

The age of Innocence.
Commercial media and young citizens of low status.

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A central question in political communication is the relationship between social institutions (politics and media) and individuals (members of the electorate and the audience). Research in Europe suggests that each country's distinct system of communication confers a different 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 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, Kosicki & McLeod, 1994). Historical study of media systems and their relations to the public reinforces that conclusion (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001). Empirical analysis based on the same methodology as this article confirms this assertion (Sampedro, Barnhurst and Cordeiro, forthcoming; Sampedro, Barnhurst and Cordeiro, in print).

This article seeks to understand the zone between the individual microsystem and social macrosystems by exploring the life history narratives of persons who face different media and

political systems. Several studies have examined people's experiences under the distinct media systems of two politically divergent countries. We took the next step by looking at people with a media system similar to one, and a political history similar to the other, of the two countries studied previously. In other words, we set out to triangulate, holding important political conditions somewhat constant so that we could compare our new group to people like them who faced a divergent media system.

Political and Media Contexts for the Audience

Almost a century ago, Chicago sociologists developed the means to explore life experiences under differing political and media systems. William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1927) turned to biography and biographical documents such as letters to newspapers as they compared people's definition of their life situation in contrasting political settings, Poland and the United States. Herbert Blumer (1933) refined the technique of gathering life histories to study the impact of changes in the media — the arrival of movies — on the feelings and conduct of young people. Storytelling is a primary tool for making sense of personal experience within the larger context of institutions. Following these innovations, sociologists and others have continued to develop life history research (for a summary, see Barnhurst 1997). Stories provide a rich store of evidence about the media and politics, including the longitudinal dimension of living through time. The storyteller provides the first interpretation of meanings for their actual interactions with systems of social organization.

In an effort to bridge between the audience experience and the media system, several recent studies have examined life histories. Young adult audience members were invited to tell 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 that was relevant to the primary social or political worlds of the

young adults. The next study then 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 all sorts of other media (Barnhurst, 1998), finding that the information media offered so little to young adults that they 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 was near-universal for newscasts, and the new study matched these 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 ideological stands on the issues of the day. The various news media 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 form part of a rich symbolic landscape that expands the capacity of young elites to choose.

The Spanish audience is neither partisan (they rate political parties among the lowest when evaluating their country’s institutions) nor very participative, but they do maintain distinct ideological positions, which are quite stable along the range from right- to left-leaning (Morán & Benedicto, 1995). In this they are like others in Europe, by contrast to the United States, although such commitments are losing strength among the younger generations, who are less committed the traditional left-right cleavage.

Political communication scholarship in Spain has indicated that national communication systems establish with their audiences a relationship entailing identity (Sampedro, 1998). The system involves identity by constructing for its various publics a discourse that reproduces a version of reality. That reality models participatory roles and displays social frontiers that define and reinforce specific identities, both collective (such as national affiliation) and individual (such as citizenship). The media system, however, is not the only factor that influences the experiences of audience members. Another factor 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 the principal broadcast media persisted for a decade after Franco's death. As part of the transition to democracy, a new system emerged from alliances between the dominant media companies and the dominant political forces, which changed the regulations for communication. The process began in the mid-1980s, when the gradual loosening of policies regulating the information market permitted first the appearance and then the multiplying of private television stations, along with the founding of broadcasting companies tied to new technologies. By the end of the century, the competition for audiences and the market for advertising had grown dramatically, compared to a quarter century earlier when the transition to democracy began.

Such a major transition in the political context would logically influence how people 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 their collective memory (Barnhurst, 2000). The increasing commercialization of the news arena came 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 U.S. young 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 people's sense of their own political engagement? What impact does the experience with a different media system have on that sense of involvement? Do the media intensify or deaden personal experience? Do they add something distinctive? In short, this study attempts to disentangle the influences of political history and media system on lived experience.

