

Images and narratives of the Bolsa Família Program: analysis of the rhetoric in mainstream press

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This article analyzes the production of narratives, images, and causal stories constructed by the mainstream press (Folha de S. Paulo and O Estado de S. Paulo newspapers) on the Bolsa Família Program (PBF). These narratives are derived from theoretical orientations for public policies that are still underdeveloped in Brazil: the post-positivist and cognitive theories, which characterizes this article as an innovative analytical effort. The study assessed the dispute over image monopoly using quantitative and qualitative analysis of journalistic materials published between 2003 and 2017. As a result, categories of images were formulated (handouts, insufficiency, electoral marketing, and populism), interpreted by Albert Hirschman's "theses" and John Campbell's typologies. The study concluded that there is a disconnection between the narratives created by the mainstream press on the one hand, and the public sentiment favorable to the program and its impacts on the other. This is mainly derived from evaluative studies elaborated by different epistemic communities related to public policies, nationally and internationally. This research corroborated the hypothesis that the mainstream press acted as a political/ideological actor who did the conservative resistance challenging the advancement of the social rights agenda in Brazil, by repeatedly reproducing conservative theses listed in Hirschman in their arguments and causative stories.

Keywords: social policy; press; cognitive analysis; Bolsa Família Program; policy image.

Imagens e narrativas do Bolsa Família: análise da retórica da grande imprensa


Este artigo analisa a produção de *narrativas, imagens e histórias causais* construídas pela grande imprensa (jornais *Folha de S. Paulo* e *O Estado de S. Paulo*) acerca de importante política social: o Programa Bolsa Família (PBF). Tais *narrativas* decorrem de orientações teóricas de políticas públicas ainda pouco desenvolvidas no Brasil - as teorias pós-positivistas e cognitivas -, constituindo-se um esforço analítico inovador neste artigo. Avaliou-se a disputa pelo monopólio da imagem (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) do PBF por meio do exame quantitativo e qualitativo de materiais jornalísticos no período entre 2003 e 2017. Em decorrência, formularam-se categorias de imagens (assistencialismo, insuficiência, marketing eleitoral e populismo), interpretadas pelas "teses" de Hirschman (1985) e pelas tipologias de Campbell (1998). Concluiu-se haver desconexão entre as narrativas criadas pela grande imprensa, por um lado, e o sentimento público favorável ao programa e seus impactos, por outro, sobretudo derivados de inúmeros estudos avaliativos elaborados por diferentes comunidades epistêmicas relacionadas às políticas públicas, nacional e internacionalmente. Esta pesquisa corroborou a hipótese de que a grande imprensa agiu como ator político/ideológico que fez o contramovimento (Polanyi, 2000) diante do avanço da agenda de direitos sociais no Brasil, ao reproduzir reiteradamente as teses conservadoras elencadas em Hirschman (1985) em seus argumentos e histórias causais.

Palavras-chave: política social; grande imprensa; Programa Bolsa Família; análise cognitiva; imagem de políticas públicas.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-761220180383x>

Article received on November 12, 2018 and accepted on August 12, 2019.

[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by this article's translator.

ISSN: 1982-3134 

Imágenes y narrativas del Bolsa Familia: análisis de la retórica de la gran prensa

Este artículo analiza la producción de narrativas, imágenes e historias causales construidas por la gran prensa (periódicos Folha de S. Paulo y O Estado de S. Paulo) acerca de una importante política social: el Programa Bolsa Familia (PBF). Tales narrativas provienen de orientaciones teóricas de políticas públicas aún poco desarrolladas en Brasil – teorías pospositivistas y cognitivas–, constituyéndose en un esfuerzo analítico innovador de este artículo. Se evaluó la disputa por el monopolio de la imagen del PBF mediante el examen cuantitativo y cualitativo de material periodístico del período 2003-2017. Como resultado, se formularon categorías de imágenes –asistencialismo, insuficiencia, marketing electoral y populismo–, interpretadas por las “tesis” de Albert Hirschman y por las tipologías de John Campbell. Se llegó a la conclusión de que había una desconexión entre las narrativas creadas por la gran prensa, por un lado, y el sentimiento público favorable al programa y sus impactos, por otro, derivado principalmente de numerosos estudios evaluativos elaborados por diferentes comunidades epistémicas relacionadas con las políticas públicas, a nivel nacional e internacional. Esta investigación corroboró la hipótesis de que la gran prensa actuó como un actor político/ideológico que hizo la resistencia conservadora en vista del avance de la agenda de derechos sociales en Brasil, al reproducir reiteradamente las tesis conservadoras listadas por Hirschman en sus argumentos e historias causales.

Palabras clave: política social; gran prensa; análisis cognitivo; Programa Bolsa Familia; imagen de políticas públicas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the 1980s, analyses of the relationship between ideas, actors and institutions have achieved central prominence in the field literature. A post-positivist perspective makes it possible to state that conflicts, ambivalence, uncertainties and controversies permeate the entire process of public policy production (Howlett, Ramesh, & Perl, 2013; Tomazini & Leite, 2016). There have been advances in *policy analysis* with the incorporation of argumentative and discursive dimensions and socio-political contextual factors in the concrete analysis of policies (Dryzek, 1990; Fischer & Forester, 1993; Majone, 1989). The post-positivist orientation has led to important epistemological and ontological changes in public policies by proposing a critical discussion of classic assumptions of policy analysis, such as linearity, the conventional rationality of neoclassical economic theories and technocratic positivism (Howlett et al., 2013; Campbell, 1998).

In operational terms, post-positivist studies have witnessed the return of cognitive analysis in a useful manner to explain policy and social phenomena that configure public policies. Cognitive analysis is a theoretical line of thought that features the importance of ideas in the configuration of public policies (Béland & Cox, 2011; Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Campbell, 1998, 2002). If public policies produce processes which configure subjective layers of sociability, ideas, in turn, produce road maps (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993); define problems (Kingdon, 2011); and affect strategic interactions between actors and restrict policy options (Howlett et al., 2013). This occurs in the form of socially constructed images (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993); public sentiment or a national mood in terms of a policy (Campbell, 1998; Kingdon, 2011); visions of the world and fundamental beliefs founded on principles (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993; Sabatier, 1999); causal stories (Stone, 1989); narratives and discourses (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004); normative structures and frames (Campbell, 1998, 2002); and paradigms (Hall, 1993; Kuhn, 2003).

