PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN THE BRAZILIAN CONGRESS

The News Agency and TV Station of the Chamber of Deputies

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Chamber of Deputies of Brazil

Abstract: The present article analyzes the media produced by the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, especially its national cable TV station and online news agency. We discuss whether these media sources promote accountability and participation. Our findings suggest that although these sources have been employed, according to the logic of audience democracy, to promote the public visibility, credibility, and reputation of Brazil's federal representatives, they do contribute to enhancing the accountability and quality of Brazilian democracy, insofar as they provide access to relevant information about legislative processes.

The past twenty-five years have brought fundamental changes to government communications in Brazil. The development of democracy (reinstalled in Brazil in 1985 after twenty years of military dictatorship) and of communications technologies has created the need and opportunity for Brazilian governmental institutions in all branches (including the legislative) to create a comprehensive communications system, justified by the constitutional principle of publicity. The political decision to invest considerable resources and efforts in the development of this system resulted from a diagnosis that these institutions lacked credibility and from the belief that commercial media have contributed to the cultivation of prejudices against politicians and thus have eroded citizens' trust in political institutions (Miguel 2008). The new communications initiative was also justified as a public service that empowers citizens and fosters political participation.

In fact, nonmediated governmental communication with the public has been quite commonplace in Brazilian history, although this has been heavily criticized by the privately owned media. For example, the federal government has a daily one-hour radio program called *Voz do Brasil* (Voice of Brazil), divided into segments for the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches, which has been mandatorily transmitted by all radio stations in the country at 7 p.m. from the 1930s till today. This program has shown remarkable resilience, surviving through several authoritarian and democratic regimes.

The present article carefully analyses the media sources of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, especially the national cable TV station and the online news

agency.[1] The aim of the analysis is to verify if elements such as representation and accountability are reinforced by the social use of those media.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodology combines four complementary research techniques. The first is bibliographic research about public communications, democracy, and accountability undertaken with the aim of supporting the study. Our analysis of Brazilian Chamber of Deputies media programs takes into account international theoretical perspectives (Arterton 1987; Barber 1984; Bimber 1999) regarding the relationships between democracy, accountability, and interactions with voters and segments of civil society, as well as other political institutions that interact with the Brazilian Parliament. Bibliographical research also allows us to briefly summarize the history of government communication in Brazil in order to contextualize the issues and the empirical phenomena we address below.

The second technique is document analysis: examining the institutional information produced about the Chamber of Deputies' communications system and its political and editorial principles. From this information we extract patterns and tendencies, especially with regards to programming and public relations.

The third technique is the analysis of primary data collected by the researchers using interviews. As Newcomb (1993, 127) states, interviews offer multiple perspectives about data and themes related to practice. They therefore help to reconstruct the history of social and political processes and contribute to the understanding of the issues under study. Here we followed the methodological suppositions of Giddens (2009), which stipulate the existence of a dual hermeneutic process that permeates studies that use interviews as sources of information. This means that researchers in these studies focus their empirical investigations on phenomena constituted as significant by the actors being investigated. The role of the social analyst is thus to create knowledge based on what social actors already know about the phenomena being investigated. In this sense, then, social research using interviews is mediated by the practical and discursive conscience of the agents being investigated.

Fifteen professionals working for TV Câmara and eleven working for Agência Câmara were interviewed and their testimonies recorded and transcribed. In the present article, we use parts of some testimonies related to the issues we address here. The interviews at Agência Câmara were conducted between November 2008 and March 2009, while the professionals and managers at TV Câmara were interviewed in December 2009. Of the twenty-six professionals interviewed, twenty were journalists and six occupied management or administrative positions in the two institutional media sources studied.[2]

Our study also used secondary data, in particular studies conducted by the managers of Agência Câmara and TV Câmara, as well as data from academic

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1. TV Câmara, www.camara.leg.br/tv; Câmara Notícias, www.camara.leg.br/camaranoticias.
2. Only the managers at the time the interviews were conducted have been identified. The other journalists' identities are kept confidential for ethical reasons.

studies regarding these two media institutions published over the last decade. This information was used in order to reinforce our study's analytical content and better illustrate the questions under investigation.

GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS IN BRAZIL

Government has long been a strong actor in communications in Brazil. During the Portuguese colonial period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the press was simply prohibited. The first Brazilian newspaper, *Diário Carioca* (1808), was the official daily of the Portuguese royal government in exile in Rio de Janeiro, where it had fled from Napoleon (Sodré 1999, 19).

Independence from Portugal in 1822 brought with it a relative freedom of the press, and political newspapers flourished over the next century. Besides using subsidies, regulation, and public relation structures to manage the press, Brazilian governments have interfered with the private press by granting loans and, in at least two authoritarian periods, by practicing censorship.

The government has also operated its own powerful communication systems, including television and radio channels. During the 1930s, the Getúlio Vargas dictatorship created the Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP) inspired by political tools then being developed in Nazi Germany and the United States (Sodré 1999, 381). Later, after the 1964 coup, Brazil's military governments invested in the development of a national electronic communications infrastructure for both private and governmental media. While continuing to finance allied private communications groups, the generals created propaganda campaigns and press offices to feed the media. They also censored the press in varying grades of severity for almost thirty years (Kucinsky 1991, xxii–xxiv).

The process of re-democratization began near the end of the 1970s. In the new scenario, censorship gave way to more subtle media control tools. Licenses to operate radio and television channels became a resource used to empower local political allies across the country. At the same time, in a context of low income that meant a reduced consumer market for media, the government became the most important advertiser in Brazil. Needless to say, advertising shares were distributed according to political criteria, directly or through state-owned companies, at the federal, state, and municipal levels.

