



## Grassroots media activism and the counter-hegemonic narrative of politics\*

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### abstract

This paper examines the narrative dispute about the June Days. By way of a hermeneutic framing analysis of the corporate media, we argue that Brazilian newspapers managed to put violence at the core of the protests through a double movement that included the naming of a subject-of-violence (the rioter) and the normalization of the state of exception dedicated to halt their existence. We also analyze Ninja Media's broadcasting of protests through Twitcam, arguing that, more than just correcting corporate media's factual mistakes, the polyphonic framing of the protests presented by 'ninja' activists publicly debunked the founding myth of journalism, broadened the scope of voices in the public sphere and helped to foster a political subject in the process of representing it.

### resumo

O presente trabalho examina a disputa narrativa em torno das Jornadas de Junho. Na primeira seção, a análise de *framing* da mídia corporativa revela sua contribuição decisiva no sentido de elevar a violência ao centro dos protestos, através de um duplo movimento que incluiu a nomeação do sujeito-vândalo e a normalização do arbítrio policial no intuito de asfixiá-lo. A segunda seção examina a narrativa da Mídia Ninja, argumentado que, mais do que constranger a mídia corporativa, corrigindo-a factualmente, o enquadramento polifônico operado por midiativistas

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\* Translated from Portuguese by Julia Nemirovsky. The present study was carried out with support from the Coordination of Superior Level Staff Improvement – Brazil (CAPES) – Financing Code 001.

‘ninjas’ desconsagrou publicamente o mito fundador do jornalismo; ampliou o escopo das vozes na esfera pública, redefinindo as condições do diálogo; e contribuiu para construir o sujeito-político-manifestante durante o processo de representá-lo.

## **Introduction**

The literature on contentious social movements recommends starting the study of popular revolts outbursts by observing their structural conditioning factors, such as the ‘political opportunities and constraints’ operating in a given context and the ‘repertoire of collective actions’ available to the agents (Tilly, 2004; Tarrow, 2009). From this perspective, collective political confrontation initiatives are influenced less by social and economic factors experienced by individuals or groups, than by existing opportunities for challenging agents to make their claims. Opportunities include the opening up of institutional access, conjuncture splits among the elites, and the decline of repressive capacity of the state (Tarrow, 2009: 99).

None of these opportunities preceded the 2013 June Days (Jornadas de Junho), the largest political demonstrations in Brazil since the redemocratization: no institutional access had been allowed, the political and economic elites kept advancing their agendas, the state kept the capacity of its repressive apparatus intact. There was, however, a concrete dissatisfaction with the situation of cities, embodied in the issue of urban mobility, and a more diffuse dissatisfaction with what has been perceived as the failure of the representative system. The spark that triggered the wave of protests, initially called by the Free Fare Movement (Movimento Passe Livre), was the increase in bus fare decreed during the school term. The revolt would spread as a consequence of the circulation of images of police repression in São Paulo, widely disseminated in social networks. What began, in the first week of June, as a protest against the R\$0.20 increase, soon turned into a demand for the very right to protest. Millions of people took to the streets in practically all Brazilian capitals, and the demands of their agenda diversified as the scale of the protests increased. From early July onwards, the demonstrations lost momentum, except in Rio de Janeiro,

and fragmented into partial mobilizations with specific objectives (Singer, 2013: 24-26).

The bursting of the demonstrations caused astonishment, as expected, but the signs of its fermentation were already given, though it was only possible for the observer to clearly discern them in retrospect (Nunes, 2013b). The protests against the construction of the Belo Monte plant (Ultimosegundo@ig, 2011); the popular resistance in Rio de Janeiro to the removal of dwellings due to sporting events that the city would host (Caffé and Rodrigues, 2013); the attacks on the World Cup mascot in the city of Porto Alegre (Moraes, 2013); the struggle for the permanence of the Maracanã Village (Aldeia Maracanã) in its original place, or of the Friedenreich municipal school, both in direct resistance to the dictates of Rio's public power – all these issues, which overlapped part of the agenda that would appear on the placards and the demands voiced by the crowd as of June, had been echoing in the public sphere for some time. Considering more specifically the issue of public transport, which triggered the protests, something similar occurred. On July 22, 2001, an editorial by the Folha São Paulo newspaper entitled 'Primitive Rebellion' ('Rebeldia primitiva') reported that bus depredations in the city of São Paulo in 2000 alone totaled 636, almost two vehicles a day (Cardoso, 2013). In 2003, the 'Bus Revolt' ('Revolta do Buzu'), in Salvador, paralyzed the capital of Bahia. In 2004, it was Santa Catarina's turn to stop due to the 'Turnstile Revolt' ('Revolta da Catraca'), the initial point of articulation of the Free Fare Movement (MPL), whose founding plenary would be held in the following year, during the World Social Forum. In 2008, a major demonstration against increases in transportation fare in Brasilia led to the approval of the fare-free transportation for students in the Federal District. In 2010 and 2011, the MPL organized protests against the cost of transportation in several Brazilian capitals. In early 2013, demonstrations in the metropolitan region of São Paulo brought down the increase in the municipality of Taboão da Serra, a victory also obtained in Porto Alegre through popular mobilization (Movimento Passe Livre, 2013: 18). And while it is true that the working class, the popular movements and the rural workers did not lead the June demonstrations, it is equally necessary to acknowledge that they were not inert at all times, as evidenced by the significant increase in the number of

strikes in 2012 (Secco, 2013). In short, much can be said about the June Days, except that they were a sort of political mobilization big bang in the Brazilian society.

Protest actions, whether spontaneous or led by structured social movements, sooner or later fade, until they cease altogether. The challenge is examining whether its gradual curb occurs for endogenous reasons, or if it was stimulated by external factors (Olivers and Myers, 2003). In the case of the June Days, three hypotheses could be put forward to explain such restraint: 1) having been unable to present their demands within a positive framework, the protesters failed to gain significant support from public opinion; 2) the spontaneity of the protests, expressed in the rejection of clearly delineated leaderships (traditional social movements, unions, parties, etc.), would have led to a clutter that, over time, had taken its toll; or 3) the alignment of the repressive apparatus of state and the corporate media in respect of repression. Since the two first hypotheses do not seem exactly convincing – either because the protests soon escalated beyond the MPL's initial circle, giving rise to diverse demands, or because the protesters did have a form of organization, although different from the one traditionally seen in movements (Nunes, 2013a), it is worth examining the third.

