

Webs and plots between politics and media in the fight against corruption in Brazil: the *Lava Jato* case

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Abstract

This article proposes an interdisciplinary study of Sociology, Political Science, Law and Social Communication, analyzing how was the relationship between media, politics and Justice in the Brazilian fight against corruption during the *Lava Jato* operation (2014-2021). Our goal is to discuss how media contributed to construct and deconstruct corruption narratives, influencing the public opinion and the political field. We applied a descriptive and analytical method that comprises data collection and literature review. The results found indicate that media was the main tool for disseminating the operation's results, inserting the authorities responsible for the investigations and sentences in legal proceedings into the political scenario. The leading role assumed by public agents and institutions through media was able to direct public opinion against the politicians involved, influencing the outcome of the 2018 elections. On the other hand, in the context of dissemination of political media scandals, the wide media coverage of the corruption scandals investigated by *Lava Jato* operation was responsible for overshadowing society's perception of other problems in the country, in a similar way to what occurred in other countries.

Keywords

Lava Jato operation; sociology of law; political science; social communication; media

1 Introduction

This article proposes a discussion regarding the fight against corruption in Brazil over recent years, especially during the *Lava Jato* operation. To examine this issue, we investigated the role of media, its influence on directing public opinion and its repercussion on the political field in Brazil, also comparing it to other experiences, such as the Italian one.

Brazil is marked by a long tradition of patrimonialism, characterized by a historical unclear distinction between public and private interests (Faoro, 1958). This sociopolitical configuration has been creating a conducive setting for corruption, providing the emergence of mega-operations such as *Lava Jato*, that confront these practices directly. As Faoro (1958) points out, Brazilian patrimonialism shapes the country's political and economic structure, serving as a basis for the State capture by private interest. As Maria Alice Costa and Elaine Borin (2018, p. 140, our translation) say, “[...] patrimonialism would represent, by Faoro's approach, the cultural aspect from Brazilian State that the historical and political contexts of society have”.

In that context, *Lava Jato* operation started in 2014 and lasted almost seven years. Its investigations were conducted by task forces, including Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF¹) and Federal Police (PF²). The investigations revealed a huge corruption scheme in the Brazilian oil company Petrobras. Several appointments to high-ranking positions and directorships were based on political relationships. People appointed were benefited by frauds on bidding processes. Other companies, mostly contractors, organized themselves into cartels and distributed the contracts signed by the state-owned company among themselves, frustrating the competitive nature that should guide the choices of companies in such bids. As there was no actual competition, overpriced contracts were drawn up for the services executed. The origin of the extra amount paid to contractors was disguised, generally through shell and consulting companies, being passed on as bribe to Petrobras' employees, money-changers, politicians and parties that used it illegally in political campaigns in the 2010 elections.

Furthermore, the same *modus operandi* of cartelization in bidding processes and overbilling had been applied to large work contracts carried out by the state government of Rio de Janeiro and by other companies as Eletronuclear. Throughout the investigations, *Lava*

¹ MPF is the acronym in Portuguese that refers to Ministério Público Federal (Federal Public Prosecutor's Office).

² PF is the acronym in Portuguese that refers to Polícia Federal (Federal Police).

Jato also revealed corruption schemes applied to other areas, such as health and public transport.

When covering corruption news, “[...] media play a vital role in the debate on formulating the public policy agenda” (Costa; Coelho, 2023, p. 60). *Lava Jato’s* coverage exemplified that phenomenon when projecting corruption as the main problem of Brazilian society, while other issues of political and social relevance were marginalized.

In this regard, the question that guides this research is: what was the role of media in the construction and deconstruction of *Lava Jato’s* narratives, shaping public opinion and influencing political and judicial dynamics? The main objective of this article is to analyze how Brazilian media worked towards *Lava Jato* operation and how it influenced the public perception on the Brazilian political field. Our specific objectives include: (a) examining the media framing of the main actors involved in the operation (judges, prosecutors and politicians); (b) evaluating the impact of media coverage on public opinion; (c) comparing media coverage in different stages of *Lava Jato*, including the period of its legitimization and subsequent political questioning.

The methodology adopted consists of a qualitative content analysis of journalistic sources and court documents related to the operation, complemented by an interdisciplinary bibliographic review from Social Communication, Political Science, Sociology and Law.

