

**TELEVISION AND THE ELITES
IN POSTAUTHORITARIAN BRAZIL**

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ABSTRACT

Brazil has never before had political democracy along with mass television. This study deals with two ongoing processes related to this unprecedented combination: television's adjustment to competitive politics and the incorporation of television into the new political order by the power elites. On the one hand, television has immensely expanded its coverage of domestic politics, conquering publics (such as prestige press professionals) who used to despise it as a third-class news-maker. On the other hand, the power elites have come to perceive and employ television as a decisive political resource. The author has reconstructed the recent history (1979-88) of late-night interview and debate ("forum politics") programs, which have consolidated a sizeable space in commercial networks despite their numerically minuscule audience ratings (below one percent). The hypothesis that they are motivated by political interests, rather than commercial calculation, was fully verified. The findings also showed that a) the "forum politics" programs constitute an extension of the political arena and are at the intersection between the interests of the networks, the power elites, and major political journalists in using television as a political resource, and that b) these programs entirely violate the logic of regular television programming. In addition, the research revealed unexplored dimensions of political journalism, the new influence of television in the political agenda, the businesses of television programming and of audience measurements. Finally, this study found that none of the segments involved in maintaining "forum politics" programs (from producers to guests and sponsors) is interested in reaching a larger public. Indications are that these programs do have a wider audience than is assumed but it has been discouraged by the specialized language they employ.

RESUMO

Esse estudo trata de dois processos; a de ajustamento da televisão brasileira à democratização do país e o de incorporação da televisão, pelas elites dirigentes, à nova ordem política. De um lado, a televisão expandiu tremendamente sua cobertura sobre política interna, conquistando públicos e setores (como profissionais da grande imprensa escrita) que a discriminavam como fonte de informação de terceira categoria. De outro lado, a televisão passou a ser percebida e utilizada como recurso político decisivo pelas elites dirigentes. Essa pesquisa reconstituiu a história recente (1979-88) de programas de debate e entrevistas ("fôros") que se consolidaram no horário noturno e em redes comerciais, apesar de não terem um volume de audiência que os justifique. A hipótese de que eles possuem uma lógica política, e não comercial, se verificou plenamente. Os resultados demonstram que os programas "foros" a) constituem uma interseção significativa entre os interesses das emissoras, das elites dirigentes e de grandes nomes da imprensa escrita, em se utilizar do veículo como recurso político e, b) fogem inteiramente à lógica da programação da televisão brasileira. Além disso, a pesquisa revelou dimensões inexploradas do jornalismo político, da pesquisa de audiências, da comercialização da programação de tarde da noite e da participação da televisão na formação da agenda política. Revelou, por fim, o desinteresse dos agentes envolvidos nos "foros" (de produtores a convidados e anunciantes) em atender ao público real desses programas; um público maior do que o pretendido e ávido de informação, mas que se vê discriminado pela linguagem qualificada adotam.

It has often been remarked that Brazilian political culture is highly elitist. Here, I will discuss an unusual arena of intra-elite communication: televised late night political talk shows. These programs are very revealing of the extreme elitism that continues to prevail in Brazil, even after 15 years of transition to democracy

My subject is the intriguing genre of television political programming that began to be broadcast on the national networks around 1979, following the softening of television censorship. I characterize this genre as “forum politics” programs as distinguished from “canned politics” programs.

Canned politics programs are, essentially, the daily evening news; they are finished products, packaged for mass consumption. They follow the same format as American networks’ prime-time news except that there are no anchorpersons, just newsreaders. These news programs are fully produced by the networks and, typically broadcast between two popular “novelas” (short-lived soap operas), they reach the national audience at large.

Forum politics are interview and debate programs that are never broadcast before 10:30 p.m. They mostly appear on the minor networks, the ones with the lowest audience ratings. Unlike canned politics, they were originally produced by independent groups leasing airtime or broadcasting in partnership with the networks. Forum politics shows have a very open format, consisting of improvised conversations or debates recorded live.¹ Also in contrast with canned politics programs, they are not oriented toward the larger public. Their audience ratings have never been numerically significant, and in the last three years they have fallen to below 1% of the total television viewing public. In addition, their commercial breaks are filled with “home” advertising—with commercials for the network or the associated producers. The apparent lack of audience and sponsorship immediately poses the question why these programs continue to be produced and broadcast on otherwise commercial networks.

Indications are that the forum politics shows do not belong with the regular television business, which is based on the size of the audiences. Instead, they seem to belong to the realm of elite interactions in a process of broad, if unpredictable, political change and economic hardship. Forum politics programs are more concerned with the search for visibility and prestige among peers than with commercializing television airtime or addressing the mass public. These programs seem to constitute a circuit of horizontal communication, a forum for the elites to communicate amongst themselves. As O’Donnell puts it, they can be best portrayed as

¹ Many of these programs are (or have been) open to the public via telephone and some are even time-flexible. For example, the dailies—“Vamos Sair da Crise” and “Ferreira Neto”—usually end the programming day of their respective channels, thus enjoying considerable flexibility. Others, such as “Crítica & Autocrítica,” are pre-recorded and buy television time of a desired length.

“exclusive jam sessions just for musicians.”² Among other consequences, this amounts to a private use of a public resource or channel—broadcast television.

This study is concerned with two levels of questions: what the forum politics programs are and how they connect to the political process of the late stages of democratization in Brazil. It is designed to explain forum politics programs in their context and to explore them as a case study and source of hypotheses about a larger problematic. Specifically, given that television has come to play a decisive role in the politics of democratic societies, where it arrived long after the establishment of democratic institutions, what impact has it had in the Brazilian political transition, where democratic institutions are emerging after the full consolidation of mass television? How have the political reorganization, the establishment of political representation, and the emergence of competitive politics been affected by the availability of mass television? Conversely, how has commercial television responded to the new order of competitive politics? How has television programming reflected and coped with the political liberalization?

Although the forum politics phenomenon *per se* is interesting enough to deserve a full study, it is used here to assess the political role of television in Brazil today. A primary assumption of this research is that these programs provide a very illuminating angle for disclosing the relationship between television and the difficult and still incomplete process of consolidation of democracy in Brazil. The forum politics programs offer the opportunity: (1) to look at intra-elite interactions, including interactions between television elites (owners, owners’ representatives) and other segments of the power elites; (2) to identify patterns of behavior and relationships between journalists and the power elites; and (3) to capture elite attitudes toward the medium of broadcast television. This study uncovers some current dimensions of television’s role in Brazilian politics, of political journalism, and of elite behavior, which are all very revealing of the difficulties and limited scope of the democratization in process. In order to build this argument, it is necessary to take a closer look at the forum politics programs, as well as at some background information.

I. The Subject: From Elites to Elites (or “Elite Merry-Go-Round”)

The features of forum politics already described may remind one of PBS, CNN, or ABC’s talkshows, but the Brazilian ones are something else again. Unlike the “MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour” or Ted Koppel’s “Nightline,” to which the guests are invited because of their involvement with the issue of the night, the forum politics shows do not focus on issues. The focus is placed on the individuals, on the personalities of the night. These are first-rank

² Personal conversation at the Kellogg Institute, fall 1988.

personalities: congresspersons, members of the Cabinet, leading technocrats from the public and private sectors, major businesspeople, top executives of multinational corporations, famous jurists and intellectuals, occasionally a bishop or a high-level military officer;³ in short, the highest of Brazilian power elites. And by “power elites” is meant the political, economic, military, religious, and intellectual segments of Brazilian elites.

These guests can talk without interruption for as much as 12-15 minutes. Producers explain this by arguing that they were invited precisely because they have “something to add,” meaningful experiences and refined opinions with original contents to report. Furthermore, the producers say that it is this flexibility that is most appreciated because the guests find it possible to develop an idea, to make an argument.

The visual treatment also places full emphasis on the guests’ figures. While interviewers may be seated behind desks and counters, guests are always placed in armchairs and the camera explores their whole figures. There are even close-ups of their Italian shoes, of the way they sit, of their gestures and expressions, including times when they are just listening to an interviewer question. The set can be a neutral environment with tasteful and minimalist props or a replica of a finely appointed private library.

