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## **“THE PRESS MOTIVATED ME”: LIFE HISTORIES WITH THE MEDIA IN BRAZIL**

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*Brazil, with commercial broadcasting and a political press, moved from dictatorship to democracy during the transition after Franco in Spain, with its noncommercial system. This coincidence creates a natural experiment in how political and media systems relate to citizens' subjective experiences. Comparing limited life histories from Brazil to previous American and Spanish narratives suggests two relationships: between market-oriented broadcasting and a postmodern consumer stance, and between a politically committed press and an engaged citizen stance.*

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A central issue in media communication is the relationship between social institutions (politics and media) and individuals (members of the electorate and the audience). Some research in Europe suggests that each country's system of communication confers a distinct role on the public, asserting that the more the media are organized along private, commercial lines, the more power shifts away from audiences (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). To become profitable, media enterprises define audience members as consumers and aim to make them available to advertisers (as a set of demographic and purchasing patterns). An analysis comparing democratic theory to the standards, limitations, and conventions of the media concludes that the most commercialized systems are also the least democratic in their actual performance as systems and in their positioning of the individual (McLeod et al., 1994). Historical study of media systems and their relations to the public reinforces that conclusion (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001).

This article seeks to understand the zone between the individual micro-system and social macrosystem by exploring the life history narratives of persons who face different media and political systems. Previous studies have examined experiences under the media systems of two countries. We took the next step by looking at audience members with a media system similar to one, and a political history similar to the other, of the two countries studied previously. As it turned out, the case we studied had a further comparative dimension, because the media system was divided, with print media resembling one country's and broadcast media resembling the other country's. These qualities allowed us to triangulate, holding important political conditions somewhat constant so that we could compare our new group to persons like them who faced elements from divergent media systems.

By examining the participants' accounts of their country's political history, we found that the stories were surprisingly parallel in the two countries, Spain and Brazil. A closer look at their experiences under different media systems revealed some similarities that could have resulted from political history. The differences, however, related to the media. The Brazilians shared with the Spaniards from previous research a similar stance as engaged citizens, which appears connected to qualities of their political press. In response to the commercialized broadcast media, the Brazilians shared a stance with the Americans from previous research, who saw themselves as wary consumers.

### ***POLITICAL AND MEDIA AUDIENCE CONTEXTS***

Early last century, Chicago sociologists developed the means to explore life experiences under differing political and media systems. William

Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1927) turned to biography and biographical documents such as letters to the editor as they compared how groups defined their life situation in contrasting political settings, Poland and the United States. Herbert Blumer (1933) refined the technique of gathering life histories to study how changes in the media—the arrival of movies—affected the feelings and conduct of young persons. Storytelling allowed them to make sense of their experiences within the larger context of institutions. Following these innovations, scholars have continued to develop life history research (for a summary, see Barnhurst (1997)). Stories provide a store of evidence about the media and politics, including the longitudinal dimension through time. The storyteller provides the first interpretation of meanings for their interactions with systems of social organization.

In an effort to bridge between the audience experience and the media system, recent studies have examined life histories. Young adult audience members told their stories, describing experiences with the changing media arena and interpreting their own narratives. An initial study looked at college students' experiences with newspapers, to ask why fewer young U.S. citizens were attending to news (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991). The study found that newspapers provided little of relevance to the primary social or political worlds of the young adults. The next study asked whether they turned instead to television news (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998), but found that they rejected newscasts as a source of political information and lamented the increasing focus on violence and self-promotion. A third study expanded its purview to include other media (Barnhurst, 1998), finding that informational media offered little to young adults, who turned instead to entertainment. They used popular music like the rock single "We Are the World" when forming a viewpoint on famine, for instance, or a film such as *Schindler's List* when developing their views on ethnic hatred.

To discover whether these experiences were a product of the U.S. media system, further research examined a contrasting system (Barnhurst, 2000). Surveys had indicated that in Spain, the young adult audience was growing for newspapers and nearly universal for newscasts, and the study matched the objective measures to narrative accounts of subjective experiences. In their life histories, college students and some older adults in Spain described themselves as empowered. To explain their sense of having political options to choose from, they cited several factors. Spanish news outlets take clear political stands on the issues of the day and openly discuss the resulting differences in their news coverage. Morning newscasts, for example, show and comment on the front pages of the day's competing newspapers. The young Spaniards told stories of buying more than one newspaper, debating the coverage with friends or family

members, and comparing newspapers to television and radio news. The partisan positions in what Blumer (1969) calls the *news arena* help form a rich symbolic landscape that expands the capacity of young elites to choose.

In the traditional definition of citizenship, the Spanish audience is neither partisan (they rate political parties among the lowest when evaluating their country's institutions) nor very participative (in the functionalist sense preferred in U.S. and British definitions, which include such acts as writing to elected officials or joining civic associations), but they do maintain distinct political positions, which are quite stable along the range from right- to left-leaning (Morán & Benedicto, 1995). In this they are like others in Europe, in contrast to the United States, although such commitments are losing strength among the younger generations less committed to the traditional left-right cleavage.

Media scholarship in Spain has indicated that national communication systems establish a relationship with audiences that involves identity (Sampedro, 1998). The system constructs for its various public a discourse that reproduces a version of reality. That reality models social roles and displays social frontiers that define and reinforce specific identities, collective (such as national affiliation) and individual (such as citizenship). The media system, however, is not the only systemic factor that influences the experiences of audience members. Other institutional factors contribute, such as the structures of domestic (including families) and economic arrangements, and among these a key factor related to communication is the political context (Sampedro, 2000).