2 Webs and plots between *Lava Jato* and politics

Some authors point out that there was in Brazil “[...] a kind of ‘italianization’ from the institutional point of view and from the judicialization strategy of the fight against corruption in the ordinary instance that caused an impact on politics as in Italy” (Kerche, 2018, p. 259, our translation).

In Italy, several traditional political parties had lost strength due to the “delegitimation of the political class” accentuated by the arrests and investigations of *Mani Pulite*. Thus, “[...] the delegitimization of the political class provided an impetus to corruption investigations and it resulted in the strengthening of the [own] process of delegitimation” (Moro, 2004, p. 57, our translation).

Furthermore, the changes occurred in Italy’s political party system as a result of *Mani Pulite* led to “[...] a profound disruption – in some cases, [...] a real liquefaction – of all areas of government” (Vannucci, 2020, p. 21-22, our translation). Comparing to the 1992 Italian elections, when traditional parties obtained more than 50% of the total votes, in the following

years such parties practically disappeared. According to Vannucci (2020, p. 21-22, our translation), “[...] these parties surrendered almost unconditionally to the action of the magistrates”. On the other hand, new parties emerged, such as Berlusconi’s Forza Italia in 1994.

A similar process took place in Brazil as a result of *Lava Jato* operation. Owing to the involvement of several politicians from Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT³) in corruption scandals at Petrobras, the left-wing political parties lost strength in the 2018 elections, paving the way for the political polarization of society and contributing to the victory of right-wing politic Jair Bolsonaro. His supporters propagated an anti-corruption speech that helped him to defeat his main opponent, PT’s candidate Fernando Haddad.

Concerning the institutional design of the agency responsible for fighting against corruption, the Italian case also had similarities and differences from the Brazilian one. In Brazil, the Public Prosecutor’s Office has autonomy vis-à-vis the government, and its members are not hierarchically subordinated to political authorities. Unlike in Brazil, the Italian Public Prosecutor’s Office was part of the Judiciary Branch. In Italy, “[...] the investigations, prosecution and judgment bodies are confused, in an institutional model in which high doses of discretion and autonomy are not limited by external accountability mechanisms” (Kerche, 2018, p. 273, our translation).

Although the independence granted to Public Prosecutor’s Office by the Brazilian Constitution, its prerogative to carry out criminal investigations and some changes in legislation consolidated an institutional design that allowed a wide independent action from its members around the country, especially using a precious tactic during the *Lava Jato’s* investigations: the award-winning collaborations, a means of obtaining evidence similar to the plea bargain, but based on the reporting of crimes of other persons⁴ or companies⁵. Through that agreements, and taking advantage of considerable autonomy, Brazilian prosecutors were able to negotiate lesser sentences with accused people in both civil and criminal matters (Kerche, 2018).

However, the wide use of these agreements throughout the operation was criticized by some studies. Faria (2021) addressed the consequences of this method in the Brazilian law, indicating that its great repercussion in recent years (for instance, amid *Lava Jato*) is related to the prominence that public prosecutors have gained on account of their freedom of

³ PT is the acronym in Portuguese that refers to Partido dos Trabalhadores (Worker’s Party).

⁴ In Portuguese, “colaboração premiada”.

⁵ In Portuguese, “acordos de leniência”.

action, in particular due to the treatment given to whistleblowers and the choice of who will have the opportunity to denounce their accomplices.

Rodrigues (2019, p. 179, our translation) argues that the award-winning collaboration was used in the *Lava Jato's* investigations with “[...] intense activity by operators of the Justice system”, since authorities responsible for authorizing collaborations outlined the scope and limits of the institute, inasmuch as they took advantage of the legislative imprecision regarding the institute.

According to Rodrigues (2019), the award-winning collaborations were also promoted with great creativity by the authorities, since the agreements were equipped with clauses that limited the right to appeal to higher Courts, preventing cases of illegality of being discussed in appeals. The same perception is adopted by Faria (2021), who highlights the discretion of Public Prosecutor’s Office in negotiating the award-winning collaboration agreements during the *Lava Jato*. According to the last author, “[...] by being considered exclusively responsible for concluding the award-winning collaboration agreements, Public Prosecutor’s Office promoted a type of anticipation of the sentences” (Faria, 2021, p. 119, our translation).

