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Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira

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The Precarity Trap: Modelling Non-Democratic Journalistic Practices Beyond Media Capture

Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira 

School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland

ABSTRACT

How and why does legacy news media move from protecting to undermining democracy? Several studies argue that journalism can facilitate and shape democratic backsliding. However, evidence is scarce and, to some extent, limited to the content analysis of news outputs and editorials. The causal mechanisms of an anti-democratic role for the press and how it is operationalised into specific processes of news production remain largely misunderstood. Using 36 semi-structured qualitative interviews and three case studies, this paper analyses journalistic practices and role perceptions in Brazil within a period of constant decline in the quality of democracy (2016-2021). The results show that labour precarity is a crucial driver in journalistic practices capable of damaging democracy, which challenges previous assumptions that media capture is mostly influenced by the political economy of news organisations. This research also indicates that journalists are not homogeneously dominated by the interests of elites and can engage with them on their own terms to advance personal agendas.

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Introduction

A large scholarship argues that journalism plays a vital role within both democratisation and de-democratisation processes (Schiffrin 2021; Voltmer and Rawnsley 2019). Studies on political transitions have shown that journalism can facilitate democratisation, notably by enabling public deliberation and holding those in power to account (McConnell and Becker 2002; Randall 1998; Voltmer and Rawnsley 2019). However, recent research on post-Soviet states in Central and Eastern Europe (Bogaards 2018; Knott 2018), India (Rao and Mudgal 2015) and South Africa (Rao and Wasserman 2015) suggests that journalism also facilitates and shapes de-democratisation due to the ways in which news organisations have been controlled by networks of political and business elites. Specifically, these studies find that the domination of legacy news media by politicians and their allies in the industry prevents journalists from scrutinising political actors as

CONTACT Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira  ricardo.rf@ed.ac.uk

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well as governments, or causes them to avoid publishing political content essential for public deliberation.

More broadly, power and profit seem to influence why and how journalism is unable to perform these pro-democratic functions. The autonomy of journalists is constantly imperilled by political and economic pressures, which are constructed through intricately connected sets of socio-economic relations. These relations are conditioned by multiple factors, such as weak regulatory framework, precarious labour conditions of journalists, financial problems within media outlets, the corruption and perversion of professional codes, and even democratic norms (Mabweazara, Muneri, and Ndlovu 2020; Waisbord 2013). Relatively recent scholarship has tried to specify these causal mechanisms and its effects by developing the theory of media capture (Atal 2017; Schiffrin 2017, 2018, 2021; Stiglitz 2017).

The term “capture” was originally coined by Stigler (1971) in Economics as a way of describing situations, in which regulators become so sympathetic to the actors they are meant to be regulating that they begin to serve them rather than the public interest. Led by Anya Schiffrin (2017), media scholars used this term differently to interrogate the failure of journalism to fulfil its pro-democratic functions. Media capture theory argues that intersecting political economies and everyday socio-economic practices can lead to news organisations becoming dominated by networks of political elites and their business allies working in collusion (Schiffrin 2021). As a result, the editorial output of captured media serves and is controlled by powerful and private interests (Schiffrin 2017, 5). Regarding causal mechanisms, media capture is often connected to insufficient or inadequate media market liberalisation following a regime transition (Schiffrin 2017, 2018, 2021). That is, the control of a fallen authoritarian regime is replaced by a colonisation of the media market by business allies of the new ruling political elites, and weak regulations further enable this collusion (Bajomi-Lázár 2013; Knott 2018). Stiglitz (2017, 11–15) expands these ideas through a systematic attempt to define key causal mechanisms, which, in different combinations, may enable media capture.

Stiglitz places great emphasis on the “ownership capture”, arguing that wealthy individuals and corporations are able to influence journalists’ perceptions and editorial decision-making within the media organisations they own (2017, 12). The author further develops the idea of capture by “financial incentives”, which range from the more obvious forms of advertising or subsidy to informal ones, such as information access by both the state and private companies (2017, 13). Stiglitz still acknowledges the dynamics of direct “censorship” but stresses that financial incentives have become more current and effective, even generating self-censorship (2017, 14). Finally, the author’s “taxonomy” proposes subtle processes of “cognitive capture”, in which individual beliefs and perceptions of journalists are affected by their constant exchange with specific kinds of sources (2017, 15). Overall, Stiglitz builds on Herman and Chomsky’s famous “filters of propaganda” (1988), which also explore how political and commercial elites act in alliance to “manufacture consent” (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

As showcased, the media capture theory tends to focus more on the political economy of the media and less on professional practice (Atal 2017; Stiglitz 2017), effacing major determinants of news production, such as agency, internal relations, and labour conditions (Deuze 2008; Sjøvaag 2013). As a result, research in this field predominantly conceptualises the role of journalism within de-democratisation processes through its failure to carry out its pro-democratic functions – that is to say, in terms of journalism’s “negative capability”. However, news outputs are a result of both the institutional structure (i.e.,

regulatory framework, market characteristics, professional and organisational guidelines, resources) and the agency/professional judgment (Cook 1998; Deuze 2008; Gitlin 2003), the latter of which is influenced by the unique assets each journalist brings to the job (i.e., socio-demographic background, political views, life conditions) (Deuze 2002, 41–43). For example, Lelo (2019) identified an inner struggle among Brazilian journalists who are required to act in violation of their professional code by exploring the concept of ethical suffering. Their roles and practices were affected by the working conditions and internal relations, specifically the growth and normalisation of harassment within newsrooms (see also Lelo 2021).

Given the focus discussed above, the extant media capture theory does not fully explain the role of journalists and news organisations within recent processes of de-democratisation in Latin America. Particularly, the case of Brazil challenges the core assumptions of the theory, leading to a puzzle that I seek to tackle with this research.