The task I propose in this article is precisely to examine how the June Days were discursively constructed by both the corporate media and the Ninja Media (Mídia Ninja), and to observe the political effects of these constructions. The June Days offered a unique opportunity to observe the dispute over the attribution of meaning of a political event, as for the first time in Brazil popular manifestations took place in a context in which corporate media no longer had discursive monopoly on public events. The popularization of the internet, coupled with the use of smartphones and social networks, allowed the appropriation of these tools to build journalistic narratives, something that was until then a privilege of large media conglomerates. In the streets and social networks, a myriad of agents – Ninja Media, Mariachi Collective, A Nova Democracia Newspaper, Projetação Collective, Vinhetando Collective, among other groups, as well as countless individuals – offered, in real time, a narrative different from that printed on newspapers' covers, thus inaugurating a new way of doing politics.

It is worth mentioning that this text does not intend to offer a neutral or unbiased account of the June events. I had an active role in this war of narratives. During the demonstrations, I was part of a collective that projected political messages on the facades of buildings. I speak, therefore, from a place ideologically committed to the counter-hegemonic longings that gained expression during the protests. But acknowledging personal involvement with a perspective – having experienced some of the events examined in this paper, *in loco* – does not mean claiming some kind of authority over the report, which would simply be fallacious. On the contrary, I hope that the arguments put forward here are able to stand on their own. I hope they are assessed taking into account their internal coherence and their relevance for raising questions about the reality they address.

If events do not ‘speak’ for themselves, but rather ‘are spoken’ about, then the challenge lies in observing the real effects that the framing mobilized in their representation were capable of generating, the purposes they serve, and what they might reveal about those who formulated it. For this reason, this paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will make explicit the negative nature of the representation of the protests as reported by newspapers, arguing that the main factor for closing and suppressing the contestation energy unleashed by the June Days was the alignment between government and corporate media in respect of the police repression. The role played by corporate media was especially important for two reasons. First, by framing the narrative of events from the outset in the realm of violence, not politics, it helped to build popular consent to the use of force in the repressive apparatus, which then appears as necessary and justified. And, second, by sanctioning police violence, it exponentially raised the costs of participating in the protests, as only the most risk-prone protesters, inclined toward violent confrontation, would remain on the streets. Therefore, it’s about understanding the contribution of the journalistic narrative to placing the dynamics of violence at the center of the protests, through a double movement that included the naming of the vandal-subject and the legitimation of police action in order to stifle them. The second part examines the narrative of the Ninja Media collective, arguing that it not only embarrassed corporate media by factually correcting it, but also, through its polyphonic framing, publicly deconsecrated the founding myth of

journalism, rooted in objectivity. Moreover, it expanded the scope of voices in the public sphere, redefining the conditions of dialogue and expanding the space of memory production, and contributed to constructing the political subject of the protestor during the process of representing them.

### **The media framing and the construction of the vandal subject**

As noted, the June Days had three different stages: the initial marches called by the MPL in Sao Paulo, the explosion of protests in Brazil and, finally, the gradual restraint and fragmentation of partial mobilizations with specific objectives. The performance of the newspapers (O Globo, Folha de São Paulo and O Estado de São Paulo) varied according to these stages. From the outset, the delegitimization of the Free Fare (Tarifa Zero), the oversimplification of manifestations as acts of violence, the emphasis on the hindering of public mobility due to the blockade of streets and avenues. In a second moment, realizing the imminence of the massive explosion of protests, the attempt to set their agenda: the insistence on issues beyond the original repertoire of demands, such as the approval of stricter anti-corruption laws. Finally, the effort was to criminalize the protesters who remained on the streets, especially in Rio de Janeiro, where public marches were frequent until October. To observe it, let us analyze its discourse, comparing between the headlines of printed newspapers, which presents themselves as objective, and the editorials, in which their ideological stances are self-consciously enunciated. Some points are especially relevant: the closure of the understanding of the Free Fare claim, the construction of the vandal's identity, the metaphor of war as the rhetorical operator of the narrative framing of violence, and the demophobic fantasy that underlies all these procedures.

In the issue of June 8, 2013, the headline of O Estado de São Paulo (Estadão) reported, with the sobriety of those who present the numerical accuracy of a fact, the effect of the first march called by the MPL: 'Protest closes Marginal Avenue and slowness reaches 226km'. The inspiration behind the making of the headlines can also be found in the editorial of that same edition:

The protest against the increase in bus, subway and train fares, which on Thursday paralyzed important roads in the capital of São Paulo, between 6pm

and 9pm, was nothing more than a festival of vandalism. ... To try to understand this protest, one must take into account the many things that are behind it. One is the fact that the Free Fare Movement is simply against any fare or, if you prefer, in favor of a zero fare. It is not opposed to raising the fare from R\$3 to R\$3.20, but to the fare itself. Therefore, there is no possible agreement and, as their militants are radical, any demonstration they promote can only end in violence. Public safety officials, knowing this, should have ordered the police to act more rigorously from the beginning of the protest. ... In order not to look bad to the so-called social movements, for political reasons, the authorities have tolerated their misdeeds. Right now, Mayor Fernando Haddad, instead of condemning the vandalism promoted by the Free Fare Movement, hastened to inform that he is open to dialogue. Are you going to discuss the free fare with this bunch of vandals? (O Estado de São Paulo, editorial of June 8th, 2013.)

