




MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION IN TENSION: THE ROLE OF FOLHA DE S. PAULO AND THE SILENCING OF POPULAR VOICES DURING THE 1964 CIVIL-MILITARY COUP IN BRAZIL

MÍDIA E OPINIÃO PÚBLICA EM TENSÃO: O PAPEL DA FOLHA DE SÃO PAULO E O SILENCIAMENTO DAS VOZES POPULARES DURANTE O GOLPE CIVIL-MILITAR DE 1964 NO BRASIL

MEDIOS Y OPINIÓN PÚBLICA EN TENSIÓN: EL PAPEL DE LA FOLHA DE S. PAULO Y EL SILENCIADO DE LAS VOCES POPULARES DURANTE EL GOLPE DE ESTADO CIVIL-MILITAR DE 1964 EN BRASIL

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Luiz Antonio Dias¹ and Rafael Lopes de Sousa²

ABSTRACT

This article examines the journalistic engagement of the newspaper Folha de S. Paulo during the 1964 Civil-Military Coup in Brazil, with a particular focus on its political coverage both in the period preceding the coup and in its immediate aftermath, marked by the removal of President João Goulart. To broaden the analysis, we incorporate data from public opinion polls conducted by IBOPE (Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics), enabling a comparative reflection on two contrasting narratives: the discourse disseminated by the press and the sentiments expressed by public opinion. The study seeks to contribute to the understanding of how media and opinion polls intersected—and diverged—during a critical moment in Brazilian political history.

Keywords: Press. Public opinion. Civil-military coup. Folha de S. Paulo. IBOPE. Military dictatorship.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina o engajamento jornalístico do jornal Folha de S. Paulo durante o Golpe Civil-Militar de 1964 no Brasil, com foco particular em sua cobertura política tanto no período que antecedeu o golpe quanto em seu período imediatamente posterior, marcado pela destituição do presidente João Goulart. Para ampliar a análise, incorporamos dados de pesquisas de opinião pública realizadas pelo IBOPE (Instituto Brasileiro de Opinião Pública e Estatística), possibilitando uma reflexão comparativa sobre duas narrativas contrastantes: o discurso disseminado pela imprensa e os sentimentos expressos pela opinião pública. O estudo busca contribuir para a compreensão de como a mídia e as pesquisas de opinião se cruzaram — e divergiram — durante um momento crítico da história política brasileira.

¹Dr. in Social History from São Paulo State University (Unesp). Postdoctoral studies in Law, Economics, and History at the University of Córdoba. Professor at the Pontifical Catholic University

²Dr. in Social History from the University of Campinas (Unicamp). Professor in the Master's Program in Education at Universidade Brasil.



Palavras-chave: Imprensa. Opinião pública. Golpe civil-militar. Folha de S. Paulo. IBOPE. Ditadura militar.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la actuación periodística del periódico Folha de S. Paulo durante el Golpe de Estado Cívico-Militar de 1964 en Brasil, con especial atención a su cobertura política tanto en el período previo al golpe como en el inmediatamente posterior, marcado por la destitución del presidente João Goulart. Para ampliar el análisis, incorporamos datos de encuestas de opinión pública realizadas por el IBOPE (Instituto Brasileño de Opinión Pública y Estadística), lo que permite una reflexión comparativa sobre dos narrativas contrastantes: el discurso difundido por la prensa y los sentimientos expresados por la opinión pública. El estudio busca contribuir a la comprensión de cómo los medios de comunicación y las encuestas de opinión se entrecruzaron —y divergieron— durante un momento crítico de la historia política brasileña.

Palabras clave: Prensa. Opinión pública. Golpe cívico-militar. Folha de S. Paulo. IBOPE. Dictadura militar.