Many people under investigation were arrested before the final processual sentence. In Brazil, this type of imprisonment is called preventive detention. Preventive detention was heavily criticized throughout the operation, being considered a method of pressure on those investigated people, in order to make award-winning agreements (Rodrigues, 2019).

The high number of preventive detentions during the *Lava Jato* was possible due to the open and vague requirements provided in Brazil’s criminal procedural legislation. In his doctoral thesis, Álvaro Chaves carried out an empirical study about decisions that decreed preventive arrests in all phases of *Lava Jato*. The researcher highlights that the guarantee of public order was the major basis for decreeing preventive detention due to its considerable vagueness and indeterminacy concept, resulting in a “terrifying conceptual malleability” (Chaves, 2021, p. 68, our translation).

Another criticism assigned to the operation concerns in what Rodrigues (2019) refers to a voluntarism from the agents responsible for court decisions. This voluntarism can be clearly identified when authorities perform acts that go beyond the attributions foreseen by their institutions. An example comprises the extremely fast processing time of the *Lava Jato* lawsuits when compared to other legal proceedings that take much longer to reach a final decision. According to Rodrigues (2019), voluntarism should not be confused with judicial

activism because, whereas the voluntarism only presupposes the extrapolation of institutional competences, the judicial activism embodies an ideological element.

According to Hirschl, since the 1990s, “[...] the world witnessed a considerable transfer of power of decision from representative institutions to courts, both domestic and supranational” (Hirschl, 2009, p. 139, our translation). This phenomenon refers to the growing role of courts in political issues, previously decided by Legislative and Executive Branches. It not only transformed the role of judges, but also changed the relationship between the Judiciary and other branches. The *Lava Jato*’s judges assumed a political role by making decisions that directly impacted the public sphere and the elections, as in the case of the arrest of former president Lula, influencing the 2018 electoral results. As in Italy, Brazilian magistrates used the media to reinforce their legitimacy and mobilize public opinion around the fight against corruption (Bretas, 2024).

In June 2019, *The Intercept* newspaper reported some alleged messages exchanged between the coordinator of *Lava Jato*’s investigations, Deltan Dallagnol, other prosecutors and former judge Sérgio Moro. These messages received the nickname “*Vaza Jato*” (Bretas, 2019). The newspaper accused members from the Public Prosecutor’s Office and Moro of coordinating investigations with the aim of criminalizing Lula and preventing him from running in the 2018 elections. According to *The Intercept*, Lula was convicted without robust evidence. Moro advised Dallagnol many times, who indicted Lula (Bretas, 2019).

“*Vaza Jato*” had a considerable repercussion, resulting in the Spoofing operation in July 2019, that arrested hackers and seized digital material. Despite such materials were confidential in the Brazilian Supreme Court – the STF⁶ – they were requested by the defense of several investigated and the Court released its access to Lula’s defense in February 2021 (Bretas, 2019).

The year 2021 was marked by a significant turnaround for *Lava Jato* operation. The dialogues published between the public prosecutors and the former judge Moro led the critics of the operation to question its *modus operandi* and Moro’s impartiality. The former President Lula had his convictions overturned by the STF, also declaring Sérgio Moro suspect to judge Lula. Due to that, Lula’s political rights were restored amid the approaching 2022 elections and the growing social disapproval of the Bolsonaro’s government.

The Federal Supreme Court played a crucial role in reversing judicial decisions that had been definitive initially. The STF argued that Moro, responsible for Lula’s conviction,

⁶ STF is the acronym in Portuguese that refers to Supremo Tribunal Federal (Federal Supreme Court).

acted with bias, compromising the impartiality and legitimacy of the judicial process. This decision was emblematic of what some analysts call as the “judicial revisionism” when the STF reviews decisions from lower courts in cases of great political repercussion, such as Lula’s one. The annulment of the former president’s convictions not only restored his political rights, but also raised important debates about the role of the Judiciary in large-scale anti-corruption campaigns.

The turnaround in the STF processes revealed a discussion about the fragility of convictions in the context of mega operations such as *Lava Jato*. This judicial review demonstrates that, while political actors may be initially removed from the public arena by corruption scandals, there is a possibility to change the process result depending on the judicial and political circumstances. Furthermore, that STF’s decisions also revealed the limits of the Judiciary’s role in the fight against corruption, since the legal system itself allows subsequent revisions that can change the course of processes initially considered successful.