Here we find the main arguments that would then be endlessly repeated – the damage to urban mobility, the emphasis on vandalism and the call for stricter repression by the government, the implausible and radical character of the free fare claim. In addition to the stereotyping maneuver expressed in the adjectives attributed to those protesting (and at the time the *Black Blocs* hadn't even been named public enemies yet), it is worth noting that the very demand for the abolition of the public transport fare is presented as a *denial* to the possibility of a dialogue. If there is no 'possible agreement' with the protesters, the result can only be violence. The ideological gesture is to label such a demand as unthinkable, as if the debate necessarily had to start from the assumption that public transport can only be paid for, as if the system of concessions for exploitation by private companies were its natural starting point, despite reports of successful experiences of free public transport in at least 18 countries (Peschanski, 2013:60). Proclaiming the impossibility of an agreement is denying the issue of public transport any chance of being regarded in terms other than market ones, denying intelligibility to the socialist vocabulary implicit to the aspiration for the free fare. The question that ends the editorial, in a provocative tone, may then convey a statement: that protesters and MPL members should not even be considered as interlocutors. The provocation aims to embarrass São Paulo's mayor, Fernando Haddad; but it is the sense of this embarrassment, the exhortation for Haddad to refuse dialogue, which should be emphasized. It gives a glimpse of what is really at stake: not vandalism, broken bus stops and the shattered glass panes of banks, but the worldview that underlies the desire

for free public transport. In other words, if there was no possible dialogue, as the *Estadão's* editorial suggests, it is not because the protesters were impervious to rational or reasonable criminals, but quite the contrary, because they were articulate enough to question some of the assumptions that regulate the right to the city, which the Establishment would like to keep out of discussion in the public sphere.

On June 13, the headline of *Folha de São Paulo* read: 'SP government says it will be tougher against vandalism'. Below, a photo that caught the moment when a military policeman, blood running down his forehead, immobilizes a protester on the ground, while pointing his gun at protesters to prevent possible lynching. The editorial of that edition of *Folha* reads as follows:

Eight military police officers and an unknown number of injured protesters, 87 damaged buses, R\$100,000 in damages to subway stations and millions stuck in a standstill in São Paulo. This is the balance of the third protest of the Free Fare Movement (MPL), which boasts about stopping São Paulo – and comes too close to getting it. Its claim to reverse the increase in bus and subway fare from R\$3 to R\$3.20 – below inflation, it is worth mentioning – is just a pretext, of the vilest kind. They are young people predisposed to violence due to a pseudo-revolutionary ideology that seeks to take advantage of an understandable general irritation at the price paid to travel on overcrowded buses and trains. Worse than that, only the trifling group's declared central objective: free transport fare. The claim's unrealism already betrays the hidden intention of vandalizing public facilities and what is assumed to be symbols of capitalist power. ... The right to manifest is sacred, but it is not above the freedom of movement – least of all when the first is claimed by a few thousand protesters and the second is denied to millions. ... It's time to put an end to it. The City Hall and the Military Police must enforce the existing restrictions for protests on Paulista Avenue, in the vicinity of which there are seven large hospitals. (*Folha de São Paulo*, editorial from June 13, 2013.)

The title of this editorial, 'Retake Paulista Av.', suggests that the government had lost control of the streets, an argument that would later be repeated in Rio de Janeiro, as we shall see. The need to overstate the violence supposedly intrinsic to the protesters' 'pseudo-revolutionary ideology' goes hand in hand with the concern of isolating them socially – hence 'trifling group'. A double move, which the selective presentation of statistics will complete: there are numbers for everything (property damages, damaged buses, injured police officers), except for injured



protesters. The numerical question reappears at the end of the text as a mainstay to demand from public authorities the prevalence of the right to come and go, denied to millions, over the right to protest, claimed by a few thousand. Alongside the appeal to the public authorities for a repression that would *put an end* to the protests, there is once again the delegitimization of a demand that starts from a principle other than that of private exploitation of public transport. We see similar artifices in the editorial of the Estado de São Paulo, published on that same day:

On the third day of protest against the increase in public transport fare, the troublemakers who promote it exceeded all limits yesterday and, from now on, either the authorities demand for the police to act more rigorously than they have been acting or the capital of São Paulo will be abandoned to disturbance, which is unacceptable. ... Attacked with sticks and stones whenever they tried to contain the riot of the troublemakers, the Military Police reacted with tear gas and rubber bullets. ... The MP acted with fairness, contrary to what the protesters said, who accused it of truculence to justify their acts of vandalism. ... The reaction of Governor Geraldo Alckmin and Mayor Fernando Haddad – despite some reticence of the latter – to the protesters' fury and irresponsible behavior indicates they are finally ready to harden the game. The overly moderate attitude of the governor was already tiring the population. It didn't matter if he was convinced that being moderate was the most appropriate approach, or if, by political calculation, he avoided looking truculent. The fact is that the population wants to end the turmoil – and that depends on the strictness of the authorities. (O Estado de São Paulo, editorial of June 13th, 2013.)

Estadão's questioning, with its blackmail rhetoric, is in line with the final gesture of the text, that of pretending to speak for the 'population'. However, the day after this editorial, a Datafolha survey attested to the approval of the protests by the majority of the people of São Paulo<sup>1</sup>. Sadly, the strictness to stifle the demonstrations, demanded by the newspapers, would eventually turn against the employees in charge of covering them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The search can be found at the following address  
[<http://noticias.terra.com.br/brasil/cidades/datafolha-maioria-dos-paulistanos-defende-protestos-contrareajuste,c107429bb514f310VgnVCM4000009bcceb0aRCRD.html>].

<sup>2</sup> The balance of police violence against journalists during the June 13 protest: a Carta Capital reporter arrested for carrying vinegar; seven Folha de São Paulo journalists injured – reporter Giuliana Vallone was hit by a rubber bullet in the eye and nearly lost her sight; a FuturaPress photographer was hit in the right eye

There is, then, an inflection, characterized not only by the press's emphasis on police excesses<sup>3</sup>, but also by a general change in the tone of coverage. Realizing the imminence of the outburst of protests, the newspapers partially abandon virulent rhetoric and the demand for repression to embrace, albeit with reservations, what would then be presented as the awakening of Brazilian civil society. The cover of O Globo newspaper of June 18, 2013 is emblematic in this sense: the title 'A country that moves. Brazil on the Streets' comes along with the (now famous) photo of the Rio Branco Avenue taken by the crowd, which seems to double in size given the reflection in the windowpanes of the buildings. Next to the main photo, which occupies much of the vertical length of the newspaper's cover, there is a box that reads 'The Battle of Alerj' (Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro), and another photo in which we see masked people around a huge bonfire in the street. The metonymic operation thus acquires a new meaning. Since the street movement reached massive proportion, preventing the reduction of the protester to the vandal, the narrative gesture was then reversed – and then suddenly it was not the middle-class segments of large urban centers who were protesting, but 'Brazil'.<sup>4</sup> 'What began with vehement

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by a rubber bullet and hospitalized (would eventually become blind); a O Estado de São Paulo photographer was hit by a police car. There began the repercussion of the police violence on the Internet, with a flood of videos on YouTube and reports on Facebook. To gather these complaints, the website <http://oquenaosainatv.tumblr.com/> was created. The next day, the São Paulo Public Prosecutor's Office called a meeting to discuss the excesses of repression.