In the contemporary world, some actors stand out as producers of narratives and causal stories which reflect interests associated with certain coalitions. Powerful media interests have acted in various countries, above all Brazil, as oligopolistic producers of narratives that dispute the hegemony in various fields of the public interest (Capelato & Prado, 1980; Chomsky, 2013; Fonseca, 2005, 2013).

They are fundamental actors “due to their ability to mediate social relations taking advantage of gray areas around these private interests which represent the ‘public sphere’, which they interpret in their own way” (Fonseca, 2013, p. 405).

The first analyses of media in the field of public policy located its influence in a concentrated form at the moment of agenda formation (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Capella, Brasil, & Alves, 2016; Kingdon, 2011). More recently, the public policy literature understands that the influence of the media extends beyond the entire process of public policy production (Soroka, Farnsworth, Lawlor, & Young, 2013). The media provokes a convergence of preferences, mobilizing public attention and configuring “public sentiment” in terms of relevant themes during the entire political cycle.

In historic situations of political instability, such as the period since President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment (Santos, 2017), the role of the media as a political actor and mobilizer of “public opinion” has been fundamental. Ever since the 1980s, during Brazil’s redemocratization process, the newspapers *Jornal do Brasil*, *O Globo*, *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* have been ostensibly combative in terms of the amplification of human rights, especially during the Constituent Assembly (Fonseca, 2005; Michilles et al., 1989). Basic social rights considered to be protection mechanisms for the working classes of capitalist systems in European countries (Polanyi, 2000) have been described by newspaper editorials as “production catastrophes”; “innocuous” when they would not be respected in work relations; and “threats to rights” previously attained (Fonseca, 2005, p. 399).

In terms of social policies oriented towards the fight against hunger and poverty in Brazil, they have historically been philanthropic, linked to religious as well as charitable entities. Beginning in the current century, these institutions began to change with the regulation of the Unified System of Social Assistance (SUAS) in 2003, which was the same time that the Zero Hunger Program was proposed, soon followed by the formulation and implementation of the Bolsa Família Program (BFP). According to Tomazini and Leite (2016, pp. 26-27), there was already a dissonance between positive public sentiment in terms of the Zero Hunger Program and the negative image (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993) propagated by the large media outlets:

In a study conducted by Datafolha (2003), hunger and poverty were listed as the second most important problem in the country by 15.1% of those interviewed, coming behind unemployment (31,7%). [...]. According to a poll by Ibope in September 2004, the area of combatting hunger and poverty was appointed as the greatest achievement of the Lula administration (25.2%). [...]. Despite media pressure to the contrary, public opinion polls indicated favorable public sentiment towards this program.

This article proposes to explore the influence of the print media on the configuration of public policies in Brazil through an analysis of its productive capacity in terms of narratives and causal stories (Stone, 1989), focusing on the BFP. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) call attention to the importance of the media in the process of disputing the image of public policies, and in this case, the public understanding of a specific program¹. Thus, in this article we shall ask: which narratives and causal stories about the BFP have been produced by the written press in Brazil?

¹ Leite, Cruz and Rosin (2018) and Macedo, Alcântara, Andrade and Ferreira (2016) are examples of works which have also followed this path.

This article features the hypothesis that the media narrative of BFP maintained the historical conservative bias against social rights, despite the evidence found in countless documental and empirical studies produced since the implementation of the program. We argue that large media outlets do not operate alone in the production of the significance – in this case negative – of the BFP, but rather are influenced by *think tanks* (such as the Millennium Institute and the Liberal Institute, among others) and political parties (of the opposition at the time) of a conservative and classically liberal slant. Both of these will not be analyzed, because our focus here is on the media.

The BFP has been the subject of studies in Brazil and abroad, focused on its institutional arrangements and bureaucratic controls (Coelho & Fernandes, 2017), its domestic and international dissemination (Gonnet, 2016; Leite & Peres, 2015; Leite, Porto de Oliveira, & Mafra, 2016; Lorenzo, 2013) and the results and impacts of the program in terms of indicators of poverty and extreme poverty (Campello & Neri, 2013). However, there are almost no instances of studies that have mapped the meanings attributed to the BFP based on media narratives, which is the subject of this study. Thus, this is an innovative study which fills in an analytical gap in studies about the potential influence of narratives created by large media outlets in terms of social policies in this country, especially the BFP. It is also innovative in that it uses the post-positive and cognitive theoretical framework – little disseminated in Brazil –, seeking to advance in the broader debate regarding the field of public policy analysis, especially the articulation between ideas and policies, or in other words, “why ideas matter.”

This study is divided into the following sections: the theoretical framework; methodology; quantitative data analysis; and final considerations.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In analyzing the journalistic material of the two referred to organs of the press, we seek to understand the symbols and meanings attributed to the BFP that have structured their narratives in the first 14 years of its operation; from its origin in 2004 to 2017. In this sense, Hirschman (1985) and Campbell (1998, 2002) are two theoretical beacons for the analysis of the primary data extracted from these two newspapers.

Hirschman (1985) identified 3 conservative theses in conservative streams of thought that, for over 200 years has reacted against social advances. The author examined congressional discourses and classic anti-revolutionary and anti-reformist books in which the so-called theses of *futility*, *threat* and *perversity* repeat themselves in conservative rhetoric, in order to convince us that any attempt to change society is useless, clumsy, or harmful. In relation to the perversity thesis,

[...] it does not affirm just that a movement has not met its target, or will lead to unexpected costs or negative collateral effects; rather it argues that the result of pushing society in one given direction will be its movement in the contrary direction. [...] It always argues that these efforts will backfire (Hirschman, 1985, p. 18).

In terms of the thesis of futility, this is founded on the rhetoric that “an attempt at change will be abortive, and will be to a large extent cosmetic and therefore illusory, because the ‘deep’ structures of society will remain intact” (Hirschman, 1985, p. 43). Finally, in terms of the threat thesis: “it argues

that the proposed change, even if it is desirable will lead to unacceptable consequences of some sort” (Hirschman, 1985, p. 73). In addition to the other arguments we have: “the oldest conquests and realizations achieved with great effort cannot be taken for granted, and would be threatened by this new reform” (Hirschman, 1985, p. 75).

