

Reflections upon racism in the context of Brazilian mass media reform

by Regina dos Santos. First published in *Media Development* 1/2004.

Communication media in Brazil - TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and periodicals in general, and all the media including the most recent phenomenon, which is the Internet - reproduce stereotypes solidly ingrained in the national mentality. Members of the African-descended population are kept from watching themselves positively reflected in the media mirror and whenever they are shown their image is presented with traits built upon racial prejudice ideals, reinforcing distorted and stereotyped images of our reality. This perverse situation of racism and discrimination, both within and from the media, especially on TV, reflects not only historical and psychological aspects of racist practices in Brazilian society, but is also the result of a series of economical and political elements which have privileged only non-blacks in every section of economic, political, and social life in the country in the last decades.

Awareness of this reality raises debate and reflection not only on the role of the media in the processes of social inclusion and exclusion in Brazil, but also on rethinking the concession and distribution structures of the mass media and the public and private incentives of organized participation in civil society. Radio and TV concessions were freely and politically distributed in Brazil up to the military government, ignoring simple objectives such as democracy, which allowed favouritism for political and economic groupings of a single race: the white one. After the exception of the military government and fifteen more years of a 'transition' to democracy, it is impossible to recognize the political will of some social sectors in Brazil to accomplish acts of change. On the contrary, the majority of the population has been manipulated by media that are more and more 'edited', subliminal, and with strong racial and sexist content. This does not reflect the regional and local differences of a complex country but conforms to the imperially-minded will of a white minority which rules the mass media.

In this context, questioning the concession process of these media in Brazil becomes necessary. Nowadays, the concession system, submitted to political (through National Congress legal channels) and economic criteria (edicts regarding bidding), immediately excludes any possibility of access by so-called 'minorities' (which in Brazil actually constitute the majority) to be part of this process. Now, it is a well known fact that the great excluded mass in our country unfortunately is hostage to democratic fallaciousness, especially of racial democracy since even though these people are directly responsible for electing most politicians in all levels of government, they cannot count on them to defend their interests and political demands – which might actually turn parliament into a mirror of the will of the majority.

On the contrary, the majority elects parliament members who, in spite of a few exceptions, act out of self-interest or in the interests of a sole majority: the white one. That's what happens in the approval of TV channel concessions, which up to now have been the privilege of some parliament members' family and recently of groups connected to Christian churches. The Catholic Church has received a gift from President Lula who signed a TV concession which will allow the creation of a national Catholic TV transmission network. That's amazing! What about concessions for Candomblé (a religion

introduced to Brazil by African slaves) ?

How long will the black population in this country have their claims and demands treated so indifferently? With regard to communication media, the black community is capable of managing communication structures in the country. But the black community is always neglected when it comes to the way the concession process takes place and the non-existence of budgetary endowments, which are exclusively directed to big private sector communication groups or chains, has made the 'communication empire' an instrument of violence, sexism, prostitution, and intolerance against African religions (among other immoderate biases of such a questionable empire).

Media reform needs

We must emphasize that the alternative mass media (community radio and TV stations), especially those foreseen in post-dictatorship communication legislation in Brazil, need structural and regulatory changes. For example, in the current set-up, community TV structures are in the hands of local political groups which, with rare exceptions, have turned the space they have in cable TV into real 'political stages' for certain perpetual local or regional election candidates. In fact it is very difficult for the community to provide infrastructure to produce and broadcast programmes on community TV channels. Therefore, it is necessary for community radio and TV concessions and concessions in general to strengthen democracy by allowing communities effectively to produce open, public and community radio and TV. Only in this way will we guarantee the existence of democratic instruments of mass communication in Brazil.

In this article we could not avoid mentioning community TV and radio systems. However, the main object of our analysis, questioning and controversy, is the open TV system, that is the TV that uses satellites for data transmission having, therefore, a wider reach. We have focused our reflections upon this system because it reaches more than 90% of houses and families in the country and because of the role it consequently plays in opinion formation, reinforcing prejudice and stereotypes engrained in the national collective unconsciousness. The reach and power of these media make us question the current concession structure as well as its concentration in the hands of approximately 12 families. Concentration has made democracy in Brazil more vulnerable.

The debate over mass media concentration – especially TV – and the democratisation of this sector is a growing imperative in Brazilian society, without which the implementation of political measures to promote socially inclusive and sustainable development is endangered. Civil society has searched for alternatives to force mass communication media – community radio and TV stations - to ally themselves to promoting democracy and cultural development. *Sociedade de Cultura Dombali* (Dombali Cultural Society) has not made every effort to making the Brazilian government, as well as international organizations such as the UN, aware of this concentrating, therefore excluding, reality of communication media in Brazil.

Such efforts have included the dissemination of documents and proposals so that we may be able to overcome this excluding reality whose main victims are the black population in Brazil. These efforts, although meaningful, must be expanded and brought up in a broader discussion and reflection scenario. This means public and private radio and TV stations

that are able to reach the greatest part of the Brazilian population, including urban centres, suburbs and the most distant places in the country.