INTRODUCTION

This article analyzes the role of the press in the 1964 Civil-Military Coup, with an emphasis on the actions of the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo*. We aim to discuss whether this newspaper was responsible for constructing — or merely reflecting — a perception widely disseminated among conservative sectors of civil society and the middle classes, according to which the country was heading toward chaos. This narrative was sustained by elements such as inflationary escalation, the supposed breakdown of hierarchy within the Armed Forces, the advance of communism, and the perceived excessive expansion of social benefits to the lower classes

The research relies on primary sources, especially editorials, headlines, and news articles published by *Folha de S. Paulo* in the period between October 1963 and April 1964. This time frame includes the attempt by President João Goulart to decree a state of siege — a proposal later withdrawn — up to the first days following the consummation of the coup. We catalogued all direct and indirect references to the Goulart government and selected those considered most emblematic, due to their relevance to the central themes of this article, for in-depth analysis

In 1963, *Folha de S. Paulo* was the newspaper with the largest circulation in the state of São Paulo. It had undergone a change in shareholder control in August 1962, being acquired by Otávio Frias de Oliveira and Carlos Caldeira Filho. Under the management of the “Frias-Caldeira” group, the newspaper underwent a modernization process that involved the reorganization of its administrative, financial, and technological structures. At the same time, there was an editorial repositioning, with the adoption of a more defined political stance, moving away from the “impartial centralism” previously followed.

In addition to journalistic material, we used four public opinion polls on political themes, conducted in the same period by the Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics (IBOPE), as primary sources. Among the various surveys conducted between October 1963 and April 1964, we selected one survey conducted in the then federal capital, Guanabara, two conducted in the city of São Paulo, and one national survey. It is worth noting that the results of two of these surveys — one national and one in São Paulo — were not disclosed at the time, remaining restricted to the institute's archives.

Founded in 1942 by Auricélio Penteado, a figure linked to the communications sector, IBOPE became one of the main public opinion polling centers in Brazil. From 1950 onward, its direction was taken over by Paulo Tarso Montenegro. Although it

competed with newspapers and radio stations that also conducted polls — especially during election periods — IBOPE stood out in the 1950s both for the accuracy of some predictions and for the controversies surrounding alleged manipulation of results. The first major controversy was the poll predicting Adhemar de Barros's victory in São Paulo's 1954 governor elections. . Besides incorrectly predicting the outcome, the institute was accused by the press of manipulating data in favor of Adhemar de Barros.

Although such suspicions do not invalidate the use of its surveys as historical sources, it requires a necessary analytical caution, particularly regarding the external — political, economic, and institutional — pressures that weigh on knowledge producers. As Bourdieu aptly observes, “[...] the limits of scientific practice are, as always, though to varying degrees, inscribed in essence in the constraints weighing on the institution and, through it, on the minds of those who participate in it” (2004, p. 228).³

Understanding the role played by newspapers also requires an analysis of the social and political context in which they operated. The participation of the press in the 1964 Civil-Military Coup occurred within a setting marked by class antagonisms. Despite the multiple possible interpretations of the coup, its dimension as an instrument to curb the reforms proposed by President João Goulart — which were causing growing dissatisfaction among business elites and conservative sectors — is undeniable. The radicalization of the presidential discourse at the end of 1963 significantly contributed to intensifying the opposition from these groups toward the government.

As market-oriented enterprises, newspapers are also subject to the pursuit of profit. Therefore, it is not unlikely — even if ethically questionable — that in certain contexts they align themselves with governments or political figures capable of favoring their economic interests. One must not ignore that the social structure is sustained by a complex web of political and economic interests. Thus, editorial support for a specific political agent can be rewarded through state advertising funds, easier access to credit lines, or other institutional benefits.

Therefore, any analysis of journalistic documents must critically consider the structural conditions. It is essential to understand the connections that may exist between the adopted editorial line and underlying corporate interests, especially in a

³ “[...] the limits of scientific practice are, as always, but to different degrees, inscribed in essence in the constraints that weigh on the institution and, through it, on the spirit of those who participate in it” (2004, p. 228).



period of political instability and ideological polarization such as the one preceding the 1964 coup.