Political institutions have a direct impact on the communication policies that set the range and style of media available within a country (Galperin, 2000). The political context evolves along with the media system through particular historical moments. In the case of Spain, a system of state monopoly for broadcast media persisted for a decade after Franco's death. As part of the transition to democracy, a new system emerged from alliances between dominant media companies and political forces, which changed the regulations for communication. The process began in the mid-1980s, when the gradual loosening of public information policy permitted private television stations to appear and then multiply, along with broadcasting companies tied to new technologies. By the century's end, competition for audiences and the advertising market had grown dramatically, compared to when the transition to democracy began.

One would expect such a shift in political contexts to influence how individuals experience the news arena. Young adults in Spain spent their early years under the monopoly system inherited from the Franco era, and the transition to democracy still reverberates in collective memory (Barnhurst, 2000). The news arena became more commercial late in their

experience, unlike the long-term pattern in the United States, which shifted beginning in the 1960s, well before the recent generation of young U.S. adults were born. In other words, the heightened political awareness that previous studies found among young Spaniards might have resulted from the transition to democracy. Although the participants pointed to the news media, they may not have been aware of how their country's transition influenced their interpretations of their experiences.

Studies of audience experiences, using life history techniques, and research on political contexts and media systems point to several questions. What impact does the experience of political transition to democracy have on one's subjective sense of political connection? What impact does the experience with a different media system have on one's sense of political affinity? In short, this study attempts to disentangle the influences of political history and the media system on the interpretation of lived experience. Unlike traditional studies of political socialization, this study sets aside functional and behavior questions to explore the subjective domain, in which young adults imagine and picture themselves as citizens and audience members.

### **BRAZIL AS A COMPARATIVE CASE**

To control for the political and media conditions in which the United States and Spain differ markedly, we needed a third country as a point of comparison. One option was to find a country with a media system like Spain's but without a recent national transition to democracy. Several countries in Europe might have fit the description, but would not have permitted further study of political transition. Another option was to find a country with a media system somewhat like that of the United States and also with a recent political transition. Latin America seemed most likely to yield a comparative opportunity. We selected Brazil for several reasons. Like the United States, Brazil is a large country with a vast media audience. Although not, of course, a perfect match, the Brazilian media share important characteristics with the media system in the United States. Besides the media conditions we wanted to study, Brazil also has key parallels to Spain in its political history, the most important being a recent and successful transition to democracy.

No two countries have identical political histories, but Brazil, like Spain, experienced a transition that at least allows comparisons. The period of military control in Brazil involved what Juan Linz (1973) calls an *authoritarian situation*, rather than a true regime, because the country did not have a single dictator. The Brazilian military maintained a consensus not to allow *ditadores* or strong men to emerge or implant themselves in power (Skidmore, 1988). The military was less repressive than

dictatorships such as those in the southern cone of South America. It maintained a congress (with very limited powers), it held regular elections (under clientelistic control) for the executive, and it provided for a bipartisan system (although artificially so).

The transition in Brazil had no precise beginning. The military began liberalizing in 1974. The Brazilian left, barred from participating in elections during military rule, abandoned its strategy of armed conflict of the 1970s, and built a base on grassroots movements that grew to become widespread. Eventually the left acquired enough strength for the Workers Party (PT) and the allied workers syndicate to integrate with the popular movements and confront the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), the opposite pole in an emerging bipartisan system. The first elections since 1965 took place for state governors in 1982. The dissident coalition made some inroads, weakening the control of the governing party. A popular mobilization occurred in 1984 to support the direct election of presidents, and Tancredo Neves, selected to head what was called the New Republic, won a mandate to lead a transition to democracy. He died before taking office, but the first civilian government came to power in 1985. With a new constitution in place in 1988, the first direct presidential elections in 1989 marked the end of transition and arrival of democracy (Keck, 1991).

Until recently, one could hardly speak of any significant interchange among the governing elites in Brazil. The three presidents after 1989—Fernando Collor de Mello, who was impeached; Itamar Franco, the vice president who succeeded him; and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who was elected in 1994—represented much the same interest bloc that directed the transition (Mangabeira, 1999). Luis Inacio “Lula” da Silva, elected in 2002, did not abandon the commitments of previous governments, although his election represented a turning point in elite control. The Brazilian transition was especially long, moderate, and cautious, producing still perceptible ambiguities and contradictions. The lengthy process generated tensions between the elites on the one hand, who brokered agreements leading to a new form of government, and the public on the other, which joined in popular mobilizations (Sastre, 1998).

Previous research has described the transition in Spain (Barnhurst, 2000). In broad strokes, Spain experienced what Linz (1973) calls a *dictatorship of a true regime*. Although Franco allowed some liberalizing reforms, a democratic transition had to await his death. Parties of the left then integrated themselves more or less into the system of government. The Spanish Communist Party (PCE) participated in the political and economic consensus of the first democratic government, formed by the centrist (UCD) and socialist (PSOE) parties. The latter party won the elections of 1982, 7 years after Franco died. Popular mobilizations did not

develop to counterbalance the transition but instead played a role in sustaining the commitment to democracy despite a coup attempt and the ongoing violence of a Basque separatist group (known by its initials, ETA). By the time the PSOE government stepped down in the 1990s, the transition was complete. Since then, Spain has seen an orderly transfer of power between parties.

Spain, Brazil, and the United States represent, in general, a range of political structures, from Spain, which has many political cleavages that have remained persistent, to the United States, which has the fewest and weakest (or least prominent) divisions on a political landscape dominated by two well-entrenched, catch-all parties that claim the center but have leaned to the right in recent decades. Brazilian institutions have in some ways imitated those in the United States, but its political cleavages are much stronger. It has some of the political diversity found also in Spain, but its political parties are more volatile and fragile.