Based on Hirschman’s postulate (1985), we discuss in this article how the secular production of intransigent rhetoric is expressed in the coverage of large media outlets regarding social policies, notably the BFP, whose logic is that of a conditional income transfer. Campbell (1998) in turn provides cognitive operational tools to access the relationship between ideas and public policies. The author proposes four categories of ideas that occur in the process of the production of public policies based on the theoretical reflection that critically analyzes the positivist assumptions of neoclassical economics. To the author, historical institutionalism as well as organizational institutionalism have theoretical errors which open up an opportunity for the articulation of these two currents generating a better understanding of the various types of ideas and how they influence policy decision making. Box 1 displays the author’s proposal.

BOX 1 **TYPES OF IDEAS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON PUBLIC POLICIES**

	FOREGROUND	BACKGROUND
	Concepts and theories in the first plane of political debate, which can be contested.	Underlying assumptions in the second plane of political debate. Principles of faith.
Cognitive level	Ideas program.	Paradigms.
Normative level	Symbolic structures (frames).	Public sentiments.

Source: Adapted from Campbell (1998).

Paradigms, according to Campbell (1998), restrict action by limiting the set of alternatives that decision makers understand as useful and pertinent; they are filters of possible content for a policy, related to knowledge about a given area. They provide a particular cognitive vision of the world, and as a result define the terrain of political discourse. As an example, the author analyzes the monetary current of thought in the United States during the 1980s when the Reagan administration implemented orthodox economic measures. Beginning in the 1970s, the main Economics departments in the country, along with Economics magazines and classical liberal and conservative think tanks embraced the paradigms of neoclassical economics. Since the appeal of ideas is, in part, derived from their sponsors, the association with the neoclassical economics of these institutions accentuated its influence within a context in which the Keynesian consensus was being dissolved (Campbell, 1998).

Program ideas are cognitive concepts which are associated with particular paradigms that facilitate action by explaining how to resolve specific policy problems. They are “technical solutions

with policy effects”. The predominance of “program ideas” depends on the political debate between actors: in the EUA, political economic proposals arose to resolve the “twin” problems of economic stagnation and double-digit inflation demonstrating the force of these program ideas in limiting the cognitive universe of Keynesian alternatives (Campbell, 1998, pp. 386-389). In sum, all of the policies considered “believable” were anchored by monetarism.

Public sentiments are normative assumptions that restrict action by limiting the set of alternatives that are perceived to be legitimate and acceptable socially and politically. This is a phenomenon captured by opinion polls, which is similar to the idea of Kigdon’s “national mood” (2011). In the referred example, the public sentiment that dominated the United States at the time was an aversion to public debt and high taxation, within a context of “stagflation”. There was, therefore, public acceptance of a balanced budget discourse (Campbell, 1998, pp. 392-394).

Symbolic structures (or norms or frames) are ideas (symbols and concepts on the first plane) which help decision makers legitimize policy solutions together with the public, forging program ideas. These include ideas that seem to protect central values with the potential to manipulate public sentiments. They appear in discourses, pronouncements, interviews and press releases, or in other words, argumentative material that decision makers produce to obtain public support for the policies they articulate. Using the cited example, defenders of orthodox economics in the United States justified tax cuts on the supply side through a “do it yourself variety of symbols,” which combined family values (tax evasion would undermine the institution of the family by reducing income and leading to women working) with a supposed threat to individual freedom, due to a distrust of governmental intervention. Acting as political actors, they transposed historical examples to forge their arguments, appealing to the normative sensibility of the American public (Campbell, 1998, pp. 394-398).

Besides the concepts referenced above, others are used in this study as analytical instruments: images, narratives, causal histories and discourses. In a succinct fashion, policy image involves the construction of the understanding of a given policy, and as a result, frames the discussion (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). *Narratives* are defined by Radaelli (2006) as arguments projected by actors in the public sphere to influence the configuration of public policies, which are not necessarily truthful, but are intended to orient the action of actors in “apocalyptic” and uncertain scenarios. Normally they are expressed as *causal stories* (Stone, 1989), or in other words, intentional constructions of causalities that establish a temporal (or sequential) order of events without worrying about their factual truth. This is a process of constructing the causes of a public problem which affects political dynamics and the creation of meaning in terms of public policies. *Discourses* are sets of ideas, values and practices which orient the actions of actors and also legitimize their proposals in the interaction process focused on the formulation and communication of public policies (Schmidt & Radaelli, 2004 as cited in Grisa, 2012). It should be emphasized that the theoretical approach mobilized here articulates with the materiality of the concrete interests of the analyzed actors.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is organized as follows: a) a theoretical bibliography of public policies, notably in its cognitive vein; b) quantitative and qualitative analysis of primary data extracted from the referred printed newspapers of large media outlets²; and c) analytical texts about the BFP. Box 2 quantifies the materials found by researching the websites of the newspapers *Folha de S. Paulo* (FSP) and *O Estado de S. Paulo* (OESP)³ using the keyword “Bolsa Família” (from the period of January 2003 through December 2017).

BOX 2 DATA SOURCES

OESP: from 9/22/2003 to 12/29/2017: 171 articles (reports and editorials)

FSP: from 11/14/2009 to 1/23/2017: 55 articles (reports and editorials)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Editorials were selected because they translate the official position of the newspaper, reflecting the relative consensus of opinions among the various nuclei of opinion that exist in each one (owners, advertisers, readers) and the interests (capital sectors, large media outlets etc.) that they represent (Fonseca, 2005), with an analysis of the permanence, ruptures, omissions, consistency and contradictions in their narratives. The editorials were selected, systematized, and analyzed based on the following characteristics: title: date, specific subject, relation to the BFP, number of times that they cite the BFP and argument in terms of the BFP.

The choice of both these newspapers is justified because they have the largest average circulation in Brazil, both in printed and digital terms, being among the five most read during the analyzed period, and being the most read in the state of São Paulo, according to the National Association of Newspapers (ANJ, n. d.).

In a first effort at categorizing public policy images à la Baumgartner and Jones (1993), the arguments are identified here by colors: contra = red; pro = green; focuses on another theme, but uses the BFP as a negative example = blue; contradictions = yellow. Four categories were identified and displayed graphically for the journalistic material from these two newspapers: assistencialism, insufficiency, political/electoral marketing and populism. What was left over was associated with the following themes: financial deviations, paternity of the BFP, and administrative problems. The categories are presented below, and in parallel we will conduct a qualitative discussion of the data.