Government communication practices also changed with the end of the military regime. The re-democratization process brought new actors into the public arena (or returned older groups to it): unions, environmentalist and other civil movements, as well as the newly re-legalized political parties. Confronted with these voices, public institutions (and private organizations) had to reframe the way they presented themselves to the press and to the public. What had been a monologue based on discreet disclosure of controlled information had to become some sort of dialogue. Furthermore, the democratic characteristics of the Constitution of 1988, with its principle of making government actions and documents public and transparent and its provision for the creation of instruments of public participation such as councils, consolidated changes that were already in progress in the field of communication and promoted others.

DEMOCRACY, PUBLIC COMMUNICATION, AND THE CONGRESS

The history of Brazilian politics has been marked by a lack of participation, transparency, and accountability due to the historical disjunction between state and society, a result of the unilateral power of the state apparatus, which has traditionally been exercised at the expense of civil society autonomy (Diniz 2000). This "democratic deficit" (Norris 2011) has been one of the factors that have hindered the consolidation of a strong democracy (Barber 1984) in Brazil. However, with the redesign of the political scenery that occurred during re-democratization, especially after the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution, the objectives of the media systems maintained by the government changed from the simple promotion of positive images to include the democratic purpose of expanding access to public information and fostering participation.

If we want to understand the context of the reconfiguration of communication and information practices in Brazilian public institutions during recent years, we need to first undertake a brief discussion about the relationship between public communication and democracy. The idea of publicity as a condition for democracy is inscribed as a principle in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988. In order to guarantee the implementation of this principle, government agencies have developed a series of visibility strategies that resulted in the creation of public systems of information and transparency, such as that maintained by the Chamber of Deputies. Those systems not only feed private media with information but also constitute themselves as institutional media devices that speak directly to the public, using devices evolving apace with the technology. In the beginning of the 1990s, those systems concentrated on the concept of transparency and mainly transmitted information, following journalistic patterns of news production by the general press. Gradually they evolved toward the concept of public communication, understood as a participatory democratic tool.

The expression "public communication" has been used in the last few years in Brazil by communication researchers and professionals (especially those in the field of organizational and government communication) to differentiate their practices from contemporaneous marketing and from the authoritarian government communication practices characteristic of predemocratic Brazil. Elizabeth Brandão (2006) argues that this does not only explain these practices but justifies and even functions as a program for them. In fact, the concept of "public communication" is being adopted as a synonym for government and institutional communications, being defined as "a communicative process that takes place between state, government, and society with the aim of informing in order to build citizenship" (Brandão 2006, 10). For Brandão, "public communication appears today as a new utopia that tries to rescue the truly social meaning of communication." This meaning has been "lost due to the imposition of a professionalism that is fully dedicated to the needs of the market" since the 1980s (2006, 12).

From this perspective, public communication in Congress is fundamental for the strengthening of the public sphere, understood as a place where social demands and claims are put in front of the electorate. This occurs because institutional visibility, political transparency, and social interaction are indis-

pensable for the reinforcement of public sphere and of democracy itself, as many international and Brazilian studies show (Aterton 1987; Barber 1984; Bimber 1999; Faria 2011; Norris 2011; Porto 1996).

This argument finds support in the ideas of those authors who identify a growing demand both of the citizens for transparency in public administration (Jardim 2006) and also of the representatives themselves for more visibility for their work (Cook 1989). Citizens' lack of information about the functions and functioning of the legislative branch can lead them to question the legitimacy of those organizations. In a similar vein, Luis Felipe Miguel points out that "the recuperation of representative mechanisms depends on a larger understanding of the meaning of representation itself" (2002, 123).

In the case of the Brazilian Congress, the new model of direct communication with society is part of a political project that seeks to consolidate and deepen the Brazilian democratic system. One of the premises of this strategy is that the use of new media and their technological potential for accountability may favor democratic practices (Aterton 1987; Bimber 1999; Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese 2007).

The disclosure of legislative activities and the live broadcasting of the sessions and debates are a priority for legislative media. They aim to foster the political visibility of the activities of the legislative branch and its interaction with other political institutions and citizens. Information is thus used as a strategy to attract the attention and interest of citizens to the legislative activities of Congress, the structure and functions of the legislature, and the basics of the legislative process.

The Secretary of Social Communication (Secom) of the Chamber of Deputies was created in 1998, simultaneously with TV Câmara. Agência Câmara, an online news service, began operating in 2000. Secom also operates a radio station and public relations programs. Together, these communications programs involve 580 institutional communications professionals, not counting press officers hired by individual representatives. This system's mission is stated as follows:

informing all the segments of the population regarding the legislative and institutional activities of Chamber of Deputies and publishing information of cultural and public utility (with autonomy, pluralism, non-partisanship, ethics, exemption and interactivity), contributing to the transparence of the institution, to the formation of political culture and to the exercise of citizenship," understanding that "public communication should guarantee space for the publication of diverse points of view, conflicts and negotiation, as well as favoring popular participation (Secretaria de Comunicação Social da Câmara dos Deputados 2006).

Many authors, such as Benjamin Barber (1984), point to a universal crisis in representative systems. The peculiarities of the Brazilian case might be considered to be one of the reasons for the growth of the Chamber of Deputies' communication system. However, it is worth noting that the concept of "crisis of representation" is itself very controversial. Bernard Manin (1997), for example, points to the various reformulations of the democratic system over the centuries, rejecting the idea of a specific or momentary crisis. Instead, Manin argues that certain limitations are intrinsic to the representative system. Researchers aligned with deliberative or participative theories of democracy offer up acid criticism of the liberal view of representation and of the idea of a representative crisis.

