

# CHRONICLE OF A RESURGENT EVENT

## A kaleidoscope of censorship in Brazil

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**ABSTRACT** Alfredo de Carvalho (1870-1916) has been placed in the Brazilian historiography among the critics of the obscurantism practiced by the Portuguese colonizers<sup>1</sup>. His reasoning was that by imposing on Brazil a “regime of systematic reclusion”, Portugal created difficulties for the sedimentation “of our current nationality” and retarded “the synchronic evolution of many of its cultural elements”<sup>2</sup>. For this very reason he became the harbinger of preservation of the memory of the press, an indispensable source for the comprehension of our civilizing process. Reiterating Carvalho, many others have declared that, since the arrival of Cabral on Brazil’s northeastern shore in 1500, the “gag syndrome” was projected over our territory. Consequently, it has impeded economic development, made political autonomy impractical and inhibited the flourishing of culture.

**KEY-WORDS** Censorship, control of the media, democratic guarantee.

Throughout the colonial period there perhaps was no manifestation of progress to which the metropolis failed to respond with prohibitive measures or annoying moves, dictated by a mistrustful policy which foresaw in the prosperity of its vast American possession the certainty of its independence. (...) A legislation which was severe to the point of cruelty regulated in its most insignificant aspects the entire economic and industrial life and the introduction of any unforeseen improvements in that life was promptly impeded by new condemnatory provisions.<sup>3</sup>

The situation would only be changed three centuries later. In 1808, to escape from the humiliation imposed upon him by the Napoleonic troops quartered in the entire Iberian Peninsula, D. João VI took refuge here. The sudden arrival of the Portuguese Court, transforming the American colony into the headquarters of the old European power, bared its situation as an “empire adrift”<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, not even the economic liberalization symbolized by the “opening of the ports to friendly nations” and the transfer of the seat of the government to Rio de Janeiro would prevent the “curse of censorship” from continuing to atrophy our printed production and to compromise our intellectual development.

In reality, there was no freedom of the press yet (...) the old restrictions continued to be maintained (...) the edict of May 30, 1809 prohibited (...) the publication (...) of advertisements, notifications and news that had not been seen, examined and necessarily approved.<sup>5</sup>

Only on the eve of national independence, the “prior censorship” would lose its force in our territory, warmed by the liberal airs of the Porto Revolution (1820).

As a consequence of the constitutional movement initiated in the general courts of Lisbon, Prince Regent D. Pedro ordered, by a notification on August 20, 1822, that the prior review be halted of works that were to be printed... (...)<sup>6</sup>

This did not mean at all that its side effects had disappeared from our social tissue. If the printing presses installed here began to operate without shackles and chains, encouraged by the liberating echo of the Declaration of Independence from Portugal at Ipiranga, its initial products were not as edifying as some patriots dreamed. The inventory which Isabel Lustosa made of this post-independence crop pointed to a whirl of “printed insults” and of “defamatory libels”, widening the existing ditch between the elite and the people.

Historically condemned to intellectual indigence, Brazilian society favored the feeling of disdain on the part of our elites for culture in general and for the press in particular. Intellectuals of the caliber of Alfredo de Carvalho never failed to make explicit their dismay and perplexity in the face of this type of contingency.

If we take into consideration the thousand hostile circumstances which have blocked and continue to obstruct the march of similar undertakings: the negative importance of the enormous illiterate majority of the population and the lamentable indifference of most of the educated, our numerous belletrist and scientific magazines and gazettes, some of real value, we appear in a much more flattering aspect...<sup>8</sup>

It is a question of a typical behavior of those who were attacked by the “gag syndrome”. This is a two-sided coin, in which one side translates the inhibition of the issuers anchored in the spaces of production and dissemination of media contents. The other side projects the receivers dispersed in anonymous audiences, who even when offered contents, frequently are unable to access them, for lack of mastery of the media codes.