Communication policy in Brazil developed on the U.S. model. The executive branch dominated media policies until the new constitution gave greater nominal power to the legislature and local governments (Galperin, 2000). An independent judiciary supported a relatively transparent process of policy reform that resulted in a new structure giving the legislature jurisdiction over communication licenses, which the executive had previously doled out. The process by 1997 attempted to produce an independent regulatory agency (known by its acronym, ANATEL), modeled on the U.S. Federal Communication Commission. Public policy toward the electronic media in Brazil has followed international trends away from government control aimed at serving the broadest public good to a market-driven model that expects less official regulation.

The U.S. and Brazilian media systems are highly commercial. Media organizations connect overtly to political and economic powers at the state and federal levels, allowing business interests to influence communication policy. A few corporations are major players in both countries. In the Brazilian system, Organizações Globo, a media conglomerate that includes businesses in old and new media, is particularly dominant, and faces several lesser national competitors, such as Grupo Folha in some newspaper markets. The Globo media giant and its competitors hold sway, just as a few large companies, such as Time-Warner and Disney, dominate in the United States. Both countries partially regulate broadcasting, which reaches close to the saturation level for households, and communication policy takes a laissez-faire approach to print media. Both countries have a structure of local, urban, and regional newspapers, with a select, quality press that wields political influence and reaches a national, albeit limited, audience.

The press does differ in the two media systems. The Census Bureau *Statistical Abstracts of the United States* for 2002 shows that U.S.

newspapers in 2000 reached a plurality of readers (78 percent of adults), with a per capita circulation (20) that has declined by a third since 1970. The bulk of the circulation (77 percent) occurs outside of metropolitan regions (cities with populations of half a million or more), and these smaller newspapers exert fragmented leadership at most. In Brazil, World Association of Newspapers statistics for 1999 show that the press reached a slight majority of readers (54 percent of adults), with a per capita circulation (5) that has increased by a sixth since 1993. Pass-along readership, however, in which 10 or more readers on average share each copy, offsets the smaller number of newspapers printed in Brazil. Unlike the U.S. press, Brazilian newspapers are overtly partisan, take political stands, and exert influence openly on the government.

The contrasts between the two media systems are a matter of degree. U.S. media are also partisan, but less overtly so. Their politics (usually) remain *sub rosa*, that is, in the background except in commentaries and editorials, although in social life, the owners and principals of U.S. media companies align themselves politically and exert pressure on government. U.S. media are also concentrated, but less so on the national stage. Time-Warner and Disney hold almost half the assets of the top 10 U.S. media companies, which have holdings that extend around the world.

The institutional context in both countries adjusts constantly to market competition and to shifting alliances among governing elites. In Brazil, some observers say, a disassociation occurs between the national institutions and the frame of popular experience and citizenship (O'Donnell, 1980). As a result, only a small portion of the populace pays attention to information about developments in institutional life (Almeida, 1996). The pattern has held true during the periods of dictatorship and transition through the present. Attention to political news attracts concern in the United States as well (Barnhurst, 1997), although for different reasons.

In the media Spanish system (Barnhurst, 2000), the news media are in general partisan, linked politically and editorially to parties and dominant forces in the country. Television was a public monopoly under government control and direction until the mid-1980s. The public stations align themselves politically, unlike the model of nonpartisan public broadcasting developed elsewhere (such as the BBC). After the Spanish system opened to competition, the process of clientelism in granting licenses continued to function through government intervention (Maxwell, 2000), although opposition groups debate and provide fiscal oversight for communication policy. The populace, especially the educated and affluent audience of the press, tends to pay attention to information about the country's institutions (Jerez et al., 2000). In Spain, European Journalism Centre figures for 1999 show that the press reached a slight majority of readers (52 percent of adults), with a per capita circulation (11) that has been increasing since 1980. Along



with magazines, Spanish newspapers provide a platform for launching political movements and cultural renewal.

Compared to the Spanish, the Brazilian and U.S. media systems are more alike. Both have highly commercial, ostensibly nonpartisan broadcasting, controlled by a few media giants. Although its circulation is smaller, the Brazilian press is also oriented to commerce, like the largely quiescent, conservative U.S. press. In both systems, power elites influence the licensing process, but in the United States that influence generally hides behind official processes. Public broadcasting is a minor element in each system. Both countries have instituted policy reforms that accompanied a global shift away from state controls and toward neo-liberal nonintervention, especially for television and new media. Spain has been slower to abandon public service and move toward commercialism and consolidation, although these trends are present.

Brazil is not identical in either dimension. Spain experienced a peaceful turnover of power to an opposition party earlier, for example, and the United States has a more thoroughly commercialized press. However, Brazil seems to provide as good a natural experimental case as possible. Its political transition began in the 1970s and settled into a democratic pattern during the 1990s, a timeline similar to Spain's, and its media system mimics the formal structures and hews to market forces much like the U.S. media. The Brazilian case allowed us to hold the condition of political transition somewhat constant while examining the responses of young adults to the media system, part of which resembled each of the other countries' media systems.

### ***LIMITED LIFE HISTORY NARRATIVES***

To conduct the comparison, we gathered life history documents from students at the Federal University of Bahia, located in Salvador, a city of two million and capital of the state of Bahia in northeastern Brazil. In a first wave, 22 participants wrote life history essays, and in a second wave a year later, we gathered 10 more essays. Participants generally ranged in age from 20 to 24, but just as in the Spanish study, some were as old as 37, which gave us access to stories from an older generation to enrich the comparison. Like their counterparts in the previous U.S. and Spanish research, the participants were predominantly studying communication, where they likely took courses on the media. With few exceptions, the participants—again like those in earlier research—came from among the elites, judging from the economic and cultural advantages described in their essays. Although not broadly representative, this selection was necessary to compare the current group to participants in the previous studies.