Concerning the Public Prosecutor’s Office, there were several attempts to limit the institution’s scope of work after the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. The *Lava Jato* case triggers the resumption of discussions on the investigative legitimacy of the Public Prosecutor’s Office, making the operation a milestone in the debate on the extent to which the prerogatives available to prosecutors legitimize their criminal investigations.

New discussions on the freedom and independence of the Public Prosecutor’s Office were also observed in Brazil after Lula had his convictions overturned by the higher Courts on the grounds that the judge was biased and had no competence to judge Lula’s case.

In March 2021, Brazil’s Federal Constitution received a new proposed amendment with the aim of changing the composition of the National Council of the Public Prosecutor’s Office. It was criticized by some institution’s members as an attack against the democracy and the autonomy of the Public Prosecutor’s Office. On the other side, those in favor of that proposed amendment defended it as a means of achieving greater control over the institution and preventing further abuse by its members.

Lava Jato was an unprecedented event in the fight against systemic corruption in Brazil due to its reach over an established network of political corruption. However, the operation also provoked several criticisms of its process and the impartiality of the agents involved. It is necessary to reflect, in face of some fruitless results from the operation, on whether the investigations were able to combat systemic corruption in Brazil, a phenomenon rooted in the country’s culture for a long time that raises many challenges. On the one hand, if

mega-operations such as *Lava Jato* feed an old yearning of society to see “white-collar” criminals arrested, on the other hand, they also create a great spectacle that, instead of helping, may only harm various public policies, including those against corruption, insofar political media scandals became a political circus.

3 The spread of discourse narratives in the fight against corruption in Brazil

Discourse, as per Foucault (2005), is an important tool of knowledge. Its exercise is configured as a way of influencing society through power, because languages have to be considered inside the historical-cultural systems. Based on this reflection, Foucault tried to understand the relationship between speeches and the historical context of their events⁷.

As stated by Fairclough (2008), discourse is not a merely individual activity and cannot be limited to linguistic aspects. Discourse takes the form of a social practice exercised through language. Discursive practices are established through the composition of meanings between interlocutors. It occurs from texts that are made up of writings or oral language. Such discursive practices can play a double role in society: at the same time as they can change it, they can reproduce its identity as it is. Therefore, discourse, as the “[...] use of language in speaking and writing”, is seen as “[...] a form of ‘social practice’” (Fairclough; Wodak, 1997, p. 258).

According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) it is from these practices that world representations are created. As mentioned by Giddens, these representations are “[...] constantly examined and reformed by renewed information about these practices themselves, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens, 1991, p. 39, our translation).

The discursive field is an arena where hegemonic forces and practices compete. Discourses stand as “[...] structured totalities that articulate both linguistic and non-linguistic elements” (Laclau, 2006, p. 27, our translation).

Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (1978) highlights that a kind of domination may take place in an ideological way. According to Gomes, it can be based on the “[...] naturalization of particular forms of social representation, identities, and relationships, constructed as tacit truths, by discursive and social practices, over time” (Gomes, 2013, p. 2103, our translation).

⁷ “[...] I suppose that, in every society, the production of discourse is, at the same time, controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by a certain number of procedures that try to conjure its powers and dangers” (Foucault, 1996, p. 8-10, our translation).

Furthermore, discourse can consolidate itself as a hegemonic way in a society, intensifying a behavior that Habermas (1970, p. 205) designated as systematically distorted communication⁸.

Speeches are constantly broadcasted by media. In this sense, the frequent coverage of corruption scandals by the media during the *Lava Jato* operation had a substantial influence on directing public opinion. Brazilian media has a long history of interdependence to political system. In Brazil, this setting allowed media to amplify the development of *Lava Jato*, but also helped to create a kind of polarization that was politically exploited by different actors.

The role of media on influencing public perception, particularly in the context of corruption scandals, can be explained by the agenda-setting theory, proposed by McCombs (2009). When McCombs developed the agenda theory, he argued that the issues most covered by the press will be those considered most important by the public, who will react to a reality that is constructed by media⁹. In this way, “[...] the media agenda establishes the public agenda” (McCombs, 2009, p. 22, our translation).

