongs to the University of Brasília (Núcleo de Prática Jurídica NPJ), located in the CNN1 district.

11 The research was conducted with the assistance of 10 undergraduate students of the University of Brasília. I thank them for their dedication and contributions to this project.

12 Professional equipment and technicians were used to edit all videos used in the experiments to ensure their quality.

13 The aim of the control group is to tell whether there was anything in the experimental situation that the researcher did not have under control and that could have produced the effect attributed to the manipulation alone (Westley, 1981, p. 204).
discussed the great number of projects accumulated in both houses (The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate), criticizing the institution for the delay in voting important projects. Thus, the theme of this particular segment of the newscast was the efficiency of the legislature and the general tone was rather critical. The summary of the news story is the following:

ANCHORMEN (Chico Pinheiro) – “Paper and dust in Congress. More than 8,000 law projects accumulate for years in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Just the reform of the Civil Code is under discussion for more than two decades”

REPORTER (Délis Ortiz) – “There is no lack of proposals in Congress. But a lot of things do not go beyond this stage. The Chamber of Deputies has more than 6,800 projects and the senate 1,600.” (The reporter than speaks for 33 seconds. She stresses the example of the project for the reform of the Civil Code, which was proposed in 1975 and was still under discussion, after 24 years).

SOUNDBITE 1 (Rep. Gerson Peres) – “They say here in the Congress that it is to ripe, let’s let the issue ripe.”

REPORTER – (Continues for 38 seconds. She gives the example of former representative Nelson Carneiro, the author of the project that legalized divorce in Brazil in 1977. She says that another of his projects “was not so lucky.” According to the reporter, the Senator died without seeing one of his projects voted and it still has not been voted after 19 years. She than comments on the tax reform and how the government’s proposal presented in 1995 was changed three times and was still waiting to be voted).

SOUNDBITE 2 (Rep. Germano Rigotto, President of the Commission of the Tax Reform): “In the last four years, the government has prioritized other reforms, and this transformed the tax reform into a ‘ugly duck’.”

REPORTER – “When it wants, Congress is fast.” (The reporter says that the best example of this was the government’s proposal to add a new tax to public functionaries’ salaries. The project was approved by the Chamber of Deputies in 24 hours, was approved by the Senate and became law in one week. Total length of the utterance: 12 seconds).

ANCHORMEN – (Concludes the news story by saying that the voting of the project was fast, but that the implementation of the new tax was suspended by the Supreme Court. Total length of the utterance: 11 seconds).

Total length of the news story: 2 minutes and 14 seconds.

This news story frames Congress as an inefficient institution because of the huge number of projects being discussed. The image is of “dust” and “accumulated paper,” of long delays in the discussion and deliberation of important projects. Nevertheless, the second soundbite by Representative Germano Rigotto presents an alternative frame to the dominant interpretation offered in the news story: the blame for the delays in voting projects in Congress is partially with the Executive branch of the government, therefore with the President, not only with the members of congress. He gives the example of the tax reform project , which was not voted in the previous years because the government prioritized
other projects. Thus, the news story presented two main frames about who is responsible for the big number of projects accumulated in Congress: on one hand, the dominant frame blames the legislative institution and its members; on the other hand, representative Rigotto argues that the blame is partially with the executive branch of the government. The news story was classified as a plural-closed segment. It presented both frames, but they were arranged in a hierarchy so that one was preferred over the other (Rep. Rigotto’s soundbite lasted only for 7 seconds!) and presented as more valid/true.

a) Framing effects

To test the study’s hypotheses, subjects were exposed to two different versions of this news story. The first treatment group watched a restricted version, in which the soundbite of Rep. Rigotto was deleted. Thus the only frame that this group was exposed to was the one blaming Congress and its members for the big number of projects accumulated. The second treatment group watched the full plural-closed version of the news story, as Jornal Nacional broadcast it. Finally, subjects in the control group watched another news story about a corruption scandal in judicial system that did not mention the Congress. After watching the news stories, participants were asked about who they though was responsible for the great number of projects accumulated in Congress and were offered three main options. Results are presented in Figure 1.

(FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)

The hypothesis that restricted news stories would lead to an increase in the number of subjects adopting its interpretive frame was confirmed. As we see in Figure 1, the interpretation that Congress members are responsible for the accumulation of projects is dominant only in the treatment group that was exposed to the restricted version of the news story and the difference between the restricted and the control groups was statistically significant (p<.10 - see annex 1). In the plural-closed and control groups, the interpretation that the government was responsible was the dominant one. Thus, it does matter if a news story presents only one frame, since the audience tends to adopt its interpretive framework when making sense of the issue or event at hand. On the other hand, when exposed to more than one frame, the audience has access to alternative interpretive patterns that may question the dominant frame of the news story or reinforce pre-existing interpretive patterns of the audience members.

One finding of the experiment is quite unexpected: although the news story emphasizes the responsibility of Congress members, the most frequent framing, presented by 44% of all respondents, was the one blaming the government for the delays in voting legislative projects. How to explain the strength of such a framing among the study’s participants? To answer this question, it is important to note that President Fernando Henrique Cardoso started to experience very low popularity levels after the crisis that emerged when he devaluated the national currency in January 1999, just two weeks after taking the office for his second term. Cardoso had based his previous successful races for the Presidency (1994 and 1998) on the success of his economic plan, Plano Real, which managed to reduce the previous uncontrolled inflation and bring the so much desired economic stability. But when he devaluated the currency, leading to an economic recession and higher rates of unemployment, the basis

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14 The question was presented in the following way: “Which of the following statements would you agree mostly: a) There are a lot of projects accumulated in Congress and the Congressmen themselves are responsible for it; b) There are a lot of projects accumulated in Congress, but to a great extent the blame is with the government; c) There are a lot of projects accumulated in Congress, but this is a normal feature of the democratic process.” Since the third option was chosen by fewer individuals, responses in this categories were coded together with “others.” Responses mentioning both Congress and the government were coded as “congress.”
for his popularity was severely eroded. In September-October 1999, when the experiment took place, most participants in the study seemed eager to blame the President for all the problems the country was facing, no matter what. In this sense, the power of TV news frames depends on pre-existing preferences. Thus, television frames cannot be seen as all-powerful forces determining the ways people make sense of politics. Nevertheless, it is important to note that even in such context of high levels of dissatisfaction with the President’s performance, news framing did have an important influence on how subjects made sense of a specific theme (Congress’ performance) in ways that contradicted well-established trends in the public’s beliefs.

The results of Figure 1 also show that restricted news stories seem to narrow the range of interpretations that people employ to make sense of specific themes. The number of individuals choosing other frames to interpret who is responsible for the big number of projects in Congress was smaller in the restricted group and much more frequent in the control group, while the plural-closed group occupied an intermediary position. Thus, news stories presenting only one frame seem to limit the plurality of interpretations that people employ to make sense of the issues and events being covered. As I suggest in the conclusions, these results raise important issues for democratic theory and indicate interesting paths that can be pursued in future research.

With the aim of investigating the role of intervening variables, the following hypothesis was presented: the lower the levels of access to other sources, of political interest, of education, and income, the stronger will be the framing effects. To test this hypothesis, I divided subjects of the restricted and plural-closed experimental conditions in two different groups, with low and high scores in the following variables: education, income, interest in politics, and exposure to other media (see annex 3 for details). I then compared the mean scores of these groups according to a dichotomous variable, which refers to those who blame Congress for the great number of projects accumulated. Results are shown in Figure 2.

(FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE)

The hypothesis about the intervening variables is confirmed, since the framing effect reported in Figure 1 did not occur among the groups with higher levels of income, interest in politics, and more frequent consumption of other media (newspapers and radio). The existing inequalities in the socioeconomic level (income), in the cultural sphere (media consumption) and in the participation in the formal political process (interest in politics) seem to strength television news’ ability to influence citizens’ interpretation of political issues and events. As I will show in the conclusions, this raises again important issues for democratic theory. Surprisingly, and contrary the expectations of the study, such a trend does not exist so clearly in the case of education. Both groups (high and low education) were affected by the experimental manipulation, although the group with less educational background presented a stronger framing effect. This finding is even more striking when one considers the high correlation between education and income (.75), as well as between education and newspaper consumption (.53). Other empirical investigations are necessary to verify if this weak effect of education on framing occurs in other contexts. If these results are replicated, they will show that framing effects do

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15 A simple dichotomy was constructed in which answers blaming Congress were coded with value “1” and other answers were coded with value “0.”