<sup>3</sup> Folha de São Paulo's cover on June 14 is emblematic in this regard: under the headline that read 'Police react violently to protest and SP lives chaotic night', there was the picture of a policeman assaulting people in a bar. The following day (June 15), Folha's editorial noted the following: 'The State of São Paulo's Military Police played a spectacle of unpreparedness, truculence and lack of control even more critical than the vandalism and violence of the protesters they were supposed curb. It is up to the MP to impose order, not to contribute to the disorder'.

<sup>4</sup> The most notorious example of this change in the editorial line was the interventions of the columnist Arnaldo Jabor in the 'Jornal Nacional'. On June 12, Jabor claimed that 'the population had only seen such hatred for the city only when the criminal organization burned dozens of buses', and that 'the middle-class rioters' who do not know why they are on the streets protesting, 'aren't even worth 20 cents'. [<http://globo.com/rede-globo/jornal-da-globo/v/arnaldo-jabor-fala-sobre-onda-de-protestos-contr-aumento-nas->

condemnation’, writes Venício de Lima, ‘turned overnight not only into an attempt to co-opt but also to instigate and define the agenda of the demonstrations, introducing claims seemingly unrelated to the protesters’ original motivation’ (Lima, 2013: 92).

Although counterbalanced by the narrative of the ‘giant who had finally awakened’, violence would still be the thread of the media representation of the June Days, especially in Rio de Janeiro, where protests were strong until at least October. In Rio, the articulation between media and police repression had a very peculiar dynamic. On some occasion, undercover police began the scuffle during protests<sup>5</sup>; in others, the government has chosen to delay police intervention so as to let violent protesters act unchecked. The day after the protest in which many broke into the municipal assembly building, while also beating and injuring police officers, former BOPE<sup>6</sup> commander and current public security consultant Rodrigo Pimentel stated, in an interview on the TV show *Bom dia Rio*, that the officers trapped were from the 5th police department, that is, not prepared for that kind of situation, and that the ‘riot police was at the barracks’. In the evening of July 17, police watched for about two hours, without intervening, the destruction of shops and shop windows in the city’s upscale neighborhood of Leblon.

All this suggests that the state government of Rio de Janeiro deliberately let certain episodes of vandalism run wild during the demonstrations. It is not

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tarifas-de-onibus/2631566/]. On the 17, Jabor retracted: “The young people awoke because no one can stand to see the Republic paralyzed by partisan and private interests.” Warning against the danger of violence and abstract claims, the columnist calls for “a new politics, reinventing itself, but with concrete objectives, such as fighting the constitutional amendment bill 37, or PEC-37” [<http://globo.com/rede-globo/jornal-da-globo/v/arnaldo-jabor-fala-sobre-novos-protestos-e-ressalta-forca-da-juventude/2640269/>].

<sup>5</sup> There were so many complaints and videos showing the action of ‘P2’ (infiltrated police) inciting vandalism that Sergio Cabral (Rio de Janeiro governor at the time) himself publicly acknowledged the fact, although saying he hadn’t been aware of it. [See, for example: <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2013/07/cabral-diz-que-nao-sabia-de-policiais-infiltrados-em-manifestacoes-no-rio.html>].

<sup>6</sup> BOPE is the elite squad of Rio de Janeiro’s police.

surprising, therefore, that the day after the biggest political demonstration in Brazil in decades, the cover of O Globo newspaper read in bold letters: 'OUT OF CONTROL'. The headline, however, reveals more than the surface of the words indicate. The hidden subject of the headline is the state, which, surprised by the force of the protests, would have lost its grip on the city. The illocutionary purpose of the headline is not only *assertive* – that is, it is not just meant to represent a supposedly given state of affairs – but above all *directive*. O Globo newspaper challenged the state, denouncing its weakness, accusing the state failure in fulfilling its elementary role of securing public order. In other words, O Globo was demanding an even tougher response the next time the people took to the streets in protest. But there is also a side effect of this kind of narrative to the other intended interlocutor. If the identity of individuals and groups is socially constructed through a dialectical process in which recognition is a fundamental condition for the constitution of subjects, then making broken windowpanes and burnt buses the centerpiece of a moment of political relevance meant giving the vandals a certificate of grandeur. As such, it served to assure them they were in fact a force to be reckoned with.

It was not long before the success of this framing strategy was so evident from the point of view of the state, that the very need to mask its exceptional character began to seem like an unnecessary concern. On July 18, during an emergency meeting at Guanabara Palace to address the vandalism practiced the night before, the Military Police Commander Erir Ribeiro stated that the pact between the police, human rights entities and the Brazilian Bar Association had failed. The press conference is broadcasted live by Globonews, which at one point divides the screen into two halves: on one side, Colonel Erir Ribeiro announcing the hardening of police actions thereafter; on the other, the *ad nauseam* repetition of images of banks and stores being broken in Leblon. Days later, on July 22, the Official Gazette reported that the State Government had created, through decree 44,302/13, the Special Commission for the Investigation of Acts of Vandalism in Public Demonstrations (or CEIV, in the acronym in Portuguese for Comissão Especial de Investigação de Atos de Vandalismo em Manifestações

Públicas).<sup>7</sup> On the same day, Bernardo Santoro, director of the Liberal Institute (Instituto Liberal), published an article on the institution's website pointing out the many unconstitutional points of the decree, describing it as a 'DOI-Codi in a full-blown democracy'. On July 24, a small O Globo editorial entitled 'Agility' praised CEIV: 'With the establishment of the special commission made up of representatives of the Public Prosecutor's Office and the police, the complaints to the courts against vandals are expected to be examined faster'. In short, the state government intended to regulate the exception that was already informally in force on the streets, to the applause of the only widely circulated newspaper in Rio de Janeiro. Even those unfamiliar with Agamben could criticize the maneuver; being an attentive liberal was enough.