On the other hand, legislatures' lack of credibility seems to be a constant all around the world and particularly in Latin America. This complicates democratic governance both for politicians and institutions. Latinobarómetro, an annual public survey conducted since 1995 in eighteen Latin American countries, shows trust in congresses in Latin America to be 34 percent in 2010, greater than confidence expressed for parties (23 percent) in the region (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012). In 2013, 31 percent of Latin American citizens said it is possible to have democracy without parties, and 27 percent believed it possible to have democracies without a congress (Corporación Latinobarómetro 2013).

Trying to influence the media turns out to be a fundamental strategy for reducing this abyss between representatives and the people they represent, since the media are recognized as among the most important political actors. The media are the main channel for citizens' access to the information which they need in order to act in the public sphere. The media are also the main instrument politicians have to publicize their agendas. Giovanni Sartori (2001) uses the expression "videopolitics" to define the new political power television has in contemporary societies to publish a fact and, through this, to make the fact happen. But the media "reproduce social diversity badly, which creates significant consequences to the exercise of citizenship" (Miguel 2002, 163). Showing the legislature in a shallow and negative way, the media contribute to the limitations of representation. All around the world, news generally emphasize scandals and treat as flaws the democratic procedures of divergence among conflicting parties. The media also underestimate the value of routine work in the permanent committees that are responsible for the most relevant part of legislative debates and for the majority of laws approved in the Chamber of Deputies.

The Global Parliamentary Report (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2012) shows that, because of these problems, a growing number of legislatures around the world are adopting communications strategies in order to keep citizens connected and engaged. Congresses are also using social media for the same ends (Williamson 2010).

The legislature has long been an important subject for the media, however, and in interactions between representatives and journalists, both sides have historically influenced each other. Writing on the history of the Brazilian Congress since its birth, after the country's independence in 1822, Casimiro Pereira Silva Neto (2003, 18) states, "Journalists and the press became great allies of the imperial parliament and government, contributing greatly to the propagation of democratic ideas in the new country. To them, we cannot forget, we owe the full transcription of parliamentary sessions and the preservation of these first pages of our legislative history."

In 1826, only four years after independence, the *Diário da Câmara dos Deputados à Assembleia Legislativa do Império do Brasil* (Diary of the Chamber of Deputies to the Legislative Assembly of the Empire of Brazil) was created to publicize parliamentary debates. It circulated only until 1830 (Sodré 1999, 99), but the tradition of publishing parliamentary speeches and of making them making them accessible for a wider audience lasted until the 1950s (Corrêa 1995, 150–151).

During the exploratory phases of our research, while we were conducting

interviews with managers of the Chamber of Deputies' communications system, one of the directors of the Communications Office of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies attributed the need for more direct communication between the legislature and the citizens to the moving of the federal capital from Rio de Janeiro to Brasília in 1961. He recalls that the Chamber of Deputies initiated its segment in the *Voz do Brasil* in 1962 and that a newsletter was created in 1968 for distribution to media outlets in order to promote the activities of the institution:

Representatives were used to galleries always full of people in Rio de Janeiro, to applause. They suddenly felt themselves in emptiness. They thus got space in the *Voice of Brazil.* Later, with the closure of Congress, the successive unconstitutional acts and the cancelation of mandates after the episode of the Constitution of 1967, the representatives felt that they were not only away from the people, but also losing power. So they had the idea of producing a daily newsletter.[3]

The director of Secom in 2008–2009 highlights that the perception of the role of commercial media was also a central reason for the extension of the communication structure in the Chamber of Deputies during the 1990s:

It was clear to the legislative that public opinion formed its concepts and ideas from what it learned in the media. Newspapers were all against dictatorship. TV was more amiable to the military because they depended on public licenses, but after the fall of dictatorship, newspapers needed other windmills to fight and one of the mills chosen was Congress. I think representatives had this view of things: "These guys only speak badly about us, stressing the wrong things and giving little emphasis to positive stuff." So it was natural that they created direct channels to communicate with society.[4]

It is thus possible to understand the legislative branch's attempts to open communication channels with society at large via the creation of its own communication media as something that seeks to favor the legitimacy that is fundamental to democratic regimes (Porto 1996). As Paulo César Santos (2005, 3) states, these congressional media sources are "institutional mechanisms created to rescue, amplify, or improve the character of political representation" in Congress. Regarding the Chamber of Deputies, Santos also emphasizes that two fundamental reasons for the creation of its communication media were the "growing inability of most representatives to occupy space in the commercial media and the exhaustion of the electoral process as the main mechanism of contact between congressmen and voters" (Santos 2005, 16).

In the next two sections, we will explore how the communications system of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies adopts concepts related to democracy and to public communication, as analyzed in the very recent Brazilian reflections upon the field. We will also discuss if these concepts correctly describe the activities of TV Câmara and Agência Câmara. We have chosen to look at these two media sources because they have the largest audiences within the Chamber of Deputies' communications system, which also includes a radio station, a print newspaper, and an Internet website geared toward children, as shown in table 1. Data

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3. Sergio Chacon, interview by Cristiane Brum Bernardes, Brasília, December 2009.
4. Chacon interview.

Table 1   Chamber of Deputies media sources most used by the public

Source	N	Percentage
TV Câmara	1,169	46%
Internet website	1,196	47%
Rádio Câmara	52	2%
Voice of Brazil	92	4%
Cannot specify	3	0.1%
Câmara newspaper	22	1%
Children's website	1	0.04%
Total	2,535	100%

Source: Primary data collected by the authors from Disque-Câmara (2013).

collected by a survey conducted by the toll-free service maintained by Secom (Disque-Câmara) indicate the preference of interviewees for information disclosed by Portal da Câmara (47 percent) and by TV Câmara (46 percent).