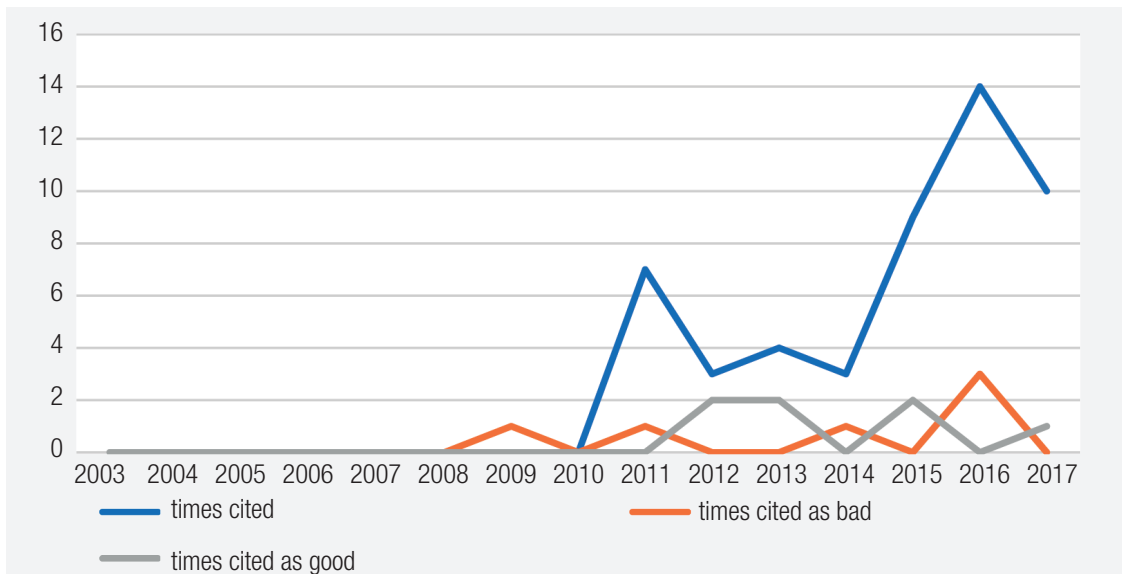
² Studies realized in the following archives: <www.acervo.folha.com.br/index.do> and <www.acervo.estadao.com.br/>.

³ Even though this article does not analyze other newspapers, various studies corroborate this analysis. Therefore, the FSP and OESP can be considered *proxies* for the Brazilian press.

4. QUANTITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

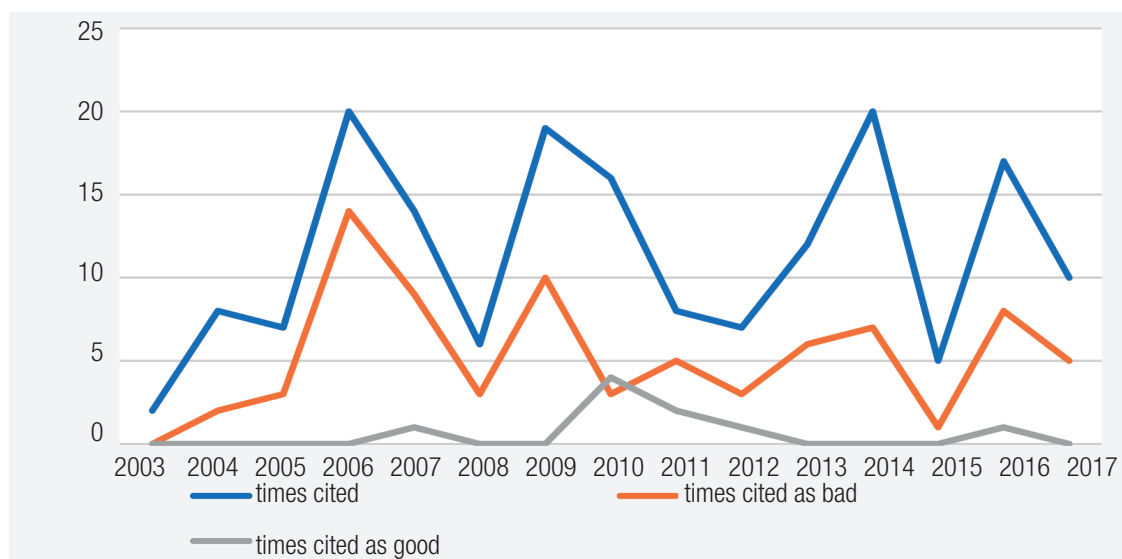
The graphs in this section illustrate the differences and similarities in the coverage of these two newspapers.

GRAPH 1 NUMBER OF THE *FSP* EDITORIALS THAT CITE THE BFP (2003-2017)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

GRAPH 2 NUMBER OF *OESP* EDITORIALS THAT CITE THE BFP (2003-2017)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

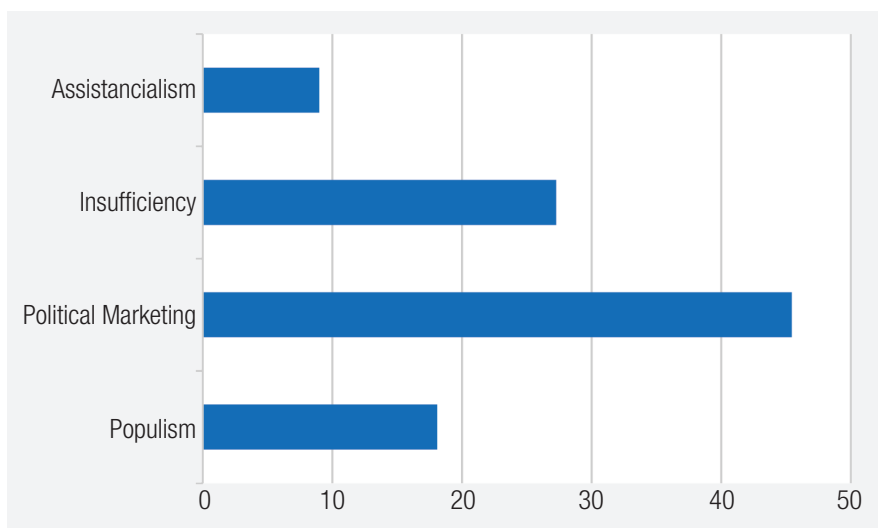
According to Graph 1, the *FSP* began to produce journalistic material regarding the BFP when the first impact studies of the BFP began to be published in 2008 (Leite et al., 2016)⁴. *OESP*, on the other hand, produced material about the BFP beginning with its creation in 2003. In the same manner, the *FSP* mentions the BFP with less frequency, most of the time not reporting directly on the subject, but rather comparing its budget to other governmental programs. It can also be seen that the *FSP* alternates its arguments about the BFP frequently, with the negative orange lines of Graph 1 frequently crossing the positive grey lines.