In order to fulfill the function of structuring the perception of the June Days in the framing of violence, corporate media discourse made the metaphor of war the main rhetorical operator of its narrative. Metaphors are particularly effective as tools of persuasion because their essence is that of 'understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Lakoff and Johnson, 2003: 5). These are not just ornamental aspects of language designed to create poetic effects (Gibbs Jr, 2008:3); 'it is a mistake, then, to think of linguistic usage as literalistic in its main body and metaphorical in its trimming. Metaphor, or something like it, governs both the growth of language and our acquisition of it' (Quine, 1992:162). If metaphors inform our perception of the world, then they also contribute to conditioning our actions in the world. They do it quite subtly. The metaphor we use to refer to a particular aspect of reality engenders a set of correlated dispositions or attitudes because it sheds light on certain aspects of experience while concealing others. In metaphors, 'symbols do additional work' (Goodman, 1992: 181), which may be either the construction of an unprecedented bridge of meaning or an invitation to establish a complicity between the sender and the receiver of the message (Cohen, 1992).

Metaphors used in the representation of political processes are never neutral, innocent, since they 'lay out the concrete meaning of politics'

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<sup>7</sup> The text of the decree creating the CEIV can be found at the following address: <http://www.legisweb.com.br/legislacao/?id=256720>.

(Zizek, 2006: 38). Hayden White points out that a narrative can be judged solely on the richness of the metaphors governing its sequence of articulation. Understood as such, the metaphor governing a historical account could be treated as a heuristic norm that self-consciously eliminates certain kinds of data taken for evidence (White 2001: 59). In a more general sense, the metaphor governing a given narrative of events creates the conditions for an assertion about such events to be seen as true or false because it will be evaluated within the metaphorical conceptual system that made it possible in the first place. But there is also the negative, closing effect of the metaphor; in this sense, the main aspect that the war metaphor tried to eliminate in the perception of the June Days was, of course, its political character. The peculiarity of the war metaphor is that it teaches us to *think by exclusion* (Henringer, 2013), establishing a Schmittian cognitive dynamic – you are either a friend or an enemy, there's no middle ground possible. Once incorporated into common sense, the metaphor of war sediments a terrain conducive to making certain inferences: it departs from the larger premise that (a) 'there is an enemy'; which gives rise to a minor premise (b) 'this enemy must be fought and defeated'; which, in turn, underlies the conclusion (c) 'since our safety depends on this victory, any combat action we take is justified'. The strength of a metaphor is directly proportional to the number of allusions it can muster in a nutshell (Swanson, 1992). If the June 17 protest in Rio de Janeiro was a 'battle' (of Alerj), it is because it is part of a wider 'war', and if we are at war, then the adoption of a vocabulary that includes notions like 'enemy' and 'army' is more than justified. Representing the June Days in terms of the war metaphor contributed not only to shaping a public agenda centered on the demand for repression but also to legitimizing it. Since war is, by definition, the void of law, the way for the police forces to enforce repression at their own discretion was then paved.

Let us briefly recap what has been said so far. Discrediting the idea of free public transport, which was the origin of the first manifestations, went hand in hand with the stigmatization of the subject who claimed it. The political character of the protests was emptied as newspapers highlighted occasional episodes of violence, overvaluing the images of conflict and repeating them *ad nauseam*, as if they were the very essence of the demonstrations'

inspiration – until the metonymic operation was completed. The *Black Bloc* then appears as an obvious candidate to stereotype: having no identifiable face in its uniqueness, it perfectly fits the role of becoming the abstract place of an ‘illicit surplus of meaning’, says Jameson (as cited in Filho, 2004: 32) whose function will be to demarcate the symbolic boundaries between politics and violence. It is evident that the use of the term ‘vandalism’ fits the description of a depredated bus stop; it is equally obvious that part of the protesters who took to the streets from June onwards can fairly be described in this way. But it is not a question of the appropriateness of using a word, but of framing the entire June Day narrative in the framing of vandalism. Newspapers can always claim that they were just chronicling the events unfolding on the streets – but isn’t it curious that they did it in the exact same way, or in the same terms, as the government would have done? If the government could offer a narrative of the June events, it would have used the same narrative framework as the corporate media, showing us how ‘impartial’ it is.

The whole point is understanding what the corporate media were actually doing while talking about the protests (Austin, 1990). In this sense, the *modus operandi* described here, which combined the naming of a subject-vandal and the adoption of a repressive strategy that had to exaggerate such subject to then appear as the necessary response to the threat they posed, resulted in a huge increase in the threshold for participating in demonstrations. Thus, taking to the streets in protest from mid-June meant risking arbitrary detention. Therefore, it would only be natural that those who remained in the streets were solely the individuals the most prone to confrontation. Facing a police force with *carte blanche* to brutalize and a media coverage that built the consensus necessary for its acceptance, the ordinary protester had no alternative but to withdraw. The story goes full circle, and newspapers may accuse the reality they helped to create – ‘See, only vandals remained on the streets, the true democratic and politicized protesters were expelled...’.

Lacan once remarked that the immense jealousy that the husband feels of his wife will continue to be pathological even if the betrayal is later confirmed (Žižek, 2010). Taking the reasoning to our discussion, it would be suitable to argue that, even though all vandalism took place exactly as

severely as the press described, this still does not nullify the fact that their representation, the way they were framed within a narrative, obeyed a principle that does not concern the vandal themselves, but rather the need to exaggerate their threatening villainous condition. From this perspective, what matters is the media's investment in the symbolic figure of the vandal, not the concrete materialization of young people who cover their faces and throw rocks at the police. Such an investment is a symptom, a manifestation of the demophobic fantasy that brings into being and at the same time supports the need for the investment itself. The true object of moral panic has never been the flesh-and-blood vandal, but what they represent – the affirmation of the fissure opened by the truly political act, that is, the claim of the part by the no part, which sets in motion the dispute that must reorder the counting of the whole (Rancière, 1996).