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 U.S.-style media system and also with a recent political transition. Latin America seemed most likely to yield a good 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 political transition that presents a set of comparative opportunities. 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, for example, in the southern cone of South America; for the most part it maintained a congress (with very limited powers), it held regular elections for the executive (which were tightly controlled by clientelism), and it provided for a bipartisan system (although an entirely artificial one).

The transition in Brazil had no precise beginning. The military started a process of liberalization in 1974. The Brazilian left, which could not participate in elections during the period of military rule, abandoned its strategy of armed conflict of the 1970s and built a base instead on grassroots movements that grew and become widespread. Eventually the left acquired so much strength that the Worker's Party (PT) and the allied worker's syndicate (CUT) tried to coordinate and integrate with the popular movements to confront the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), the opposite pole in an emerging bipartisan system. The first elections since 1965 were held for state governors in 1982. The dissident coalition made some inroads, weakening the control of the governing party. An enormous popular mobilization took place in 1984 in support of the direct election for presidents, and Tancredo Neves was voted to head what was called the New Republic, with a mandate to lead a transition to democracy. He died before taking office, but in 1985 the first civilian government came to power. A new constitution was put in place in 1988, and some authors say the presidential elections of 1989 mark the end of the transition and arrival of democracy in Brazil (Keck, 1991).

One can hardly speak of any significant interchange among the governing elites in Brazil. The first two presidents after 1989, Fernando Collor de Mello and Fernando Henrique Cardoso, for the most part represented the same social interest bloc that had directed the transition (Mangabeira, 1999). And at least initially, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, who was elected in 2002, did not abandon the commitments of previous governments. The Brazilian transition was especially long, moderate, and cautious, and for that reason its ambiguities and contradictions are still perceptible. The lengthy process generated tensions between the elites on one hand, who were involved in the agreements leading to a new form of government, and the public on the other hand, who became involved in popular mobilizations (Sastre, 1998).

The transition in Spain has been described in previous research (Barnhurst, 2000). In broad strokes, Spain under Franco experienced what Linz (1973) calls a dictatorship of a true regime. Although Franco allowed some liberalizing reforms, the transition to democracy had to wait until after his death. Parties of the left, to a greater or lesser degree, then integrated themselves in 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, which won the elections of 1982, seven years after the death of Franco. Popular mobilization 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 the Basque separatist group ETA. By the time the PSOE government stepped down in the 1990s, the transition is said to have been complete.

Spain, Brazil, and the United States have political structures that, in general, represent a range of ideological cleavages, from Spain, which has the most and most persistent such cleavages, to the United States, which has the fewest on a political landscape dominated by two well-entrenched, catch-all parties that claim to be centrist but have listed to the right in recent decades. Brazilian institutions in many ways overtly imitate those in the United States, but its political cleavages are much stronger. It has some of the ideological 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 had dominated media policies until the new constitution gave greater nominal power to the legislature and to local governments (Galperin, 2000). An independent judiciary supported a relatively transparent process of policy reform that took place, resulting in a new structure that gave the legislature jurisdiction over communication licenses, which had previously been doled out by the executive. The process led in 1997 to the establishment of an independent regulatory agency, known by its acronym, ANATEL, which is similar in many respects to the U.S. Federal Communication Commission (FCC). Public policy toward the electronic media in Brazil has

followed widespread 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 are overtly connected to political and economic powers at the state and federal levels, allowing business interests to exert very strong influences over communication. A few corporations are major players in both countries. In the Brazilian system, the vast Organizações Globo, a media conglomerate that includes businesses in old as well as new media, faces several lesser competitors in the national level, such as Grupo Folha. These media giants hold sway, just as a few large companies, such as AOL Time Warner and Disney, dominate in the United States. In both countries broadcasting is somewhat regulated and approaches 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 handful of quality newspapers reaching a national, albeit limited, audience that plays a role as a political and cultural influence.

One difference in the two media systems is in the press. The Census Bureau Statistical Abstract 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 do not exert as much political or social leadership. 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. Clearly the smaller number of newspapers in Brazil is offset by pass-along readership, in which a single copy gets shared among ten or more readers on average. Unlike the U.S. press, Brazilian newspapers tend to take stronger ideological positions and exert more political influence.