Unlike the Johnny Carson, Arsenio Hall, Pat Sajak, or David Letterman shows, the informality of the Brazilian shows never allows for comedy and satire. Forum politics can be described as shows of manners and style, of the guests’ politeness and refinement, as well as of seriousness and accountability.

The forum politics offer not only a personalistic approach to their guests but also deferential treatment. One of them had a waiter serving drinks in a silver tray during the program. The episodes for which I was present during the taping also had waiters, but off the set. But by deferential treatment I am referring specifically to the way the guests are addressed. This is in contrast to American political talk shows, in which the relationship between the journalist and guests can often be contentious or adversarial. It is outside the purpose of forum politics to

³ As a matter of fact, the military do not usually appear on forum politics shows. Their rare appearances are remembered as exceptions, as in the case of Gen. Dilermando Monteiro, who was interviewed on Canal Livre. Producers say that they have tried to invite military authorities, but they have not responded favorably. On the one hand, the forum politics shows emerged during the later stages of democratization, when the military were willing to move to the backstage. On the other hand, the military never used to address the public directly or submit themselves to public accountability. Television was heavily used during the Gen. Medici administration but to carry official propaganda, appeals to the mass public in the form of finished advertising packages. An interesting sign of the new times brought by the political transition is President Figueiredo’s decision to have a television program in 1982, an electoral year. “Povo e o Presidente” (The People and the President) was created and produced by the leading Globo network. It was originally broadcast on Sundays as a new segment of the leading “Fantástico” and was clearly oriented to the mass public. However, it was soon transferred to later time slots and in 1983 it was moved to late night on Mondays.

contest the guests' answers. If they are deviating from the question asked, as indeed happens, the producers assume that "the public is sufficiently intelligent to make its own judgements" (and the feedback they receive from viewers confirms this). As another producer made clear: "We are not here to squeeze out the truth for the sole reason that this is not possible. The individuals who come here know how to just say what they want to say. Besides, they would not come to be taken apart."⁴

Forum politics are improvised talks, recorded live and not edited, even when the original idea was to have a neat edited interview or debate and even when the program is taped in advance. Producers have all come to realize that editing this clientele's words means trouble: not because of their guests' indignation at being cut from the final version—as I suspected—but because of the pressures that the producers themselves suffer from their guests and the guests' advisors to cut this and that. Guests tend to regret what they said and try to interfere in the editing. As Alan Ridding noted, the guests can be, and often are, what Americans would call "long-winded."⁵

Another peculiarity is that these programs are defined by their producers as independent journalism. This is argued on the grounds that their programs are improvised and open-ended. All thirteen producers I interviewed stressed their refusal to make previous agreements with guests and interviewers beyond the one or two general topics suggested beforehand at the time of the guest's invitation. As far as I could observe, guests and interviewers often have no more than 10 minutes to break the ice before recording. Guests are usually personally received and hosted in private by the heads of the network and the program with a relaxing scotch. In some programs they only meet the interviewers on the program's set immediately before taping. An important part of the forum politics shows' format is the blend of "spontaneity" with the "tension" stemming from the unpredictability of what is going to be asked.

The interesting point here is the association between improvisation and independent journalism. There is no necessary connection between improvisation and good journalism. On the contrary, the best documentaries and talk shows are clearly very well prepared. But when individuals and not issues are at stake, improvisation appears to be the only means of gaining credibility. What is offered is individuals, members of the power elite, who come to be thoroughly interrogated, without a prearranged script. It is the lack of concern with issues that makes improvisation so important to ensure some journalistic credibility for these programs. Accidents do occur and are an important part of the game; they attest to the spontaneity and veracity of the program.

⁴ Alexandre Machado, former producer of "Crítica & Autocrítica" and current producer of "Vamos Sair da Crise."

⁵ Telephone interview, Rio, 1988.

The best metaphor here, as O'Donnell suggested, is "a theatre where the actors are playing for the benefit of other actors of the same theatre company. They are performing without a script because they do not need one."⁶

Two other dimensions of forum politics programs mentioned in the introduction should be developed to complete the picture. In contrast to the canned politics programs, the forum politics shows were not originated by the networks. They were initially produced by independent groups contracted either by a press organization or an interest group which would buy time from a network or would produce the show in association with the networks.⁷ Today all networks have their own forum politics programs but many of these programs are still produced by independent firms, outside the networks. This is very uncommon because over 90% of what is produced for television in Brazil is made by the networks.⁸

As already mentioned, like American talk shows these programs do not reach large audiences. But the Brazilian forum politics clearly *never sought* large audiences. Their time slots, format, language, or production values violate television standards in Brazil. They are, in fact, the opposite of the visually rich and fast-paced prime-time programming.

Their late-night time slot is typical of what is called in the marketing jargon the "AB public" viewing time.⁹ Audience measurements over the past 15 years have consistently shown that after 10:00 p.m. television does not reach the masses. The total audience drops to about 30% of its prime-time peak level and the participation of the upper classes increases sharply from 15% to over half of the late-night viewers. The reason is obvious to Brazilians: 75% of the population lives in urban areas and the overwhelming majority of this percentage, the masses, lives in the farthest peripheries of the cities. They depend on extremely precarious public transportation systems and expend more than one hour average between their homes and their workplaces, where they are expected to arrive by 7:00 a.m. Thus, they go to sleep earlier than the upper classes. Yet the forum politics programs' ratings have been minimal even by the standards of the late-night AB public.

The language employed is colloquial as far as the participants are concerned but inaccessible to the larger public, who are semi-literate and do not command political, juridical, and economic jargon. The timing is lengthy and no special attention is paid to visual resources. Forum

⁶ Conversation, Kellogg Institute, fall 1988.

⁷ The independent producers are fully responsible for the production. The association is restricted to the use of the networks' facilities and to sharing the revenues attained from the program's commercialization. (Interviews with Fernando Barbosa Lima, Roberto d'Avila, Carlos Alberto Vizeu, Roberto Muller, Alexandro Machado, Teteca Teixeira, Beliza Ribeiro.)

⁸ Mattos, Sergio, "The Impact of the 1964 Revolution in Brazilian Television," M.A. dissertation, University of Texas at San Antonio, Klinsensmith Independent Publisher, 1982.

⁹ In Brazil, social classes are referred to on a continuum from A to E, with A and B being the most highly educated and wealthy.

politics have indeed been portrayed, even by the members of the elites who were interviewed for this study, as the “most boring” television programs.

Clearly, an explanation for the endurance of these programs must be sought in the political context of which forum politics shows are a part. They have to be looked at in the political context because they contradict both the logic of commercial television and the conventional wisdom about intra-elite communication. Forum politics shows are neither sound television business nor a typical form of intra-elite communication. Elites are not using television in this case as a *mass* medium, nor is television the medium through which the elites usually communicate with themselves—which are print and informal means. Moreover, these programs are clearly devoted to politics but they do not seem to have any necessary connection to electoral politics. They are produced regardless of the electoral calendar and are not targeting the electorate at large.¹⁰ It seems to me that the reasons for such an extension of intra-elite communication can be assessed only after identifying the elites involved and the circumstances that have led them to use late-night television.

II. The Background and Some Analytical Propositions

Despite the widely shared opinion in Brazil that television is a very important element in the late stages of the democratization, there is no scholarly literature on the subject. My broader intention is to initiate a political account of television and politics in Brazil, bearing in mind that in the absence of previous research by other scholars, such an account could only be fully accomplished through what would amount to a research program.

There are significant indications that the political influence of television in Brazil is greater than in the advanced democracies. Brazilian polling institutes have repeatedly found evidence that campaign and debate programs on prime-time television constitute a major factor affecting the decision of voters.¹¹ The literature on media and politics (non-existent in Brazil) has found that in the US (MacCombs et al.) and Western Europe (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck) the media have “freed” both candidates and voters from the political parties in some important respects.¹² It is argued that over time the media have replaced the political parties in many of their traditional

¹⁰ Certainly, the proximity of electoral contests affects the selection of guests and the directions of the interview or debate, but electoral motivations do not constitute a sufficient or even a necessary condition for those programs to exist.

