

BOOK
REVIEW***Telejornalismo e
poder nas eleições
presidenciais****(TV journalism and power in
presidential elections)*

FLORA NEVES

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During the early years of television's existence, when the luminous screen glowing in the middle of the living room was considered to be only a household appliance, there were some people who said that "TV is to watch, not to study" (!). And thus, due mainly to this bias, the academic world showed resistance to the first theoretical works and field research on this media which, among the conventional communication media, is without the slightest doubt the most influential form of political persuasion and disseminator of models and social practices. If at some time someone thought that TV's influence on society did not deserve profound studies, today this serious error of evaluation is seen as responsible for the delay in the initiation of a serious study devoted to revealing the true facts. TV influences the entire political process, and how!

In this context, the contribution which Flora Neves makes with the book ***Telejornalismo e Poder nas eleições presidenciais*** (TV Journalism and Power in presidential elections) is very timely. It involves dense and very well-structured academic work which resulted in a highly qualified book, with appropriate insight into the topics and which comes at a very good time. Brazilians at last regained the right to freely exercise the right to choose the president of the republic and the other holders of elective positions on the federal, state and municipal levels. But in order for the choice to be responsible and positive, it is essential that there is information of good quality regarding the electoral process and mainly regarding the influences which are exerted in a decisive way on

the managing of this process. The book offers these attributes, is timely, enlightening and transmits in clear, objective language the information which we should all have about TV Journalism and Power on the levels of political decision.

The study is the result of research which examines how the 2002 and 2006 presidential elections were handled in the *Jornal Nacional* newscast of the Globo Network and seeks to show how this newscast presented the candidacies and offered a possible contribution to influence public opinion, with implications for the basic precepts of professional practice and ethics. The research was based on the news items – reports, interviews, covered notes, catch lines and headlines – displayed by the TV newscast from April to October of the years 2002 and 2006, the two elections which were won by candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva against José Serra and Geraldo Alkmin. The criterion utilized was to select the news items which contained the words “presidential election” and which showed candidates or conversations, even those of third parties, about the candidates and their actions. The survey covered 199 TV newscasts and a total of 874 news items which totaled around one hundred hours of recording. And the research was guided by the concepts of relevance and of the degree of visibility and importance attributed to the candidates.

In her research work which gave rise to the book, Flora Neves heard some very revealing statements in the form of testimony by professionals who were active on the front line of the election coverage in the two periods analyzed. There are impressive accounts by journalists such as Francisco Visney Pinheiro, known as Pinheirinho, responsible for the political editing at *TV Globo* in São Paulo and a witness of the fraudulent editing of the Lula-Collor presidential debate in 1989. Or such as reporter Rodrigo Vianna, fired for not having agreed with the distortions imposed by the same TV station in the 2006 electoral coverage. “These examples of testimony should remain in history”, says Professor Laurindo Lalo Leal Filho in the preface. In addition to the testimony, there is a full meticulous bibliographic research which supports the arguments.

The author says that in 2002 the largest television network in Brazil bet all its chips on the coverage of the contest, including unprecedented decisions, such as the live interviews carried out by *Jornal Nacional*. This intense coverage also occurred in the Network’s other TV newscasts. Two debates were held, one in the first round and the other in the runoff election. Besides dissemination of the polls, the candidates’ agendas and live interviews, *Jornal Nacional* displayed, during the electoral debate, three series of special reports regarding Brazilian problems

(with the objective of eliciting replies from the candidate with respect to the situations shown in the news items); “Brazil” (examples which were successful in the country) and “the power of the president” (items about the attributes of a president of the republic).

But the Globo Network’s greater effort in the 2002 presidential election did not mean, however, that it had been impartial. The studies point to a balance in the time devoted to each candidate. Nevertheless, quality of information and impartiality go beyond giving a balanced coverage to the candidates with respect to the time or number of items; it is also necessary to maintain the balance in the content (Neves, 2008:68).

“TV’s power of penetration in Brazil, where 11% of the inhabitants have no schooling (Brazilian Geographical and Statistical Institute – IBGE, 2006), can transform it into a controlling agent of ideas and responsible for the agenda-setting of the public’s thinking” (Neves, 2008:17).

The research also deals with another decisive aspect for the exchange of favors between Media and Power:

“Nowadays, the Brazilian concession model, with respect to the regulation of the system, is totally vulnerable. In addition to providing opportunities for “give and take” – since the concessions are approved by the Congress and a good number of its members are holders of radio and television stations – the rules do not present a method of effective control, like what occurs in other countries. Therefore, the concessions become an acquired right of their holders” (Neves, 2008:22).