The limited life history technique generated brief documents—usually three to five pages—in which participants related stories in chronological

order from early recollections to the present, but limited to one topic. In this case, we asked them to describe, within the context of family and social life, their media experiences with some topic of *public* interest, which they themselves selected. These instructions were general enough to admit whatever interested the participants but specific enough to focus the writing on their position as members of the media audience and the public. The technique allows the study of subjective experience, without regard to the functionalist definitions of citizen participation described earlier, which predominate in U.S. and British but not Latin American or Southern European analysis of (and perhaps experiences with) politics.

Given the limited resources of our local collaborators and the conditions for fieldwork in Brazil, it was not possible to photocopy and distribute questionnaires or gather demographic data on the participants. However, previous studies had not drawn such information consistently, and the focus of our research was on the qualitative dimension of the participants' experiences, not on statistical variables. Our approach was to gather a saturation sample, which in sociological terms is a sufficient number of individual cases so that additional cases, although they may provide interesting idiosyncrasies, no longer add to the general understanding of the question at hand.

When reading the life history essays, we approached the documents as personal narratives along the lines suggested by William Labov (1997) and elaborated by others (e.g., Reissman, 1993). These scholars alert researchers to the underlying structures of stories. Even off-the-cuff stories told aloud usually contain five parts. An initial *abstract* announces that a story is about to be told and conveys an overview of its contents. An *orientation* to the time, place, and characters follows, transporting the teller and hearer to the previous setting. Complicating *action* then carries the story along by answering the question, "What happened next?" Upon reaching the end, signaled by a *coda*, the storyteller closes off past actions by bringing the audience back to the present. Stories usually contain an *evaluation* as well, which assesses the importance and consequences of the retold events. Although the life history essays are written, the documents have many qualities of informal narrative, especially among young adults.

Following the procedure from other studies (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991), each researcher developed a list of themes after reading the life history documents in the original Portuguese. The research team included native speakers of Portuguese and English, and all have a reading knowledge of both languages. After discussing the similarities and differences in our initial readings, one author prepared a preliminary set of observations. Once we reached a consensus on the observations, another author developed an initial draft essay, which we sent back and forth, adding specific examples and evidence drawn from the life histories. Our translations involved teamwork

with the native speaker of the language and aimed to reproduce the tone and vocabulary of the participants' writing (although not their errors).

The limited life history technique, while keeping the writing task reasonably short and informal, did afford participants an opportunity to consider their presentation of self carefully. Writing a life history about experiences with the media was a public act, an expression of their stance toward social life. The process of making a written statement allowed participants to reveal how they viewed themselves as citizens. To convey a picture of life history documents, we first present, as an example, some fairly typical stories from a single essay. (For the document described in this section, as well as others, see the full text in Portuguese on line; Barnhurst, 2004.)

The narrative by Juliana, 18, recounts seven brief stories that she loosely organizes around a central theme and links together with casual observations about the Brazilian media and society. She begins with the story of her earliest media recollection:

I must have been around six years old, and the only thing I ever watched on television was the bright colors of the cartoons and the announcers. Suddenly, the entire program schedule was taken over by news of the death of a man called Tancredo Neves. I didn't understand why everybody at home cried so much—because he never got to be the “true president,” he wasn't somebody well known on TV, at least for me. And they kept showing the funeral events, an air of sadness took over everything, and I, in my happy childhood, only wanted to see cartoons, without hearing anything about that other commotion.

This story relates an event that also appears prominently in other young adults' experiences. Juliana goes on to evaluate the story as a first encounter “about life and death,” and these become her central themes: hope and renewal versus loss and dissolution. The remainder of her narrative presents a series of paired stories, each set illustrating the two poles of her central theme, but presented off-the-cuff (in other words, the essay is not overtly structured).

She orients readers to her second story by describing the way many of her memories link to a particular strain of music, which TV Globo always played to foreshadow tragedies of all sorts, from local disasters to national economic troubles. The media complicated her life by giving her what she calls a “morbid fascination” for accidents and terrible deaths, from news as well as horror films. To overcome this habit, she took action by turning to religion, to help herself separate “tragic fiction from cruel reality.” Then

the Gulf War exploded. Overwhelmed by a feeling of doom, I prayed entire *Te Deums*, asking God not to permit the loss of life, and fell

asleep asking for the whole thing to end. I watched the newscasts, waiting for the good news that the war had ended. But instead I felt afflicted by sensationalist news that said the Middle East had enough oil to set the whole world on fire, decreeing its end.

Her evaluation of the story blames television news for working against hope (as well as religion). In reaction she began to pay more attention to the print media, reading not news but the humor, art, and film columns of serious magazines. She then turns to her third story, recounting another event that plays prominently in the participants' life histories:

At the beginning of the '90s, I was pleased that young people went into the streets, mobilizing against government corruption. I gave them credit for following their political ideals, like young people of the past who risked even their lives. At the time I wasn't able to see the manipulation surrounding those events and did not question whether those people acted in good conscience. I believed naively in the firm political integrity of the president of UNE [the National Student Union] and still saw a future for the country—even though I didn't know for sure what it meant.

She doesn't elaborate on whatever later discoveries removed her initial delight in the youth movement. This first go-round on her emerging theme of hope only partially balances the negative pole of loss and dissolution from the Gulf War. The positive hope and renewal begins as youthful idealism but disillusion follows. There was much to learn, she implies, but she did learn eventually (without explaining how). Finally, she issues this blunt evaluation: "Brazil has always been an icon of incompetence."