Brazil and the Long-term Capture

Indexes from the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) show that the quality of democracy in Brazil has steadily declined since 2016 (Figure 1). Journalism is widely believed to have played an active role in this de-democratisation process (Araújo and Prior 2021; de Albuquerque 2019; van Dijk 2017). Brazil has one of the highest media ownership concentrations in the world (Bastian 2019; Moreira, Noam, and Mutter 2016; Paiva, Sodr e, and

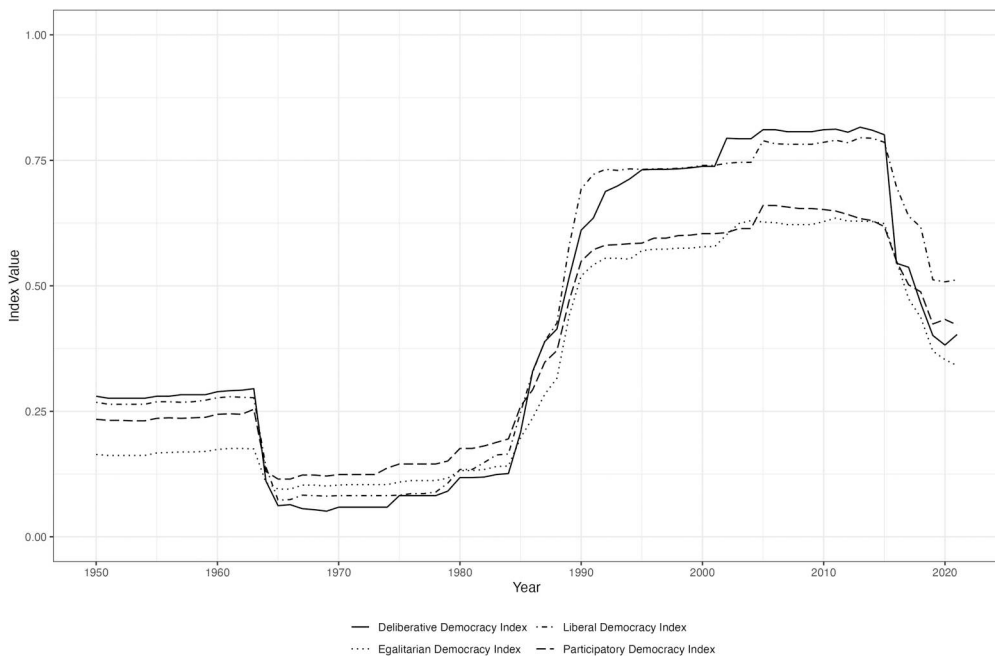


Figure 1. Brazil has declined in key V-Dem indexes from 2016 to 2021. V-Dem turns more than 450 indicators into a score between 0 and 1, with values closer to 1 representing higher quality of democracy (Coppedge 2023).

Source: Author development on V-Dem data.

Custódio 2015). The media landscape has been predominantly private since its inception and dominated by a handful of wealthy conservative families whose companies have a monopoly over printed national newspapers, radio stations in capital cities, national television networks and digital news websites (Media Ownership Monitor 2017; Paiva, Sodré, and Custódio 2015, 110; van Dijk 2017, 203). Additionally, most of the regional TV and radio stations are affiliated with these dominant groups, while Public Service Media has a negligible audience (Bastian 2019, 64). From the creation of the printed press by the Portuguese royal family in 1808 (Guedes-Bailey and Barbosa 2008; Sodré 1999) to the current system of broadcast licenses issued by the Brazilian government (Bastian 2019; Paiva, Sodré, and Custódio 2015), the legacy news media have been controlled by business elites close to power within a permissive regulatory framework. That is, they have been operating through intertwined relations with different kinds of ruling political elites for centuries. This can be defined by scholarly literature as media capture.

Previous studies of de-democratising countries, such as Poland, Hungary, India and South Africa, support Schiffrin's and Stiglitz's arguments that a failure in media liberalisation following regime transitions results in outlets being captured by political and business elites working in collusion (Bogaards 2018; Knott 2018; Rao and Mudgal 2015; Rao and Wasserman 2015). According to this model, news outlets become a tool for politicians (Knott 2018, 365) and/or shift towards providing profit-oriented (and less or non-political) content (Rao and Wasserman 2015, 657) rather than operate as an accountability mechanism and fostering public debate. Contrary to the aforementioned cases studies, however, Brazil has not experienced insufficient media market liberalisation following a regime transition. Indeed, the high concentration of ownership pre-dates the 1964 dictatorship and was not substantially altered after the 1985 democratisation (Bastian 2019, 37–55).

In addition, journalism in Brazil differs from that of other de-democratising countries in that it does not seem to be wholly dominated by coherent networks of elites. While Brazilian media organisations have colluded with dominant political elites on some occasions, they also seem to have intervened in public debates as political actors in their own right (de Albuquerque 2005, 2012, 2013). Indeed, they appear to have facilitated Brazil's de-democratisation by targeting specific political actors and favouring commercial interests. This different pattern of behaviour is best reflected by the following three events, all of which have frequently been cited as turning points in Brazil's political life (Pinheiro-Machado 2019; Souza 2016): the impeachment of the left-wing president Dilma Rousseff in 2016; the anti-corruption taskforce *Operação Lava Jato* (Car Wash Operation), which led to the arrest of her predecessor and mentor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, in 2018; and the election of the far-right populist Jair Bolsonaro late that year.

Studies suggest that Brazilian news outlets strongly advocated for Rousseff's impeachment, choosing to ignore blatant irregularities in the trial (de Albuquerque 2019; Guazina, Prior, and Araújo 2019), while simultaneously promoting economic policies rejected in the election (Pimentel and Marques 2021).¹ Other research has argued that the Brazilian media has overlooked significant misconduct in the Car Wash Operation² and manipulated news outputs in order to destabilise the then-incumbent government (Souza 2016; van Dijk 2017). Moreover, the task force analysing the case received massive supporting coverage, which ensured former president Lula's conviction and his subsequent arrest in a controversial judicial process.³ In jail, the leader in the polls was prevented from

re-running for president in the 2018 election. Immediately afterwards, the main news outlets also downplayed Bolsonaro's authoritarian values throughout the electoral campaign (Araújo and Prior 2021). Though focused on the concept of ethical suffering, Lelo (2019) also provides initial empirical evidence that Brazilian journalists working for mainstream legacy news media are compelled to provide unfair representations in their outputs based on the private interests of owners and high-level managers.