Even so, in both countries the institutional context constantly adjusts 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.

The media system in Spain has been described elsewhere (Barnhurst, 2000), but in general the Spanish news media are partisan, linked politically and editorially to parties and dominant forces in the country. Television was a public monopoly under government control and direction in Spain until the mid-1980s, when the system was first opened to competition. The process of clientelism in the granting of licenses continues to function through the intervention of the government (Maxwell, 2000), although communication policy in Spain is subjected to wide debate and fiscal oversight by opposition groups. The populace tends to pay attention to information about the country's institutions (Jerez, Sampedro & Baer, 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 are highly commercial, ostensibly nonpartisan, and controlled by a small number of media conglomerates. Although its circulation is smaller, the Brazilian press is also commerce-oriented, as is the largely quiescent, conservative U.S. press. In both systems, power elites influence the licensing process, although in the U.S. that influence remains generally hidden behind official processes. Both countries have instituted communication policy reforms that accompanied a global shift away from nationalistic controls and toward neoliberal, non-interventionist approaches, especially for television and newer media. Spain has been slower to abandon public service and move toward commercialism and consolidation, although these trends are present.

Although not identical in either dimension, Brazil seems to provide as good a natural experimental case as possible. Its political transition initiated in the 1970s settled into a

democratic pattern during the 1990s, a timeline similar to Spain's, and its media system mimics the formal structures and heeds to market forces much like the U.S. media. The Brazilian case promised to allow us to hold the condition of transition somewhat constant while examining the responses of young adults to the media system.

Design of the Study

To conduct the comparison, we gathered life history documents from Brazilian 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. 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 the participant 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 family and social contexts, 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.

Given the limited resources of our local collaborators and the conditions for field work in Brazil, it was not possible to photocopy and distribute questionnaires or gather demographic data

on the participants. However, previous studies had not gathered 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 and elaborated by others (Labov, 1997; Reissman, 1993). These scholars alert us to the underlying structures of even off-the-cuff stories told orally, which generally contain an initial abstract, which announces that a story is about to be told and conveys an overview of its contents, followed by an orientation to the time, place, and characters, which transports the teller and hearer to the previous setting. Complicating action then carries the story along by answering the question, What happened next?, until the storyteller reaches the end, signaled by a coda, which closes off past actions by bringing narrator and audience back to the present. Stories usually contain an evaluation as well, which assesses the importance and consequences of the events being retold. Although our the life history essays are written documents, they have many qualities of informal narrative, especially among young adults.

Following the procedure used in previous studies (see Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991), each of the researchers developed a list of themes after reading the life history documents in the original Portuguese. Our team included a native speaker of the language as well as English, and all the investigators have a reading knowledge of both languages. After discussing the similarities and differences in our initial readings, we again read the documents and one author prepared a preliminary set of observations. After we reached a consensus on those observations, another author then developed an initial draft, which we sent back and forth, adding specific examples and evidence drawn from the life histories. Our translations involved teamwork between the native speakers of each language and aim to reproduce the tone and vocabulary of the participants' writing (although not their errors).

Limited Life History Narratives

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 public life. This was important because we wanted to see how the participants viewed themselves in their role 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 several others, the full text in Portuguese is available on line (<http://www.uic.edu/depts/comm/lifehist/international/Brazil/menuc-brazil.htm>).

The narrative by Juliana, 18, recounts seven brief stories that are loosely organized around a central theme and linked 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 called man Tancredo Neves. I didn't understand why the household staff 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.

The comfortable conditions of her early life are clear from this story about 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 are linked 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, 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 Deum*'s, asking God not to permit the loss of life, and fell asleep asking for the whole thing to end. I then 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 — I still didn't know for sure what it meant.