The exception to this rule of Brazilian life, she says, was always sports. But here again the media deliver death as well as joy. Her fourth and fifth stories recall two sporting events, high and low points that occurred in 1994. One was the death of Formula One racer Ayrton Senna, at the Grand Prix in San Marino, Italy. She couldn't absorb the news, she writes, until the body was returned to Brazil, when in the flood of media coverage she finally began to cry. The other event was the Brazilian soccer victory in the World Cup. She describes her emotional high as part of being Brazilian, as recompense for all the ills her country endures.

In neither of these two cases, at the time, could I sense the pressure from the media driving me to those emotions. In part they were also sincere, after all the two were national icons for me, a girl of fourteen years, but the tears and the laughter weren't as linked to those events as I believed.

This evaluation of the two stories asserts Juliana's own control. Although the media prompted them, she claims the feelings as her own. She also draws a clear connection between her emotional responses to the two events and the way that the media, especially television, connect her to national icons.

Having formed that connection to Brazilian-ness, she then moved on, finding herself paying less attention to news. She looked instead for other sources of information, and found them on two stations. She says TVE Brazil, the publicly subsidized cultural and educational channel, displayed Brazilian national culture to her and added to her knowledge and creativity. And MTV Brazil, the 24-hour, all-music-video channel, gave her glimpses of an alternative culture that she wanted to have access to herself.

She concludes the narrative with two more stories, another pairing of high and low emotions resulting from two events of 1997. One was the death of Renato Russo, the legendary member of the Brazilian rock band, Legião Urbana, and the other, Juliana's emerging involvement in the internet. As a result,

I started to distance myself more from television and get more involved with written communication. I began making friends in other states, exchanging ideas and experiences, and looking for information I normally wouldn't find. I valued even more the act of writing when exchanging e-mails and observing the emotions and style of each person, the identity within their writing.

The trajectory of her narrative moves from the unreality of media experience and her incomprehension of its meaning, through a series of events that demonstrate increasing control and independence, until she reaches something more solid and real (although still mediated). In this, her life history resembles the essays of other young adults (Barnhurst, 1998).

Like the previous groups studied, Juliana and her cohort do not refer primarily to hard news. They speak only occasionally about professional politicians or about any institutional political processes. The infrequent comments may reveal a characteristic of the post-materialist generation (Inglehart, 1977, 1990), as well as the lifestyle politics typifying the public today (Bennett, 1998). Even so, Juliana and the other participants managed to eke out political information and political positions from other media genres, such as entertainment and fiction, as had previous groups (Barnhurst, 1998).

The essays reveal their assumptions about who citizens are, what duties citizens carry out, and what knowledge citizens require. The result is not a factual account of what *is* (or what behaviors and functions they performed), but a discursive structuring of those facts, a self-positioning that

interprets and reimagines their relation to complex entities of media and political life.

Although no single essay is typical, this example illustrates the elements present in other life histories from Brazil. In the following section, we present in overview the patterns from all the essays. We first examine the participants' accounts of the transition to democracy, to discover whether their experiences were parallel to the Spanish case. We then explore their relationship with the media system, to observe similarities and differences, before finally attempting to assess whether they are like the Spaniards or the Americans from previous research in their stance as citizens and media consumers.

### ***EXPERIENCES OF POLITICAL TRANSITION***

To understand the impact of the transition to democracy, we describe how the essays present the experience. We then ask whether those experiences closely paralleled what the Spaniards in previous research described (Barnhurst, 2000).

Like Juliana, other participants have a strong recollection of two events in the Brazilian transition. The first involves the highest levels of national leadership: the 1985 death of Tancredo, elected to guide the first civilian government after two decades of military rule. The moment of national crisis risked a return to authoritarian rule. The Brazilian young adults cite the event as their first political experience, one that they returned to ponder, even entertaining the likelihood of conspiracy. They point to the political advantage gained by Tancredo's close associates and to the media exploitation of the events:

It was the first time in my life that I followed politics. The day that he was to take power he fell ill and in less than fifteen days (I believe that was the period) was put through seven surgeries that killed him. I never believed that he died of natural causes. I don't believe it was the illness that killed him. When I see representative Antônio Brito on TV, who was back then the presidential spokesman and friend of Tancredo, I have the impression that he knows the truth about the death of the president. But . . . I think he is just another sell-out.

—*João, 30*

The second event involved the widespread political action Juliana recalls: the 1991 mass demonstrations, especially among young adults, against President Collor. In the anti-corruption protests, the participants recognized that the arrival of democracy did not mean the end of national problems. They describe the Collor impeachment by referring to a mix of

media genres, and fictional programming provides an impetus toward activism, even though the participants themselves realize that is not the aim of the programs:

I went on street and followed all the news—TV, newspapers, magazines—and I always wore black clothing as a sign of protest. At the same time, I never missed a single episode of the soap opera “Anos Rebeldes” (“Rebellious Years”), which was showing on the Globo network. My favorite character was Heloisa, and her rebelliousness—even without intending to—seemed to inspire me to struggle against a president whom I thought was corrupt, dishonest, criminal . . . . At least these days I take pride in having helped depose Fernando Collor de Mello.

—*Tattiana, 25*

The political transition provided a venue for political learning. Eivaldo, 20, describes the first direct presidential election, when he was 13, as “my first ‘participation’ in a political process” (note his use of quotation marks, which suggest his distance from voting age). He supported Lula, the opposition candidate Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, who lost the election to Collor but eventually went on to become president. Education reinforced Eivaldo’s political learning: “At school a mock election was held, and I campaigned for my candidate.” Others from this group describe similar experiences. Later they observe the problems of the new system, and they are able to see themselves playing a role in it.