The first side, that is, the issuance, is not limited just to the possible exercising of “censorship” of the contents, but has a structural character, translating the gagging of Brazilian society adroitly accomplished by the Portuguese colonizers, as Patrick WILCKEN synthesizes well:

Portugal, fearful of losing its most valuable colonial possession, tried to isolate Brazil... (...) The Portuguese Crown prohibited the press and suspended the importation of books and the foundation of universities. Lisbon repressed the nascent craft industry of Brazil, and its colonial authorities destroyed the looms, in order to protect the importation of poor quality Portuguese wool; it even uprooted native trees, in order to prevent competition with certain types of wood. By order of the Crown, there were attempts to restrict internal communications in Brazil, when the latter were not used for the export trade. Laws were approved to restrict river navigation and the development of a land-based postal system was discouraged. The highways (...) were in an extremely bad condition. The dirt roads were only marginally helpful. (...) And some paths led nowhere...<sup>9</sup>

The second side of the coin, that is, the cognitive lack of appetite, represented by the illiteracy and the ignorance of the great majority of our population, was described with precision by another emblematic intellectual from the State of Pernambuco. On sketching the physiognomy of our society, in the middle of the XX century, Paulo Freire said that the root of our lack of democratic experience and of our political-economic stagnation was precisely the “muteness” of Brazilian men.

This was, in reality, the constant aspect of our colonial life. Always men crushed by power. (...) Never, or almost never, interfering (...) in the constitution and in the organization of ordinary life. (...) Almost always forbidden to grow. Forbidden to speak. The only voice that could be heard, in the silence to which we were subjected, was that of the pulpit.<sup>10</sup>

This situation only changed substantially in the second half of the XX century, as a result of the political will of the State in the sense of increasing the new generations’ opportunities for schooling. If the

disease of illiteracy has not yet been completely eradicated, its margin is being reduced, and the expansion and improvement of the educational network is noted. This corresponds to removing the “gag” which prevents the contact of thousands of Brazilians with learned culture.

After the Second World War, the rhythm of growth of education in Brazil surpassed that of the other Latin American countries... (...) According to the 1950 census data, 53.9% of the men and 60.6% of the women were illiterate. (...) The National Survey of Sample Domiciles (PNAI) in 1987 indicated that the rates had fallen to 23.8% among the men and 26.0% among the women.<sup>11</sup>

This effort, unfinished and insufficient, means a step taken in the direction of neutralizing the “gag” in the area of reception.

A similar advance also occurred on the issuance level, since the Constitution of 1988 instituted the primacy of “freedom of expression”, incorporating the spirit of the First Amendment to the USA Constitution, thus defined by Freitas Nobre: “it dispenses with ordinary legislation for crimes of the press”<sup>12</sup>

This clause represents a democratic guarantee, inhibiting the authoritarian appetite which has been historically harnessing our elites to institutional regressions in times of crisis. This involves remote episodes, extensively described by Antonio Costella<sup>13</sup>, Arael Menezes da Costa<sup>14</sup> and Sergio Mattos<sup>15</sup>, in the same way that Paulo Marconi<sup>16</sup> or Moacir Pereira<sup>17</sup> did with relation to recent episodes of the dictatorship of the generals<sup>18</sup>.

Thanks to this liberal, tolerant and pluralistic concept, we have been living on the occasion of the turn of the century one of the most fecund moments in the exercising of freedom of the press in Brazil. From the denunciations of administrative dishonesty which led to the impeachment of President Collor<sup>19</sup> to the recent parliamentary inquiries which x-rayed the systemic corruption of the state apparatus in the Trade Union Republic<sup>20</sup>, we have been witnessing the fearless attitude of the media in the attempt to regain public credibility and the investigative courage of its professionals, seeking to strengthen social prestige in the process of erosion.

But the forces which act between the cracks in the constitutional system have never renounced their authoritarian designs, remaining vigilant in order to gag the media networks, in a subtle or ostensive way, as Sergio Mattos has well documented:

After the Constitution of 1988 there were various attempts to find ways to silence the press, which began to have a role in the re-democratization of the country with the publication of denunciations of corruption and political and administrative frauds. These denunciations began to disturb to such a point that freedom of the press began to be threatened in several ways. (...) Initially we will deal with the Gag Law, followed by the discussion which agitated the country regarding the creation of the Federal Journalism Board, the debates concerning the National Movie and Audiovisual Agency (ACINAV) and the General Law of Communications.<sup>21</sup>

Faced with these threats of discretionary relapses, the Alfredo de Carvalho (Alcar) Network for Recovery of the Memory of the Press and Construction of the History of the Media in Brazil decided to focus on the issue of censorship in its IV National Congress held in São Luis in the State of Maranhão from May 31 to June 3, 2006.