¹¹ Interviews with Carlos Mateus, head of Gallup in Brazil, and with Luis Paulo and Carlos Augusto Montenegro, owners and directors of IBOPE (Instituto Brasileiro de Pesquisa de Opinião).

¹² M. MacCombs, D. Weaver, D. Graber, and D.H. Eyal, *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election*, Praeger, 1981. R.J. Dalton, S. Flanagan, and P.A. Beck, eds., *Electoral Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, Princeton University Press, 1984.

functions: namely, as suppliers of political information and opinion, monitors of governing actions, and “sponsors” of candidates’ electoral campaigns.

Electoral campaigns need less party organizational and legitimizing support, and voters’ behavior has become increasingly volatile, disregarding party loyalty and making decisions on the basis of the information they gather directly from the media and their reference groups. Voting decisions have tended to become more contingent upon each electoral competition and more centered on the candidates’ image and positions on issues. It can be said that, in a way, the media tend to make superfluous intra-party politics and mobilization of the bases. Street politics and political activism have grown around single issues and outside party politics.

II.1 The Question of Mass Television Prior to Democracy

All of this points to the very puzzling question already mentioned:¹³ if television has become such a challenge in those societies where it arrived long after the establishment of democratic institutions, what can one say for the cases where democratic institutions are emerging after the full establishment of television?

Observation of the use of television in Spain may be applicable to Brazil. Rafael Arias Salgado has noted that the existence of television prior to democratic politics in contemporary Spain has *contributed* to the survival of some oligarchic or authoritarian traits of Spanish political culture.¹⁴ By providing direct access to the masses, television has allowed the parties’ leaderships to dispense with intra-party mobilization, to enjoy excessive autonomy from their bases, and even to change their stands drastically—as the PSOE did on the NATO issue—without having to be subjected to democratic means of legitimation. Effective use of television has enabled the political elites to be elected and to govern without the usual constraints of well consolidated (and representative) party structures.

The emerging democratic institutions in Brazil seem to be more vulnerable to television than in Spain because, unlike the latter, Brazil has been unable so far to establish political identities or a consistent party system composed of parties connected to social cleavages (whatever they may be), possessing clear political stands, and truly committed to democracy.

The unfortunate distinctiveness of current Brazilian politics is that, so far, the actors have refused to commit themselves to more encompassing political identities. By refusing to do so, they have preserved the alternative of defining, redefining or correcting their stands on each new issue or political circumstance. The lack of clearly defined political forces creates a void that can be easily “filled” by competent use of television. Instead of party programs framing political appeal, we have technical expertise in television and political marketing framing it by playing with images,

¹³ I thank Scott Mainwaring for having brought this question to my attention.

¹⁴ Paper presented at the Fortín Santa Rosa, Uruguay, March 1987.

words, and emotions. The amount of time and energy spent in law propositions and amendments in Congress, as well as in controversies in the media, around the rules and scope of free access to prime-time television for political broadcasts is the most eloquent indication that such a replacement of political representation by television is at work in Brazil. Not only candidates during electoral campaigns but also political parties (regardless of the electoral calendar) have secured free broadcasting rights. Free television for electoral campaigning has been granted since before the military coup and kept under variable restrictions since then. From 1974 onwards, all the electoral contests were held under different rules. Interestingly enough, electoral regulations were left out of the extremely detailed constitutional text approved in 1988 and therefore left susceptible to *ad hoc* redefinitions.

To put it more clearly, the existence of mass television prior to democracy may have consequences by itself—as in the case of Spain—but it becomes a much bigger problem when—as happens in Brazil—it is combined with lack of political identities on which to base political recruiting and representation. In this regard the situation in Brazil is certainly more complex than in most Latin American countries that do possess well-consolidated political identities—in parties or movements—such as Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Ecuador. One remark is in order here: the mere existence of political identities is not a sufficient condition for democracy. The character of such political identities can be conducive or obstructive (Sendero Luminoso in Peru and religious and ethnic parties and movements in Europe and in the Middle East) to democratic politics and to democratic stability. The point here is that the absence of political identities amounts to the absence of a necessary condition for political democracy.

Availability of free television rights for political parties and candidates opened the way to all sorts of opportunistic behavior. There are no cultural or political counterforces to discourage self-interested manipulation of television by political elites. To give one example, free access to television for candidates and parties has led to the formation of parties for the sole purpose of selling their free television rights to other parties truly engaged in politics.¹⁵ This was the reason why free access for parties was recently restricted to those parties that have elected representatives.¹⁶ But this still left open the alternative for congresspersons to form parties with free television rights for either economic or political advantage. In the latter case, a group of congresspersons would simulate a split to create a new party for the sole purpose of forming a coalition with the original party, doubling its free television time. And it should be emphasized that these calculations and courses of actions have really been part of the political process in current Brazil.

¹⁵ The way to transfer those rights is by forming a party coalition.

¹⁶ Interview with Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Brasília, June 6, 1988.

Another recent example of the irresistible appeal the media have for the political elites was President Sarney's successful use of the media licensing system for forming pro-government majorities in the Constituent Congress in May and June of 1988. Concession of broadcasting licenses is a prerogative exclusive to the President and entirely discretionary. By conceding radio and television licenses to congresspersons as well as other miscellaneous favors, the Government succeeded in carrying the day.¹⁷ The Constituent Assembly voted for Presidentialism and for a 5-year term for Sarney, as opposed to Parliamentarism and the 4-year term that appeared probable until the week before.

As Wober and Gunter point out, using television has both "forward" and "backward" consequences.¹⁸ The political uses of television are primarily concerned with "forward" impact; that is with reaching and influencing the viewers. This concerns the elite/masses level of communication. As has been argued above, the most important "forward" effect has been the replacement of political organization and representation by technically well-made appeals to be carried by the media to the masses. On the other hand, the political uses of television also influence those who are regularly exposed to the cameras and/or using them.

"Backward" effects refer to the changes in the behavior and functioning of those groups and institutions that are regularly covered by television or oriented to using the media. The constant exposure to the cameras and "doing something to be consumed through television" stimulates and rewards some behaviors or skills at the expense of others. In other words, it introduces a new bias or a new parameter at the elite/elite level of political competition. One manifestation of backward effects is the sudden prominence professionals in political marketing, phonologists, and the like attained during the period covered by this study. Media professionals in Brazil also became first rated acquaintances for catch-all parties and have, indeed, welcomed the opportunity of embracing political careers. Many of them have attained impressive electoral records.¹⁹ As elsewhere, this bias also encourages performers (actors and actresses, pop singers) and all those who show good skills for dealing with television to try and build political careers without the need to commit themselves to any specific, clearcut political constituency.²⁰

¹⁷ Media licensing was a much covered scandal in 1988. It was reported by all the major newspapers (*Jornal do Brasil*, *Folha de São Paulo* and *Estado de São Paulo*) and weekly news magazines (*Veja* and *Senhor*). For a general overview, see Ricardo Setti in *Jornal do Brasil*, August 2, 1988.

¹⁸ J.M. Wober and B. Gunter, *Television and Social Control*, St. Martin's Press, 1988.

¹⁹ This is the case of Federal Deputies or House Representatives Antonio Britto <PMDB-RS>, Roberto d'Avila <PDT-RJ>, Artur da Tavola <PMDB-RJ>, Mendes Ribeiro <PMDB-RJ>, and Helio Costa <PMDB-MG>, among others. Also impressive were the polls results for the candidacies of television owner Silvio Santos and forum politics host João Mellão in São Paulo in 1988.

²⁰ Gilberto Gil, Lucelia Santos, Bete Mendes are some of the performers who have succeeded in politics.