Overall, preliminary evidence indicates that Brazil presents a process of de-democratisation underpinned by a long-term media capture, yet it diverges from the theory's core assumptions in at least two ways. First, the political economy of the news media has not substantially changed following democratisation. Hence, media ownership cannot be an explanatory variable for non-democratic roles and practices since it did not vary over time. Second, business and political elites seem to be less in consensus and more in conflict. Brazilian news outlets appear to take a more interventionist and independent role compared to other cases of de-democratisation, targeting specific political elites in order to serve their financial interests. In this vein, Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) theorise a "Captured Liberal" media system in parts of Latin America. The legal frameworks in so-called consolidated liberal democracies protect press freedom, guarantee access to information and foster media competition to some extent. However, the authors argue that the ascension of new political groups is contingent on "both the creation of close relations, formal and informal, with already well-established media groups and the recognition of their interests at the expense of pluralism" in countries such as Brazil (Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero 2017, 53). As a result, the media landscape seems vibrant and independent, but the mainstream news outputs are heavily shaped by the news organisations' private interests within an environment of constant negotiations between media owners or lobbyists and institutional powers.

Thus, the extant media capture literature points to a recursive relationship between the political economy and the socio-economic practice of news media. Nonetheless, this scholarship is overly centred on the collusion between business and political elites or more direct forms of financial capture. This tends to leave out several aspects of the news practitioners' agency in de-democratisation of which relatively little is known. A more recent sub-set of research has begun to explore how role perceptions and the dynamics within news production can facilitate and shape media capture, but thus far, this has been restricted to the Public Service Media in the United Kingdom (Freedman 2019) and former Soviet states in Europe (Dragomir 2018; Kerpel 2017; Milosavljević and Poler 2018). On the other hand, journalism studies have had a tradition of accounting for sociological aspects. Previous studies on role conception and performance suggest that "watchdog journalism" and even "opinionated news coverage" are frequent and normalised in countries, like Brazil, due to an unstable political field (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2019, 300; Mellado, Márquez-Ramírez, et al. 2017; Mellado, Hellmueller, et al. 2017). However, this research struggles to connect with political theories, including journalism's potential to undermine democracy. For instance, few studies consider the changing interests that guide these watchdog traditions or the fairness of their application over time, which risks damaging democratic deliberation (de Albuquerque 2005; 2019). Furthermore, empirical evidence of the impacts of media capture on news production is scarce across different systems (Atal 2017; Finkel 2015; Mabwezara, Muneri, and Ndlovu 2020), and the studies about the role of controlled news organisations and

journalists in Brazil are considerably limited to content analysis of news outputs and editorials (Araújo and Prior 2021; Guazina, Prior, and Araújo 2019; van Dijk 2017).

Based on the empirical data used in this paper, I will argue that the internal relations of news organisations and journalists' labour conditions play a much larger role in media capture. Indeed, they represent key mechanisms of control used by business elites ruling legacy news media in Brazil. Although the country's mainstream outlets are still driven by their financial interest and were captured as institutions by business elites long before de-democratisation, precarious labour conditions facilitated and amplified the capture of news practitioners, which has resulted in increased levels of practices damaging democracy. These non-democratic journalistic practices provided unfair representations based on private interests that shaped public deliberation. At the same time, this "precarity trap", as I call it, resulted in contradictory influences on journalistic practice shaped by the non-homogeneous nature of the news media, notably in terms of journalistic agency. In doing so, this study will provide a more detailed understanding of the causal mechanisms of journalistic practices and role perceptions capable of damaging democracy by answering:

- (1) How and why have journalists' practices and role perceptions changed in Brazil during the consistent decline of the country's democracy indicators (2016–2021)?
- (2) Can journalistic practices potentially damaging to democracy be attributed mostly to a negative capability regarding traditional pro-democratic functions or to a more active agency in de-democratisation?
- (3) How do these new journalistic practices and role perceptions vary according to the journalists' professional positions within different news organisations?

Methodology

This paper engages with the reality of news production and regime transitions while acknowledging the constructed social representations. Critical Realism (CR) provides a suitable epistemological framework, as it recognises the independent existence of an objective reality but also emphasises that human knowledge about this reality is a social construct (Archer et al. 1998; Bhaskar 2008; Danermark et al. 2002). Scholars in journalism studies have been resorting to CR as a means of overcoming the theory/practice divide (Lau 2004; Toynbee 2008; Wright 2011).

Understanding journalism as a result of both the ever-present condition (i.e., material cause) and the critically reproduced outcome of human agency (Bhaskar 1998, 37–38), this study will focus on the interaction of structure and agency over time and the resulting change or stability generated by the causal influence of emergent properties (Archer 1995). Moreover, the first research question in this paper defines two dimensions. The "how" requires exploring the interaction between position-practice systems and journalistic agency. The "why" is related to the recursive loop of interactions between the primary causal mechanisms in the social structure and these systems within the context of news production.

To advance these goals, this study focuses on the journalistic practices and news organisations' internal relations during three crucial political events (i.e., case studies)

of Brazil's de-democratisation (2016–2021) through a series of longitudinal qualitative semi-structured interviews with journalists that covered these events. These are (1) the news coverage of the Car Wash Operation (2014–2022), focusing on its relations with the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016 and the arrest of former President Lula in 2018, (2) the 2018 election, which placed Jair Bolsonaro, a politician openly against liberal democracy, in the presidency, and (3) the first three years of Bolsonaro's four-year term (2019–2021).

Given the centrality of time and change in the research questions, the most suitable methodological option was to develop contrasting case studies of journalistic practice at different moments and conduct a cross-case analysis. The cross-case analysis reinforces validity, supports generalizability, and facilitates theoretical elaboration (Miles and Huberman 1994). Contrasting case studies also allows us to move from the particular to the general (Danermark et al. 2002, 105) and identify "demi-regularities" (Fletcher 2017; Lawson 1998) in order to generate theory (Bergene 2007).