In terms of Graph 2, we can affirm that *OESP* maintained a vigorous criticism of the BFP, referring to it in a systematically negative manner, except in cases in which it criticized another program or action and used the BFP instrumentally to justify another causal story. It points out, in an indirect fashion, its good results, as was the case with the editorials “The announced crimes of the MST” (from 4/5/2010) and “The emptying of the MST” (from 4/29/2008) which argued that the Homeless Movement (MST) is a “criminal organization” which attracts militants exclusively because of their extreme poverty. The editorials argued that as soon as they left this condition, due to the BFP, they left the movement.

It is also worth noting that these media narratives frequently alternate in electoral periods. In Graph 2, the orange line is always above the gray line with the exception of 2010, when they crossed after the election of President Dilma Rousseff, demonstrating ambiguity between “critical support” of the BFP and widespread popular approval and the structural position of opposition to the recently elected president.

Graphs 3 and 4 describe the incidence of the categorization of the image of the BFP produced by each of these newspapers. Graphs 5 and 6 describe the use of these arguments in each year below.

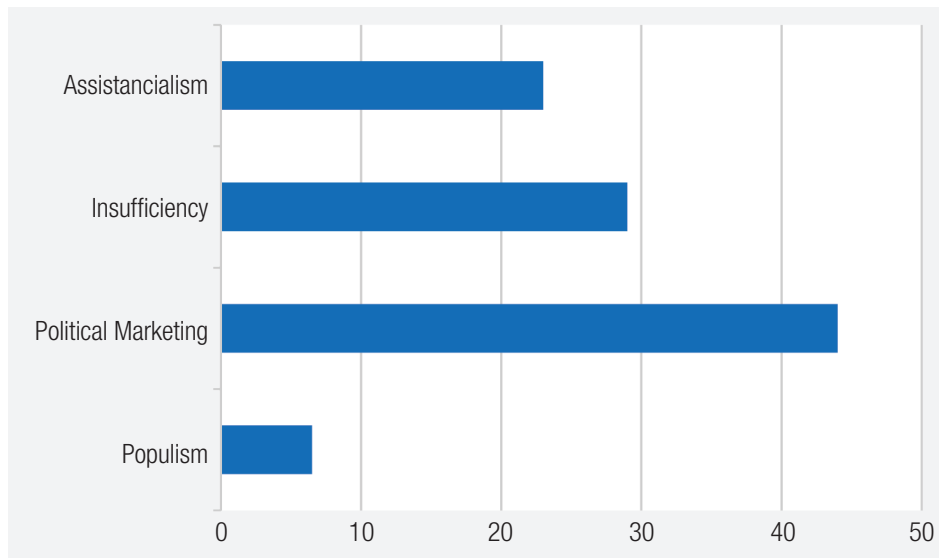
GRAPH 3 ARGUMENTS USED AGAINST THE BFP – FSP (%)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

⁴ In the editorials of the *FSP* cognates of the words of the BFP were not identified during the period from 2003 to 2008. Three editorials were found about the Zero Hunger Program.

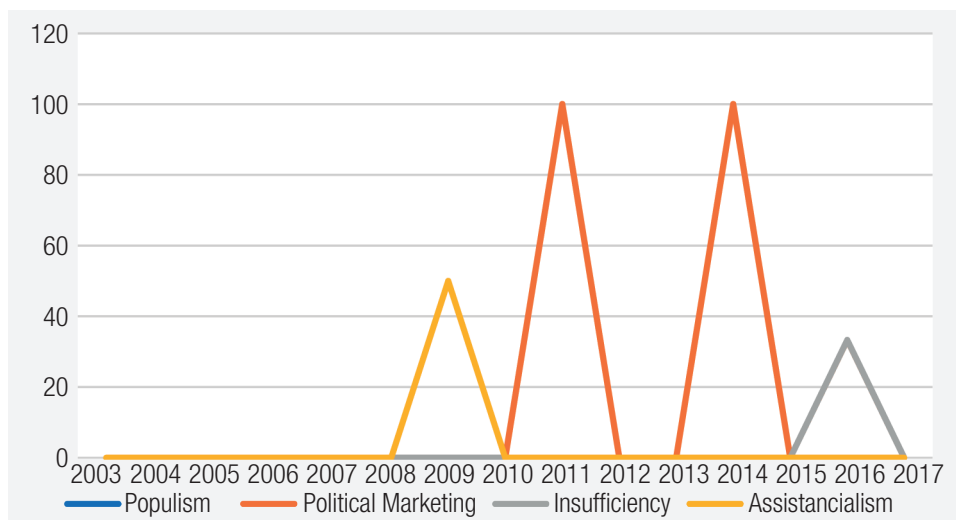
GRAPH 4 ARGUMENTS USED AGAINST THE BFP – OESP (%)



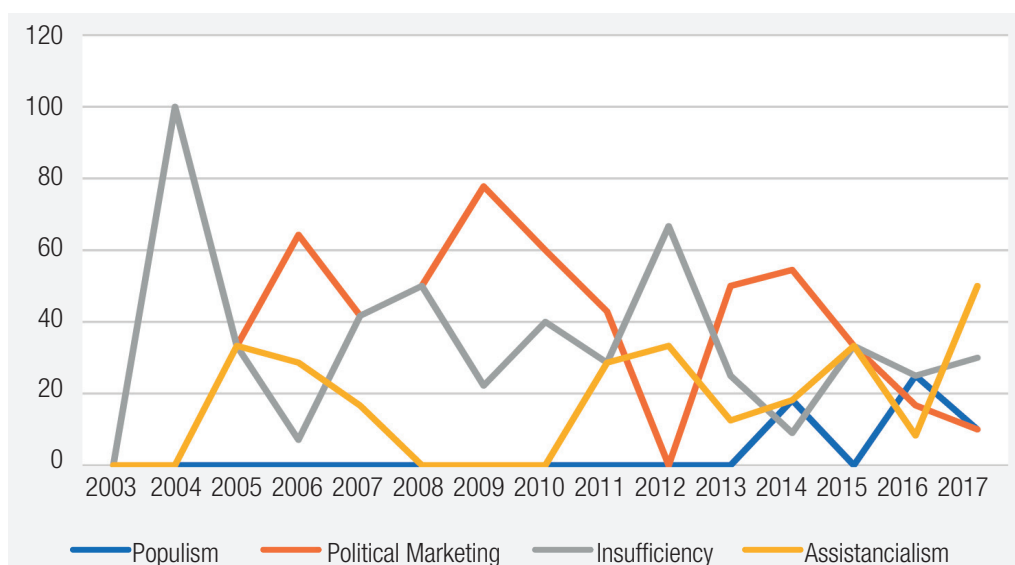
Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Comparing Graphs 3 and 4, we can perceive that the categorizations used by the two newspapers are similar, with a greater incidence of the allegation of the BFP being used for political/electoral marketing, followed by its innocuousness (insufficiency) in both, alternating just the incidence of arguments of assistencialism and populism: the former being greater in *OESP* and the latter greater in the *FSP*. It should be noted, however, that despite these four main categories of arguments, others were also used but with less frequency. In the case of the BFP there were articles questioning the “paternity” of the BFP, as well as others pointing to “a lack of a need” for it. In *OESP* the theme of paternity also appears, in parallel with issues of diversion of funds, irregularities and a lack of clarity in the eligibility criteria definitions.