Another key element in the analysis of the press is the political ideology and personal convictions of both the owners and the journalists and editors. The press, through its institutional agents, decides what will be considered “news” and how events will be narrated. It is up to the historian, equipped with theoretical and methodological tools, to question the narrative constructions and strive to understand the criteria and values that conferred visibility to certain facts, transforming them into subjects of journalistic coverage.

It is equally necessary to consider the readers’ position in relation to the conveyed discourse. There is a significant distance between what is said by the media and what is effectively understood, assimilated, and accepted by the public. Thus, the notion of media manipulation should be treated with caution. The reader cannot be conceived as a homogeneous and passive mass, moldable against its own interests. As Roger Chartier warns, “[...] texts do not [...] inscribe themselves in the reader as they would in soft wax” (1990, p. 25)⁴. We begin with the hypothesis that newspapers — especially in contexts of strong polarization — tend to reinforce perceptions already shared by their habitual readership, functioning more as mechanisms for legitimating and reinforcing pre-existing views than as instruments for persuading dissenting readers.

This same critical principle guided our analysis of the IBOPE opinion polls used in this study. We understand that these surveys should be treated like any other historical document — that is, with analytical rigor and attention to their conditions of origin. Such surveys should not be read as neutral mirrors of social reality, since, even when they do not explicitly identify their sponsors, they are almost always tied to the expectations and interests of their clients. Therefore, they may contain structural biases or thematic inductions. As Pierre Bourdieu warned (2004, p. 224), there are cases in which a survey “[...] will measure nothing but the effect exercised by the measuring instrument: this is what happens whenever the researcher imposes on the respondents a problematic that is not theirs — which will not stop them from responding to it, nonetheless, out of submission, indifference, or pretension.”⁵ Even so, we understand that these surveys

⁴ “[...] texts do not [...] register in the reader as they would in soft wax.” (1990, p. 25).

⁵ “[...] will not measure anything beyond the effect exerted by the measuring instrument: this is what happens whenever the researcher imposes on the interviewees a problem that is not theirs — which will not prevent them from responding to it, despite everything, through submission, indifference or pretension.”

offer important clues about social moods and trends in public opinion during politically sensitive moments.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHAOS: MEDIA, POLITICAL CRISIS, AND LEGITIMACY DISPUTES

In the specific case of *Folha de S. Paulo*, the discursive construction of the “communist threat” is a constant throughout its editorial trajectory. In 1956, for example, *Folha* sided with the Armed Forces attempting to prevent the candidacy of Juscelino Kubitschek. However, paradoxically, the *Grupo Folhas* also condemned the civil-military movement that sought to prevent the inauguration of the elected president, thus revealing another striking feature of its editorial line: its attachment to institutional legality.

According to Motta (2002), the construction of an anti-communist imaginary in Brazil dates back to the early 20th century. However, in certain historical moments, this imaginary was intensified, especially after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The 1935 episode known as the Communist Uprising significantly contributed to amplifying the perception of the “red threat” in the country: what had seemed like a distant danger came to be understood as a concrete and imminent reality. In the 1960s, the narrative of communist infiltration regained strength. It was believed that communists held strategic positions in various spheres of government and society. The memory of the 1935 uprising, in this context, was re-signified as a rhetorical tool for combating communism, being constantly reactivated as justification for repressive actions (MOTTA, 2002, pp. 83–84).

The victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 had ambivalent impacts in Latin America: it strengthened revolutionary groups while also catalyzing a reaction from anti-communist segments throughout the region. It is in this context that we must understand the role of *Folha de S. Paulo*, which throughout this period contributed to the dissemination of the idea of an imminent communist threat.

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, *Folha*’s opposition to populism — often associated with communism — became more assertive, and its criticisms began to take on a markedly more aggressive tone. Particularly noteworthy in this regard were the newspaper’s connections with two important ideological articulation organizations of the period: the Institute for Social Research and Studies (*Instituto de Pesquisas e Estudos*



Sociais – IPÊS) and the Brazilian Institute for Democratic Action (*Instituto Brasileiro de Ação Democrática* – IBAD).