Qualitative interviews have proven to be an effective method of analysing the dynamic interaction of multifarious agents, particularly for uncovering journalists' perspectives, attitudes, and practices (Ferrucci 2017; Karlsen and Stavelin 2014; Plesner 2009). Furthermore, the understanding of journalistic practice as a human agency emerging from the interplay with the structure and contingent on internal reflections informs the specific choice of employing the semi-structured form of qualitative interviews. Semi-structured interviews offer a guide with open rather than leading questions and also enable improvised follow-up questions to clarify or expand answers when needed (Wengraf 2001), which deepen the journalists' key decisions and dilemmas.

Semi-structured interviewing provides both relative freedom for participants to talk about specific situations and actions (Kvale 2014) and the means to return to more rigorous questioning when the conversation slips to "common-sense" assumptions shared by those in the same field (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 136). These shared values and discourses are particularly strong among journalists regarding norms, practice, and organisational issues (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2019, 299). As described by Zelizer (1993), journalists are "interpretative communities", meaning their profession is united by a shared discourse and collective interpretation of key norms and dynamics. The semi-structured model and questions developed around specific cases of news coverage allowed me to overcome such conditions in several situations and collect more detailed accounts.

It is, however, important to note some limitations. The data collected was dependent on the participant's ability to remember events, which occurred relatively far in the past (Anderson and Jack 2016). Furthermore, interviewees in qualitative studies can be purposefully generic, evasive, and/or engaging in *post hoc* rationalisations in order to portray "better versions" of themselves (Mason 2018, 254). These are particularly pronounced among journalists due to their shared perceptions discussed above and also their knowledge of interview dynamics (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2019, 300). The follow-up questions were used efficiently to minimise such effects, as they maintained a focus on specific practices employed in the news coverage of each case study. Moreover, securing a large number of participants from the same news outlets aided in flagging significant discrepancies in the accounts (Rubin and Rubin 2005, 136). Additionally, news outputs from the period under study and internal documents of newsrooms were used to guide the follow-ups.

The interview sample contains different kinds of journalists in order to triangulate interviewee accounts and explore different perspectives brought forward by news media managers, reporters, and editors. Journalists covering politics or managing newsrooms throughout the period of the case studies were identified and selected through the news coverage using outlets' archives and contacts sections. Subsequently, snowballing techniques were employed to contact more participants. In terms of news organisations, this study focuses on the mainstream news outlets with the largest audiences, as determined by the Reuters Digital News Report. These are the news outlets from the media giants Globo, Record, and Folha/UOL, which are viewed as being central to public deliberation in Brazil, despite the growing importance of social media (Newman et al. 2020).

With an average duration of one hour and a half, interviews were conducted between December 2021 and July 2022 until the saturation point (Charmaz 2014, 192; Mason 2018, 70). A total of 36 participants were interviewed – 10 in-person and 26 online. The research was conducted with the ethical approval of the University of Edinburgh, which required obtaining informed consent and anonymising the participants. Participants were clustered into three main categories of professional activity, avoiding the increasingly specific post terminology adopted in the newsrooms. For the same reason, the news outlets were not specified in this paper, only the media group to which they belong. In the results, participants were identified by a number, their assigned professional cluster, and the news organisation they work for (e.g., Journalist 1 – PL, Globo). Table 1 details the clusters of professional positions and news organisations.

Participants' accounts were first transcribed. Then, interview data was analysed through NVivo by open textual coding. The answers were grouped by thematic axis to extract adequate inferences. This task involved identifying key themes and coding data accordingly for each case study, searching for the "demi-regularities" at the empirical level of reality. Although CR acknowledges that social meanings, ideas, and decisions can have causal impacts, these social objects do not follow a "causal law" or a "deterministic regularity" (Fletcher 2017, 185). Rather, CR views reality as a result of multiple overlapping interactions and ever-changing decisions, making it impossible to form direct predictions. Thus, CR seeks to examine and explore tendencies rather than laws (Danermark et al. 2002, 70). These tendencies can be seen by rough trends or broken patterns in empirical data (Fletcher 2017, 185), that is, "demi-regularities", which can be effectively identified through qualitative data coding.

This study used a "directed" coding process, which is a deductive but, nonetheless, flexible approach (Fletcher 2017, 186; Gilgun 2019, 108; Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1281). Specifically, the variables were constructed based on both existing theory and the gathered data. CR aims to find the best explanation of reality through engagement with existing theories about this reality. Nonetheless, the concepts that emerge from the data are also crucial for a number of critical realists (Maxwell 2012; Oliver 2012; Yeung 1997). In this vein, Saldaña (2021, 218) warns that "preconceptions of what to expect may distort observations of what is 'really' happening" when the coding approach is too rigid. Therefore, an initial list of codes was developed, drawing from the literature review. Then, codes were adjusted, eliminated, or created during a series of pilot processes until the whole sample was coded.

The coding process was conducted separately for each case, followed by an in-case analysis. Then, the process was applied across all cases in a cross-case synthesis (Yin

Table 1. Map of participants, professional positions and news organisations.