Backward effects stimulate the elites to devote themselves to ensuring access to television and learning how to make good use of it. Concerns with opening the way to television and learning from marketing and phonology experts have surpassed, if not replaced, the traditional means of forming a political constituency. One outstanding example is Guilherme Afif Domingos, the most voted representative of the city of São Paulo in 1986. He declared that his ability to be in television and to make good use of it is, in his opinion, the principal explanation for his astounding electoral accomplishments.²¹

A preliminary conclusion could be that the availability of television to parties and candidates has accentuated these weaknesses and reinforced personalism and non-accountability. The political use of television has definitely become a central element in political actors' calculations and a major factor influencing electoral outcomes. But while the effectiveness of the use of television for electoral politics has been measured and confirmed by the polling institutes, there is no evidence about the reactions the backward effects may have provoked within the political elites. Two questions are in order. First, whether or not this bias has undermined the positions of certain elites by fostering the political chances of media professionals and other newcomers who are foreign to the elite niches. Second, whether or not such a high appraisal of television's usefulness for politics is accurate and will hold in the medium and long term.

A last remark worth making is that all the pressures and disputes around free access to prime-time television have constituted a strong incentive for television owners to get engaged in politics, because "free access" has been expanded and this always implies significant losses of revenues. The redefinitions of the licensing system and the use of public funds for political propaganda by the Constituent Congress also influenced the television owners in this same direction.

II.2 The Hollywood of the Poor

A second outstanding difference between Brazil and the advanced democracies, and even Spain and other Southern Cone countries, is the place television occupies in Brazil's system of mass communication. Unlike the press in all those societies, newspapers and the printed press in general fall entirely *outside* the mass communication circuit in Brazil. Therefore, "mainstream political communication circuit" and "public opinion" in Brazil refer to a minority segment of the population, namely the classes A and B, the consumers of the "prestige" press and "prestige" (late-night) television. The sum of all four national newspapers' sales last year did not reach 10% of the population—because this is a population composed of poor and semi-literate individuals.

²¹ Interview, June 8, 1988, Câmara dos Deputados, Brasília.

Television coverage, by contrast, reaches the whole national territory, over 90% of urban households and 70% of rural. Television was made so widely available that, in spite of being a market-oriented business, it reaches far beyond the consumer market. In 1985, 30% of television audience was outside the market economy; i.e. below minimal—floor level—purchasing power.²²

This occurred because television was early on defined by the military regime as a national security priority. It experienced rapid development after the late 1960s. The military governments consistently provided the technical and physical infrastructure and the financial support for a nationally integrated television system to boom. This included not only huge investments in research and development on satellite technology and in immediate expansion of microwave interlacing, but even the provision of CDC (Direct Credit for the Customer) through which television sets were made affordable to low income families. In five years the country was already receiving simultaneous transmission through national networks and five years later color television was made available. Mass television was one of the outstanding achievements of the military regime and it was conceived and used not only for the sake of national integration but also for (symbolic) cooptation—“to instill in the population a sense of participation in the modernization process.”²³

The military had the opportunity to select who should have access to the formidable television business. Broadcasting in Brazil has always (since the 1930s) been regulated by a licensing system controlled by the federal government. In the 1960s licensing became the exclusive prerogative of the President and the insulation of this area from pressure groups was further accentuated by the creation of the Ministry of Communications in 1968, which was staffed by military personnel (from the top to the lower technical levels).²⁴ Mass television became one of the areas of greatest concentration of power and “political sensitivity.” To illustrate this point, when television licenses opened up in 1981 and 1983, two leading, but independent, press organizations—*Editora Abril* and *Jornal do Brasil*—applied for the concessions on both occasions. Yet the first license for running a national network was eventually awarded to three other groups of which two were already licensees (Silvio Santos and Grupo Capital) and the third (Bloch Editora) was the only newcomer to television business. The second license, which was for a local station in Rio de Janeiro, was awarded to a little-known evangelical minister—Pastor Fanini.

²² Mauro Salles in *Senhor* no. 288, July 31, 1985, p 57. In 1989 this percentage must be even greater since income concentration has accentuated since 1985.

²³ Sergio Mattos, op. cit.

²⁴ It should be noted that the military regime did not impose drastic changes in the previous conceptions of how television was to be regulated. The military implemented the new Code for Communications that was issued in 1961 and, certainly, extended its centralizing features. Sergio Mattos covers this subject (op.cit).

The military established four national commercial networks and one public network. However, one of the commercial networks alone has retained for 18 years the *de facto* monopoly of the audience, an average of 75% of the national audience during prime time. It is said that despite 169 stations, 5 national and 3 regional networks, Brazil has in fact one and one-fourth channels: the one is Globo and all the others together attain one-fourth of Globo's audience. Globo has set the terms for advertising business, and has boosted Tancredo Neves' presidential candidacy, in exchange for which Globo's owner, Roberto Marinho, nominated the Minister of Communication. Globo's finance director happens to be the son of a very influential Army general who is today the Minister of the Army, and the list goes on—five best selling books have already been published about the inside stories of Globo.²⁵

The clue to the Globo phenomenon is a mix of political shelter with competent entrepreneurial management and some early financial and technical assistance from the American Time-Life group. The fact is that Globo set the standard for mass television in Brazil, one of technically sophisticated entertainment. Globo's phenomenon has been compared to Hollywood because of its incredibly successful fiction productions. These range from three to four different "lines" of "novelas" to mini-series, "true-cases" (*caso-verdade*), and special drama series.²⁶ Globo's programming menu has long been a national addiction, and may be on its way to becoming an international mass addiction since Globo's fiction productions have been exported to 83 countries. A last piece of relevant information is that Globo has ranked since 1979 as the fourth private television company in the world. It is only surpassed by the three American networks.

Television in Brazil has been called the "Brazilian Hollywood," or the "Hollywood of the Poor." It is 90 percent entertainment, but it is very important to note that the 10 percent of news it carries is about 100 percent of the news that reaches the majority of the population. The commonsensical approach to this television diet is that Globo's fiction accounts better for the country's reality than its prime-time news (the "Jornal Nacional" or JN). A German journalist, widely quoted some years ago, put it this way: "There are no differences between JN and any prime-time news in the First World. The problem is that JN is supposed to be reporting a Third World reality and such reality just does not seem to be there."

²⁵ The influence of Globo's owner extends throughout Brazil and even into North America. In fact, it even extends right into the Kellogg Institute itself. Marinho was a member of the Kellogg Institute's Advisory Board.

²⁶ Globo produces novelas for all tastes—children and nannies at 6:00, more comedy-like shows at 7:00, and real drama after the news by 8:30. Sometimes a fourth series of adult-only soap operas is produced for the 10:00 p.m. hour.

If democracy is to be consolidated in Brazil it must penetrate television. If the substantive issues of democratization do not penetrate television—and Globo, in particular—if they do not make sense for the mass public, democratization will not even form a constituency in the country.

Free access to prime-time television for candidates and parties is one step in this direction. Audience measurements of the parties' political broadcasting in 1988 were surprising. They have shown that the audience has remained stable and in some cases has even increased during these programs. In fact, the quality of party broadcasts has greatly improved and is already matching prime-time standards. However, these broadcasts are too occasional to balance the agenda setting and image building effects of the daily news.

II.3 Political Journalism and Elitism

The television system of Brazil combines what many authors would describe as the two worst alternatives: subjection to direct government interference and to market forces. As has been argued for the US, the market motive imposes the need to maximize audiences and thus the striving for the broadest and most conventional appeals. This in turn tends to lead to sameness, to a homogeneous supply of television programming and to a middle-of-the-road political ethos. In England the system is run by the public administration, but it is kept out of government control and has been made purposefully diverse. As Wober and Gunter put it, the British system is run for the viewers, the advertisers are the willingly used.²⁷ In the US the system is run for its primary users, advertisers, and the ones used by the system are the viewers. In Brazil, the viewers are the ones used by a system that is not only run for advertisers but also subject to government interference and to the political elites' manipulations via legislation and direct contacts.