The situational pretext was undoubtedly the repressive climate established in the contemporary world as a result of the events subsequent to the episode of September 11, inhibiting the producers of content in the inflamed zones or even putting their safety in jeopardy. The Latin American projections of this lethal gagging are situated in countries such as Colombia, Mexico and Brazil, where the drug traffic and the mafias that prey on the public treasury hamper the free performance of the news agents when not threatening their very survival.

In 2005, according to the statistics of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), a record number of journalists and other media professionals – 150 people – were killed while practicing their professions. This is the highest number of media professionals' deaths yet recorded in history and represents a tragic continuation of a statistical trend which has been growing in recent years; being a journalist is very dangerous and unfortunately is becoming more and more so. In addition to deaths in the field, journalists and other media professionals continue to face threats and persecutions; last year, more than 500 media professionals were arrested or made prisoners.<sup>22</sup>

The historical motivation was the evocation of the 300 years of media censorship in Brazil, taking as an emblematic event the prohibition and dismantling of the printing shop which began to operate in the city of Recife in 1706.

In Brazil, the exercising of the art of Gutenberg was zealously prohibited and its disciples were persecuted without more ado. In 1706 or a little earlier, an enterprising individual, whose name is unfortunately unknown, succeeded in establishing in Recife a printing shop, which was limited to the printing of bills of exchange and brief devout prayers. The then Governor of Pernambuco, Francisco de Castro Moraes, perhaps tolerated its operation; not so the Court of Lisbon, which on hearing about the supposed offense, by means of the Royal Order of July 8, 1706, imposed upon him the injunction of 'confiscating the printed bills and notifying the owners of the shop and the printers not to print nor permit the printing of books or separate papers'<sup>23</sup>

The convocation for the congress in São Luis, Maranhão, had a positive repercussion, attracting almost five hundred participants, who met with the intention of critically reviewing the past, extracting from it lessons capable of illuminating a less traumatic future.

It was natural that emblematic historians of the phenomena relating to control of the media and of information were invited to send their contributions, marking out the debates and questioning their fundamental mechanisms, their seasonal routines. Antonio Costella and Sérgio Mattos, authors of well-known books on the subject, replied promptly, sending texts in which they took a critical stock of the kind of censorship practiced in Brazil, from colonial times to the present day.

They were joined by emerging leaders of the Alfredo de Carvalho Network, focusing on relevant aspects of the censorship practiced in the respective segmented areas. Ana Baum evaluated the extent of radio censorship and Ruth Vianna mapped out the filters that shape the physiognomy of audiovisual flows. In turn, Karina Woitowicz explored the controls interposed on the action of the producers of meaning stationed on the media periphery, while Robson Bastos outlined the limits within which move the Internet users of the digital world. Also outstanding was the contribution of Luis Guilherme Pontes

Tavares, focusing on particular sources of recent censorship in the State of Bahia, in which he pointed out noteworthy singularities.

The essay written jointly by Ciça Guirardo and Danielle Lellis Garoto acquired a special connotation, resuscitating a paradigmatic episode of our colonial life. They presented the exegesis of Padre Antonio Vieira's interventions in the pulpit in the State of Maranhão, taking advantage of the rhetorical immunities granted the congregated missionaries to censure the villainy committed against the Brazilian Indians by the Portuguese colonizers.

The collection which recovers the memory of the Alcar Congress in São Luis showed a peculiar characteristic<sup>24</sup>. This involved the intellectual participation of authors academically affiliated with the Communicational Group of São Bernardo<sup>25</sup>, institutionally nourished by the UNESCO/METHODIST Chair of Communication<sup>26</sup>, whose contributions increased the density of the kaleidoscope of censorship in Brazil, due to their variety and their up-to-date nature.

Two researchers residing in the region focused specifically on the communicational space of São Bernardo. Valdenízio Petrolli recalled the political censorship in the press of the so-called ABC municipalities in the Greater São Paulo Metropolitan Region, describing scenarios and characterizing celebrities. In turn, Domingo Glenir Santarnecchi envisaged issuances without censorship, optimizing the digital technology of radio and television, but making use of the Internet as a support.

Sandra Reimão and Antonio de Andrade reconstituted the course of a half-century of censorship in Brazilian movies and television, from 1950 to 2000, making use of the records found in books, newspapers and magazines, which oscillate between subtle irony and scathing denunciation.