### **Media activism and the construction of the political subject of the demonstrator**

Media activism is not exactly new. Indymedia, the pioneer, made its debut during protests against the World Trade Organization meeting in 1999; in Brazil, the first movement in this area came from the Independent Media Center (Centro de Mídia Independente).<sup>8</sup> However, media activism gained new momentum with the action of the Ninja Media<sup>9</sup> (acronym in Portuguese

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<sup>8</sup> Media activism emerged in the late 1990s, early 2000s, during anti-globalization protests. The Indymedia Network and the Independent Media Center (CMI) managed to hog the limelight, soon becoming a reference for the construction of media by users and protesters themselves, who could thus begin to narrate their own struggles on the Internet. The CMIs played a key role in appropriating the (then) new digital technologies for the struggle of anti-capitalist collectives and social movements, setting the stage for the most recent experiences to develop. I thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>9</sup> Ninja Media was created in 2011 with the Pós-TV (Post-TV), the digital media branch of Fora do Eixo collective. Created amid the Pontos de Cultura (Culture Points) program of the Department of Culture, Fora do Eixo (“Out of the axis”) has established itself as a network for cultural production and the development of communication technologies. Gradually, it also began to act as a kind of social movement, collaborating with various groups and collectives in many states. But, after June 2013, the collective became well known, mainly due to the Ninja Media.



for ‘Independent Narratives, Journalism and Action’) during the June demonstrations, although it was not the only initiative of the kind to cover them. The action of the ‘ninjas’ basically consisted of transmitting live images of the protests, using a cellphone (via Twitcam). The audience could not only follow, on Facebook, what occurred on the streets during demonstration evenings, but also interact with ‘reporters’ by sending questions or making suggestions, which they eventually answered, always live.

In formal terms, we can characterize Ninja Media discourse as a narrative that intends to intervene in reality rather than to represent it; a narrative whose source of legitimacy rested on the fact that it was a live and uncut first-person broadcast, which suggests an ethics of proximity. Contrary to the supposedly descriptive activity of traditional journalism, based on the ethics of impartiality, and therefore of distancing, the work of the ‘ninjas’ invites the engagement of the public to which it addresses. The following table summarizes the difference between these two types of journalism:

	Corporate Media	Ninja Media
Speech Type	Representation (Descriptive)	Intervention (Narrative)
Source of Legitimacy	Supposed Neutrality (Ethics of objectivity)	Openly Partial (Ethics of proximity)
Engagement with the Audience	Low (Little Openness and Responsiveness)	High (Co-presence and co-authorship)

Table 1: Comparison of corporate media and Ninja media (source: author)

The discourse of the ‘ninjas’ was the target of various criticisms and objections, which was only natural. Roughly, the arguments accuse the precariousness of the visual language used in the broadcasts, the lack of reporters’ professional practice, the partiality that would undermine the

ethical principle of seeking to capture the facts in their plurality of meanings, and the absence of an editing that could make sense of the long and unbroken streams of images. Many people even contended that their work could not even be considered journalistic: they were passionate agents who directly intervened in reality, not distant observers striving to describe it, therefore, they would automatically become characters of the stories to which they belonged, not chroniclers of the facts taking place before their eyes. From this perspective, it would not be possible to occupy the positions of observer and participant at the same time, nor to extract any broader meaning from the uncut exhausting transmissions of the protests in real time. Finally, there would be no real understanding at the end of a 'ninja' narrative, only spasms of political activism previously committed to a particular ideology (Moretzsohn, 2013; Gabeira, 2013; Escorel, 2013).

Such criticisms say more about the subjects who state them than about the object with which they deal. Let us first look at the objection concerning the alleged lack of editing, and thus, the sense-making of the broadcast of the protests via Twitcam by the Ninja Media. The misconception here is to understand 'editing' as synonymous with 'the absence of cuts'. But the lack of cuts or interruptions in transmissions does not imply narratives totally devoid of editing work, in the sense of consciously assembling an intelligible sequence of events. What position does the camera reporter take among the crowd of protesters? What subjects and actions do they preferably record? What angles do they choose? What people do they interview? And how do they conduct these interviews? All these choices are already an operation of selection, that is, they make up a clipping of information in order to offer a very particular perspective on reality.

Moreover, the coverage of manifestations by 'ninjas' is a dialogical process in which the narrative is being constructed throughout the event also due to interactions with the audience, which, connected to social networks, receives information in real time and shares it, issuing police repression alerts at a particular location, making requests for information checks, etc. Recording and editing blend together in a spontaneous and uncoordinated work of interaction.

Despite this collective edition, the meaning-making problem would still remain, since the uninterrupted visual record, regardless of whichever characteristics it might have, would not be sufficient by itself to facilitate an adequate understanding of the events portrayed. The meaning, which critics insist on saying is not there, is constantly being constructed in the discourse of the 'ninjas', a discourse that reflects a markedly counter-hegemonic stance on the world. If all that 'ninjas' offered was just a chaotic jumble of images that failed to establish an understandable picture of reality, how could it have *resonated* with the protesters who remained on the streets after June? And isn't it interesting that this criticism is the exact reverse of that traditionally attributed to the traditional press, about how the habit of tearing pieces of facts would hinder their understanding within a broader order of events, making it impossible to understand their meaning (Bourdieu, 1997; Chau, 2006)? There seems to be no middle ground: corporate media shreds reality too much, Ninja Media refuses to edit it. What both critics fail to understand is the narrative structure that underlies the operation of reporting the facts, whether on the pages of daily newspapers or on the broadcast of protests over the Internet. It may not be very perceivable, but there is always a story being told.

Stories are created from the account of the 'facts', which supposes a plot weaving operation, in which 'events are converted into a story by the suppression or subordination of some of them and the highlighting of others by characterization, repetition of motive, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies and so on' (White, 2001: 100). Inserting the 'facts' into a plot is attributing a meaning to them. This construction operates both at the substantive level, the meaning added to a specific event, and at the formal level, the patterned repetition of models within which stories can be understood, giving rise to socially shared cognitive conventions. News stories not only inform what happens in the world, but also provide models of apprehension of facts that, once made conventional, are 'no longer a subject for discussion but a premise of any conversation at all' (Schudson, 1999: 279). In other words, journalistic discourse sets a frame of reference within which the stories presented may gain particular, narratively constructed meanings. Thus, journalistic narratives become ways

of world making (Goodman, 1995), that is, they are able to construct realities during the process of representing them.