Television owners have too huge interests at stake to afford the risk of government retaliation. To be effective, the government does not need to come to the point of taking back licenses. It is sufficient to cut public advertising or a credit line or just to hold back licenses for importing equipment to put a network out of balance. The federal government is not only the biggest advertiser but has sufficient leverage to lead other big advertisers, who are multinational corporations, to follow its recommendations. With regard to the uses of television as an instrument for politics, there is nothing the television owners can do about it besides lobbying and using their medium for making politics too.

The greatest weapon television owners have against government and politicians is their news and other journalistic programs. Redemocratization raised the value of journalism as a political resource that the networks can manipulate to their advantage. The recovery of freedom

²⁷ Op. cit. footnote 18.

of speech was followed by improvements in television journalism. This included the hiring of professionals from the printed press and from one another's networks, the introduction of news commentary and columnists, and the re-emergence of forum politics programs.

Most of these changes, however, have been limited to either late-night or early-morning time periods, or to the minor networks. Prime-time television saw very few changes and still reproduces the same programming pattern as during the dictatorship. Besides, the changes in television journalism were also limited to an expansion of political opinion rather than to sound political reporting. Here, television reflects features of journalism in Brazil as a whole.

The quality of journalism in Brazil is a very controversial matter. The most common appraisals are that the country has "freedom of press enterprise but not of press itself" ("liberdade de empresa, não de imprensa") and that press in Brazil is the "press owners' voice." These statements are incomplete because they miss the interferences the journalists and advertisers also make. News and events are erased from reality and from history without any consequences.²⁸ The number of journalists on the pay-roll of public agencies and politicians in the legislatures is astonishing.²⁹ On the other hand, there has also been a traditional leftist component in the printed press; a significant presence of politically committed journalists who also let partisanship interfere with news making.³⁰ The press establishment rewards independent and investigative journalism and the annual awards for journalism have consistently favored this kind of reporting.³¹ Media organizations have given great prominence to all sorts of scandals hurting the power elites on corruption, personal life, or whatever other grounds. And curiously, the credibility of the press has increased sharply in the last opinion polls.

This picture is very paradoxical and essentially reflects the lack of journalistic ethics. News makers in Brazil can be committed to any sort of interests—from socialist revolution to a friend's demand—but not to the supposed right of citizens to be well informed. News making is just another instrument used for political and/or economic advantage, and has been far more engaged

²⁸ But not only the news; the annals of the Senate have also been erased or censored in 1981 and in 1983. As political columnist Newton Rodrigues stressed, by doing this, the government exposed journalists and press organizations who covered the "erased" issues, debates, and statements to the threat of indictment under the National Security Law.

²⁹ Interviews with Rubem de Azevedo Lima and Jânio de Freitas reported the hiring of 43 journalists by the House of Representatives at the end of Geisel's mandate and of an equivalent number by the Senate later. Much larger is the number of journalists on the pay-roll of agencies of the Executive branch. A conservative estimate can be drawn from Jorge Cunha Lima's announcement in 1983 that he had in his hand a list of hundreds of journalists who were being paid by the government and that the São Paulo Journalists' Union refused to publish it (*Folha de São Paulo*).

³⁰ Interview with José Carlos de Assis, Rio, July 1988.

³¹ The 1987 Exxon Award was given to Jânio de Freitas for his demonstration of the patronage involved in the "North-South Railway" contract.

in the power game than in reporting news. Even investigative reportings are more oriented to intra-elite fights than to informing the readers.

Many politicians, scholars, and even journalists interviewed for this study agreed that political journalism in Brazil has not helped the consolidation of democracy. By not distinguishing corrupt tenants from their office positions, press allusions to successive scandals have damaged the credibility of democratic institutions themselves. Democracy easily became associated with greater opportunities for corrupt politicians—which is by no means true. But much more detrimental has been the perverse combination of reliance on official sources with incompetence on key issue areas. The coverage of economic policies and of the Constituent Assembly are the best examples of this. Reliance on official sources reflects both the lack of expertise and the habits or routines consolidated in two decades of military rule, censorship, and restriction to official press releases. One consequence of this reliance has been the creation of false expectations in the public, because official sources are not accountable and tend to disinform. Lack of expertise, though, also feeds suspicion, so the press has tended to simultaneously reproduce official information in its news reportings and contest it in signed columns and editorials. By doing so, it appears to be independent while it has been, in fact, unable to grasp and present independent reporting and well-founded criticism or approval of what is being reported. As some journalists have said, there is a compulsive need to oppose the government (even the civilian government), a compulsion that is in part commercially motivated. Others see the press caught in a double bind; it has to appear critical and independent to the public but it also has to attend to the power elites. Economists and members of the Constituent Assembly stressed that most of the media were totally unprepared to cover government responses to the debt crisis and recession as well as the Assembly's battles and decisions. Both have been unfairly opposed by the press on dubious grounds. Public expectations have consistently been frustrated and the consequence has been growing skepticism, if not total withdrawal, from the political transition.

I found no consensus about the vices and virtues of news making in Brazil. Some classified the press as belonging to the "archaic side" (family-run business) of the country, while others considered it to be very modern and in its way to becoming truly independent and professional. Both views apply to parts of the press system today. This paper should contribute to disclosing current trends in the coverage of politics in Brazil.

What is relevant for this study is that the improvements in television journalism did not break this unethical pattern. They meant more opinion, more commentary, rather than investigative reporting and production of "hard news." In short, the improvements in television journalism made it an even more suitable vehicle for the manipulations mentioned above. It is further relevant to note that forum politics are not only a fully suitable means to the end of "framing public opinion"; they also expose the non-professionalism of journalists. Many of these programs

provide blatant evidence of the non-differentiation between interviewers and guests. Both of them are, say, on the same side of the story with the difference that the role of journalists is to help guests to talk and to build their images. In all cases, forum programs are opportunities for establishing or strengthening personal ties between journalists and the power elites. However, from the standpoint of the shortcomings of press expertise in addressing key issues, forum politics programs may have provided a valuable extension by sometimes inviting the real decision-makers to explain directly what is going on.

III. Preliminary Findings

What I hope to have conveyed by this background sketch is first, some compelling reasons why television must be taken into account by political analysts of contemporary Brazil; and second, the broader context of the forum politics programs, a context of a very stratified television programming diet for a very stratified society. From the perspective of mainstream television, we can understand how distant the forum politics programs are from the mass circuit. They share almost no features of what mass television is all about, in spite of being an integral part of television programming for a decade.

These programs are indeed an advantageous angle for disclosing some defining features of the current relations between television and politics; especially, for assessing how television has made its conversion to the new order of competitive politics as well as how democratization has influenced the most strictly political programs produced by television—the forum politics programs. Preliminary findings provide some interesting evidence in this regard.

III.1 Origin and Endurance: Different Political Motives

The indications are, so far, that the explanation for the emergence of forum politics shows cannot explain their endurance. The interest in bringing back political talk-shows, according to Fernando Barbosa Lima, the producer who reintroduced this kind of program in February 1979, was “commercial and journalistic.” He had previous experience with this genre of program and had all the reasons to believe that there was a strong demand for political information and opinion among the AB public. The military had just extinguished the most repressive pieces of legislation—the “Institutional Acts”—and created a multi-party system. Censorship, which began to be informally liberalized from mid-1975 for the print media, was by this time—early 1979—quite softened for television too. The fragmentation of censorship power had caused the system to become largely unworkable and unenforceable.³² The Amnesty Law was issued five months

³² Joan Dassin, “Press Censorship and the Military State in Brazil,” in J. Curry, *Press Censorship around the World*, Praeger, 1982, p.397.

after “Abertura” (“Opening”) was first broadcast. Exiled leaders were preparing their return and could be interviewed abroad by this program (“Abertura”).

But the novelty of having political discussion on television was sufficiently appealing in itself to catch the attention of the more educated portion of the Brazilian television audience. In fact, “Abertura” was a big success in terms of prominence and prestige among a “qualified” or “quality” public. Besides the commercial possibilities of responding to a long unsatisfied demand for political information, this program had very political “second-intents.” Before taking any steps to produce “Abertura,” Fernando Barbosa Lima flew to Brasília to consult the highest political authorities about the feasibility of such a project. Gen. Golbery do Couto e Silva and senator Petrônio Portela cheered the idea because of the positive symbolic effects such a program could have on public opinion. It would be one more sign of the new era; it would definitely help to legitimize the government effort toward democratization, which by that time had accomplished only very limited advances.