This IPÊS/IBAD complex carried out a broad campaign against President João Goulart's government, mobilizing political and economic resources to influence public opinion and legislative processes. It operated through lobbying in Congress, funding anti-government public demonstrations, and especially by widely distributing propaganda materials with a strong anti-communist bias. According to Dreifuss (1981), the complex distributed approximately 2.5 million "educational" books and pamphlets that highlighted the supposed risks of communist infiltration and sought to garner support for containment actions against what came to be called the "red threat."

The group had strong ties with major media outlets, especially the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*; *Organizações Globo*; *TV Record*; *Jornal do Brasil*; and also with the *Grupo Folhas*. Otávio Frias, financial director of the *Grupo Folhas*, was a prominent figure within IPÊS. (DREIFUSS, 1981, p. 527)⁶

In addition to media owners' political opinions and convictions, it is essential to consider the intense economic pressures exerted on these groups to take a stand against João Goulart's government. Confronting powerful political and economic organizations — such as the IPÊS/IBAD complex or the Brazilian Advertisers Association (ABA) — could compromise media conglomerates' commercial interests and growth goals. In conclusion, it is essential to observe the influence exercised by advertisers over newspapers. Advertising, a central element in the financial sustainability of the press, not only determines the layout and space allocated to news stories but may also, albeit indirectly and subtly, influence the definition of editorial and political stances.

From the beginning of his presidency, Goulart worked to restore the presidential powers limited by the parliamentary system imposed as a condition for his rise to office. He sought to neutralize his opponents and publicly reaffirmed his commitment to democracy. The left, in turn, mobilized around the anticipation of a plebiscite on the form of government, seeing it as the only legitimate way to restore full powers to the president. This campaign engaged various sectors of civil society that, in 1961, had

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supported the legality movement to guarantee Goulart's inauguration. The National Congress gave in to pressure and scheduled the plebiscite for January 6, 1963.

Throughout 1963, criticism of the government intensified, especially in the press. The dominant narrative held that the country was rapidly moving toward political, economic, and institutional chaos. Negative economic indicators reinforced this perception: inflation, which had been 43.5% in 1961, rose to 61.72% in 1962 and reached 80.53% in 1963 (FIPE, 2014). Simultaneously, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) saw a significant decline: -8.6% in 1961; -6.6% in 1962; and a mere 0.6% growth in 1963 (IBGE, 2014). The increase in strikes and incidents of military insubordination further composed the scenario of instability explored by the press, solidifying the idea that the country was on the brink of collapse.

The criticisms directed by *Folha de S. Paulo* at the government's handling of the *Revolta dos Sargentos* (Sergeants' Revolt, 1963) which took place in Brasília in September 1963, were particularly severe. In an editorial published on the 13th of that month, the newspaper lamented the event in the following terms:

Once again the orderly and hard-working population of this country is struck by the somber news of an uprising against the constituted power. Groups of military personnel, whose weapons should serve exclusively to defend the institutions [...] turn them [...] against a decision of the highest court in the country. (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Sept 13, 1963, Editorial)⁷

Shortly after this episode, another moment of tension marked the political crisis: the request by President João Goulart for the declaration of a state of siege, presented to the National Congress on October 4, 1963. The proposal provoked intense negative reactions from the press, the parliamentary opposition, and military sectors. Three days later, facing widespread resistance, the president withdrew the request.

Folha de S. Paulo, in this context, was particularly forceful in its criticism of the presidential initiative. The newspaper suggested that the request may have resulted from pressure exerted by left-wing sectors on Goulart, insinuating even that the president's withdrawal indicated unstable leadership and submission to ideological interests that could compromise institutional order.

⁷ "Once again, the orderly and hard-working population of this country is faced with the grim news of an uprising against the established power. Groups of military personnel, whose weapons should serve exclusively for the defense of institutions [...] turn [...] against a decision by the highest court in the country." (*Folha de S. Paulo*, September 13, 1963, Editorial).