Take, for instance, what happens in the United States, Canada and South Africa, obviously in a different way in each country. Brazil's mass media must follow this model in becoming partners in the promotion of democracy and human rights. In these countries structures have been created to do that. This happens not only because of community access to mass communication structures, minority political organization and participation mechanisms related to private and political communication structures, but especially because of budgetary endowments which guarantee the professional production and broadcasting of community programmes.

In South Africa, communication professionals use the technical and financial public TV structure to produce programmes such as soap operas, news and entertainment programmes, and other cultural productions. We must also remember the Canadian example, which guarantees ethnic groups communication concessions. This legislation effectively contributes to access by previously excluded communities to Canadian media, such as First Peoples, who now own APTN channel (Aboriginal Peoples Television Network).

After some years of producing and broadcasting the TV programme *Afirmção* (Affirmation), *Sociedade de Cultura Dombali* has been asking institutions such as *TV Cultura* (Culture TV) in São Paulo and *TVE* in Rio de Janeiro to let us make use of their existing structures – including openings in programme schedules, professionals, studios and equipment – for the production and broadcasting of videos and TV programmes. Unfortunately, the bureaucratic structure, and many times greed and disbelief, have not yet allowed such a simple and democratically spirited practice.

Advocacy on exclusion

There is a need to promote debate about the historical picture of black and African-descent exclusion in the media with legislators, in Municipal Chambers, State Legislative Assemblies, House of Representatives in Brasilia and in the Federal Senate as well as with public and private TV stations, including community TV stations. The debate must also involve civil society, communication professionals, and third sector organizations. We are convinced of this need based on the experiences mentioned above and considering the benefits that democracy, the representation with dignity of the black population in the media, as well as the establishment of political concessions to this population will bring to the social, economic, and cultural development of Brazil.

Our expectation is for these actions to result not only in reflection upon the historical picture of black and African-descent exclusion in the media, but mostly for us to be able to create radio and TV concession mechanisms in a way that brings equity to this population. Although constituting 50% of the Brazilian population and having relevantly contributed to the building of the country, such people have not left out of the historical creating, structuring, conceding, and developing processes of these communication and telecommunication structures. This is the opposite of what happened with other ethnic groups, which nowadays own 100% of communication structures in Brazil.

This system weakens democracy as long as it holds the black and African-descent population hostage to the dictatorship imposed by the media. But we all know of the ample racist sectors which dominate society – which still dwell in a colonial administrative structure, based on excluding and exploiting social relations. It is not in the interests of the dominating sectors for the black population, which constitutes the basis of the social pyramid, to get involved and organized. The Brazilian government, the Ministry of Communications, the National Congress, public and private communication companies, and Brazilian Television keep committing the crime of exclusion and denial against a population that has consolidated with their blood, sweat and tears the economic structures of Brazil. They continue to deny the presence and dignified representation of this population in the media and to block access to communication structures through political and economic constraints.

Unfortunately, hypocrisy and racism underlie the cordial relations between blacks and whites in the country, aggravated by an air of indifference by the general non-black population in relation to the countless denunciations by black movement representatives and other organized segments of the community, of the repeated racist and discriminatory situations to which they are submitted in the media. Why have only the victims of racism in the media spoken against what happens daily on Brazilian Television? Where are our 'allies' and friends? The answer is simple: they are among the millions who remain silent in the face of the crimes committed against the black population in all types of media. After all, as the proverb goes: 'Silence gives consent'.

Changing embedded structures

The public concession model of media in Brazil is the same as in the period of dictatorship, which privileged certain families with concessions and economic investments, allowing media concentration and the hindering of democracy by putting the communication structure at the service of a dictatorial State (1964 - 1985) and of a few families. This structure only serves the dominant interests, freedom-of-thought-limiting and freedom-of-action-limiting interests of the Brazilian population as a whole. It also pandered to the cultural industry in a world that, living the Cold War scenario, was trying to keep safe the capitalist ideological domination, then predominant in totalitarian societies in Latin America.

An alarming fact is that, when the period of military dictatorship was over, this structure was not questioned but, on the contrary, was maintained. Economic and social groups which benefited from this media distribution policy were then able to extend their power in the sector while they sought new concessions, which this time included new structures and communication technologies like cable TV, fixed, cellular, and satellite telephone systems, and a data transmission structure through computer technologies.

The general media in the country – TV, radio, billboards, newspapers, magazines and other means of communication, including school books – have, to a large extent, contributed to reinforcing elements of exclusion and racial discrimination. They persistently reproduce terms and discriminating situations which reinforce stereotypes in the Brazilian population's imagination. Favouring racism and discrimination, the present concentration and media monopoly reveals the urgent imperative of changing this terrible trend of political concessions in Brazil.

Nowadays, the concession policy is based on political and economic criteria, which do not guarantee the necessary democracy and equity that is fundamental for the communication sector to become an ally of social development. The challenge to remedy this is posed to Brazilian society as a whole. Besides reflecting and making evident the exclusive and racist structure of Brazilian media and the national political scene, both sides must sit down together to discuss reform. It's that simple.

Notes

1. Especially during the process of the III Worldwide Conference Against Racism and during II PrepCom for the World Summit on the Information Society.

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