Professional clusters	Description	Participants (N = 36)
Production Level (PL)	Reporters and TV producers. It is the lowest level in the newsroom's hierarchy. These journalists are responsible for most of the news production with a higher level of external relations. They can use a greater understanding of the topics and better connections with documents and/or sources to influence and shape news outputs, but they have minimal formal power in the decision-making process of the newsroom.	21
Middle Level (ML)	Editors, Assistant-Editors or similar job details, which are journalists with a significant level of autonomy to decide what should be covered and shape news outputs, often there to consult MM. It includes News Chiefs, <i>Pauteiros</i> or similar positions responsible for managing the reporting teams and overseeing the day's agenda in consultation with editors.	12
Media Managers (MM)	Executive positions that engage in a direct conversation with owners, such as Editor-executive, Editor-in-chief, Newsroom Director or Secretary and Vice-President of Journalism. These are described by participants as "the guardians of the news organisation's editorial guidelines, stances and interests".	3
News organisations clusters	Description	Participants (N = 36)
Globo	The Globo group cluster is mostly formed by professionals from Globo TV - the oldest TV network operating in Brazil and the audience leader for over half a century. It includes a minor portion of journalists from the group's website (G1) and all-news cable channel (GloboNews), which operate in partnership. G1 is also the most accessed news website.	11
Record	The Record group cluster has a majority of professionals from Record TV, which is the second network in the country. It includes a minor portion of journalists from the group's website (R7) and all-news cable channel (RecordNews), which operate in partnership. R7 has the third-best audience among online news outlets. Since 1989, the group has been controlled by a religious group that participates heavily in politics.	10
Folha/UOL	Folha de S.Paulo is considered one of the most influential in Brazilian politics. The newspaper was founded in 1921, and it is the number one for printed and digital subscriptions. The same group controls the online portal UOL, which is the oldest in Brazil and the second-best audience for online news. These newsrooms operate in collaboration. The cluster includes a similar number of professionals from each one.	15

Source: Developed by the author based on data collected in the interviews and audience figures from Newman et al. (2020).

2018, 48). Miles and Huberman support a two-stage strategy for cross-case analysis (1994, 174). First, the researcher examines two or more cases to identify emergent patterns or their absence. Second, they subject the themes across all cases to variable-oriented analysis, which allows the identification of differences and common themes. As such, standard variables were identified across the cases and within the themes. Each case was analysed individually, together of which generated a matrix connecting these standard variables. A meta-matrix was subsequently created through the synthesis of the variables across all three cases. In doing so, this analysis achieved both the detail of the individual cases and the overall explanation, i.e., the key tendencies and causal mechanisms during Brazil's de-democratisation.

Results and Discussion

The following two broad themes emerged from the analysis: "the labour conditions of journalists" and "the interests of news organisations". Among the causal mechanisms

driving changes in journalistic practices, those related to these two themes recurred throughout the dataset. This section will present and discuss the results around these themes, by introducing representative quotes from the participants' accounts in order to substantiate the analysis.⁴

The Labour Conditions of Journalists

The results show that a set of causal mechanisms related to labour precarity enabled new patterns of media capture. These patterns shaped journalists' agency in different ways but predominantly led to non-democratic journalistic practices. These factors emerged in all three cases and presented a clear interconnection. This dynamic can be described as the "precarity trap", which consists of three main dimensions, as described in the following sections:

Frail Structure and Competitive Environment

The majority of participants observed that journalists either did a poor job in all three of the analysed cases or poorer than in previous news coverages. A common view amongst interviewees attributes this declining performance mainly to the intense pressure of competition, increasingly shorter deadlines, budget cuts, and the reduction of newsroom structures. Specifically, the current structure of the newsroom was not able to cope with the challenges imposed by the key political events under analysis. Two comments below support this assessment:

When the Car Wash started, nobody knew how to cover it. It was a completely new dynamic. A tsunami of information, unprecedented access. We were kind of learning by doing. You would give a hell of a headline about the whistle-blower revealing strong accusations of corruption, and then soon after, none of that was proven. (Journalist 17 – ML, Folha/UOL)

It was very difficult in the 2018 election. And it is very difficult with the government. Not only the attacks more recently, but it's a group that doesn't talk to the press, that doesn't like the press, and is hostile to the press. We had to learn how to deal with it, to seek information in another way. And to assess whether you really have to amplify certain discourses. (Journalist 25 – PL, Globo)

In this dimension, participants' accounts suggest that the conditions described above resulted in a lack of critical questioning and independent investigation. As a result, journalists overly relied on official sources without questioning their agenda. As one interviewee said about the Car Wash Operation (Case 1):

We have to report. It was the prosecutors who were speaking. The judge. What will you do? Do not report? We even saw that the accusation presented to the press was not exactly what was in the lawsuit filed in court. We could see that there was a weakness. But what are we going to do? We had to report. The judiciary made those statements. (Journalist 8 – PL, Globo)

The above statement demonstrates that some journalists apparently did not see a purpose in questioning the dominant narrative or providing a more comprehensive coverage as part of their role. Instead, they focused on giving the big headlines and scoops before their competitors. Commenting on the newsroom priorities, one participant echoed:

There is a lot of this thing about having to publish first. It influences a lot. There's even this expression in the newsroom: publish one paragraph first, fix it later. The important is to splash a headline on the website. You can write later. You can do several updates later. (Journalist 5 – PL, Folha/UOL)

Some of the participants' accounts also suggest that news practitioners tend to cut corners and adopt unfair practices in order to get those headlines and scoops. Additionally, some interviewees mentioned a "herd dynamic" in which MM and ML professionals require them to reproduce stories from competing outlets, forming a dominant narrative. Overall, these practices corroborate the negative capability apparent in the literature.

Some journalists felt that this combination of frail structure and intense pace also prevented meaningful reflections about their roles in the newsroom. Moreover, the space to debate instructions is perceived as inadequate and seems diminished under such conditions. Poor training of professionals was also reported by a few participants, which has an impact on this dimension.

Fear of Losing the Job

In this second dimension, journalists actively adopt practices not aligned with normative and pro-democratic functions out of fear of losing their jobs in an increasingly gloomy market for news practitioners. It is usually carried out by complying with the instructions of MM and ML professionals, which are often predicated by the interests of the outlet's owners. However, non-democratic practices can be performed by journalists of their own volition based on a perception of such interests. The non-democratic practices described by the participants include bias, specific narrative framing, source selectiveness, and self-censorship.