This goes for both traditional journalism and media activism. But reducing the weight of the criterion of correspondence with reality does not mean discarding it entirely, which would lead to the elimination of the boundaries that distinguish journalism from fictional discourse. Rather, it means prioritizing the project of anchoring the validity of journalistic discourse on other grounds.<sup>10</sup> There is a difference between saying ‘facticity matters’ and ‘facticity is all that matters’, and that difference becomes more evident if we pay attention to the uses of words rather than to their meanings. Therefore, one should start from the recognition of the multiple illocutionary purposes proper to journalistic discourse, and the perlocutionary acts they help to place in the world, and then search for a criterion of validity in the critical imagination of the worlds that this discourse helps to build.

This is where the Ninja Media discourse reveals the fruitfulness of the perspective it introduces: it frees journalism from its primary fidelity to correspondence with reality without, however, falling into sterile relativism. It is not a question of rejecting the truth as a regulatory ideal, but of broadening the normative horizon of all description activity to encompass other ethical and political concerns, some of which stem from the very commitment to seek the truth. Thus, the criterion for deciding on the quality of journalistic discourse should not refer solely to the degree of objectivity of its reports, but rather to the purposes which those reports serve, the horizons they unfold, the possibilities of which they allow a glimpse. Rather, it is a matter of questioning the validity of the journalistic discourse in a way

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<sup>10</sup> Obviously, the guiding principles of journalistic work include the transparency of sources and the fairness requirement to ‘listen to both sides’. But none of this solves the problem we are raising. Sources contrary to one another may be mistaken, or even lying (Seidenglanz and Sponholz, 2008: 43); they can even be strategically employed as a false or cynical counterpoint within a narrative the newspaper is constructing. The main thing is always in the context: the judgment about the correctness of a journalistic action can only be formulated if its effects on the conjuncture in which it operates are examined.

that makes us reflect on how instructive the story is, how much it would allow us to understand about ourselves, and if it could open a fertile perspective on the events it describes.

It was precisely because it gave meaning to the events it dealt with, mediating the understanding of the June Days in a framing different from the one offered by the press, that the 'ninja' speech could engage the June protesters. The problem is not the difficulty of reconciling the positions of observer and participant; rather, the possibility of such a junction only seems problematic because of the old positivist fable that separated them in the first place. When we abandon the belief that such a separation is possible, when we are led to recognize, with Heisenberg, that all observation is to some extent participation, the problem is not even posed. One can always debate how much participation and observation there is in a given account, but it is a question of degree, not an ontological impasse. The boundaries between 'ninja' and protesters are more porous, or less defined, but they still exist: they open a space for polyphonic enunciation, without however diluting this multiplicity of voices into a homogeneous whole.

The demarcation of these borders is not trivial at all. Since the characters of journalistic narratives also become their coauthors, new questions arise about the relationship, which is above all a power relationship, between the subject and the object of the representation. In this sense, the nuisance introduced by the narrative of 'ninjas' is analogous to the impact of the ethnographic problematization, installed after the publication of *Writing Culture* (1986). The essays collected in *Writing Culture* displace the assumption of anthropological neutrality, as they buttress the perception that ethnographic account is always writing, and objectivity is textually constructed (Clifford 1986: 14-26). It was not without reason, therefore, that most ethnographers of the post-Geertz generation found in Bakhtin's work, in the notions of polyphony and heteroglossia, the inspiration for new modes of ethnographic authority rather than interpretive one (Clifford, 2002). When one assumes polyphony as a mode of textual production, the author / authorship / authority triad is undermined. Is this not precisely the effect generated by the 'ninja' narratives of the journalistic activity – which in fact explains why the first reaction of the field itself was to label these broadcasts as mere ideological work outside journalism's record?

Keeping the due proportions, we could say that 'ninja' media activism does for journalism something similar to what Writing Culture did for ethnography: the introduction of a new procedure for an old work, which questions the assumptions of representation from a perspective that, by contrast, reveals the ideological substrate of the practice it has come to displace. To paraphrase James Clifford, it would be the case that the 'ninja' discourse evidences the fact that journalistic work, although not fictional, is always a representation, a narrative account of a subjectively perceived story. Language matters: the detached attitude, which is based on the pretense to objectivity or neutrality, cannot endure there where language exhibits peculiar color and flavor. The 'ninja' narrative drifts apart from the analytical, rational and (potentially) dogmatic indirect discourse to the extent that it has a specific coloration, a characteristic tone that uniquely distinguishes it. The contrast is evident. The newscast sets a distance from viewers, seeking to reassure the audience (or frighten them); protected by the studio, the presenter speaks at a regular, homogeneous pace in the third person, while the interviewees have their speech cut off, edited (Stam, 1993: 160). The 'ninja' narrative, on the contrary, establishes a relationship of intimacy, relies on the sympathy of its audience, even because it depends to some extent on this interaction to continue doing its work. By explicitly assuming a color that uniquely distinguishes it, the 'ninja' discourse stands beside, not above, its objects, the protesters. This allows them to appear as what they really are – heterogeneous subjects, not an amorphous mass on which demophobic fantasies of corporate elites are projected. Not surprisingly, the most assiduous June Day protesters recognized themselves on online broadcasts, not newspaper covers.

This, however, poses a new challenge: if, on the one hand, the use of distancing, which would create the necessary conditions for the making of an objective account, is in fact an ideologically motivated fiction, on the other hand, proximity imposes the problem of excessive identification with the Other, to the point of jeopardizing the ability to capture them in their uniqueness (Caiafa: 2007: 150-151). It is not uncommon for such an identification to result in a perspective incapable of constructing any critical traction in relation to the identified group, thus obscuring the examination of its contradictions and impasses. Every narrative is constructed on the

basis of one-off exclusions, elements that could have been embraced but were left aside. Twitcam's broadcast of protests would be no exception to the rule. Since a close examination of this question would escape the scope of this paper, it will suffice to suggest that in the case of the June Days the 'ninja' narrative may have shown a certain tendency to absolutize its position, despite the manifest support for the multiplicity of perspectives (for example, the casualness with which the violence of protesters against traditional journalists was treated is concerning). Romanticizing 'ninja' discourse as intrinsically virtuous, just because it was born spontaneously from a counter-hegemonic position, can be morally comforting to those who adhere to progressive ideas, but is analytically counterproductive. Despite playing with the spectacularization of violence, many media activists and sympathizers have claimed a kind of moral high ground for themselves, which is not exactly beneficial, even if we admit the hostile context, the persecution by the government, and the criminalization imposed by traditional media outlets. Moreover, polyphony also hides its pitfalls, since the virtuosity of the assembly of voices may well only serve to confirm its manipulation by a single author (Rabinow, 2012: 86).