The origins of “Abertura” are quite revealing of the contiguity the forum politics programs have always had in relation to the power elites, and of the importance these elites have tended to attribute to television. Gaining access to Gen. Golbery and to Petrônio Portela—who was already chosen to be the Minister of Justice of the coming government of Gen. Figueiredo (which took office in March 1979) and was in charge of articulating the next steps of the “political opening”—was not an easy task for anybody. However, an independent television producer with a project in mind could be received by both of the very highest political authorities of that time and, moreover, Barbosa Lima also received the sponsorship of the Federal Savings Bank (CEF) for his program.³³ This also serves as another illustration of how political journalism is made in Brazil.

“Abertura” paved the way for various other forum politics programs to enter the mainstream political communication circuit (prestige press and television shows). They were either re-editions of old programs such as “Pinga-Fogos” or the conversion of culturally oriented talk shows into political ones, such as “Ferreira Netto,” or new programs. This first era of forum politics gained audience ratings above 5% and attracted the attention of the printed press. So far, the indications are that they were oriented to and consumed by the AB public at large. Forum Politics shows were thus a quite self-evident business; the selling of a big novelty—politics and politicians in television.

These features were not present anymore after 1985. The average audience dropped to below 1% and both the printed press and the AB public lost interest, but the forum politics shows are still there. The explanations for their survival do not seem to stem anymore from the general

³³ Fernando Barbosa Lima is also the son of the socialist Barbosa Lima Sobrinho, the President of the National Press Association, ABI, for many years. Most probably, though, this was not the connection through which he reached Gen. Golbery and Petrônio Portela.

context of the AB public but from the peculiarities of the power elites. Here, Ronald Pohoryles and Charles Lindblom can be of help.³⁴ Pohoryles studied the relationship between media owners and the power elites in a policy-making case in Austria and discovered that media owners and top executives invariably have direct interactions with reference persons from within the power elites and are themselves political players. This author finds Lindblom's proposition of "mutual adjustment" to describe intra-elite competition a useful model to account for the relationship between the heads of media organizations and the power elites. Lindblom's thesis is that:

Western industrial societies are characterized by diverse power elites who control the political process. These elites are tied up in relationships of competition, interchange, and mutual alignment. Interdependence, if not outright conflict, among authorities at any level often requires mutual adjustments... Although public officials cannot take the trouble to design ad hoc controls for each citizen, they can design them for more important targets—each other... Reciprocal obligation among authorities is the foundation for extremely powerful controls and is attested by the frequency with which it corrupts public officials and the private party, who also enter into mutual control. The political system becomes thus a network of authority under mutual adjustment among authorities who practice an extended use of their authority in order to control each other.

Pohoryles found that the relationship between media owners and the power elites is one of rivalry, competition and of mutual adjustment too:

There are very significant differences in journalists' attitudes on issues; the higher someone's status the closer he is to the government's attitude... That such attitudes are also directly and personally influenced by acquaintances (trusted reference persons) in influential political circles is supported by the data and confirms Lindblom's thesis of "mutual alignment." It is apparent that the relations between political elites and those of the media may be termed a network... More than a half of media elites, but only one-third of media staff, have trusted reference persons in the political power elite with whom opinion co-ordination takes place.

Networking, promoting opinion co-ordination, and mutual adjustment are clearly some of the uses of the forum politics programs. For instance, these programs are opportunities for television owners—who are integral members of the power elites—to establish direct relations with members of all segments of the power elites; that is to say, to make politics themselves. It is interesting to remember that the forum politics shows did not originate in the networks but came to be closely controlled by them. Eduardo Lafond, director of programming of Bandeirantes network, recalled his experience in this respect.³⁵ He took office in 1978 and remembered that at the beginning the forum politics programs meant "programming space sold to independent

³⁴ R. Pohoryles, "What Powers the Media? The Influence of the Media in Public Affairs: An Austrian Study" in *Media, Culture, and Society* 9:2, April 1987 London.

³⁵ Interview in May 11, São Paulo.

producers.” After a couple of “headaches,” the network’s owner began to request the lists of participants of those programs in advance, so that he could—and did—veto when necessary. By this time, the network itself was already producing its own forum politics programs and the network owner personally hosted the guests invited to all forum politics programs to be taped in his studios.³⁶ By reconstructing the history of forum politics shows we also reconstruct a revealing part of the conversion of networks’ owners to the new order. But these programs are opportunities for the guests too, for exploring each other’s views; for opinion co-ordination, for networking, for “mutual adjustment” as Lindblom suggests.

These uses of forum politics are not sufficient to explain why the elites have resorted to using television to communicate with themselves if there are other more exclusive channels for doing so. Why are they doing this in front of television cameras? A preliminary answer, I think, is threefold. First, forum politics are not the main channel for the elites to communicate with themselves; private and collective personal contacts, as well as printed media are also used and may be more effective for that purpose. Data processing on this respect is still to be done. At the moment, my impression is that what is done in front of the cameras is, usually, a “plus”; a reinforcement of a pressure that is taking place in more direct channels, a more extended elaboration of a positioning, a self-introduction of one’s worldview, an updating of how one interprets the political moment, a justification of a new policy, etc. Only eventually are these programs used for attaining a direct impact in the political process. These talks also seem to be oriented to the broader elite audience, to be consumed across the different segments of the elites and the different centers of power in the country.

Second and more importantly, it seems that the refusal of political actors to commit themselves to clearcut positions and programs makes it very convenient for them to have the forum politics shows in their current format. Instead of focusing on issues, these programs focus on personalities, allowing politicians who refuse to take definite stands to update, correct or redefine their views on each new issue and at each new political circumstance. In other words, it is the extreme personalism and extreme pragmatism of Brazilian elites that constitute a permanent source of unpredictability and new situations, calling for the actors’ positioning. Their elitist behavior renews their need to come to forum politics programs to update or redefine their stances.

Third, forum politics programs were already there in the programming schedule of the networks (as a result of entrepreneurial initiatives targeting an originally unsatisfied demand). The power elites, in turn, were also already used to them. In other words, the conversion of these programs from political journalism to intra-elite communication did not require any intentional

³⁶ Very similar reports were given by Maurício Dias, Milton Temmer, and Teteca Teixeira with regard to other networks.

move, any specific decision; it was the very direction taken by the transition process that led to the withdrawal of the larger AB public from these programs and the programs' gradual adjustment to a more elitist scope.³⁷

These findings confirm the first hypothesis in that they indicate that both the emergence and specially the endurance of forum politics programs are connected to political interests on the part of the power elites. Other findings also corroborate the political grounds from which these programs stem. The next two sections are dedicated to demonstrating that the forum politics shows are, among the television programs that deal with politics, the least related to the business of television advertising and the most closely entangled with politics itself.

III.2 Real and Perceived Public

The forum politics shows have lasted for a decade without any empirical studies of their audience. Despite the power position—both political and economic—of these programs' users and makers, nobody ever bothered to find out what the whole universe of forum viewers is. The heads of Gallup and IBOPE, as well as the president and vice-president of two top advertising agencies (Denison and Almap), were unanimous in this respect: "There are no means to know what market this is, who is the real public, and what impact these programs have on their viewers."

It should be emphasized that we are talking about the very highest of Brazilian power elites—it would be no effort for them to ask Gallup or IBOPE or an advertising agency to study forum's audience and impact. The fact is that both makers and users of forum politics are sufficiently happy with what they know about the audience. They operate on the basis of interpersonal feed-back and this has shown that the public that matters is there. And indeed, I found that the higher up I moved, the more attention and importance was given to those shows. Upper-middle rank managers of state and multinational banks and corporations whom I interviewed agreed with the opinion polls in indicating total withdrawal on the part of the public from following the political news and the democratization. However, I got a different picture from my interviews with the president of the National Federation of Banks (Febraban, Roberto Bornhausen), the president of the National Confederation of Industry (CNI, Albano Franco), the president and vice-president of "Montreal SA," a top "empreiteira" (Engineer and Project) in Steel and Petroleum, FIESP's (Federation of São Paulo Industries) advisor on political marketing, and various senators and ministers. They all stressed that these programs are very much watched, that they give "good visibility," and do communicate with their peers.