While media managers tend to minimise or blatantly deny the existence of the dynamics described above, several PL and ML professionals provided solid and sometimes detailed accounts of specific top to bottom requests and a particular set of interests connected to higher echelons, sometimes directly presented by owners in all news organisations. For example, one interviewee said:

The company has an interest. Of course, it does. It is a private company that has its market needs. It has its interest in how the economy is conducted and even political preferences (...) It is dealt with by the board. There are meetings, and there are some points of contact. There is no formal announcement to the entire newsroom. It's not a daily interference. But there is an editorial line, and these interests, to some extent, also shape this editorial line and, consequently, the news output, particularly in major coverages or sensitive topics. (Journalist 26 – ML, Globo).

Major coverages or sensitive news outputs, also referred to as "delicate" or "controversial", are often those involving important political actors. The occurrence with which these interests were transmitted and the degree of interference, however, varied considerably across the outlets. Another participant describes a stronger approach at Record:

Record is the Church, and the Church is Record. Everyone inside knows. Of the places I've worked, it's the most direct. The main objective is to carry out the owner's power project. After the bishop publicly said he was going to support Bolsonaro, the TV went into campaign mode. It was a special series on corruption focusing on the PT and Lula, and only positive material about Bolsonaro. (Journalist 4 – ML, Record)⁵

Several participants demonstrate deep dissatisfaction, and some even a repulsion to interference or directives that confront traditional principles of journalistic practice. In that respect, one interviewee made the following remark:

These requests come, and as a professional, we know it's a lie. So, it's aggressive. It's aggressive to our work. You feel bad putting this out to the public. It's not the reason I chose the profession. I stopped going out for a while. I didn't want to meet new people. They usually ask where you work, and I was ashamed to say. (Journalist 29 – PL, Record)

Asked why staying in a job under such conditions, the same participant said: "In my case, it was economic issues. Journalists also have to pay the bills." Indeed, the vast majority of the participants accepted and tended to legitimise non-democratic instructions and practices primarily to maintain employment. As another interviewee illustrates:

The main concern is keeping your job. Most people disagree. But if you want to dance, this is the dance. You need to dance their music. To dance this dance here, you have to do that. If you don't want to, go away. Nobody has to stay, right? But I think there was this idea of when you're here, you have to do this. Unfortunately. (Journalist 12 – PL, Record)

Lack of job security, low salaries, and scarce opportunities in the job market for journalists were subthemes regularly cited in association with the view that they needed to protect their job. In a similar vein, a significant number of participants shared feeling entrapped by precarity to the point of no longer caring about their role:

It is bills, credit cards, everything. Everyone in the newsroom needs their salary. I used to have this kind of romantic notion that the newsroom is more left-wing, and the newspaper's owner is right-wing. So, we keep a healthy balance that results in quality news coverage. After Dilma's impeachment, that fell apart. The power I thought I had is worthless. And from there, it became total hypocrisy. It's work to earn money and trying to hold on your stomach as long as you can. (Journalist 22 – ML, Folha/UOL)

Furthermore, a few participants stated that they tend to adopt self-censorship to avoid risking their jobs. The comment below represents these views and also demonstrates that some of the decisions are not based on direct instructions but rather on the journalists' perceptions of the news organisations' interests:

It became very explicit after Edir Macedo declared his vote for Bolsonaro. Everyone knew where to look. It was way too explicit. (...) There were topics that I didn't even suggest for reporting. Even some terms I avoided using on air to avoid having problems. (Journalist 10 – PL, Record)

Opportunity for Career Advancement

Based on the participants' accounts, another dimension of dynamics caused by labour precarity can be formed in which journalists not only comply but also go above and beyond managers' expectations when performing non-democratic practices. Exercising their agency, news practitioners at PL and ML levels fully embrace the interests of owners (or perceptions of them) in order to get a better position within the news organisation. One participant explained these decisions during the 2018 election (Case 2):

It's a window of opportunity. You can see that the company is leaning in that direction. So, you go on with that wave too. Why not? There was a reporter who went to cover a demonstration with a black jacket and a Brazil's shirt underneath.⁶ (Journalist 10 – PL, Record)

Similarly, another interviewee revealed that some journalists used and even undermined the quality of news coverage to become a more recognised professional:

If it had been a more balanced coverage, the country as a whole would have gained much more. We would have learned more about the intricacies of corruption. But it was political screaming. One yells, another yells. They want to arrest the guy. Lula cannot be a candidate (...) It's a little for ideology, a little for audience. Look at the journalists who 'made themselves' during the Car Wash. They made their name during the Car Wash. How? Bashing, bashing, bashing, bashing. Screaming louder than each other. Some of them are still in evidence today. These are journalists who made themselves by cursing and speaking without technical elements to say what they said. (Journalist 7 – PL, Folha/UOL)

Some journalists went too far in their demonstration of support to the “company politics”, leading media managers to go in the opposite direction and demanding for a reduction of such practices. As one interviewee described:

It was so explicit that there were many journalists, some of them reporters, who started to post videos on Instagram with the Brazil shirt talking bad about the PT to try to surf the wave and win points with the direction. It got to a point where the company had to stop it. I remember that [name] called everyone to talk and said: 'Damn, are you crazy? Then you go to a community where everyone likes the PT, and you're going to be lynched. Damn it. Quit being stupid'. (Journalist 10 – PL, Record)

These results cannot be examined without considering the increased participation of news practitioners in social media. Indeed, this dimension demonstrates that social media followers is the current commodity of journalists and no longer the quality of reporting. In this dimension, journalists tend to consciously cut corners and adopt non-normative practices described in previous dimensions in order to provide headlines that are either aligned with the organisational interests and/or help increase their follower count. Conversely, they may also practice self-censorship with the same goal. Journalists can preventively avoid addressing topics or conducting critical questioning that may clash with managers' instructions or cause a decline in followers. Among others, one participant accurately portrays the impact of social media in this dimension as follows:

Sometimes, with a certain subject, I hold. Oh, I'm not going to talk about that. I won't. In some situations, I've already taken a hold, mainly to prevent people from pissing me off on social media. The thing isn't even if I'm going to answer or not. It's because the company looks at the reporter's social media. Not what he's doing but how the account is being viewed by the population. If the journalist has a good engagement on social media, he has extra points to stay in the news organisation. If the journalist's engagement is bad, if he has a problem on social media, he is bad for the company. You won't get promoted, or you might even be fired. (Journalist 10 – PL, Record)

These results show that journalists engaged with the capture and the owners' agenda on their own terms, using it to implement their own agenda. That is, they exercise journalistic agency to navigate the interests of elites and, to some extent, profit from it. Furthermore, a significant part of the subthemes forming this dimension suggests that a journalist's follower count on social media has become a driving measure used by media managers to define spaces and promotions.