16 Nevertheless, since the differences between the restricted and the plural-closed groups were not statistically significant (see Figure 1), further research involving more subjects is necessary to confirm the hypothesis about the role of intervening variables.
not only occur among those citizens deprived of basic cultural, economic and social resources, but also take place with more privileged sectors of society.

b) Information and Interpretation

The theoretical framework of the present research calls attention to the debilities of the “informed citizen” ideal and of its emphasis on information. It proposes instead the “interpreting citizen” model as a better way to understand the relationship between citizenship, information, interpretation, and democracy. It is therefore important to stress that even though audiences may not retain much information from the news stories, they may recognize and use frames presented by the newscast in order to make sense of political events and issues. If this is true, the traditional emphasis on information will prove to be misleading and we can then focus on the processes of framing and interpretation that characterize the ways citizens make sense of the world of politics.

To verify whether subjects retained information from the news story, two questions were asked about information that figured prominently in the report. The first question asked if subjects remembered the number of projects accumulated in Congress according to the news story. As we have seen, the newscast gave a big emphasis to the figure (more than 8,000 projects in Congress, 6,800 in the Chamber of Deputies, and 1,800 in the Senate). Any answer mentioning just one of these figures was coded as “yes.” The second question asked whether the subjects remembered which project was shown by the newscast as one of those waiting for decades to be voted. As we have seen, the Civil Code was presented as an important example. The results of both questions are presented in Table 1.

| TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE |

The results show that the great majority of the individuals (86% and 71%) did not remember information that figured prominently in the news report they had just watched. As expected, recall of information was very low. But the hypothesis also proposed that, although most people do not retain much information about a news report, they are able to identify and remember its main frame. To investigate whether audience members could identify or not the main frame of the news story, subjects were asked to tell which “point of view” it presented or “which side” the report took on the issue of the great number of projects in Congress. The question was open-ended and the answers were coded according to three main possibilities. Results are presented in Table 2.

| TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE |

The great majority of the individuals (50%) identified a critical and/or negative point of view about the Congress in the news story, while 17% argued that the report was neutral and objective and did not take sides in the discussion about the projects accumulated in the legislative power. Thus, the majority of the subjects agreed with the study’s classification of the news story as framing the Congress in a critical/negative way, although a significant number of individuals (31%) did not know or did not provide a “clear” answer to the question. The study’s participants were therefore able to identify the dominant interpretation of the news story, despite of not recalling much information from it.

To investigate the relationship between the identification of the story’s main frame and the experimental conditions, responses were divided according to the two treatment groups (restricted and plural-closed). Figure 3 presents the results. They show that most of the individuals identifying the

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17 The results include only subjects from the restricted and the plural-closed groups (n=42), since the control group watched a different news story.
dominant frame of the news story were in the plural-closed group. To some extent, this finding runs against the expectations of the study, since one could expect that the identification of the main frame of the news story would be easier when people watch a news story with only one frame (restricted). But it could also be argued that when people are exposed to a news story with more than one point of view or frame, it might then be easier to notice that the report privileged or preferred one of them.

(FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE)

Were subjects in the different treatment groups able to identify whether the news story was restricted or plural? In other words, do audience members recognize when a report presents only one frame or more than one point of view? To answer these questions, subjects were asked how many “points of view” or “sides of the discussion” the news story presented. Results are presented in Figure 4. They show that all individuals that identified two interpretations in the report were in the plural-closed group, while none of the subjects in the restricted group said the report contained two points of view. Nevertheless, most people that identified some point of view in the news story stated that it presented only one position/frame, both in the restricted and the plural-closed treatment groups. Thus, there was no significant difference in the number of people identifying one point of view in the report when both groups are compared. Furthermore, since most individuals did not know the answer or gave unclear responses (coded in the category “other”), the results suggest that most people had difficulties in answering the question. To some extent, this may be due the lack of public vocabulary about framing related issues in Brazil. The concept of framing is not known or used by the general public or even by elites, since there is no tradition in the country of critical analysis of media content. The concepts of “point of view” or “sides of the discussion” are only general approximations to the idea of framing and most respondents may have found them unclear or disconnected from their own vocabulary. More research, using more detailed qualitative interviewing techniques, are necessary to investigate these issues.

(FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE)

c) Framing and the Evaluation of Congress’ Necessity

Finally, the experiment also evaluated whether presenting only one frame in a critical news story about a political institution would increase a negative attitude in the audience concerning the institution. The assumption here is that restricted and critical news stories about political institutions will increase negative evaluations of their role and performance. To test this hypothesis, subjects were asked if they considered Congress a necessary institution and their answers were compared in the three experimental groups. Figure 5 presents the results. The number of individuals affirming that Congress was not necessary increased significantly from the plural-closed to the restricted condition (p<.10). Thus, when individuals were exposed to a news story with only one frame blaming the institution for some deficiencies in its performance, the evaluation of its necessity tends to decline.

(FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE)

Conclusions

The experimental results reported in this paper confirmed the hypotheses of the study. The main conclusion is that the range of frames presented by a news story about a political event or issue has important implications to the process by which audiences make sense and interpret this event or issue.
Thus, when exposed to only one side of the discussion about a political theme or fact, citizens tend to adopt the interpretive framework presented by the news story. On the other hand, when having access to different opinions on those issues, citizens have access to alternative frames or clues that may be used to develop more varied understandings and evaluations of public matters. As the study shows, restricted news stories narrow the range of interpretive frames people employ to make sense of specific topics. This process seems to happen even when a single and short soundbite presents the alternative frame, as in the case of the experiment reported in this paper. These findings raise important issues about the political role of TV news in general, and of Globo’s Jornal Nacional in particular. My previous analysis of Jornal Nacional’s content has shown that when it presents some kind of interpretation, it tends to adopt a restricted form, usually based on the official sources of the state (Porto, 1998a).

The study also shows that such framing effects were relatively weak. As we have seen, most people did not adopt the interpretive framework presented by the news story and preferred instead to blame the government, not Congress members, for the big number of projects accumulated in the legislative power. This indicates the importance of pre-existing attitudes. For example, the existence of a strongly negative evaluation of the President’s performance may direct responsibility of several problems to him, no matter how television frames these problems. However, even in such context there were significant framing effects, indicating that television may alter situations like this in the long term. Framing effects proved to be relatively weak also because of the important role of intervening variables. The experimental results show that such effects are stronger among people with less education, income, interest in politics, and access to other sources of information, although education played a less significant role.

Another important result of the study is that although most people retain very little information from news stories, they tend to identify its main point of view or frame. Most subjects didn’t identify the number of interpretations or positions presented by the newscast, but they had a better performance in this task than in the recall of information. These results suggest that although audience members do not retain much information from TV news, they are able to identify the interpretive framework employed by journalists to build the story line.

Finally, the results also show that a restricted news story can contribute to increase the negative evaluation of a political institution. As we have seen, when exposed to a news report with only one critical frame about the Congress’s performance, more citizens tend to think that Congress is not a necessary institution. This raises a number of questions about the relationship between narrow interpretive patterns of the news coverage and the legitimacy of democracy and its institutions.

This paper began by suggesting the importance of establishing clear connections between the study of television effects and democratic theory. How then can we relate the experimental findings reported in this paper to broader issues about democratic theories and systems? I think the results point out to the need to overcome the traditional emphasis of democratic theory on information. We should focus instead on the important role of interpretive frames as clues or shortcuts that allow citizens to make sense of the world of politics even when they are not well informed about public matters. The “rational citizen” model assumes that citizens with low levels of information can build reasonable and consistent preferences by using these shortcuts. Nevertheless, it ignores how the political and social structure can be organized in a way that limits the range of frames available for citizens. The “interpreting citizen” model proposed in this paper stresses how one of the fundamental institutions of this structure, 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.
Moreover, this framing effect seems to be strongly connected to the unequal and unjust social and political relationships that characterize societies like Brazil. Thus, it is mostly those with lower income, interest in politics, education, and access to other communicational resources that seem to be more affected by a narrow news coverage. Therefore, social and political inequality works as to increase the effects of media content that excludes other points of view. The “interpreting citizen” model incorporates the often-neglected problem of how elites and their institutions can persuade citizens to adopt preferences that may work against their interests.