Rosa Nava, today directing the Postgraduate Program in Communication of the Presidente Antonio Carlos University in Barbacena (State of Minas Gerais), presented a rereading of her masters dissertation concerning the implementation of the Research and Documentation Department of the newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*. She contends that the sign of censorship in effect in the 1960s buried the interpretative journalism precociously transplanted to our country.

From another perspective, Ernane Rabelo, currently teaching at the Federal University of Viçosa (State of Minas Gerais) made a foray into the field of the alternative press which caused annoyance to the leaders of the military regime. The subject of his analysis was the newspaper *De Fato*, published in the city of Belo Horizonte (State of Minas Gerais) during three years, in the 1970s, whose abrupt interruption was caused by a terrorist attack which destroyed the editorial office and intimidated the editors.

Vera Lucia Spacil Raddatz (Ijuí, State of Rio Grande do Sul) and her colleague, Ângela Maria Zamin (São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul) followed a similar path, studying the years of dictatorship: radio censorship in the interior of their state.

The collection also includes contributions from representatives of the new generation of the São Bernardo Group: Roseane Arcanjo Pinheiro identified “gagged hearts and minds”, examining the censorship of journalism in Manaus (State of Amazonas) in the period 1960-1970; Bruna Vieira Guimarães and Lincoln Ferreira diagnosed the censorship of ideological propaganda in printed matter at the beginning of the Republic, that is to say, in the last decade of the XIX century.

The Maranhão congress was enriched by a series of profiles on the behavior of media censorship in three different Brazilian regions.

The Northeastern Region appeared in the studies of Aline Maria Grego Lins (UNICAP – Recife, State of Pernambuco) on the struggle against arbitrary regimes during the XX century in the Recife press, and of Andréa Cristiana Santos (Salvador, State of Bahia), who observed the journalism of the newspaper *A Tarde* during the military regime, distinguishing between voices and silences. Also fitting in here is the Bahia viewpoint of Luis Guilherme Pontes Tavares, referred to previously.

Paula Puhl (FEEVALE – Novo Hamburgo, State of Rio Grande do Sul) favored the development/involvement of the Rio Grande do Sul regional media during the “Estado Novo” (dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas); Vera Lucia Spacil Raddatz (Ijuí, Rio Grande do Sul) and her colleague Ângela Maria Zamin (São Leopoldo, Rio Grande do Sul) studied the radio censorship imposed by the governments that defeated João Goulart and expelled him from power. Also coming from the Southern Region is the perspicacious narrative by Luciano Klockner (Pontifical Catholic University – PUC-RS-Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul) about the day when the Esso Reporter newscast was censored.

The vestiges of the Southeastern Region were harvested in the State of Minas Gerais by Ernane Rabelo, in the State of Rio de Janeiro by Ana Baum and Rosas Nava, in the same way that the State of São Paulo was represented by means of the reports by Valdenízio Perolli, Robson Bastos, Domingo Glenir Santarnecchi, Sandra Reimão and Antonio Andrade.

In the Northern Region, there was only one narrative, that of Roseane Pinheiro, revealing the radio censorship in Manaus in the 1960s and 1970s.

Other events which marked the 300 years of censorship in Brazil were assessed by the participants of the IV National Congress of Media History. Some of them remain unpublished, as desired by their authors; others can be consulted in the portal of the Alfredo de Carvalho Network, at one of the following addresses: [www.jornalismo.ufsc.br/redealcar](http://www.jornalismo.ufsc.br/redealcar) or [www.metodista.br/unesco/redealcar](http://www.metodista.br/unesco/redealcar).



On preserving the memory of these “historic moments”, picking out “events”, reconstituting “situations” and seeking the links which magnetize the “succession of episodes”, the directors of the Alcar Network intend only to project some anonymous, modest and forgotten “heroes”. Contingently it has been possible, without any vengeful spirit, to remove from the shadow certain personalities who were not so effective at erasing the vestiges of the villainy practiced, in the illusion of escaping from the judgment of History. The Bibliography of the Alfredo de Carvalho Network (appendix) illustrates these assertions.

The collective mission of the Alfredo de Carvalho Network , in this and other projects, has been to meet the challenge launched by Fernand Braudel in the attempt to “help comprehend the special place that certain events or exceptional personalities occupy in the history of civilizations”<sup>28</sup>.

## NOTES

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