GRAPH 5 ARGUMENTS USED AGAINST THE BFP PER YEAR – FSP (%)



Source: Elaborated by the authors.

GRAPH 6 ARGUMENTS USED AGAINST THE BFP PER YEAR – OESP (%)

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

In terms of the year by year analysis, it may be observed that in election years the argument that the BFP is used for political marketing was always used often: 2006 (the last year of Lula's first administration), 2010 (the last year of his second administration) and 2014 (the last year of Dilma Rousseff's first administration). In addition to this category, assistencialism and insufficiency dominate. The predominance of political/electoral marketing occurs in *OESP* from the beginning of the period analyzed and it appears in the *FSP* during the elections of 2010 and 2014. This indicates that marketing sought a narrative that would justify the continuation of the Labor Party (PT) in the Presidency by relying on a causal history of a social program with great dissemination and popular appeal.

In terms of *OESP*, all of the arguments are used constantly during the period analyzed. Soon after the launch of the BFP, the newspaper alleged its innocuousness with vehemence, despite the absence of a BFP impact study at the time⁵. The narratives were based on previous federal programs such as the Bolsa Escola (School Stipend), which (according to the newspaper) was a failure, or suppositions in respect to the perverse affect that receiving money would have on the "production of the beneficiary". *OESP* stands out as the media outlet which most emphasizes the need for public policies which value "work and meritocracy" to the detriment of income transfers. The newspaper did not mention, however, that historically one of the great proponents of the minimum wage paradigm was Milton Friedman, an orthodox economist, (Suplicy & Buarque, 1997), with objectives distinct from those of the BFP.

⁵ According to Jannuzzi (2011), the time frame of the evaluation of the impact is fundamental, because it would be logically impossible to have these evaluations in such a short period of time.

It can be observed in *OESP*, that the incidence of the argument of “assistencialism” also accompanied the presidential election calendar. The “populism” argument, on the other hand, became more frequent after 2013.

5. QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

The tables in this section exemplify how the categorizations of the image of the BFP were expressed in the studied vehicles, identifying the analytical layers of ideas proposed by Campbell (1998), Radaelli (2006) and Stone (1989): the normative structures (*frames*) which are mobilized in each article and the narrative and causal stories that structure the arguments that are expressed by large media outlets. Excerpts of editorials and articles are cited to demonstrate the analytical categories utilized, in addition to their dates and links to where they were accessed.

BOX 3 FRAMES, NARRATIVES AND CAUSAL STORIES FOR THE BOLSA FAMILIA PROGRAM - ASSISTENCIALISM

Narratives, frames and causal stories	Sources
<p>FRAMES: Associating the poor with being idle and lazy, that “weigh down” the State, becoming a burden to society CAUSAL STORY: Income transfers generate dependence on the State and an avoidance of work by the beneficiaries.</p>	
<p>NARRATIVE: “Given the evidence of the 2016 Household Survey, the question is whether the Bolsa Família Program, as framed by Labor administrations, is a real help to the northeastern population or, on the contrary, a mere expedient to maintain a third of the population of the region dependent on the State.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 12/3/2017 “As in the time of the colonels” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20171203-45337-spo-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “Now in existence for a decade, the Bolsa Família today represents most of the gains of a significant part of the population. A program which was meant to be temporary and serve just as auxiliary assistance to beneficiaries in their fight to escape poverty, has been consolidated as the basis of survival for these families, because the income from work, when it exists, is insufficient, and there are no prospects that this situation will change for the foreseeable future. These Brazilians therefore, have become, permanent clients living on the favors of the State.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 12/29/2014 “The dependence of the Bolsa Família” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20141229-44267-spo-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “The Minister and the President blessed the decision to extend the Bolsa Família and other social programs to 320 thousand families. [...] But they need to go much further. No rescue produces durable effects if the assisted person remains incapable of earning a decent wage through work. A strategy of mere assistencialism tends to quickly turn into dangerous political paternalism.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 22/01/12 “Beyond Assistencialism” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20120122-43195-spo-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The assistencialism category represents the image of policies which are socially rooted and inert, and not very different than the tradition of the *Poor Law* in the United Kingdom, in a country, like Brazil, whose first notions of citizenship in the 20th century were linked to the distant regulatory practices of universal citizenship in developed capitalist countries (W. G. Santos, 1979). In this category, anti-market social policies that did not require contributions were viewed as counterproductive, creating a dependence of the beneficiaries on the State, and were thus pejoratively termed “paternalist”. The assumption is that the “rational and atomic individual” who works is capable of overcoming his or her social needs: policies of social inclusion, including the BFP, even though they have popular support, do not solve the problems they propose to redress. On the contrary, they propose the alluded to “thesis of perversity” (Hirschman, 1985), because they generate effects that are contrary to the desired effect. Because they do not stimulate an individual’s autonomy, they reinforce initial dependence and/or create other dependencies in a way which “exacerbates the situation that they seek to remedy”. It is important to point out that evaluation studies of the BFP⁶ have demonstrated that the reality does not corroborate this erected normative structure (associating the poor with being idle and lazy, “weighing” on the State as a burden to society), nor the causal story developed by journalistic narratives (income transfers create dependence on the State on the part of beneficiaries and an aversion to work).