In the *Lava Jato* case, the intense coverage of political corruption shaped the public narrative, establishing corruption as the main problem of Brazilian society at that time. The research developed by Kerche and Tanscheit (2021) confirms the idea defended by McCombs (2009). According to that authors, opinion polls carried out between 2010 and 2014 reveal that corruption was not identified as one of the country’s main problems by people interviewed. However, throughout the *Lava Jato* operation, corruption became a leading concern in the Brazilian society. A survey carried out during the August 16, 2015 protests on Paulista Avenue (São Paulo) indicated that the “poor management and corruption” are responsible for the “poor quality of public services” for approximately 90% of the protesters present (Cavalcante, 2015, p. 194, our translation). It was from Dilma’s second term, during the *Lava Jato*, that corruption began to be considered a problem in polls, hindering a reduction in the percentage of concern in the successor government of Michel Temer (Kerche; Tanscheit, 2021).

⁸ “But the more important occurrences of the pattern of systematically distorted communication are those which appear in speech which is not conspicuously pathological. This is what we encounter in the case of pseudocommunication, where the participants do not recognize any communication disturbances. Pseudocommunication produces a system of reciprocal misunderstandings which, due to the false assumption of consensus, are not recognized as such. Only a neutral observer notices that the participants do not understand one another. [...] Three criteria are available for defining the scope of specific incomprehensible acts and utterances. [...] (b) On the behavior level, the deformed language game appears in the form of rigidity and compulsory repetition. Stereotyped behavior patterns recur in situations involving stimuli which cause emotionally loaded reactions” (Habermas, 1970, p. 205).

⁹ Philippe Robert (2006, p. 87) argues that the feeling of vulnerability that people experience is due not only to the real threat we experience; it is rather also the result of the media coverage of crimes committed, generally exaggerated.

This approach must be complemented by other analyzes that explain how events are framed (framing) by the media, influencing not only what topics will be relevant, but also how they are perceived. Framing theory (Entman, 1993) helps to explain how media not only selects what issues are important, but also builds public perception by emphasizing certain aspects by the news, shaping the narrative around events and actors.

During the *Lava Jato* operation, the media framing of the prosecutors' and judges' acts was mostly positive, reinforcing the fight against corruption legitimacy. In that context, the coverage of media about corruption and the Justice system created a scenario where the legitimacy of authorities involved was constructed through narratives that reinforced the fight against corruption as a national priority. This process contributed to shape the social imagination, giving the actors from the Judicial system the role of heroes in the fight against impunity.

The mediatic notoriety achieved by authorities responsible for *Lava Jato* led them to the political arena. Moro was the President Jair Bolsonaro's Minister of Justice in 2019, becoming Senator in 2023. Dallagnol became a federal deputy in 2023, impeached in the same year, under accusations of having run the 2022 elections while still responding to administrative disciplinary proceedings, a condition prohibited in Brazil. These processes were related to his work at the Public Prosecutor's Office during the *Lava Jato* operation.

The concept of "visibility paradox", discussed by Maria Helena Weber (2017) is crucial to understand how *Lava Jato* achieved an unprecedented public visibility for those authorities. According to the author, it is possible to "identify the visibility paradox when the public institution is confused with its leaders" (Weber, 2017, p. 38, our translation)¹⁰.

On the other hand, accused politicians were widely portrayed as guilty by media, often before a judicial conclusion, generating a process of prior conviction in public opinion. Moreover, media can amplify scandals and transform them into public spectacles. As Bento and Engelmann point out, "[...] the scandals produced in the context of the fight against corruption [in Brazil] contributed to the construction and legitimization of judicial institutions as bodies of "policy control" (Bento; Engelmann, 2018, p. 99, our translation).

In Brazil, Lopes Júnior (2010, p. 128, our translation) emphasizes what he calls as the "mediatization of political activity", originated from the changes in the public sphere in past decades that gave a "new visibility" for ruling elites. The development of new information technologies has been responsible for the deepening of a new trend: the theatricalization of

¹⁰ Weber points out that the "public sphere of visibility [...] is the place [...] where public and private interests are [...] mixed in order to get recognition, support and favorable public image" (Weber, 2017, p. 36, our translation).

political life. The “political scandal” is the best expression of this theatricalization (Lopes Júnior, 2010, p. 128, our translation).