THE BRAZILIAN CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES ON TV

In Brazil during the 1990s, television became another target for institutional communication by Congress. In a country where television "appeared and consolidated itself as a private business, a near monopoly directed toward the market" (Renault 2004, 28), new media technology offered Congress and other governmental institutions the opportunity to provide privately owned media with information in an attempt to influence the media's agenda. It also, however, created direct channels for governing officials to talk to the voters and to fight for space in the public arena.

The first legislative channel to operate in Brazil and in Latin America was TV Assembleia in the state of Minas Gerais, on the air since November 1995. TV Senado initiated its operations in 1996 and TV Câmara, in 1998. Their reference was C-Span, the private, nonprofit congressional channel created in 1979 by cable television operators in the United States in 1979, which has one channel transmitting the sessions of each federal legislative house. Brazilian channels were financed by public money, however, and included newscasts, debates, and interviews in their schedules, following the model of the French La Chaîne Parlementaire, created in 1993 (Santos 2006). The goals inscribed in Law 8977/1995, Article 23 (January 6, 1995), allowed the creation of congressional television channels in Brazil. This law stipulated that plenary (or House floor) sessions could be transmitted live, updating the principle of publicity of congressional debate and deliberation to the age of electronic media. This law was implemented and every floor session of the two federal legislative houses can now be seen live by those who have access to cable paid television (or on free satellite and open channels in a few cities).

As the director of Secom points out, the main objective of these new media sources was to avoid commercial media's control of news about Congress, creating a direct channel of communication with citizens of Brazil:

TV Câmara was born in 1998 to give visibility to members of Parliament, to show what the representatives do. . . . Privately owned media do not echo one hundredth of what we do here. So it was the desire to create a relative transparency and to fight against the portrayal of the legislature commonly seen in the mainstream media, to combat, eliminate, or give counterpoints to erroneous portrayals that these media sources created. TV Câmara wasn't born with the idea of creating transparency, however, but to give greater exposure to congressional activities.[5]

The television station operates twenty-four hours daily, seven days a week in the Chamber of Deputies. Aside from transmitting live every session of the floor, TV Câmara also broadcasts, live or on videotape, the meetings and public audiences of the twenty permanent committees, as well as temporary, investigative (Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry or CPIs), or special committees created to evaluate specific laws. The TV schedule includes news, interviews, and debate shows in addition to documentaries and other television formats. The transmission of floor and committee sessions dominates the weekly schedule with almost 28 percent of all transmission time. Debates and interviews take up another 24 percent and newscasts 19 percent. Cultural content and documentaries account for 16 percent and 11 percent of the channel's airtime, respectively. Most of the production is responsibility of the channel's own communication professionals: fifty-four civil servants with university degrees in communications hired through public recruitment processes. The channel also employs some two hundred technicians. Finally, TV Câmara also has some coproductions, especially documentaries.

Table 2 shows in detail the results of the inquiry into the distribution of television genres in the channel schedule, according to the categories adopted by its managers, which differ from the usual categorization used by commercial media. Institutional media, a recent phenomenon in the public arena, still lack specific criteria for examining their specialized schedules. One thing that can easily be seen, however, is the amount of time dedicated to the transmission of sessions, both plenary and in committees.

A viewer survey conducted by the toll-free service of the Chamber of Deputies (Barros, Bernardes, and Lemos, 2011) shows greater interest in programs that highlight the direct participation of the representatives: House floor and committee transmissions, debates, and interviews. This material makes up 74 percent of the public's preferred programming. Of this total, 37.2 percent refer to transmission of floor and committee debates and voting, with equal percentage given to debates and interviews (with representatives) (table 3). The data show that the programing schedule attends to the viewing public's preferences, although it has also been constructed to meet the representatives' interests to promote their congressional activities.

These data contradict the commonsense perception that citizens would not be interested in political activities or in the work of the legislative branch, as discussed elsewhere (Barros, Bernardes, and Lemos 2011, 254). To the contrary: part of the public dedicates time to watching congressional sessions, interviews with

5. Chacon, interview.

Table 2 TV Câmara schedule

Genre	Duration (hours)								Per-centage
	Mon-day	Tues-day	Wednes-day	Thurs-day	Fri-day	Satur-day	Sun-day	Week	
Information	4:00	3:30	3:30	3:45	3:30	7:15	7:00	32:30	19.3
Debates and interviews	9:45	5:45	5:45	7:00	5:45	3:15	4:00	41:15	24.5
Culture	2:30	2:30	1:30	1:30	3:30	8:00	7:00	26:30	15.7
Documentaries	1:45	1:15	2:15	0:45	3:15	3:00	6:00	18:15	10.8
Other	0	0	0	0	0	2:30	0	2:30	1.4
Floor and committee	6:00	11:00	11:00	11:00	8:00	0	0	47:00	27.9
Total	24:00	24:00	24:00	24:00	24:00	24:00	24:00	168:00	100

Source: Primary data collected by the authors, 2010.

Table 3 Types of programming preferred by viewers of TV Câmara

Type of program	Quantity (hours)	Percentage
Floor and committees	4,006	37.2
Debates and interviews	3,998	37.2
News	1,572	14.6
Documentaries	1,181	11
Total	10,757	100

Source: Barros, Bernardes, and Lemos 2011.

representatives, and debates about issues under discussion in Congress. How big is this public? Not huge, to be sure, but not irrelevant either. From January to July 2014, TV Câmara on cable reached 16,977,460 viewers, achieving a medium rating of 0.05 percent. As a reference, during the same period TV Globo, Brazil's biggest open commercial channel, had a rating of 4.25 percent on cable TV.[6] On June 26, 2013, the vote on a controversial legislative proposition, transmitted live by TV Câmara, reached an audience record for the channel of 3.2 percent.[7] In 2011, a poll conducted among TV viewers using satellite dishes (estimated to be some 54.3 million people in Brazil) found that TV Câmara had an average audience of 4.7 million people in the whole country. Another 13 million people declared that they occasionally watched TV Câmara.