We can then stop blaming the victims – citizens as not competent because of their low levels of information – and investigate instead the role of the political and communicational structures – how they can harm democracy by narrowing the range of interpretations in the public sphere. The “interpreting citizen” model proposes an alternative path to search for solutions to these often-neglected problems. It does so by taking plurality as a key condition for the establishment of a more democratic, diverse and consistent public opinion. In this way, it indicates the strong links between television effects and the dilemmas of existing democratic theories and systems.
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ANNEX 1

The concept of statistical significance is used to evaluate whether observed differences are reliable or whether they are a result of chance. The minimum significance level usually accepted in the social sciences is $p<.05$, meaning that the observed difference would appear ninety-five times out of one hundred. Nevertheless, most of the results of the significance tests reported in this paper are in the $p<.10$ level (the difference would appear ninety times out of one hundred), not satisfying the usual requirements. This is mostly due to the fact that the experiment reported in this paper has few cases (63 subjects), which is in turn related to the budgetary constraints of the project. Taken into consideration these limitations, in this paper I consider the significance level of $p<.10$ as relevant.

ANNEX 2

Unless otherwise stated, the results of the one-tailed t-tests reported in this paper were obtained by constructing a dummy variable (a dichotomy with value 1 to one of the categories and 0 for all others) and comparing the means of the experimental conditions.

ANNEX 3

The variables used in Figure 2 were operationalized in the following way:

Education = Low: from no education to the conclusion of high school (59%); High: first year of college or more (41%).

Income = Low: from less than one to four minimum wages per month (47%); High: More than four minimum wages per month (53%).

Interest in Politics = Low: from no interest to few interest (32%); High: from some interest to very interested (68%).

Newspaper Readership = Low: from never reads to reads once a week (43%); High: from reads several times a week to reads every day (57%).

Radio Listening = Low: from never listen to news on radio to listen less than once a week (45%); High: from listens once a week to listens every day (55%).
Table 1 – Information Retained from the News Story*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Remember?</th>
<th>Number of projects accumulated in Congress</th>
<th>Project that was presented as being discussed for a long period of time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>86 %</td>
<td>71 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>14 %</td>
<td>29 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Number of respondents = 42 (Restricted and plural-closed groups).

Table 2 – The News Story’s Point of View
According to the Subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frame</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative for Congress</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Frame (Neutral Report)</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative for Government/President</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doesn’t Know or Not Clear</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Number of respondents = 42 (Restricted and plural-closed groups).

Figure 1 – Framing Effects: Responsibility for the Great Number of Projects Accumulated in Congress

Significantly different by one tailed t-test (see annex 2):
Restricted from control: p<.10
Figure 2 – Effects of Education, Income, Interest in Politics and other Sources on Framing Congress as Responsible for the Great Number of Projects Accumulated

**General Pattern**

- **Education**
  - Restricted vs. Plural-Closed
  - Low vs. High

- **Income**
  - Restricted vs. Plural-Closed
  - Low vs. High

- **Interest in Politics**
  - Restricted vs. Plural-Closed
  - Low vs. High

- **Newspaper Readership**
  - Restricted vs. Plural-Closed
  - Low vs. High

- **Radio News Listening**
  - Restricted vs. Plural-Closed
  - Low vs. High
Figure 3 – Identification of the News Story’s Dominant Point of View by Experimental Condition

Significantly different by one tailed t-test (see annex 2): p<.10.

Figure 4 - Identification of the Number of Points of View in the News Story by Experimental Condition

Pearson’s Chi Square value: 6.577 (p<.05)
Figure 5 – Evaluation of the Necessity of Congress by Experimental Condition

Significantly different by one tailed t-test (see annex 2): Restricted from plural-closed: p<.10.