She doesn't elaborate on whatever later discoveries removed her initial delight in the youth movement. In the first go-round of her emerging theme, the negative pole of loss and dissolution from the Gulf War is only partially balanced. The positive hope and renewal begins as youthful idealism but is followed by disillusion. 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 perceive any 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 14 years, but the tears and the laughter weren't as linked to those events as I believed.

This evaluation of the two stories assert 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 iconography.

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 underground 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 Punk 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 the other new participants do not refer primarily to hard news. They speak only occasionally about professional politicians or about any institutionalized political processes. The general absence of such comments may reflect a characteristic of what Inglehart (1977, 1990) has called the post-materialist generation, and might also reflect the sort of lifestyle politics that typifies the public today (Bennett, 1998). Even so, Juliana and the other participants managed to eke out political information and ideological 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 should have. The result was not a factual account of what *is*, but a discursive structuring of those facts, an interpretation, re-imagining, and self-positioning in relation to complex entities of media and political life.

Although no single essay is typical in every particular, this example illustrates several important components of other life histories from Brazil. In the following section, we present these and other components in overview 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 (Sampedro, 1999). 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 a general pattern in 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 Neves, who was elected to guide the first civilian government after two decades of military rule. The moment was a national crisis, risking a return to a previous period of authoritarianism. The Brazilian life history essays cite the event as their first political experience, one that they returned to ponder and even entertain 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 Fernando Collor de Mello. In the anti-corruption protests, the participants recognized that the arrival of democracy did not mean the end of all their nation's 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 “Años 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 distance him slightly from a term out of formal political discourse). He supported “Lula,” the opposition candidate Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, who eventually became president but lost that election to Collor. 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 and Sáiz, in print; Sampedro and Saíz, in preparation). The first was a 1981 coup d'état, which presented a crisis in leadership. The second was a series of popular protests, the 1995 mobilization against the Basque separatist group ETA. The Spaniards also described their own participation 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), which were historic and 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 were completely uncertain about the direction of political life, when each country seemed to teeter at the brink. The parallel protest movements are recounted as central to the young adults' loss of innocence. They no longer harbored the immature idea that free elections alone could ensure honest and peaceful government. These affluent young people are precisely the ones who are best equipped to accomplish the kind of political learning that the transitions provide.

Our conclusion, after examining the current group of life histories and comparing them to the group described in earlier research, is that the memories of these two transitions were indeed 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 see primarily as technical, not political.

Only among much older participants — who remembered war, peace, and the assassination of John F. Kennedy — did events usher in an end to innocence while reinforcing beliefs about political participation and democracy.

Having established that the experiences of transition in Brazil and Spain clearly parallel each other, we next turn to the question of how the participants experienced the media system. The next section first reviews the previous Spanish results and then describes in detail the Brazilian responses to their country's media system. After a brief review of the similarities and differences we found, we attempt to discover 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 were self-conscious 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, and they resented media image-mongering and sensationalism. Although they expressed strong emotions about the media, especially the recent move to 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, ends up feeling surprised that the recent presidential elections hadn't engaged her. "I don't pay attention to the speeches, and I don't get involved in the newscasts," she writes, and her evaluation attributes her attitude to "a certain generalized disillusionment with Brazilian politics, the media, and civil society." The media were clearly

seen as a separate and external zone, which was not greatly implicated in the sense of self among the participants.

The Brazilians also made a great show of being media savvy. They commented on the internal logic of the media, the intentions of reporters and the strategies of their sources. Joaõ, 30, described an exchange between a reporter and the leader of the Landless Movement (MST), which has a long history of using non-violent civil disobedience to work for land redistribution in Brazil. He comments on how well a reporter's question was formulated and how the MST leader reformulated the question, concluding, "As I see it, the reporter was eclipsed." Miguel, 30, sees Collor de Mello 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 continues by commenting on the ways the media sold the public on the presidential candidate, 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 enumerate the media strategies that then led to the president's reelection in 1998.