All of this suggests that the relevance of the 'ninja' broadcasts of the June 2013 demonstrations was not in the factual corrections imposed on corporate media reporting, but in helping to build a protesting political subject during the process of representing them. This is especially relevant if we keep in mind how fragile the ties of identification with a political event can be to those who may take part in its early stages. 'The fact that the event is undecidable,' writes Badiou, 'imposes the constraint that the *subject* of the event must appear. Such a subject is constituted by a sentence in the form of a wager: this sentence is as follows. This has taken place, which I can neither calculate nor demonstrate, but to which I shall be faithful.' (Badiou, 2002: 45; italics of the author). A wager, then: is it not precisely this availability, this openness to the possibilities that an event gives rise to, a necessary condition for the task of thinking about the June Days? From the point of view of the established power, what has always been at stake since the first manifestation of the MPL in São Paulo was the need to halt them, through the repressive brutality of the state, the appearance of a political subject who sought to remove the problem of public transportation from its

marketing framework to think of it as a matter of right to the city. By presenting a story different from that of the corporate media, 'ninja' broadcasts not only made evident, by contrast, all that such a story had to exclude in order to tell a lie by only telling truths, but also helped to create a sense of belonging to a 'we' whose truth was still open, being built during the manifestations themselves.

In spite of its shortcomings and limitations, the June Day 'ninja' narrative at least had the merit of placing in the world a novelty that sought to untie the knot of political immobility, claiming more participation and right to the city. It denaturalized corporate media discourse, revealing by contrast its ideologically motivated fictional character. It has undermined its monopoly of Truth production. It did this not from a centralized place of speech, but from a myriad of collective and individual perspectives, forming a polyphony whose authority cannot be fully claimed by any specific agent. 'Polyphony', asserts Robert Stam, 'does not consist in the mere appearance of a representative of a given group but rather in the fostering of a textual setting where that group's voice can be heard with its full force and resonance' which implies in the objective change of the position of the interlocutors, not in a mere addition to an arrangement given beforehand (Stam, 1993: 167). More than broadening and diversifying the voices in the public sphere, media activism began to redefine the conditions of dialogue – which is itself a political act.

### **Concluding remarks**

The contrast between the representation of June events offered by the corporate media and the Ninja Media could not be more evident. The challenge, then, was to examine the assumptions and effects of this contrast, and it was precisely this trajectory that the arguments presented here sought to follow. In this sense, the critique of such representations provided us with a good illustration of the Gramscian discussion on hegemony. Gramsci, of course, was aware of the fact that, from the standpoint of power, coercion is not enough; the state, or the elites who run it, depend as much on coercive force as on the discursive construction of consent to maintain the foundations of its domination. June 2013 exposed this relationship in a



crystal clear way: corporate media, the cultural hegemonic operator that has always had the prerogative of establishing ‘truths’ not only about the facts, but also about the correct way of perceiving them, has employed its full rhetorical arsenal to frame the demonstrations in exactly the same way that the state would, if it had the opportunity to do so (which indeed defies the Manichean interpretations of Brazilian political life, given that in 2013 the country was chaired by Dilma Rousseff, of the Partido dos Trabalhadores, that is, the Workers Party). In contrast, a myriad of individual and collective media agents presented a diverse narrative framework, paving the way for the construction of an alternative identity for protesters, thus contributing to the ‘resource mobilization’ process described in the social movement literature (McCarthy and Zald, 2003).<sup>11</sup>

The lessons to be learned from the June events are not at all clear, perhaps because the very temporality that underlies the spirit of the claims prevents it – after all, its goal was to change the very order of the political game, not just the position of one or two pieces on the board (Nunes, 2013b). However, it is certain that media activism in general, and Ninja Media in particular, did not perish along with the emptying of protests in 2013. Quite to the contrary, we have since witnessed a gradual increase in the number and relevance of such initiatives. Consider, for example, the platform launched by Ninja Media in 2014, focused on collaborative content production; among the various media activism initiatives coming from the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, I have in mind especially the collectives *Papo Reto* (‘Straight Talk’) and *OcupaAlemão* (‘Occupy Alemão’), but there are many others; protests against hosting the soccer World Cup (2014), which once again raised the issue of the democratic access to cities; in the demonstration of the strength of the stoppage of high school students in São Paulo (2015/2016). Voices and protests gained scale and visibility because, among other reasons, they had the opportunity to represent themselves in the public sphere, rather than being unilaterally represented by the prevailing corporate power.

Of course, counter-hegemonic perspectives have failed to gain all discursive authority over themselves, and continue to be described in often negative, stereotyped ways. There is still the question, which remains open, whether

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<sup>11</sup> I thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

the media production of the common folk will have enough strength and scope to rival the hegemony of capital, or whether it will be domesticated and absorbed by it. While, on the one hand, it is certain that the crack in the traditional political representation wall is open, on the other hand, it is necessary to recognize the magnitude of the challenges ahead. Twitcam broadcasts work at extraordinary events that escape routine normality – but isn't the hegemony of corporate media constructed and reaffirmed in the daily presentation of 'reality', be it in the *fait divers* (Bourdieu, 1997) or institutional politics itself? Can the spreading of *fake news* have the side effect of a revival of the credibility of traditional journalism outlets, in contrast to what is increasingly perceived as the toxic environment of social networks? And what guarantees us that the exponential growth of media activism initiatives is able to overcome the impasses that arise with the bureaucratization necessary to gain scale, which usually leads to the gradual removal of the group's original interests, as foreseen by the Robert Michels' Iron Law (2001)? There are many questions and unanswered queries, which of course is expected. But at least the progressive field has significantly broadened its repertoire of collective actions and representations.

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