After Presidential Decree 5820 was published on June 29, 2006, TV Câmara also began experimental transmissions on open digital channels in São Paulo

6. The numbers of the audience survey cannot be shared publicly due to contractual clauses. In March 2014, a newspaper published the list of channels with the largest audiences on Brazilian cable TV. TV Câmara appeared in twenty-sixth place, ahead of Sony, HBO, and TV Justiça (Feltrin 2014).

7. "Exclusivo: TV Câmara bate recorde de audiência com votação da PEC 37," *Portal 4- O site de todas as emissoras*, June 26, 2013, portal4.wordpress.com/2013/06/26/exclusivo-tv-camara-bate-recorde-de-audiencia-com-votacao-da-pec37/.

(2010) and Brasília (2011). Digital television legislation brought the opportunity to expand the content exhibited and the public reached, using the possibility of multiple transmission and open channels with the potential to reach 20 million people in São Paulo and 1.9 million people in Brasília.[8]

An opinion poll conducted by a specialized firm in 2012 shows the degree of public trust in TV Câmara.[9] The percentage of viewers who always trust (43.38 percent) or mostly trust (16.89 percent) the channel's programs is greater than 60 percent. A considerable number of citizens also sometimes, rarely, or never trust the channel (7.76 percent, 7.31 percent, and 17.81 percent, respectively). There is thus a 32.88 percent rate of distrust among viewers—almost a third of the study's sample.

These numbers call attention to the relevance of institutional trustworthiness as a justification for the use of journalistic credibility as the basis for the Chamber's media sources. According to this argument, credibility is an essential part the media institutions' role in informing the voting public about the actions of their legislature. It also serves to improve Congress's credibility, which is an important aspect of any democratic political regime. This applies directly to the case that we are studying here, given that TV Câmara adopts journalistic practices that seek to confer legitimacy and credibility to the Chamber's information institutions. As one of the journalists we interviewed put it: "It's a complicated thing to run a TV station that competes with other TV stations . . . , but obviously we want a greater audience share and greater public credibility, that is important. A TV channel without credibility and with no audience has no reason to exist."[10]

ONLINE POLITICS

We might state that the development of the Internet and its adoption as a platform for institutional communication further developed publicity strategies that employed television and increased their gains. It is worth remembering that politics has become a mediated phenomenon and this includes congressional representatives' daily activities. To a degree, representatives now operate following the logic of audience democracy, in which the media substitute parliament as the main forum for public debate (Manin 1997). Nadia Urbinati (2013, 10) points to the role that conventional and digital media have played in this transformation, with the Internet in particular "playing an unprecedented supporting role for audience democracy." The Internet makes a new kind of co-presence possible in the political arena, permitting multiple new online fields of activity for spectators, actors, and operators (Ribeiro 2000).

In terms of audience democracy's new regime of visibility, it has become ever more important for politicians and institutions to create information policies. The

generation, processing, and transmission of information and images have become a fundamental source of power (Castells 2003). The Internet and politics have thus become inevitably intertwined, and political institutions now routinely make use of digital resources (Leston-Bandeira 2012; Global Centre for Information and Communication Technologies 2012).

Data about the Chamber of Deputies' communications system must thus be analyzed in light of this context. As a consequence of the burgeoning new digital technologies, another media mechanism was created in 2000: Agência Câmara de Notícias. This department is responsible for publishing journalistic information regarding the Chamber on the Internet. The new service was justified, once again, by appealing to the need to improve the legislature's visibility. Publication of news on the site is done in real time, covering the development of legislative activities such as votes on the House floor, public hearings in committees and meetings of congressional groups.

Data collected by the managers of Secom in July 2014 show numbers and duration of access, number of pieces read in each visit, and other information, as shown in table 4.

Agência Câmara publishes news pieces on every legislative proposition presented by the representatives and offers information about the daily voting schedule, a summary of each week's schedule, consolidated news pieces following votes in real time and special reports on important items in the congressional agenda. Readers can subscribe to a daily digital newsletter, which is distributed by e-mail and links to the most important news, organized by themes chosen by the reader.

Public attention focuses on information directly related to congressional and legislative activities. Data show that the kind of content most frequently read by visitors relates to information regarding bills, the results of voting sessions, and Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry. These views sum up to 59 percent of the total (or 1,847 citizens), followed by general news about the legislative branch (12 percent or 377 citizens), as shown in table 5.

One of the solutions employed to give greater visibility to meetings of the Chamber was the creation of the Web Câmara in October 2009, which transmits legislative events via the Internet. Citizens interested in a given public hearing that is not on the air on TV Câmara or on Rádio Câmara can now follow it in real

Table 4 Agência Câmara access in July 2014

Type of access	
Average of visits per work day in the month	13,874
Number of visits during the month	430,094
Total of individual visitors during the month	348,760
Average length of visit on the website during the month	3 mins. 56 secs.
Average number of news pieces read during each visit	4.6
Visitors that returned to the website that month	34%
Digital newsletter subscribers	63,282

Source: Secretaria de Comunicação da Câmara dos Deputados, July 2014.

time on the website. In general, journalists who produce news pieces for Agência Câmara and other institutional media attend these hearings. In 2013, for example, the Chamber's commissions held 574 public audiences, each with an average of four people invited to give testimony, which works out to some 2,296 occasions of congressional participation by representatives of Brazilian civil society.[11]

Agência Câmara's survey of its readers (Roedel 2010)[12] reveals some relevant data that allow us to deepen our analysis. First of all, the survey allows us to form a better profile of the agency's readers, as we can see in table 6.