BOX 4 **FRAMES, NARRATIVES AND CAUSAL STORIES OF THE BOLSA FAMILIA PROGRAM - INSUFFICIENCY**

Narratives and causal stories	Sources
<p>FRAME: Policy choices of Labor governments are mistaken or erratic.</p> <p>CAUSAL STORY: Only economic growth generates a redistribution of income and less poverty.</p>	
<p>NARRATIVE: “Professor Elimar Nascimento, of the University of Brasilia, a specialist in public policy, remembers that ‘during the last two years of the recession, unemployment explains why people are returning to the Bolsa Família, which is a ‘palliative measure, which does not solve the problem of poverty. It is only with renewed growth that this movement can be overcome; there is no magic to be performed’. And for growth to return, we need to end Labor’s fiscal mess.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 2/17/2017 “Lula’s new poor people” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20170217-45048-spo-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “Brazil is the fourth most unequal country in the region [Latin America] [...] Brazil’s position has improved considerably since 1990, when the country headed the list of most unequal countries, but the uncomfortable current situation proves that we need to do much more than the Bolsa Família and bet on income transfers.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 8/27/2012 “Persistent inequality” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20120827-43413-nac-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “Financial help for these families is indispensable in the short term to guarantee their survival, but this will not contribute to a reduction in the levels of poverty in Brazil.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 3/25/2006 “It’s not enough to give money” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20060325-41066-spo-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

⁶ Among others, Oliveira and Soares (2013) realized a demystifying study about the “laziness effect”.

The “insufficiency” argument is close to the “futility thesis” (Hirschman, 1985), according to which, inclusion policies have a minimal effect on the social structure of countries. Under this thesis, any attempt at change is destined to fail, because the structural causes are not addressed by the BFP, and they should be treated as an economic rather than a social issue. This argument seeks to demean the BFP due to the supposed technical incompetence of its formulators and implementors, who are not associating this public policy with a more effective and efficient paradigm or the “correct” causal story. According to *OESP*, the “correct causal path” would be a classically liberal orthodox recipe for economic growth which would be enough to provide “social well-being”. Therefore, income transfers are innocuous in the fight against poverty, and pose obstacles that destabilize the “natural equilibrium process” that comes from the “free market”.

BOX 5 **FRAMES, NARRATIVES AND CAUSAL STORIES OF THE BOLSA FAMILIA PROGRAM – POLITICAL/ELECTORAL MARKETING**

Narratives and causal stories	Sources
<p>FRAMES: The Labor (PT) government has usurped the objectives of the program to use it for its own political gain. CAUSAL STORY: The more you expand the BFP the more votes the Labor Party will have.</p>	
<p>NARRATIVE: “It’s electoral intent shines [...] reaching 12 million people, the Lula administration’s income transfer program has an obvious electoral effect [...] Starting as a palliative resource, the Bolsa Familia is being turned into a script for a loss of virtue. Instead of measuring the success of the program in terms of a decrease in the number of people who need it, the Executive branch has sought to extend it even further.”</p>	<p><i>FSP</i>, 11/14/2009 “Those who don’t communicate ...” Retrieved from https://acervo.folha.com.br/leitor.do?numero=18086&keyword=Bolsa%2CFam%C3%ADlia&anchor=5770023&origem=busca&pd=9f1dc98dd665ebf656c9779e343cdf18</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “Note the importance of the Bolsa Familia Program for the maintenance of electoral loyalty [...] it isn’t every social benefit that ensures a firm vote for the Labor party, and yes it is true that the Bolsa Familia – that program that should be temporary but is becoming more and more permanent, because the government is proud of it, is not only incapable of creating conditions to get off its rolls, but is actually used to gain more votes, when more people are assisted.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 15/09/2014 “The Bolsa Vote” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20140915-44162-nac-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “Extension of the Bolsa Familia Program to assist people of 16 and 17 years of age [...] If the Bolsa Familia Program already has clear electoral benefits, the creation of this ‘allowance’ for adolescents who soon will become voters makes it blindingly clear.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 1/5/2008 “Two ways of being crafty” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20080105-41717-spo-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The “political/electoral marketing” category is characterized by the creation of a causal story that the BFP was important to the Lula/Dilma governments not for its capacity to help fight poverty, but rather for its electoral effects. It was therefore a mere instrument of political/electoral marketing to keep the Labor Party (PT) in power. This is a causal story that exclusively privileges the electoral externalities of social policies, simplifying and vulgarizing the political and social process.

This category criminalizes the Labor Party and assumes that it is acting as a usurper in favor of specific political interests. The causal story developed inverts the empirical causality, ignoring the dynamics of the job market and the economic crises that generate continual poverty in capitalist countries, which also make income transfer programs necessary to the establishment of social order. Countless stories in other countries at distinct moments corroborate this assertion. These considerations, however, are systematically ignored in the articles and editorials produced by the *OESP*.

BOX 6 **FRAMES, NARRATIVES AND CAUSAL STORIES OF THE BOLSA FAMILIA PROGRAM – POPULISM**

Narratives and causal stories	Sources
<p>FRAMES: An appeal to the belief that the poor are more irrational in their voting, are incompetent politically and fall for the martyr trap.</p>	
<p>CAUSAL STORIES: Increasing social spending is an instrument of populist governments.</p>	
<p>NARRATIVE: “Lying on the platform in the attempt to get support is taking advantage of the listener’s good faith. [...] Lula in Recife, alongside Dilma Rousseff: ‘They want to end the Bolsa Familia’ [...] Lula perhaps is beginning to believe that the best role he can play from here on out is that of a martyr. He can always count on the devotion of those who have blind faith.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 9/21/2017 “The lies of populism” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20170921-45264-nac-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “The increase in the Bolsa Familia, the renegotiation of state debt, and the liberation of funding for the Olympics are part of this strategy that seeks popularity and congressional support are imposed on the person who occupies the position of President on an interim basis.”</p>	<p><i>FSP</i>, 7/1/2016. “Game of shadows” Retrieved from https://acervo.folha.com.br/leitor.do?numero=20638&keyword=Bolsa%2CFam%C3%ADlia&anchor=6028067&origem=busca&pd=bbc21991e0c4246464d4fab003c858a2</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “The existence of more than 1 million suspect benefits which are being conceded incorrectly is not a surprise in light of a decade in which the Bolsa Familia has been manipulated by Labor/Lula as a powerful instrument to remain in power.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 11/15/2016 “Portrait of Labor populism” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20161115-44954-nac-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>
<p>NARRATIVE: “Thus, yes, Lula has already let it be known that if there is no <i>impeachment</i>, the government will be ‘refounded’ on bases that are even more populist. As published in <i>OESP</i>, the Labor leader is the author of a ‘survival’ plan for President Dilma Rousseff which includes expanding the Bolsa Familia, expanding the offer of credit and investing in civil construction to generate jobs.”</p>	<p><i>OESP</i>, 4/12/2016 “The force of populism” Retrieved from https://acervo.estadao.com.br/pagina/#!/20160412-44737-nac-3-edi-a3-not/busca/Bolsa+Fam%C3%ADlia</p>