Political media scandals are originated from the growing role of “mass media” associated with the diffusion of new technologies that facilitate the information transmission in real time. The media has increasingly become the main stage “[...] where relations in the political field are carried out and reputations are created, sustained and, occasionally, destroyed” (Lima, 2012, p. 443, our translation).

Cases of greater repercussion for public disclosure, that generally include famous politicians involved in “white collar crimes,” are the subject of wide coverage by the media and investigative journalists, “[...] who daily feed the success of investigations” (Mouzinho, 2007, p. 107-108, our translation).

The media not only reports facts, but also constructs them by emphasizing certain frames and narratives. As Albuquerque defends, “[...] the idea of ‘fact’ only makes sense if exists a consensus (or something close to it) around a broad set of fundamental truths” (Albuquerque, 2000, p. 37, our translation). According to Azevedo, “[...] to become a scandal, a fact must resonate and reverberate among opinion makers and provoke chain reactions strong enough for the case to become a ‘hot’ issue in public opinion” (Azevedo, 2010, p. 14-15, our translation).

In the context of *Lava Jato*, the discursive construction manifested itself in a kind of Manichaeic narrative until 2019, where judges and prosecutors were the ‘punishers’, and the politicians investigated were portrayed as enemies of society. It contributed to reinforcing dichotomies and political polarizations in Brazil at that time.

Yet that manicheism were reduced gradually from 2020 onwards, media itself began to question the methods used by judicial agents, especially after *The Intercept’s* revelations. This case demonstrates that the media role is not homogeneous, but permeated by internal disputes and political dynamics that are supposed to be considered. According to Cunha, “[...] the role of media and their relation to the political system and democracy have never been peaceful” (Cunha, 2015a, p. 8).

The major corruption cases that frequently are shown by media, as in the case of the *Mani Pulite* operation in Italy; the *Enron* investigation in the USA; and the *Lava Jato* in Brazil, show two faces. Whereas the disclosure of corruption cases by the media makes them known to the public, the excess of scandals conveyed by the media tends to increase disbelief on institutions. In Brazil, it could be seen by the way that *Lava Jato* mobilized public opinion

around the fight against corruption, while increased a growing distrust towards the whole political system paradoxically.

For instance, analyzing the Portuguese context, Isabel Ferin Cunha's research (2015b) helps us to understand that the relationship between media, politics and corruption follows similar patterns in different countries, especially in nations where media has a great power to influence public opinion. Cunha (2015b) argues that media, by shaping the perception of scandals, helps to reinforce certain power structures, while it can destabilize the belief in democracy¹¹.

The consequences of the excessive number of political media scandals can impact the political and social fields. As Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 8) defend, media should be understood considering "[...] the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society, among other elements of social structure"¹².

Political media scandals contribute to anesthetize "[...] public opinion, so that new revelations about corruption are no longer scandalous or they simply generate attitudes of disbelief towards representative institutions" (Peruzzotti, 2012, p. 405, our translation).

While analyzing the period around the turn of the millennium, authors such as Naím (2009) and Ivanov (2007) emphasized that some anti-corruption campaigns could provoke certain unwanted consequences. We believe that such effects can unfold in situations in which the fight against corruption undergoes marked spectacularization. The main side effect that an anti-corruption campaign can provoke in such circumstances is the "[...] popular cynicism about politics" (Ivanov, 2007, p. 39, our translation). When the fight against corruption becomes a kind of obsession, there is an emptying of the true purpose of political discussions, opening more and more space for accusations of corruption among politicians, especially with different ideological banners.

This kind of obsession can generate the false idea that social, political and economic progress will necessarily happen by removing corrupt people from politics. As Naím (2009) pointed out, the election victory of politicians typically considered corrupts, such as Silvio Berlusconi in Italy and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, were actually driven by the society's

¹¹ "The indicators we present, especially those that demonstrate the prominence attributed to political figures or the judiciary on television, contribute to a discredited perception of politics and democratic institutions. This perception constructed from television seems to come not exactly from the informative content broadcasted or from the investigations on some case, but rather from the repetition of sound-bytes and image-bytes, linking the semantic field of corruption to the field of politics and Justice" (Cunha, 2015b, p. 58).