In Spain, the life histories from previous research likewise focused on two events (Barnhurst, 2000; Sampedro & Sáiz, 2003). The first, a 1981 coup d’état, presented a crisis in leadership. The second was a series of popular protests, the 1995 mobilization against ETA. The Spaniards also described their own engaged attitude growing out of what these events taught them.

The participants from both countries not only knew about the recent processes of transition in their country but also remembered primarily media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992), historic moments notably differentiated from the everyday run of political information. In both countries, media events signaled the arrival of democracy in transcendent ways. In both countries, subsequent media events accompanied the narrators’ passage from a naïve faith in democracy to a mature sense of the need for vigilance. And finally, in both countries, the life histories describe the transition in terms of political learning.

The parallel crises of national leadership were transcendent because they marked periods when the participants felt uncertain about the direction of political life, when each country seemed to teeter at the brink.

They recount the parallel protest movements as central to their loss of innocence as young adults. They no longer harbored the immature idea that free elections alone could ensure honest and peaceful government. The affluent young adults were well equipped to accomplish the kind of political learning that the transitions provided.

After examining the current group of life histories and comparing them to the group described in earlier research, we conclude that the memories of these two transitions are surprisingly parallel. By contrast, the U.S. life histories had nothing similar. Most life stories describe some passage from innocence to maturity, but young adults in the U.S. research remembered events like the Challenger space shuttle explosion, which they saw primarily as technical, not political. Only among much older participants—who remembered war, peace, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy—did events usher in an end to innocence while reinforcing beliefs about political participation and democracy.

Having established the parallel experiences of transition in Brazil and Spain, we next turn to the question of how the participants experienced the media system. The following section first reviews the previous Spanish results and then describes in detail the Brazilian responses to their media system. After a brief review of the similarities and differences we found, we can then answer whether the Brazilians align themselves more with their Spanish or U.S. counterparts from previous research.

### ***RESPONSES TO THE MEDIA SYSTEM***

The Spaniards in previous studies responded to their media system primarily as citizens (Barnhurst, 2000). They saw themselves self-consciously as political actors, who sought information and engaged in political dialogue and action. They read and viewed more than one source of information, and then compared the presentation of events. Their families and friends provided a context for interpretation and discussion, so that the process was somewhat collaborative. Unlike their warm connection to parents and peers, their relationship with the media was detached and critical. They used the media as a resource for selecting among political options (their definition of action, as opposed to group membership or other functional acts), and they resented media image-mongering and sensationalism. Although they expressed strong emotions about the media, especially the recent move in Spain toward market-driven television, they were not fearful and did not describe themselves as powerless.

The Brazilians adopted a cool detachment from the media. Tattiana, 25, who recalls her political involvement beginning at age 12, ended up feeling surprised that the recent presidential elections had not engaged her. “I don’t pay attention to the speeches, and I don’t get involved in the



newscasts,” she writes, and in her evaluation she attributes her attitude to “a certain generalized disillusionment with Brazilian politics, the media, and civil society.” The participants clearly see the media as a separate and external zone not greatly implicated in their sense of self.

The Brazilians also made a great show of being media savvy. They remarked on the internal logic of the media, the intentions of reporters, and the strategies of their sources. João, 30, describes an exchange between a reporter and the leader of the Landless Workers Movement (MST), which has a long history of using nonviolent civil disobedience to work for land redistribution in Brazil. He describes how well a reporter formulated—and the MST leader reformulated—a question, concluding, “As I see it, the reporter was eclipsed.” Miguel, 30, saw Collor as an invention of the media: “Really, I didn’t vote for him because I thought he was a fabricated candidate; he sounded very fake to me.” The narrative then comments on how the media sell the public on presidential candidates and concludes, “If we observe attentively, we could perceive the total set up for the election of Fernando Henrique” (note his use of the hortatory *we*). He goes on to list the media strategies that led to Henrique’s election in 1998.

The participants also turned to collage, juxtaposing political media events (those described earlier) and other media tragedies. Josenildes, 25, relates at length a fatal mix-up—the police shot a pregnant woman and her 8-year-old son as she rushed to the delivery room—and focuses on the surviving husband’s comments to show the absurdity of media: “He repeated several times a sentence that made no sense under the circumstances but had, to my thinking, great expressiveness: ‘It’s a joke!’ ” Older participants, such as Cíntia, 37, played rhetorical games and took a longer perspective, recalling how, just as the Pill had once made the magazine covers (“something even penicillin didn’t get”), Viagra did as well. “Each period is represented by the pill it deserves,” she writes: “One let you control the collateral effects of sexual excitement, and the other served to raise up that same excitement.”

The younger participants were especially likely to describe their fragmented media activities. Wagner, 22, remarks, “I can never manage to listen to a CD. I can’t get through a whole CD. I’m always skipping.” Later, his life history mentions sharing his mother’s sadness at the death of Tancredo and concludes, “Now I would like to return to the past and tell her not to cry, that it’s not worth the trouble.” After expressing his preference for the audiovisual, his intermittent attention, and his disbelief in the significance of politics, he raises suspicions about media images:

There’s manipulation. Any news story that I hear has a hard time persuading me. I believe more in people I know. Images don’t surprise

me. If I read something I can remain doubtful, but if someone talks to me . . .