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

The category “populism” configures intersections with the previous categories, given that it deals with a term used to characterize various movements over time (Debert, 2008) with a special appeal to poor citizens. The image of the BFP as being populist demonstrates the perception – on the part of these newspapers – that it is a control mechanism perpetrated by Labor with the expectation of votes in exchange. Once again it represents the inversion of the causal history in terms of the role of the BFP in the social transformation of the country between 2003 and 2016, the year that the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff interrupted the era of social citizenship in Brazil, inaugurated by the Federal Constitution of 1988 (Fagnani, 2017). Populism perhaps is the explicit category of dislocation in the media narrative in the most recent discussion in the epistemic communities of Political Science, Political Economy and Public Policy. The appeal to the belief that the poor vote in an irrational manner, are politically incompetent, and would fall for the “martyr” trap is extremely impressionist, elitist and out of date in terms of the polls regarding electoral behavior in Brazil and abroad, to the point of negating classically liberal perspectives, such as Schumpeter (1942) and his “political market”. These newspaper narratives are sustained neither empirically nor theoretically.

Increases in social spending, which would be an instrument of populist governments is another aspect that falsifies evidence of the development of capitalist countries. However, the journalistic production under analysis distances itself wholly from a profound and plural examination of academic studies, as well as studies by governments and international institutions, even though these writers were aware of them, hiding them from their readers.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article analyzes the dispute of narratives, images and causal stories of the BFP using a prism as yet rarely explored in Brazil: three cognitive analytical categories derived from post-positivist theories of public policies. Large media outlets have been examined as crucial political/ideological actors in this dispute, in a perspective that is simultaneously quantitative and qualitative, designed to observe, elucidating the theoretical frames of these disputes *vis-à-vis* popular perceptions and studies conducted internationally and in epistemic communities (Haas, 1992).

In this manner, this study corroborates the hypothesis that large media outlets remain political/ideological actors who act as a countermovement against greater social rights, as in the case of the BFP. Even though there are shades of narratives and causal stories in the newspapers analyzed, the reiteration of intransigent arguments harks back to the conflicts involved in the inclusion of social rights in the Constituent Assembly of the 1980s (Fonseca, 2005), continually reproducing conservative theses identified by Hirschman (1985), who examined narratives and discourses from the 19th and 20th centuries derived from classically liberal/conservative thinking. As we have seen, social advances are seen by the Brazilian media as “futile”, “perverse” or “threatening”: a framing that deliberately ignores capitalist dynamics in distinct periods and locations.

This study, which has focused on the *FSP* and *OESP* in relation to their coverage of the BFP, suggests that the former has produced some conservative theses, especially perversity (“assistencialist” arguments) and futility (“insufficiency” arguments), increasing the incidence of articles and editorials during electoral periods beginning in 2008. During these periods, the *FSP* was notable in its greater incidence of arguments related to “political/electoral marketing” and “populism”, demonstrating a political position which represents the capitalist and middle classes to the detriment of workers and

lower classes, even though the newspaper proclaims itself to be “plural, apolitical and critical” (*Folha de S. Paulo* [FSP], n.d.). *OESP* is an emblematic case that reproduces all the categorizations of the literature about conservative thinking: beginning with the first year of the BFP, its articles and editorials make elitist, conservative and reactionary assumptions. During electoral periods, it also produced a higher frequency of arguments associated with “political/electoral marketing” and “populism”.

These large media outlets undoubtedly act as political/ideological actors which confront the images of public policies produced by epistemic communities and think tanks linked to the United Nations and the international framework of human rights, as well as the popular perception of the BFP⁷. Along these lines, between the years 1990 and 2000 the World Bank produced countless studies and evaluations of income transfer programs, analyzing their social impacts which were much broader than the monetary results of their beneficiaries (Leite et al., 2016). The analyses produced by these studies have unquestionable public utility, but they have been ignored by the Brazilian press in general⁸. As an illustration, our search of the *Open Knowledge Repository* website of the World Bank (2018) within the “Documents and Reports” section, found 39 briefs, result reports, agreements and working papers, among other items by using the keywords “Bolsa Familia Program”. On the *United Nations Development Programme* website (United Nations, 2018), we located 254 documents (including news items, case studies, reports and other items) which deal with the BFP. On the Economic Commission of Latin America website, we found 434 documents, and on the *Scientific Electronic Library Online* website (SCIELO, n.d.) we found 46 academic texts from various journals. These studies demonstrate that there has been an abundance of information about the BFP for years in national and international databases which are open access, distinct, and credible.

The process of disinformation generated by media narratives also deliberately ignores the countless studies realized by the public policy epistemic community in Brazil, which cover an enormous gamut of situations: issues such as the immediate alleviation of poverty, school attendance, paying attention to health and formal employment (Campello & Neri, 2013; Castro & Modesto, 2010; D. B. Santos et al., 2017)⁹, and the female emancipation encouraged by the newfound focus on the family as the unit of interest (Cassaro, 2017), among others; as well as technical analyses conducted by the Applied Economic Research Institute (IPEA, n.d.), which produced 189 studies during the examined period.

Finally, from the point of view of “the rules of the game” in free market democracies, the analyzed newspapers – which proclaim themselves to be classical liberals – have distanced themselves from the role of “keeping a critical eye on the public sphere” of these societies, as envisioned by classical liberals such as Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill; or the “political market” of Schumpeter (1942), in which electors validate the “supply” of public policies; and that of Przeworski (1998), known as vertical accountability. In this way, it is legitimate for governments to be reelected if “they are approved” by the electoral judgment of their adopted policies.

Therefore, the paths of real democracies have been stripped of their virtue by the predominance of *narratives, images* and *causal stories* that create parallel realities anchored by old ideas of conservative matrices.

⁷ The positive popular perception of this program is in contrast to the public sentiments of the middle class readers of these large media outlets.

⁸ Research conducted between 10/15/2018 and 11/1/2018.

⁹ There is a gamut of qualified and internationally recognized studies available through the Ministry of Social Development (MDS, n.d.).

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