The Interests of News Organisations

As previously discussed, the “precarity trap” as a form of media capture emerged as the most present causal factor for changes in journalistic practices from 2016 to 2022. However, participants’ accounts also demonstrate that the political economy of the media still has a substantial effect in the period. Indeed, several interviewees pointed out a dominant neoliberal agenda advocated by managers and editors (i.e., interests in dimensions 2 and 3 of the “precarity trap”).

The key mainstream media groups analysed are private monopolies, who support and promote this agenda in the face of opportune political shifts. A seasoned journalist who often engaged with the editorial board and the owners of a key outlet under study provides a representative explanation of this dynamic:

The owners of the news media don’t truly support Bolsonaro. Their preference is and has always been the PSDB.⁷ But, above all, they are anti-PT and in favour of a neoliberal economy. The management of the news organisations embraced Car Wash because of both audience profits and the opportunity to criminalise the PT. Then, they facilitated the election of Bolsonaro, downplaying the risks to democracy for the possibility of pushing more neoliberal policies. (Journalist 21 – PL, Folha/UOL)

The descriptions of the various participants suggest that (1) media managers of private mainstream news organisations in Brazil tend to follow and advocate a neoliberal agenda in close connection with its owners; (2) journalists climbing the hierarchy share these interests or start to assume them because of their new positions. As such, these interests tend to prevail even in newsrooms with a production process more open to debate, consequently shaping the dominant instructions within MM-ML-PL internal relations.

Overall, the participants demonstrated a high level of rationalisation and even resignation towards the role of owners and how their interests influence news coverage. Comments such as “that is how it is” recurred on interviewees’ accounts related to this theme. These comments emerged often associated with the view that they need to do their job despite these interferences, which consolidate the effect in dimensions 2 and 3 of the precarity trap. For example, this reporter justifies direct requests connected to the outlets’ owners:

Every news organisation has its editorial line, and you work within this editorial line. In the case of my company, the company where I work, there were situations like ‘let’s talk more about this than that’. And there were sometimes requests. We call them missions. It’s a top-down thing. We have to do this story, and that’s it. The ‘house’ wants it. I try to make it as journalistic as possible. I think there are a lot of people in a lot of news organisations who are given certain missions, and you have to try to make lemonade out of lemons. (Journalist 13 – PL, Record)

Conversely, the journalist responsible for passing instructions from the upper levels to the reporters within the same organisation echoes this rationalisation:

Don’t be under the illusion that places don’t have their sides. I’m not going to tell you that they don’t because then we won’t be able to talk frankly. All news organisations have interests. It’s illusory to think they don’t have. So, you have to adapt to what the company where you are working asks of you. I try to make it as newsworthy as possible. There is no illusion. We are workers. We are cogs in the machine. (Journalist 14 – ML, Record)

Carried out under the resignation described above, the dominant set of interests shaping news outputs explains, to some extent, the unfair criticism of left-wing actors, uncritical adherence to the Car Wash operation, and strategic support for Bolsonaro (i.e., critics of his political positions, but protection of his economic agenda). For example, even MM and ML journalists from outlets under severe attacks from the president during Case 3 stated that their organisations supported his economic agenda “100%”, which resulted in a significant amount of “positive news outputs”. As one prominent editor points out:

The newspaper praises the president. The economic agenda of the Bolsonaro government and that of the newspaper are very similar. What the newspaper criticises is the incompetence in approving, the bullshit, but on the merits, many of the things that Bolsonaro defends in the economy, in infrastructure, the newspaper also defends. (Journalist 6 – ML, Folha/UOL)

According to the vast majority of the interviewees, mainstream news organisations in Brazil consistently advocated for greater neoliberal economic policies after the 1988 Constitution, mostly due to their patterns of private ownership. However, their accounts suggest an increase in this support during the period under study, which was reflected in the instructions conveyed by media managers and high-level editors. As this participant describes:

It began to happen in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff in 2016, with bosses meddling more in my work. A new direction began to form in the company, and they began to look at our work with more organised intentions, which only increased at the end of Car Wash and Lula’s arrest all the way to Bolsonaro’s election (...) There were some political preferences, but most of the instructions and concerns were related to economic policies. (Journalist 22 – ML, Folha/UOL)

Reports of this “meddling” are recurrent throughout the sample in ways that shape the news outputs according to the outlets’ private interests. Among many, this reporter provides a practical example of this dynamic during the 2018 election (Case 2):

I was writing about the economy and the decisions presidential candidates would face after the election. A few minutes later, I got recommendations to interview certain experts, all in favour of austerity measures. (...) During the election, the press was critical of Bolsonaro’s speeches, but it was always in favour of his economic policies and Paulo Guedes [Finance Minister]. During his government, the press criticises his speeches on democracy and the environment, but the economic policy of austerity and privatisation has always been portrayed very favourably (...) Labor, tax, and social security reforms are what matters for the business elites that own the Brazilian media. (Journalist 5 – PL, Folha/UOL)

Figure 2 showcases the relationship between labour precarity and the outlets’ economic agenda emerging as the key causal factors of journalistic practices damaging to democracy. These causal factors are deeply connected and affected by shifts in politics, thus forming both a modifying factor and an intrinsic cause.