And it underlines:

“Many politicians, when they are elected or when they help to elect political partners, directly influence the composition of the Congress, responsible for approval of the concessions. This structure formed by the political power which holds the stations is found in at least 13 Brazilian states. In the others, if they do not have networks of radio and TV stations owned by members of Congress, they have stations controlled by businessmen who support political oligarchies” (Neves, 2008:23).

The author points out that the work of the media was one of the highlights of the 2006 elections, although in 2002 the time and the number of interviews and debates had been greater. In 2002, the

coverage was centered on the proposals, the risks and the economic debate. In 2006, the approach was focused on the denunciations which involved the government and members of the Congress.

The television networks announced extensive coverage for the elections, with live interviews, discussions and debates with the main candidates. The largest network, Globo, tried to present an intense approach in its newscast, as in 2002, but with fewer live interviews and special reports. The *Jornal Nacional* had only one set of interviews in the first round and did not hold any live interviews in the runoff election, as announced previously. The *Jornal Hoje* also did not hold any live interviews in the studio. The channel's highlight was the *JN Caravana* project, which went on the air on July 31, 2006 in the city of São Miguel das Missões in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. But the proposal provoked much criticism with relation to the journalistic accuracy, the coherence with the JN project and the real intentions of the network's directors. In her book the author recalls that the producers chose the poorest places, with the objective of observing from up close the progress of the social projects, in this case to evaluate Lula's administration.

Accordingly, going into this area in a legitimate way, placing its newscasters to confirm the veracity of the events, side by side with the population, could represent for the *Jornal Nacional* a correct, subtle strategy to influence the voter who was convinced by the discourse of the government moving closer to the people, a markedly successful formula of President Lula during his first four-year term. Being at the side of the people, speaking directly to them, renewed the debates regarding the possibility of a new populism, represented by the figure of Lula.

Silva (2008) compared Globo's *Caravana JN* with the *Caravana Rolidei* of the movie *Bye Bye Brasil* directed by Cacá Diegues. More than 25 years later, what did *Caravana JN* do? It recreated the circus, and took it into the TV and the homes. Globo's bus is a delayed semblance of the discovery of the deeper Brazil and of the reencounter with the desires of the people. There is a kind of pasteurization of life of the people, a new "poetry of misery" displayed to reveal to us the singular riches of the poor Brazilian. In this itinerant circus medley there are civic numbers, entertainment tricks and rhetorical maneuvers.

"That newspapers, magazines and concessionaires of radio and television stations have a political party editorial position is only normal. When these positions deliberately contaminate the political coverage – without being explicit – they violate the citizens' basic right to be correctly informed" (Neves, 2008: 80).

Venício Lima emphasizes that the version of the events disseminated by the media during the period of the election campaign became, without any doubt, the great debate regarding the 2006 elections. “The elections that year indicate an important historic advance in our country: the major media entered – finally – in the public discussion agenda” (Lima, 2006).

In 2006, the Globo Network disseminated fewer election polls than in 2002, and contracted the polling companies Datafolha, from the *Folha de S. Paulo* Group, and Ibope. From April until the end of the runoff election, the newscast disseminated 33 results with respect to the presidential election. But in its editorial line it acted in a way to directly influence the election result.

Two weeks before the first round of the elections, JN explicitly used several resources in order to attack the campaign of the Workers’ Party (PT). Reporter Rodrigo Vianna, fired by Globo because of the elections, in a statement made to the author, revealed that “professionals in the Globo editorial office in São Paulo had not seen so much interference in agendas and editing since the military dictatorship, with the coverage of the ‘dossier case’ being even worse than the interference in the 1982 election for governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro (won by Leonel Brizola) and the 1989 presidential election (won by Fernando Collor de Mello)” (Neves, 2008:221).

The author points out that the way in which the news was presented by *Jornal Nacional*, the Network’s major newscast and the one with the largest audience in Brazil, “is a thermometer showing how the relations are between media and government in Brazilian journalism” (Neves, 2008:222).

For this reason, I repeat here the words written by Professor Laurindo Lalo Leal Filho in the preface to ***Telejornalismo e Poder nas eleições presidenciais***: “You are opening what seems to be a book, right? But it is more than that. It is a document to be read, studied and kept”. And I would like to add: especially in a presidential election year, like next year, when once again the Media, and especially TV, will have a decisive role in the electoral process, the book by Flora Neves is of fundamental importance for following and comprehending the political events and the way in which they will be or will not be transmitted to the Brazilians. A careful reading of the data contained in it will help to construct the “thermometer” with which we will be able to measure the relations between media and power in Brazil.

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