The Brazilians also positioned themselves as political and media critics. Regarding the first Gulf conflict, Euvaldo, 20, writes, “That stopped being news and turned into a show. Obviously, I was against Iraq, but now I think I would have liked my TV antenna to pick up some channel from the Middle East” (a prescient wish, as it turned out). Presentations of alternative political views won some praise in the essays. “Reading a brave article in the newspaper that challenges the power structures of the oligarchy,” writes Orocil, 30, “was always a pleasure for me.” Other cases received open and acid criticism. Luciana, 27, writes, “In the 1989 elections, I considered television my declared enemy.” Like other participants, she condemns the selling of the good-looking candidate (Collor) as “an abuse, disrespectful of the people’s intelligence” and later writes that behind the image, “the dominant classes were dissatisfied with the president and wanted to topple him.”

The older participants more explicitly evaluate what functions media institutions should perform. When Tancredo died before taking office, Sahada, 35, writes “TV managed to unite the country in a single emotion” (here he echoes the U.S. Kennedy coverage). Others from Bahia relied on the media for notices of public demonstrations:

I recall that the press motivated me, several times, to go out in the streets to call for an end to the Collor government. I remember that I went out dressed in black the Sunday that Collor wanted everyone to wear colorful clothing as a manifestation of support. I wore black, responding to a call from the opposition that was disseminated by the press.

—*Leandro*, 27

In their role as critics, participants argue that audiovisual media have power to unify, inform, and motivate but also serve anti-democratic ends. One long section explains how the news first described the humble MST members and their temerity in organizing themselves.

Pictures and documentaries raised everyone’s consciousness: old people and children being expelled at gun point from the ranches of the large landholders—a national revolt began to form. No one talked of anything else; it was an issue in all the newspapers and magazines . . . The picture began to change as soon as the MST began to organize, growing stronger by the minute and winning support from the parties of the left, such as the PT. Before long the media began to replace the

images of the poor and oppressed with images of advantage-takers and frauds—people who already owned land and were on the list of landless were denounced, and [the media] began to discredit the movement.

—*Mateus, 20*

Framing research has documented these long-term trends in Brazilian newspaper coverage of the MST (Oliveira, 2003). Such insights in the essays by young adults, who experience the media without benefit of sociological techniques, tend to increase confidence in their life histories as valuable documents.

In sum, the Brazilians take the following subjective stance: they respond with interest in, without focusing primarily on, political events. They also report an inclination to activism, but do not compare how different news outlets cover the same event. They join little collaborative dialogue about news. They express resentment toward (especially the audiovisual) media (perhaps in part because of ownership concentration), but are not primarily fearful or powerless. They find the commercial power of media to influence political movements ominous, but the media system does give them access to alternatives and options.

Given their parallel political histories, it is not surprising that the Brazilians share with the Spaniards a more engaged stance in the face of their media. The similarities might also spring in part from the media system, but it is not possible to ascribe the relative weight or sort out the influence of the two factors—political history and media system—for any given similarity we found. Suffice it to say that, from their similar political histories, the two groups grew to see themselves as involved citizens who criticize their media.

In other ways the Brazilians do not resemble the Spaniards, contrary to expectation, and the differences appear to spring from the distinct media systems. To review: In Spain, the media system is political, and most media organizations adopt party positions or align themselves along the predominant political cleavages. Even television stations have fairly overt affiliations, despite the recent growth of commercialism. In Brazil, the media system more strongly divides between broadcasting (commercial) and print (political). Television, driven almost entirely by commerce, buries political ideology beneath dramatic content aimed at expanding market share. Newspapers and magazines are where political actors propose and respond to policy alternatives and where partisan processes take place; they are venues that harbor political difference. This dual system generates two important differences.

One difference is how the Brazilians respond to print. Reading comprehension is not universal in Brazil, and high literacy rates distinguish elites from other classes, opening options to them. The life histories describe print media, not television, as the central sources of ideas employed in

order from early recollections to the present, but limited to one topic. In this case, we asked them to describe, within the context of family and social life, their media experiences with some topic of *public* interest, which they themselves selected. These instructions were general enough to admit whatever interested the participants but specific enough to focus the writing on their position as members of the media audience and the public. The technique allows the study of subjective experience, without regard to the functionalist definitions of citizen participation described earlier, which predominate in U.S. and British but not Latin American or Southern European analysis of (and perhaps experiences with) politics.

Given the limited resources of our local collaborators and the conditions for fieldwork in Brazil, it was not possible to photocopy and distribute questionnaires or gather demographic data on the participants. However, previous studies had not drawn such information consistently, and the focus of our research was on the qualitative dimension of the participants' experiences, not on statistical variables. Our approach was to gather a saturation sample, which in sociological terms is a sufficient number of individual cases so that additional cases, although they may provide interesting idiosyncrasies, no longer add to the general understanding of the question at hand.

When reading the life history essays, we approached the documents as personal narratives along the lines suggested by William Labov (1997) and elaborated by others (e.g., Riessman, 1993). These scholars alert researchers to the underlying structures of stories. Even off-the-cuff stories told aloud usually contain five parts. An initial *abstract* announces that a story is about to be told and conveys an overview of its contents. An *orientation* to the time, place, and characters follows, transporting the teller and hearer to the previous setting. Complicating *action* then carries the story along by answering the question, "What happened next?" Upon reaching the end, signaled by a *coda*, the storyteller closes off past actions by bringing the audience back to the present. Stories usually contain an *evaluation* as well, which assesses the importance and consequences of the retold events. Although the life history essays are written, the documents have many qualities of informal narrative, especially among young adults.