In the case of Brazil during the analysed period, these shifts consist of the political activism of sectors of the judicial branch and the emergence of a new far-right force shuffling the partisan landscape, by confusing the electorate and using disruptive communication strategies, including attacks on the press. These political shifts provide opportunities for news organisations to advocate their agenda more strongly but also pose additional challenges for weakened newsrooms. At the same time, non-democratic journalistic practices tend to contribute towards fostering further political shifts that perpetuate this cycle

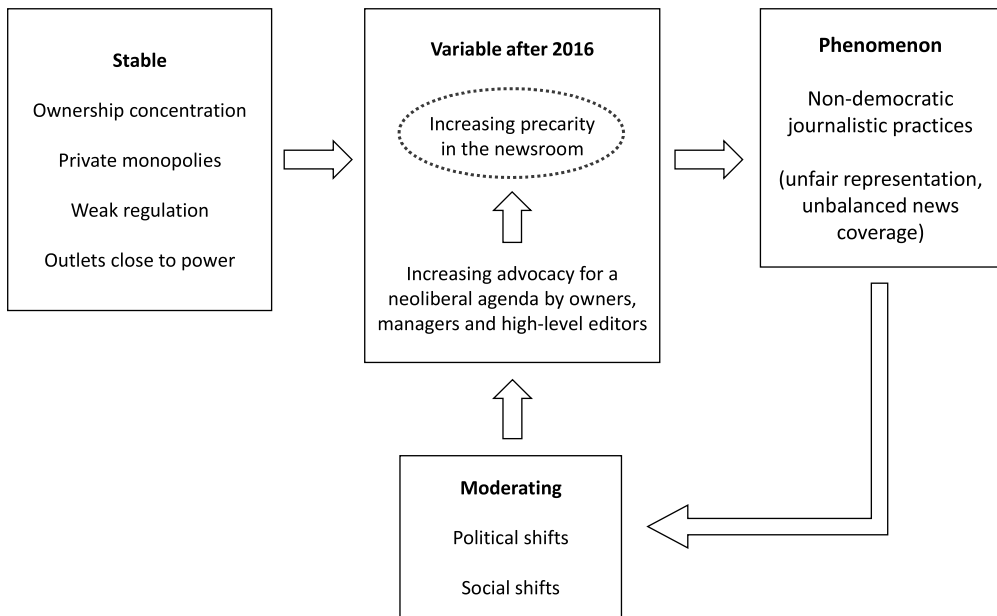


Figure 2. The key causal factors of non-democratic journalistic practices in the Brazilian mainstream new media and their interactions.

Source: Developed by the author.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to argue that the internal relations of news organisations and the labour conditions of journalists play a fundamental role in media capture. Indeed, the results demonstrate that labour precarity is the key mechanism of control for business elites ruling the legacy news media in Brazil, which, in turn, enables and shapes new roles and practices for journalists within the country's recent de-democratisation processes. Moreover, the study's findings provide an understanding of how and why different forms of non-democratic roles and practices are operationalised into specific processes of news production. One important result is that journalists are not homogeneously dominated by elites' interests. While some news practitioners can comply with their organisations' interests for fear of losing their jobs, others can embrace this agenda on their own terms to advance their careers.

Another contribution of this study is the indication of an increased impact of social media on journalistic practice at all levels of the newsroom. According to the interview data, the number of followers is more or equally vital to securing a journalist position as the quality of reporting, thus serving as an integral part of the precarity trap established by this study. Furthermore, these more pervasive forms of monitoring in a context where news practitioners adjust their actions based on both the outlets' manifested interests and their perceptions suggest a more dynamic interaction between censorship and self-censorship. A less static view of these concepts could be usefully explored in further research. As expected, the research has also found a high level of rationalisation among journalists justifying their actions at the service of private interests and significant resignation about the interference of these interests in journalistic practices.

Regulation capable of reducing ownership concentration and abusive practices is crucial to reduce dynamics of traditional financial capture, patently present in the case of Brazil. However, this paper suggests that media policies in liberal democracies should also find renewed ways of addressing labour precarity. If we are bound to the thought of the press as an institution of democracy, news practitioners should have better working conditions and guarantees similar to those in other democratic bodies, including security and stability to protect them from pressures and interests foreign to democratic journalistic practice. Still, just as they reject regulations on their political economies, news organisations have a tendency of refraining from implementing measures that could fundamentally change predatory internal relations. As one participant asserts: “Newspapers like to talk about democracy a lot, but they don’t exercise democracy in the newsroom” (Journalist 9 – PL, Folha/UOL). The results of this paper suggest that poor working conditions or job insecurity can be more than a deficiency in the news industry and seem to be exploited as a form of control that undermines journalistic autonomy.

Notes

1. Business elites from different sectors, including media owners, strongly supported the impeachment and advocated a major shift in economic policy at the same time. After participating in Rousseff’s removal, her vice-president, Michel Temer, was sworn in and implemented this plan of austerity, reducing the social welfare state and giving fiscal benefits to large private companies (see also Ferreira 2022, 98–100).
2. Car Wash critics claim abuse of preventive arrests, coercion to fabricate accusations, lack of evidence, illegal exchange of information with foreign states, and collusion between judge and prosecutors (Martins, Zanin Martins, and Valim 2021). The process reached the United Nations Human Rights Committee (OHCHR 2018).
3. Lula was released in November 2019, one year after the 2018 presidential election, when the Brazilian Supreme Court revised decision on arrests of convicts with an appeal. In June 2021, the court condemned Car Wash judge for bias and dismissed the charges (Goes 2021).
4. The recurrence of these themes is not limited to the cases, professional clusters or news organisations indicated in the quotes.
5. The participant is referring to bishop Edir Macedo, the head of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God and also owner of Record group. In the same excerpt, PT is Lula’s *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party).
6. The Brazilian national football team shirt was used by protesters in demonstrations starting in 2015 against the left-wing government, and later captured by Bolsonaro and the new far-right as a symbol of support.
7. *Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira* (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) is a centre-right party that used to blend social democracy, Christian democracy and economic liberalism. It ruled Brazil with Fernando Henrique Cardoso from 1995 to 2002, when Lula from PT won the election, and Sao Paulo Estate from 1995 to 2022.

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ORCID

Ricardo Ribeiro Ferreira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2926-4678>

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