The participants also turned to collage, juxtaposing political media events (those described earlier) and other media tragedies. Josenildes, 25, describes at length a fatal mix-up — the police shot a pregnant woman and her eight-year-old son as she rushed to the delivery room — and focuses on the surviving husband's comments as an expression of the absurdity of the 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 brought a longer perspective by, for example, 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."

We found that the younger participants were especially likely to engage in a fragmented aesthetic. 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 Neves 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 asserts his suspicion of the truth of all 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 remark). Presentations of alternative political views win some praise. “Reading a brave article in the newspaper that challenges the power structures of the oligarchy,” writes Orocil, 30, “was always a pleasure for me.” In other cases the criticisms are open and acid. 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 de Mello) as “an abuse, disrespectful of the people’s intelligence” and later analyzes what was behind the image: “the dominant classes were dissatisfied with the president and wanted to topple him.”

The older participants are more explicit in expressing evaluations of what functions media institutions should perform. When Tancredo Neves died before taking office, writes Sahada, 35, “TV managed to unite the country in a single emotion” (note here the echo of the Kennedy coverage in the United States). Others from Bahia relied on the media to transmit advance information about 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, the participants argue that the audiovisual media exercise the power to unify, inform, and motivate but also serve anti-democratic ends. Mateus, in a long section on the

Landless Movement (MST), explains how the news at first described the humble existence of 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 [Worker's Party]. 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*

The stance of the Brazilians might be summarized as follows: they respond with interest in politics, although they are not focused primarily on political events. They also report some activism, but they do not engage in comparing different news outlets for coverage of the same event. There is little collaborative dialogue about political news. They express resentment toward (especially the audiovisual) media, but they are not primarily fearful or powerless. They find the commercial muscle of huge media businesses and their influence on political movements ominous. However, the media system does provide them with access to ideological alternatives and to options for political action.

Given the parallel in their 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 into relatively engaged, active citizens who criticize their media.

What is more interesting are the ways the Brazilians do not resemble the Spaniards, contrary to expectation, especially when some of the differences appear to spring from the distinct media systems. To review: In Spain, the media system is ideological, 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 is more strongly divided between commercial broadcasting and

ideological print. For some time, television has been driven almost entirely by commercialism, burying ideology beneath dramatic content aimed at expanding market share. Newspapers and magazines are the venues where political actors propose and respond to specific policy alternatives and where partisan processes take place; they are, in short, the venues that harbor ideological difference. This dual system generates two important differences.

One difference is in how the Brazilians respond to print. Reading comprehension cannot be assumed in Brazil, and a high degree of literacy plays an essential role in distinguishing the elites from other classes and in opening up options to them. The print media are the central form of political communication in the country as described in the life histories. The important medium linked to political action in the Brazilian essays is print, not television. The participants describe television as a medium that operates politically on the level of demagoguery, selling images and pandering to the baser urges of viewers in a disingenuous pursuit of audience ratings. In Spain the distinction between print and broadcast hold generally, but are not as pronounced. As a consequence, we note fewer comparisons of mainstream news sources, especially between ideological perspectives of print and broadcast outlets. There is also less collaboration on ideological interpretation and less activism described in the Brazilian essays. Where the Spaniards remark on the emerging visual dramatics and shocking topics, the Brazilians saw no change. There was none in Brazil, where these qualities have existed in television news throughout their lives.

Another major difference is the conspicuously postmodern attitude Brazilians participants adopt toward the media. The postmodern period of media reception has been identified with a logic that includes media savvy and cool detachment (Allinson, 2000). This logic accepts, or at least begins from, the incongruity of media representations, and in response turns to paradox, collage, games, disbelief, and suspicion of all media content. Postmodern reception takes as a given that all discourse is partial, variable, inexact, and, finally, fictitious. The Brazilian life history essays differ strongly from the Spanish by displaying these postmodern qualities. The Brazilians display detachment and media savvy, engage in aesthetic games, and pay fragmented

attention, all of which spring not only from their privileged access to and facility at consuming a variety of media, but also from the existence of market-driven broadcasting.