³⁷ Luis Paulo Montenegro and other interviewees dated such withdrawal of the AB public at around 1985. IBOPE's audience measurements confirm 1985 as a mark, although there are some variations before and after this year, probably according to specific political and/or economic circumstances.

I also found that there are three overlapping monitoring systems of forum politics shows within the federal government. Dentel (an agency of the Ministry of Communication), EBN (Public National News Agency), and the SNI (National Information Service) all record all these programs. The SNI and EBN also produce a weekly synopsis of what happened on these programs, to be distributed in the presidential palace to the President's direct assistants. If one wants to send a message to the government, the forum will serve well.

Finally, I verified that the press, contrary to my expectations, does not provide regular coverage of these programs—they announce who will be there in the political section, but commentary on what happened is only occasional. However, journalists covering politics are all following these programs and some of them told me that they do get leads that they follow, but there is no credit. Press and forum compete and reach the very same public.

Returning to the lack of interest in knowing what the universe of forum viewers is, it is rather intriguing, because without knowing the audience size and profile/composition, these programs cannot be sold in regular television advertising business. Nor can their prominent guests be sure whether their participation in these programs enhances or damages their public image.

The fact is that mainstream advertising agencies do not sell forum politics shows to their clients because there are no tools to measure this market. The AB public is not only the segment that is least accessible to the poll institutes' research methods (telemeter, door-to-door, bi-weekly note book), but it is also the smallest segment of the audience so that its estimates are the most affected by the margin of error of the statistics. Moreover, the measurement of television audience after 10:00 p.m. is the least accurate because it is only done retrospectively—the day after. And owing to reasons of statistical consistency (the need to recompose the figure as it was at 10:00 p.m. the night before), such retrospective measuring dismisses information that does not fit into the picture as of at 10:00 p.m. the night before.³⁸ To sum up, both the broadcasting time and assumed viewers of the forum politics shows compose, in Alex Periscinotto words, “the shadowiest portion of the television market.”³⁹ However, most of the interviewees have reason to believe that the audience is wider and much more heterogeneous than is assumed by the producers, sponsors, and clientele of these shows. These interviewees have all been approached in the streets by all sorts of people, some of whom are able to express articulate comments while others just manifest their interest and acknowledgement of whom they (my interviewees) are.

III.3 The Political Business of Forum Politics Programs

³⁸ Alexandre Machado, interview op. cit.

³⁹ Interview, São Paulo, 1988.

Contrary to my expectations, the fact that the forum programs are outside the television advertising market does not prevent them from being a very profitable business. Independent producers are leaving other clienteles—from what they call “institutional productions”—to fully devote themselves to forum politics productions.

Producers have generally agreed that sponsorship for those programs has always been a complicated problem; not just because of the ignorance of the market, but because businessmen do not want to take the risk of being associated with programs that can create problems with the government or other segments of the elites.

The solution has been more political than commercial. Interviews revealed that there are explicit and non-explicit sponsors. The major sources of explicit advertising are public agencies: federal state corporations—Federal Savings Bank, Bank of Brazil, Petrobrás—and the federal and state governments. These advertising contracts have been politically manipulated; i.e. subjected to sudden interruptions. Documented cases account for “Abertura,” “Canal Livre,” and “Dia D,” among others. There is also a lot of friendship among producers, the networks, the guests, and sponsors. The forum politics shows are cheap productions and sometimes this sponsorship can be fully deducted from federal income tax, but in this case the sponsorship has to be explicit.⁴⁰

The “under the table” deals were not really accessible. The producers would not disclose to me how they make their profits. But I have statements that there are many big corporations that are interested in the existence of such and such programs but do not want to be explicitly associated with them. The media accept this kind of deal with no problems.⁴¹

Who are these ghost sponsors and why are they doing it? A plausible answer is that by sponsoring a forum politics program a businessman or a interest-group attains a position from which he or they can influence the selection of guests and the directions of the programs without damaging their journalistic credibility. The late stages of the transition brought grand redefinitions; not only the writing of a new constitution from scratch, but the general policy on “informatics” (computer industry), nuclear energy, among others. Huge interests have been at stake and, as one of the most experienced political columnist—Villas Boas Correia—said, the forum politics programs “have become more and more engaged in politics, more and more used by lobbies.”⁴²

A further corroboration of the political nature of these programs is found in their history, especially in their origins and demise. These are mostly political. As we already saw, the very first of these programs to penetrate a national network in 1979, the “Abertura,” was decided in the

⁴⁰ The federal income tax allows enterprises to deduct a certain amount of advertising expenses. A part of this amount was enough to buy one year of sponsorship of a weekly forum politics.

⁴¹ Ney de Lima Figueiredo was the one to uncover this whole issue—interview in May 17, São Paulo. From then on, this was included and confirmed in subsequent interviews with producers, hosts, journalists/interviewers, and personnel of the Commercial Departments of the networks.

⁴² Interview in April 26, Rio de Janeiro.

Presidential Palace. As with many other forum politics programs, it later suffered typical retaliation: sudden suspension of its major (public) advertiser—the CEF (Federal Savings Bank). Another example of political origin that was disclosed by its producer and host, was “Jogo de Carta.” Mino Carta, a very well-known journalist and editor, was invited to direct and host a forum politics show by the Tancredo Neves presidential campaign in mid-1984. In Mino Carta’s words:

The campaign people invited me to direct and host a program of interview and debate in TV Record. They would finance me until the election and then I would have to take off by myself. And it worked out pretty well. It lasted for almost three years and I had never to really bother with sponsorship. The TV Record people took care of it.⁴³

A quite different but equally significant origin of one of the most successful forum politics shows was that of “Crítica & Autocrítica.” This program has been produced since August 1981 by the leading financial newspaper in Brazil, the Gazeta Mercantil group. Its vice-president Roberto Muller explained:

We identified a willingness on the part of business and industrial leaders to publicize their views about the economic policy as well as their support for the democratization. They were actually already giving interviews in the printed press. We thought they would come to television if they could find a suitable space. We were about to publish our annual awards for the top ten businessmen and we decided to do it along with a series of debate programs with those top industrialists and businessmen... The Gazeta Mercantil group is not just a newspaper or a publisher; it is essentially a service oriented to fulfill the demands of a very specific market.

Bandeirantes network, clearly, overpriced its Sunday night space. It was an absurd price, we all knew it. But there was such a willingness to have this space on the part of some industrialists that they decided to buy it anyway. So “Crítica & Autocrítica” started like this and had always been well sponsored. Of course we formed a team which produced excellent marketing pieces to keep selling the program on the basis of its “quality” audience.⁴⁴

The cases of political death were better known and more easy to report. It was the fate of “Jogo de Carta,” “Ferreira Netto,” “ETC,” “1986” and “1987,” “Aventura,” “Brasil Constituinte,” “Dia D,” and others. The former six programs were extinguished owing to political pressures coming from the federal government on the network owners. The latter two were extinguished owing to internal political reasons: conflict between the hosts, and engagement in political campaigns respectively.

To sum up, these three sets of findings indicate that the forum politics shows have become a theatre where the power elites are the sponsors, the protagonists, and the public.

⁴³ Interview in May 20, *Editora Tres*, São Paulo.

⁴⁴ This second paragraph is quoted from Alexandre Machado, the executive producer. Interview in April 12, São Paulo.

Journalists make up the supporting cast. These programs originate from political motivations and are extinguished accordingly; i.e. as a result of political vetoes.