¹² "In many cases it may be reasonable to assume that the media system essentially "reflects" other aspects of social structure – the party system, for example. But there is good evidence that media institutions have an impact of their own on other social structures" (Hallin; Mancini, 2004, p. 8).

discontentment with corruption. In countries such as China, Vietnam, and Pakistan, according to Ivanov (2007), in the end of the last century, an anti-corruption discourse prevailed among leaders whose purpose was to persecute political opponents. Therefore, speech against corruption can anesthetize political debate, thus contributing to promote political leaders and push people away from the reflection on the other problems faced by the country. Corruption has devastating effects in any country. However, debates on corruption cannot compromise debates on other issues, even as it affects them.

4 Final considerations

This paper presented a discussion about the main political and mediatic aspects related to *Lava Jato* (2014-2021) in Brazil. The preliminary apparent success of the *Lava Jato* operation, mainly because of the discovery of a wide network of corruption that had been operating for years in Brazil, was replaced by a lot of criticism after the disclosure of conversations between the prosecutors responsible for the investigation and the case's judge Sérgio Moro. It led to a political turnaround in 2021, due to the annulment of the convictions against Lula after the recognition of the suspicion of Moro by the STF.

In Brazil, the involvement of political actors in corruption scandals did not result in their political "death". The case of president Lula is exemplary in this sense. Although convicted of passive corruption and money laundering by *Lava Jato*, his convictions were later annulled by the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in 2021, allowing him to return to the political scene and launch his candidacy for the 2022 elections. The return of public actors to the political field after judicial convictions reveals the complexity of the Brazilian political and judicial systems and the impact of the STF's revisionist decisions.

However, political reversibility is not only a legal phenomenon, but it also depends on factors such as the capacity of social and political mobilization of those involved. In Lula's case, his support base and the political exhaustion of Bolsonaro's government were factors that facilitated his reintegration into political life after the STF's decisions. This type of judicial revisionism has the potential to reconfigure the political scenario, showing that judicial operations, even with great repercussion, are not the end point for the actors involved. Corruption scandals can, paradoxically, strengthen the image of some leaders by being interpreted as political persecution, generating a cycle of reversibility for these actors.

There are many effects that mega-operations such as *Lava Jato* can generate in the political sphere in the context of "mediatization of political activity" (Lopes Júnior, 2010, p.

128, our translation). One of these effects is the emptying of the true purpose of political discussions, opening more and more space for accusations of corruption among politicians, especially with different ideological banners.

We discussed the implications that media coverage can have for public opinion by discursive strategies, either directing it or obscuring public perception to other political, economic or social problems that are equally relevant. Corruption continues to affect policies in many areas, including important ones such as education and health. However, the existing problems in several sectors cannot be attributed to corruption alone. The excessive appeal to fight corruption may obscure society's perception of other high-priority issues, overshadowing countless other problems faced by a country.

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Teias e tramas entre política e mídia no combate à corrupção no Brasil: o caso da Operação Lava Jato

Resumo

Este artigo propõe uma abordagem interdisciplinar entre a Sociologia do Direito, a Ciência Política e a Comunicação Social, analisando como se deu a relação entre mídia e política no combate à corrupção durante a Operação Lava Jato. Analisamos como a mídia contribuiu para construir e desconstruir narrativas de corrupção, influenciando diretamente a opinião pública e o campo político. Aplicamos um método descritivo e analítico composto por coleta de dados e revisão de literatura. Os resultados encontrados indicam que a mídia foi a principal ferramenta de divulgação dos resultados da Operação, inserindo no cenário político as autoridades responsáveis pelas investigações e processos judiciais da Lava Jato. O protagonismo assumido pelos agentes e instituições públicas na mídia foi capaz de direcionar a opinião pública contra os políticos envolvidos, influenciando o resultado das eleições de 2018. Por outro lado, em um contexto de propagação de escândalos político-midiáticos, a ampla cobertura midiática dos escândalos de corrupção investigados pela Operação Lava Jato foi responsável por ofuscar a percepção da sociedade sobre outros problemas do país, de forma semelhante ao ocorrido em outros países.

Palavras-chave

operação Lava Jato; sociologia do direito; ciência política; comunicação social; mídia

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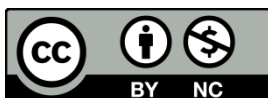
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