

Self-Censorship and Accountability: Brazil's Evolving Media Landscape

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An Interview with Amalia Perez
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Fabiano Maisonnave is a senior reporter and editorial writer for Folha de S. Paulo, Brazil's largest newspaper, and the 2016 Knight Latin American Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. Since 2012, he has covered some of the country's most important stories, from land conflicts in the Amazon to the 2014 presidential election. Previously, Maisonnave worked as the newspaper's correspondent in Washington, Caracas, and Beijing. He has reported from 30 countries on events including the Haitian earthquake and China's leadership change. A former Fulbright scholar, he holds a master's degree in history from the University of Connecticut. His research was on Afro-Brazilian immigrants in the United States.

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: There has been a mass exodus in Brazil from the traditional media to the nontraditional, start-up media. Since this process has lately become relatively ubiquitous worldwide, what factors specific to Brazil might explain this shift? What advantages does this new subset of news production have over its traditional counterparts, such as your employer, the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*?

Fabiano Maisonnave: *Folha*, as every other newspaper in Brazil and most of the newspapers in the Western world, has been in crisis ever since the Internet became such a platform for news distribution. Brazil is currently suffering both from this newspaper crisis and an economic crisis, so the toll has been greater here than in several other countries in Latin America. All three of Brazil's main newspapers have been shrinking considerably in both staff and in the scope of

their coverage. There have consequently been a lot of layoffs at *Folha*. Moreover, I used to be a correspondent in Beijing for *Folha*, and other Brazilian newspapers had dispatches there, but all of them, including *Folha's*, have since closed. This is a shame, because China is Brazil's main trade partner. The coverage is shrinking, friends and colleagues are losing jobs, and they have to choose whether to change careers or take on new things. Many of them have bravely started new projects. This movement towards new, nontraditional news production happens in the United States, too—the *Marshall Project*, the *Huffington Post*—but in Brazil, the readership of both traditional and nontraditional news is much smaller, despite the fact that we are a country of 200 million people. So, these new outlets have to compete in a very narrow market for news production. Also, in Brazil, the funding for these new media outlets comes from U.S.-based organizations such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Foundation. This new sector of Brazilian news production is thus dependent on foreign money.

Journal: A notable consequence of shrinking news production has been the decline in coverage of Brazil's Amazon basin. Do you think that the rise of this nontraditional, independent news actor will fill this gap in news coverage?

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the whole region, which is impossible. They are trying to cover stories about indigenous populations because they can't cover crime or the political daily life of the region. Instead, the local media, which is problematic for several reasons, controls the news production of these topics. Since the newspapers are very weak, we don't have a consistent readership. Television news is the main

source of news in the rural Amazonian region. Television depends on government concessions. People who own television channels and control their content are either politicians, businessmen linked to politicians, local governments, or churches. Politicians control more than half of the television news outlets in the Amazon. These people have no interest in quality journalism: their main interests are to get elected and to attack the opposition. As the national news-

papers shrink in presence, we know less and less about what is happening in the region, and that's a big, big problem.

Journal: Can social media potentially mitigate this crisis and fill a role to diffuse information?

Maisonnave: Well, if there's a video of a police shooting on Facebook, everyone can see it, but that's more recording than actual journalism. Professional journalists are the ones who check facts, hear all involved in a story, have narration skills. People might feel more under surveillance because everyone has a smartphone, but that's not journalism. Journalism is to go after the facts, investigate, and maintain a balanced perspective on what is happening. Social media cannot do that.

Journal: You make an important distinction between journalism and the diffusion of news. Speaking of investigative journalism, what do you think has made Brazil such a dangerous place for journalists?

Maisonnave: Brazil is a dangerous place for everyone, and it is even more dangerous for black people. About 80 percent of police killings are of black people. There have been some murders of journalists of late, but they're mostly journalists in the countryside who tend to fall into political fights. In the countryside, they either side with one party or the other. That, of course, doesn't justify their being killed, but it does mean that they are in this polarized, partisan, unprofessional environment. Many of them try do a very good job but are seriously constricted by this environment. I'll give you an example of when I was seriously threatened in 2001. I was working for *Folha* in the countryside, and I was uncovering a corruption scandal that involved tax payments. During the investigation, a lawyer told me there was a plot to kill me. I had to leave the countryside and go back to São Paulo. In Campo Grande, Edgar Pereira—the owner of the weekly “Boca do Povo,” the only local publication which reproduced my story—was shot dead weeks later.

Journal: Is this a problem of democracy? If there were a more thriving democratic mechanism of rule of law, for example, or a commitment to reforming the criminal justice system, could that not only save people, but also preserve quality investigative journalism?

Maisonnave: It is certainly a problem of public security. In some places, the violence is overwhelming. It affects everybody. Seventy percent of all the drugs that go through Brazil traverse the place where I lived when I was threatened in 2001. It borders Bolivia, which provides us with cocaine, and Paraguay, which provides us with marijuana. Brazil is the second largest consumer of cocaine in the world, behind the United States, so it's a huge market. I stayed there as a journalist for roughly two years, and I never dared to publish a story about drugs. It would be too dangerous for my family. Even a political story would be too dangerous. There are just some places where you can't cover all the stories you would want to. The perception and threat of violence cause a lot of self-censorship.

Journal: Does the systemic lack of coverage about the most dire phenomena have ramifications for policy? Can journalism play a role in galvanizing the formulation of policy?

Maisonnave: Journalism certainly could have a role in checking the power, surveilling, and breaking stories, but that never happens in the countryside. It's a big flaw of our democracy that we don't have widespread quality journalism. If you see the free press index that Reporters Without Borders compiles, Brazil is ranked 99th out of 180 countries. It's a very bad ranking. This certainly involves the rampant violence and the lack of coverage.

Journal: And Mexico is right up there with Brazil in terms of rankings. Have you ever done any work there?

Maisonnave: Yes, it is worse there, but only marginally. But it's not foreign journalists who are under threat. The people getting killed in Mexico are Mexicans. It's a very hard environment, again, to work in. Venezuela is also plagued by these problems, mostly because of the way the government deals with the press. Recently, after a long campaign of political and economic pressure, the government has taken control of several media outlets and turned them into pro-government entities, such as Globovisión TV and *El Universal* daily.

Journal: In conjunction, these countries would indicate that the presence of drugs, government policy toward news production, and the quality of democracy decisively determine the character and condition of journalism and news.

Maisonnavé: Yes, although each country has different variations of these problems. Mexico's biggest problem is drug trafficking and lack of rule of law; Brazil's is the government policy towards media. I'll give an example. *Folha's* daily circulation is around 300,000, but the primetime television news has a viewership of about 60 million people. So television dominates the news environment. And, like I said before, if you want to open up a television outlet you have to get a concession from the government. And that is a very politicized concession, which is why, in the Amazon, you see all these politicians wanting their own television stations. This happens across other states as well. The first two presidents after the military dictatorship, José Sarney and Fernando Collor, both have global television affiliates in their states. Coincidence or not, Sarney is from Maranhão, the poorest state in the country, and Collor, who was impeached in 1992, is from the second poorest state.

Journal: How has it been under the current president Dilma Rousseff, in relation to her predecessors?

Maisonnavé: Well, Dilma and the former president Lula da Silva didn't try hard enough to change these rules and democratize. They instead tried to maintain good relations with Globo and other TV channels in order to have some good coverage. It was more about personal relations than policy change, unfortunately. 