Following the procedure from other studies (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991), each researcher developed a list of themes after reading the life history documents in the original Portuguese. The research team included native speakers of Portuguese and English, and all have a reading knowledge of both languages. After discussing the similarities and differences in our initial readings, one author prepared a preliminary set of observations. Once we reached a consensus on the observations, another author developed an initial draft essay, which we sent back and forth, adding specific examples and evidence drawn from the life histories. Our translations involved teamwork

Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1927) turned to biography and biographical documents such as letters to the editor as they compared how groups defined their life situation in contrasting political settings, Poland and the United States. Herbert Blumer (1933) refined the technique of gathering life histories to study how changes in the media—the arrival of movies—affected the feelings and conduct of young persons. Storytelling allowed them to make sense of their experiences within the larger context of institutions. Following these innovations, scholars have continued to develop life history research (for a summary, see Barnhurst (1997)). Stories provide a store of evidence about the media and politics, including the longitudinal dimension through time. The storyteller provides the first interpretation of meanings for their interactions with systems of social organization.

In an effort to bridge between the audience experience and the media system, recent studies have examined life histories. Young adult audience members told their stories, describing experiences with the changing media arena and interpreting their own narratives. An initial study looked at college students' experiences with newspapers, to ask why fewer young U.S. citizens were attending to news (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991). The study found that newspapers provided little of relevance to the primary social or political worlds of the young adults. The next study asked whether they turned instead to television news (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1998), but found that they rejected newscasts as a source of political information and lamented the increasing focus on violence and self-promotion. A third study expanded its purview to include other media (Barnhurst, 1998), finding that informational media offered little to young adults, who turned instead to entertainment. They used popular music like the rock single "We Are the World" when forming a viewpoint on famine, for instance, or a film such as *Schindler's List* when developing their views on ethnic hatred.

To discover whether these experiences were a product of the U.S. media system, further research examined a contrasting system (Barnhurst, 2000). Surveys had indicated that in Spain, the young adult audience was growing for newspapers and nearly universal for newscasts, and the study matched the objective measures to narrative accounts of subjective experiences. In their life histories, college students and some older adults in Spain described themselves as empowered. To explain their sense of having political options to choose from, they cited several factors. Spanish news outlets take clear political stands on the issues of the day and openly discuss the resulting differences in their news coverage. Morning newscasts, for example, show and comment on the front pages of the day's competing newspapers. The young Spaniards told stories of buying more than one newspaper, debating the coverage with friends or family

1998). The Spaniards in the current series of studies appear to have twice benefited, because they shared a collective memory of replacing dictatorship with democracy and also a media system involved in enriching individual citizens by providing political options.

Other factors make comparisons of media and political systems difficult and imprecise. The party system of Brazil is much more fragmented than that of Spain or, especially, that of the United States, and the present study does not control for those differences. The prevailing view of what amounts to active citizenship also differs in each country. Researchers tend to view political life through the lens of practices in their homeland. Anglophones, for example, consider engagement through their national experience of joining groups, writing to representatives, and similar activities that seem functional rather than merely symbolic. By these measures, of course, U.S. civic engagement gets higher marks than that of any other region except perhaps Scandinavia. Instead of applying the one definition of citizenship, we consider the study participants' subjective self-positioning. They may flatter themselves as citizens, but that inclination was no more prevalent than in previous studies. Our interest has not been behavioral or in what political scientists call *behavioralism*, but in subjective states, which precede and guide activity in the everyday world.

However, none of the previous studies includes participants outside the initial stratum of university-trained elites, a sample this study adopted for comparative purposes. What is the role of socio-economic differences in the development of participants' subjective stances? Further research clearly should address this dimension. Besides the impact of social class, including access to education, employment, and other cultural and economic opportunities, this line of research also has the limitation of depending on students, many of them studying communication. Their stated interests, as well as the media literacy developed as they move through their courses, would make them more likely to have thought about the media and politics. Although not ideal, this characteristic common to the groups makes them roughly comparable. Two additional studies have moved the research outside the zone of university elites studying communication (Sampedro et al., 2003a, 2003b).

Besides the dimension of social class, the life histories play out on a particular historical backdrop, in which the media are constantly adjusting to social forces. The internet, for example, was still fairly new to Brazil in the late 1990s and consequently plays only a minor role in the life histories. The same is true of essays written by the Spanish and U.S. participants in previous studies. As the means of deploying political information and ideas evolve, new generations of young persons may find some of what the current generation missed. They might find the internet gives

them access to information sources that are more political. The presence of the BBC online or the emergence of the Arab satellite television channel Al-Jazeera during the Iraq invasion (and its internet site, [www.aljazeera.net](http://www.aljazeera.net)) no doubt influenced the subjective experience of the younger generation first encountering political events. None of the participants had, of course, experienced the attacks to come (September 11, 2001, in the United States or March 11, 2004, in Spain), and further study might reveal a closing of the distance between young adults in the two countries as a result. The attacks likely figure prominently in the life histories of young adults forming their identities since 2001, but it seems likely that some distance would remain between the subjective postures of young U.S. and Spanish citizens. After an initial phase of communal solidarity, young adults seem to have settled quickly into established patterns for others their age.

The life histories from Brazil, when considered alongside studies carried out previously in the United States and Spain, suggest that the media system did influence the subjective experiences of the young adult participants. Politicized media present a public sphere that includes a range of potential citizen actions, from forming opinions about government policy choices to taking a stand on the exercise of power. Commercialized media systems present a social sphere of civil society that includes a range of choices largely defined in the market, from formulating dreams of a better life to planning purchases of products that identify with particular tastes and lifestyles. Life history techniques confirm at the micro-level what other studies have shown from the macro-level: The more commercial the media and the less political the system combined (as in the United States), the more likely the discourse of citizenship will split or set apart the political and public sphere from the private and social sphere of civil society.

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