Readers identifying as "common citizens" predominate at 57 percent of the total. Following them are "liberal professionals"—lawyers, doctors, and the like—at 11 percent. Journalists are in third place with 10 percent. The rest of the respondents are divided among representatives of associations, federations, and unions (6 percent), government organs (4 percent), private companies (2 percent) and nongovernmental organizations (1 percent). This profile is relatively inclusive, which highlights Agência Câmara's capacity for social inclusion, both in terms of individual readers (common citizens) and also in terms of public and private institutions and organizations. Another interesting point is that 10 percent of the readers are journalists keeping track of congressional coverage. These media professionals are gatekeepers, selecting information in order to distribute it through other media channels. This, of course, shows how the Chamber's media sources end up creating wider coverage for the legislature's activities.

As we can see in table 7, readers appreciate Agência Câmara's broad coverage of legislative activities (26 percent). They also appreciate the rapidity of its online service in terms of keeping up with the news (21 percent), how information is clearly presented and explained (19 percent), the precision and correctness of the information (19 percent), and the depth of the news (10 percent). These criteria are typical of public communication, according to Brandão (2006), especially public journalism in legislative institutions, whose strong point is its contextualized, wide, and well-explained coverage of political issues.

Positive public feedback is one of the things public information systems use in order legitimate themselves, according to Zémor (1995) and this makes the data presented in table 7 highly relevant.

By mapping out the themes of most interest to the readers, this survey also identified floor votes as having the highest approval rating (33 percent), followed by committee votes (24 percent). Public hearings (20 percent) and representatives' speeches on the floor (16 percent) come third and fourth, as shown in table 8.

The data also show that the House floor is the primary stage in the Chamber of Deputies, the focus of greatest congressional visibility, given that it is the apex of the legislature's decision-making power. Readers are also quite interested in debates and decisions in the committees, a legislative arena largely ignored by the commercial press. Public hearings come in third, but they are events that are generally linked to one or another committee agenda, given that they generally

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11. Data furnished by the Departamento de Comissões da Câmara dos Deputados, 2014.
12. Internet survey of 261 readers undertaken in 2010.

Table 5 Content most frequently accessed by Agência Câmara users

Type of content	Number	Percentage
Information about bills, result of voting sessions and Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry (CPIs)	1.847	59
Information about the activities of representatives	323	10
Information about public hearings and seminars promoted in the Chamber of Representatives	73	2
Information about budget, public expenses, and contracts	97	3
General news about Congress	377	12
Parliamentary speeches	312	10
Other	100	3
Total	3.129	100

Source: Primary data collected by the authors, 2014.

Table 6 Agência Câmara readers' profile (150 responses; respondents can indicate more than one answer)

Type of reader	Number	Percentage
Common citizen	150	57
Liberal professional	30	11
Journalist	31	10
Representative of a governmental organ	10	4
Representative of an association, union, or federation	16	6
Private sector company representative	6	2
NGO representative	3	1
Other	24	9
Total	270	100

Source: Roedel 2010.

Table 7 Agência Câmara: reader evaluation (150 responses; respondents can indicate more than one answer)

Positive evaluation	Number	Percentage
Breadth of the news regarding legislative activities	137	26
Rapidity of online news service	109	21
Clear exposition and explanation of the news	99	19
Correct and exact information	99	19
Depth of the news	53	10
Other	25	5
Total	523	100

Source: Roedel 2010.

Table 8 *Type of information that most interests Agência Câmara's readers*

Type of information	Number	Percentage
Floor votes	223	33
Committee votes	161	24
Public hearings	136	20
Speeches on the floor by representatives	106	16
Other	40	6
Total	666	100

Source: Roedel 2010.

contain debates promoted by these decision-making bodies. Hearings are understood to be a political mechanism whereby Congress interacts with civil society organizations and movements, as well as scientists and authorities from other political spheres, particularly specialists and community leaders. These debates seek to offer congressional representatives support in their activities as presidents of committees and authors or supporters of bills. They thus are an informational activity for members of Congress (Santos and Almeida 2005).

Table 8 calls attention to one of legislative media's functions: its role as a counterpoint to privately owned media. According to this perspective, Internet coverage complements the mainstream media in reporting congressional activities, compensating for the deficiencies of privately owned media, which tend to focus on scandals, gaffes, and leaks. Because of this, mainstream, privately owned media tend to treat Congress in an episodic and fragmented fashion. The discourses of the employees and managers of the congressional media sources thus focus on how the mainstream media has criteria of news selection, dramatization, coverage, and "spin," which contribute to reinforcing Congress's negative image. Furthermore, it is argued that the mainstream media rarely offer up incisive critique of the political process or an invitation for the public to participate in it. In fact, the mainstream media seem to reduce the public's interest in politics (Barros, Bernardes, and Rodrigues 2014).

This view of the private media, as we argued above, is the foundation of the institutional communication systems built by the legislative branch in Brazil. If information was the first tool adopted by those systems and is still the most used, the strategies employed by the Chamber of Deputies have advanced to include interaction technologies. Besides publishing information about legislative activities, Agência Câmara also offers a series of tools developed to foster engagement with society. Table 9 lists these digital mechanisms, which aim to allow contact with users.