III.4 Political Interests in Forum Politics Programs

Other preliminary findings uncover some more specific political motivations that sustain the reproduction of forum politics programs. They indicate that they constitute a very good angle to look at intra-elite networking and that they are clearly an extension of the political arena.⁴⁵

As already mentioned, the forum politics shows overlap the prestige press circuit—they have the same public. Both allow for the transmission of well-addressed messages, for it is known that the government, the business community, the military, and so forth, are following what is carried by both the prestige press and forum programs. So, if one wants to send a message to the business community or to the government, both of these channels will do the job. However, the forum shows provide a channel for communication that has two advantages over the press: it reaches all the centers of power simultaneously and without the “framings” that press news making necessarily implies, such as headlines, prominence, size, selection of quotes, and so forth.

I was in Brasília when the Minister of Communication used the forum circuit twice in one week. He was clearly interested in being heard not only in Brasília but in his home state (Bahia) and in the home states of the senators he was challenging. He is not a highly praised personality and by using the forum program’s circuit he would make sure his message would go through in its entirety. Besides, he could know in advance that the press would cover it anyway, as it did.

The forum politics have also performed some important democratizing functions. One of the most praised aspects of the forum among congresspersons is that these shows offer the unique opportunity for newcomers—specially those coming from below—to introduce themselves to the power elites, who constitute a crucial audience that is often suspicious of them.

The forums are also very useful for all those engaged in politics—from journalists to advisors, politicians and activists—because they display the newly elected or appointed actors, so that one can know with whom he or she is in an airport, or restaurant, in an elevator or cocktail party, and so forth. The forum shows also provide unique information about those personalities, those non-verbal but quite defining dimensions of the guests. Thirdly, the forum shows are inescapable sources for keeping up with what is going on, for updating who is where, saying what, and how. Finally, as Francisco Weffort noted, the forum must be very useful for the major catch-all parties—which in his words are “inorganic giants”—because these shows provide a stage for

⁴⁵ Political arena is defined as the multiple scenarios and situations where elites interact.

knowing who their cadres are and for selecting them on grounds that can include their performance in television.⁴⁶

A last remark on the forum politics programs is that their journalistic credibility has been much a matter of formal and stylistic resolution. Guests can be placed in what appear to be psychologically uncomfortable positions, such as in the center of an arena of journalists (as in “Roda-Viva”) or in front of a counter with four or five journalists, and so forth. As already said, the guests are always fully investigated by the cameras but not really by the interviewers. These latter resort, at most, to surprising the guests with “out of line” questions. The goal is not primarily substantive, but more symbolic, even theatrical. The intent is to provoke (and demonstrate) the spontaneity of a surprised reaction, thus the impression of candor from the personalities who come to that stage.

A fascinating aspect of the forum politics programs is their non-transparency. They seem irrelevant from almost all dimensions: they are hidden in late-night dead time of minor networks but communicate with the highest of Brazilian elites; they are outside the television advertising business but are very profitable; their audience ratings have fallen to below 1% but this gives me no reason whatsoever to expect them to be in decline. On the contrary, my bet is that they found their vocation very well—a jam session exclusive to the elites.

What is very worrying is that the Brazilian elites find no problem in using television for their own sake. They do not care who else is watching them, even though they have been approached by cab drivers, waiters, salesmen, and students, among others. There are reasons to believe that 20 percent of the cities’ population has unusual work shifts and watches television at unusual times. Audience measurements of prime-time political broadcasting confirm that interest in politics is a quite relative matter—low education and low interest in public affairs holds everywhere, but not always. Some of my interviewees and I share the impression that there is a hunger for information, for learning from television, that is bigger, much bigger, than suspected. The educational system is most ineffective and the apparently discouraging results of polls may be reflecting more the anger and dissatisfaction with the political situation than the interest (or lack of interest) in learning, in finding out what is going on, who is who, etc. But the elites are neither aware of nor interested in these matters.

IV. Conclusions

As already said, this study is concerned with two orders of questions: what the forum politics programs are and how they connect with the political process of the late stages of

⁴⁶ Interview, São Paulo, 1988.

democratization in Brazil. Such analysis is intended as a first assessment of how television and competitive politics have affected each other. So far, processing the data confirms that:

1. Television in Brazil has been a very relevant element of politics since before the lifting of censorship. The only empirically verified accounts of television's impact on politics that are available—those made by the polling institutes during electoral competitions—are irrefutable: the use of prime-time television has swayed voting preferences.
2. The structural explanation for this is the fact that television in Brazil had become *the mass* communication medium; it is unchallenged by the printed press and unparalleled by radio.
3. A more circumstantial explanation for the current imbroglio of television with politics—which goes far beyond the use of television for electoral purposes—stems from the elitism that prevails among Brazilian elites. These found in television the way to address the masses—a way to “be democratic”—without committing themselves with political representation. The result has been the relative absence of political parties and the manipulation of the masses through marketing and television expertise.

The current pattern of relationship between television and politics in Brazil has been such that it has bypassed or at the least minimized democratization. As Francisco Weffort puts it:

The construction of a party system is precisely the first condition for constructing democracy in this country. This is because Brazilian society has been kept disorganized by the machinations of the elites, who have long become accustomed to use the masses in their own interests. The elites here change parties as they change shirts and have never been truly interested in the consolidation of any kind of a party system. The Brazilian experience proves a general rule of the thumb: the ruling groups prefer to rule through the State apparatus; they only organize parties when forced to do so.⁴⁷

The extensions of free television time for politics have facilitated the formation of parties that are nothing but a label—and sophisticated video color productions—for very ephemeral aggregations of interests among members of the elites. Free television time, television news and forum politics programs have opened the way for the elites to build public images, to conquer political support, to be elected and govern without being bounded by the political representation of any constituency beyond their own circles.

It must be noted that by no means is this a necessary outcome of the existence of television prior to democracy. Availability of free television is itself a consequence of the power structure in Brazil and its contribution to the fragility of democratic institutions has been at most

⁴⁷ *Folha de São Paulo*, Nov 20, 1988, p. A-3.

secondary. The determining factor here is the elitism, the extreme stratification of Brazilian society, the structural marginalization and political manipulation of the population at large.

4. Forum politics programs are eloquent manifestations of this elitism and of the kind of political journalism it has generated in Brazil. The forum politics shows re-emerged as journalistic entrepreneurship oriented to a potential market. But, as we saw in the case of “Abertura,” it was born already cast into “high politics,” and became more of a service to the elites (be they the television owners or other segments) than to the public.

On the other hand, by promoting personal interaction between journalists and the power elites, these programs also reinforce the friendship, loyalty, and personal ties that contribute to preventing journalism from developing its own ethics in Brazil. As I could verify, the recording of a forum politics show is usually followed by intimate reactions, hugs and hand-shakings, personal remarks on each others performances, and the departure of the whole group to a first-class restaurant for dinner and/or drinks.

These programs are also a means by which the elite establishment socializes newcomers. By bringing them into the forum politics programs, the elitist system frames them with the manners and style of its own.

To conclude, the study of forum politics programs reveals the pervasiveness of elitism in Brazilian society; how it shapes not only television’s radically different programming diets—one for prime-time mass consumption and the other for late-night elite consumption—but also journalistic activity, the newcomers’ public image, and so forth. This very tiny and peripheral portion of Brazilian television seem to be one of those slender but catalytic factors that reflects and contributes to reproducing the elitism of Brazilian society and politics. The forum politics phenomenon is definitely an accurate indicator of how short democratization has fallen in Brazil.

At the more specific level the questions that are still to be answered include: Who is using whom in the forum politics programs? Are they a service to the power elites or a means by which television owners use their media to interfere in politics, or both? What would happen if forum politics ceased to be produced? Would it change anything at all? What is the real repercussion of these programs? Have they been used to influence the political process or have they been mostly consumed as social columnism and used as a means to attain prestige among peers?

At the more general level the questions that might be partially answered include: What could television do to contribute to democratization? Couldn’t television have a decisive role in closing the huge educational gap that deprives Brazil of a democratic constituency? Why has the re-entrance of politics in television been kept in such a marginal and elitist space, i.e. in the late-night news and forum politics programs and in the minor networks?