These differences align the Brazilians with their U.S. counterparts in previous studies (Barnhurst & Wartella, 1991, 1998). The young U.S. elites also had a dual response to the media system: Their essays dismiss television as a serious medium, countering sound-bite political coverage with media savvy, and viewing politician appearances as manufactured images. Newspapers they honor as symbols of adult knowledge, but respond with nostalgia or dashed hope, regretting their own failure to become readers. In any case, they do not remember a press that presented substantial political alternatives. They turn instead to movies, pop music, and other entertainment genres for political ideas (Barnhurst, 1998). The U.S. participants adopted a postmodern stance, like the Brazilians, but unlike the Brazilians, they confronted a media system that presented a fairly uniform ideological field. The choices open to citizens under a fully commercialized system are all consumer choices, between branded versions of roughly the same political content. The U.S. participants did not generally recount stories depicting themselves as self-conscious political actors. They reported few cases of activism, and made no comparisons among media coverage, except as buyers of news in different packages (print or broadcast). Like the Brazilians, they express anger toward the media, without translating their dislike into detailed critiques. Unlike the Brazilians or the Spaniards, the U.S. Americans expressed a great deal of fear, taking the news (especially in its local, televised incarnation) at face value, with its warnings of health risks, crimes, and violence.

It seems clear that the type of media system plays a key role in what stance the participants from each country adopted. There was some overlap in the engaged and active postures, and in both the experience of political transition and the encounters with politically committed news outlets in Spain and Brazil. The nuances of the Brazilians' responses to print media are especially telling, because they align the participants with the Spaniards, in contrast to their responses to broadcast media. Clearly the media system, not the transition to democracy, explains this difference. The postmodern attitude could result from many cultural differences, but it is usually

thought to be media related — that is its primary expression. That the Brazilian and U.S. life history essays share the attitude seems to implicate the media.

Summary & Conclusion

Previous research examined life history documents to discover whether the declining interest in news among young adults resulted from the U.S. media system (Barnhurst, 2000). The Spanish participants under an ideological media system described quite different subjective responses. But the comparison included a confounding factor: One case had a recent political history of transition from authoritarian to democratic government, and the other had not. Were the differences found between life histories from the United States and Spain due to the context of political transition? The comparison of Brazilian with Spanish participants indicates that a history of political transition does heighten awareness, as critics of the previous research suggested and forthcoming studies confirm (Sampedro and Sáiz, in print; Sampedro and Sáiz, in preparation). However, the availability of sober, less-commercialized venues for political news again had a clear impact on the subjective lives of participants.

The participants from the three countries describe experiences that seem to place them along a continuum, from the least engaged (United States) to the most engaged (Spain). Brazil falls somewhere between the two extremes. That continuum of subjective responses seems most affected by the characteristics of different media systems: highly commercialized, non-ideological on one extreme (United States), and less commercial but more ideological on the other (Spain). Again Brazil falls between the extremes, but the dual Brazilian system, with commercial broadcasting (like the United States) and ideological print media (like Spain), sharpens the distinctions.

When political history is added to this picture, it may enhance (or detract from) the participants' subjective responses. Political change (versus stability) becomes a factor worthy of detailed examination in its own right. The Spanish participants in earlier research appear to have

been twice the beneficiaries, 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.

However, none of the previous studies described here includes participants outside the initial stratum of university trained elites — and of necessity this study adopted that limitation for comparative purposes. What is the role of socioeconomic differences in the development of participants' subjective postures? We have begun to address this issue in our next publications (Sampedro, Barnhurst and Cordeiro, forthcoming; Sampedro, Barnhurst and Cordeiro, in print).

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. Ideological media present a political sphere that includes a range of citizen actions, from forming opinions about policy choices to taking to the streets in protest against government or non-government power. Commercialized media systems present a social sphere of civil society that includes a range of choices largely defined by the market, from formulating dreams of a better life to planning or making 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: It seems that the more commercialized the media and the less ideological 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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