Periodically, the data collected in polls and online conversations (chats) are forwarded to the committees where issues are being discussed. From 2005 to April 2014, 168 polls were conducted. In April 2014, 27 polls were active, with a total of 1,360,540 votes. The poll on gay marriage, for instance, got some 19,268 votes; affirmative action quotas in the university received 12,850 votes. The poll on the revocation of the gun control bill got 126,870 votes; a bill about criminal investiga-

Table 9 *Agência Câmara: digital mechanisms for public contact and feedback*

Mechanism	Goals
Fale Conosco (contact service via e-mail)	Receive criticisms, suggestions, and commentary about the news agency's content
Polls about specific themes	Collect citizen opinions regarding themes that are of interest to the legislature
Polls in every news piece about bills	Collect citizen opinions about bills
Chats	Permit online debates between bills' sponsors and interested citizens
Readers' comments about news pieces	These are published and forwarded to the representatives through an automatic link in their Internet pages
Virtual public audiences	Permit public participation in debates during public audiences

Source: Information given to the authors by Agência Câmara.

tions got 230,386 in 2013; but the most voted poll as of April 23, 2014, with 813,483 votes, was in regard to the concept of the family in Brazil's Federal Family Law. It is interesting to note here that the number of votes has basically increased in every poll since 2005; the first poll had only 2,575 votes. Analyzing the mentions of these polls in the Internet (in news websites, institutional websites, and social media), we notice that interest groups have started encouraging participation as a means to advocate their positions.

The number of chats, generally conducted with the participation of representatives acting as bill sponsors, totaled sixty-three in April 2014. In December of 2013, video chats began to be televised and by April 23, 2014, the number of video chats had risen to fourteen. The monthly average number of comments in the chats in 2013 was 1,042. The monthly average of comments for news pieces was 2,500. Thirty opinions, on average, are forwarded daily to the representatives. In 2014, Agência Câmara registered an average of 13,000 daily hits.

Social media have also been used by Agência Câmara and by TV Câmara to interact with their public. Both media sources have Twitter and Facebook profiles. Table 10 shows the data related to social media up to April 22, 2014. On that date, Agência Câmara was in the first place among the Chamber of Deputies' media sources, with 85,400 followers on Twitter and 33,177 on Facebook. TV Câmara was the second most popular of the Chamber's media sources, with 46,058 followers on Twitter and 10,085 followers on Facebook.

CONCLUSIONS: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC MEDIA

The data discussed above allow us to ask some questions about the roles played by TV Câmara and Agência Câmara. First of all, we should ask if the efforts and investments of these institutions effectively contribute to promoting public debate, advancing accountability, and fostering democracy. Do these media sources offer information that is really of interest to the public and that is independent,

Table 10 Chamber of Deputies' social media profile

Media source	Twitter followers	Facebook followers
Agência Câmara	85,400	33,177
TV Câmara	46,058	10,085
Rádio Câmara	24,500	1,171
Plenarinho (children's website)	1,375	2,333
Public Relations	2,234	—
e-Democracy	3,222	6,561
TOTAL	162,789	52,327

Source: Barros, Bernardes, and Rodrigues 2014.

different, more complete, and more accessible than that produced by privately owned media? If these questions could be answered in the affirmative, it would justify the congressional news media's existence and their identification as the public media they claim to be.

A decade after their creation, the new government communication media began to be evaluated by researchers and by the institutions themselves, through academic and professional initiatives, as the data presented in this article exemplifies. In October 2006 the Inter-Parliamentary Union promoted the first "Conference on Parliaments, Parliamentary TV Channels, and Public Broadcasters" in Geneva, with 180 participants from seventy-eight countries (International Parliamentary Union 2006). In Brazil, congressional communication media sources created the Association of Legislative Television and Radio (ASTRAL) in 2003. A small but growing number of papers and dissertations in academic publications and programs are also being produced. A common point in these studies is the perception that institutional communication media introduce noteworthy changes in the legislative process itself, such as providing a greater presence of representatives in floor and committees, more and longer speeches, or the simple concern about oratory and look adequate to electronic media (Cook 1989 and 2004; Santos 2005).

Researchers have also pointed out that congressional media outlets "have broken the monopoly of commercial media in the definition of public agendas" (Santos 2005, 23), bringing into the homes of citizens detailed, real-time information about the functioning of the legislature. Journalists cite speeches that they watch on the congressional channels: this would not be possible if public media did not exist and transmit the sessions live (Renault 2004, 132). Francisco Sant'anna (2006) found that nine out of ten private media journalists covering the Brazilian Congress think it is possible to inform themselves about the facts they will write about by using the radio and television transmissions of Senate sessions. Six out of ten use other information produced by Senate media outlets. Commercial channels regularly use freely distributed images of those sessions. They even transmit live depositions to Parliamentary Committees of Inquiry, often enough that it is being questioned whether or not these meetings have been transformed into sensationalist reality shows. On the other hand, says Santos (2005), the work of the permanent congressional committees and discussions of many bills have

also begun to be portrayed by private media, due to the material offered by institutional sources. All of these changes were instigated by congressional media such as TV Câmara and Agência Câmara, and they can be seen as contributing to widening the public's knowledge of citizens about legislative activities and enlarging the space for public debate.

Despite the democratic potential of these institutions, however, some analysts point to difficulties in these sources' practice of public communication. Márcia Jardim (2006) concludes that the majority of the six Latin American congressional channels studied have an institutional (and not independent) management model. Their directors are nominated by the parliamentary body itself and they work without the control of editorial councils. Access is also limited by the fact that cable television is a paid service, although the Internet is used more and more these days. Nevertheless, Jardim believes that live and unedited transmission of floor and committee sessions on the majority of these congressional channels can promote accountability, since it shows the public how legislatures actually work. Journalism, debates, documentaries, and interviews also contribute to informing the public and promote accountability. In the same vein, Sant'anna (2006) states that debate and interview programs offer an important opportunity for balancing commercial media's lack of diversity and the absence of editorial opinion regarding legislative news, since the language adopted by parliamentary media (in their search for credibility) tends to be an objective reporting of facts, without personal analysis, even if it takes in the ideological diversity existing in Congress.

Our research group has compared the news areas of the websites of the Brazilian and the Argentinean Chambers of Deputies.[13] Using the categories multimedia characteristics, interactivity, hypertextuality, personalization, memory, and continuous updating (Palácios 2002), we discovered an important difference between the two websites. The Brazilian site uses information resources far more intensively, letting Internet users navigate, interact, update, and create archives for searches. The result is potentially democratizing.

More completely, Sérgio Braga (2007) analyzed 195 items in eighteen South American legislative websites in order to create an "informatization index" that shows how parliaments have advanced in their use of information and communication technologies so as to publicize their activities and interact with citizens. He concludes that the sites of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, the Peruvian Congress, the Brazilian Senate, and the Venezuelan Congress are the most advanced in Latin America and that they help democracies in consolidation to achieve greater transparency, even if they are not yet effective participation tools.

The data presented above lead us to conclude that accountability is the main purpose of TV Câmara and of Agência Câmara, as with other institutional legislative media. Both the television channel and the news agency focus on information about legislative agendas and the political process, materialized in their daily activities. This regular offer of information contributes to extending political transparency, an objective of public communication (Zémor 1995; Brandão 2006;

13. Câmara dos Deputados, www.camara.gov.br; Honorable Cámara de Diputados de la Nación, www.diputados.gov.ar.

Jardim 2006). In conjunction with this view, our findings allow us to emphasize the capacity of new media and information technologies to promote the opening up of political institutions and the adoption of more democratic practices (Aterton 1987; Bimber 1999).

Informational accountability seems to be the most relevant function of the two media sources analyzed here, with some particular emphases. Both the TV channel and the news agency prioritize information regarding the legislative agenda and the political process. TV Câmara's main feature is the live transmission of floor and committee sessions. The TV channel also transmits congressional representatives' opinions and analysis, with debate and interview programs that take up almost a quarter (24.5 percent) of its programming schedule. The TV channel also provides cultural programs (15.7 percent) and documentaries (10.8 percent); this can be explained by the characteristics of Brazilian television system, which is mostly commercial and gives little space to this kind of programming.

The focus of Agência Câmara is also on providing information, even more rigorously than the TV channel, given that the Agência does not offer interviews, debates, or cultural content. For its part, however, the news agency incorporates the logic of demand, adjusting its production according to the needs of its readers. One example of this is the *boletim eletrônico* (electronic newsletter), where citizens can choose which legislative themes they want to receive news about through e-mail messages.

The data regarding viewing/reading public preferences indicate a convergence between the perspectives of the two institutions and the interests of their public. Certainly, this is a public with a highly unique social-demographic profile, with a greater interest in politics than most Brazilians. Further and more detailed studies are needed in order to analyze these viewers and readers.

We can also reach the conclusion that the Agência is socially more porous than the TV station, given that the Internet allows the Agência a wider variety of mechanisms to interact with its public. We can say that Agência Câmara's role thus goes beyond informational accountability, offering tools so that citizens can participate in the legislative process and express their opinions through polls, chat rooms frequented by representatives, commentary on published news, and live transmission of sessions via the Internet. This difference is also reflected in the two institutions' social media profile: while Agência Câmara has 85,400 followers on Twitter and 33,177 on Facebook, TV Câmara has 46,058 followers on Twitter and only 10,085 on Facebook.

In spite of these differences, from the point of view of accountability, both institutions act strategically by prioritizing information regarding legislative work in order to build public trust in Congress. One example of this can be seen in TV Câmara's live transmissions of floor and committee sessions and of Agência Câmara's following House votes in real time.

One point that calls out for attention is the care that both institutions take in presenting the news in an attractive, conventional, and accessible format—certainly a strategy that uses journalism's social credibility in order to legitimize the programs of the congressional media sources. This credibility is essential to the sources' goal of informing the population at large about the legislature and

how it functions, thus increasing Congress's legitimacy and that of Brazilian democracy in general.

It is worth pointing out that what the Chamber's media sources publicize is how representatives think, what they do, and what they discuss while in Congress in Brasília. Transparency and accountability do not take into account the representatives' activities with their political allies and fronts or what they do at home among their electorate. What deputies do in their states of origin is not part of the institutional communication agenda of the Chamber of Deputies. If it is disclosed, and it probably is, it is done by individual cabinet's communication officers, in other formats and media. From the point of view of Congress's communication institutions, this approach ends up distancing the representatives from the voters and, at the same time, makes it harder for citizens to perceive the bases of their representatives' political activity in TV Câmara and Agenda Câmara programs. This aspect also requires further elucidation. It is especially relevant considering Brazil's proportional system for the election of representatives, which makes the concept of constituency certainly more complex.

Another consequence of the focus on accountability is the emphasis on the legislative process itself: the presenting of bills, amendments, projects, and votes, as well as the political negotiations inherent in these. Once a law is passed, it ceases to be news in congressional media sources, as if the attention paid to the parliamentary activity in and of itself is all that needs to be shown, and not, say, the effects of the law or its social insertion in the daily lives of the population. The congressional news sources focus on the authority behind law making and the legislative process but do not look at the testimonies of the citizens whom the law will affect.

Finally, we must also take into account the limited reach of these media sources. We cannot honestly say, for example, that the information they produce is available to all members of society. A large part of the Brazilian populace continues not to have access to the information produced by Congress. Summing up, there are limitations on both the reach of this information and the way in which it is framed. The promotion of a wider and deeper accountability dialogue between the perspectives of lawmakers and those of the citizens they represent continues to be a challenge facing the two media institutions analyzed here.

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