For the respondents, the demand was a fair right. However, for the military, it put the essence of the Armed Forces at risk and was indicated by many members of the forces as a fundamental cause for the “revolution” of 1964. According to Ferreira: “With the insurrection of the sergeants, most newspapers distanced themselves from the government and increased their criticism of the president. Messages about the danger of communism and the risk of Cubanization of the country intensified in particular.” (2011, p. 364)⁸

Still according to Ferreira (2011), the request for a state of siege by João Goulart was encouraged by the military ministers, who saw the measure as a necessary instrument for a possible federal intervention in Guanabara — then governed by Carlos Lacerda, one of the president's main opponents. However, the proposal found no support even among conservative sectors, as expected, nor even among left-wing leaders. The Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), Governor Miguel Arraes, and the National Union of Students (UNE) all expressed reservations about the measure, fearing that “exception laws would turn against them and the labor movement.”

In this scenario, the anti-communist rhetoric continued to intensify, at least in the pages of *Folha de S. Paulo*, which reiterated the communist threat as a justification for surveillance over social and union movements. An editorial published by the newspaper shortly after the state of siege crisis illustrates this climate of distrust and ideological mobilization, amplifying fear about an alleged attempt to subvert democratic order:

In recent times, the [communist] phenomenon has worsened. Some ministers of Education tried to make the youth a brigade in service of communism (...). They even advocated for the union of students, sergeants and non-commissioned officers, and peasants to implement in Brazil the reforms that have been so often spoken about recently. (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Jan 12, 1964)⁹

This editorial clearly shows how *Folha de S. Paulo* reinforced the idea that the basic reforms could be coercively implemented by leftist groups, which, according to the newspaper, would constitute a direct threat to institutional stability. This rhetoric fed rumors about a possible “breakdown of order” promoted by the government itself — a

⁸ “With the sergeants’ uprising, most newspapers distanced themselves from the government and increased their criticism of the president. In particular, messages about the danger of communism and the risk of the country becoming Cuban intensified” (2011, p. 364).

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narrative already widely disseminated in the press at the time. As Martins and Luca observe: “The argument that the president was preparing a coup was mobilized several times in the press, especially after Goulart requested that Congress declare a state of siege.” (2006, p. 97)¹⁰

Amid the growing dissemination of anti-communist discourse, it is worth highlighting a public opinion poll conducted by IBOPE during the same period, which addressed various political issues. Among the topics investigated, we highlight the data regarding the population's perception of communism — essential for understanding the tensions and underlying fears in Brazilian society at that time.

Table 1: Question: Do you believe that communism in Brazil is:

Response	Total	Class A/B Upper class/ Middle class	Class C Lower class	Class D Lowest-income group
Increasing	54%	57%	52%	48%
Decreasing	16%	17%	18%	9%
Staying the same	2%	4%	2%	1%
Don't know	28%	22%	28%	42%

IBOPE – Special Polls. PE 061 MR0277 (Survey 7). Public Opinion Poll conducted in São Paulo, February 1–8, 1964. No sponsor identified. 500 respondents.

We can see that the perception of a growing communist presence in Brazil did, in fact, exist. However, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the media contributed to the growth of this “communist fear.” It is worth noting that in another question from the same survey, only a minority of respondents believed that the left was composed of communists (16%). One cannot overlook the high rates (28%) of “don’t know” answers on the topic, which demonstrates either a lack of knowledge or a lack of concern about the issue, especially among the poorer classes, where the “don’t know” rate reached 42%. For Bourdieu, this is one of the main problems with such surveys — understanding the meaning of this “non-response,” which does not necessarily equate to ignorance: “It is known that non-responses are the scourge, the cross, and the misery

¹⁰ “[...] the argument that the president was preparing a coup was used several times in the press, especially after Goulart asked Congress to declare a state of siege. (2006, p. 97).”

of polling institutes, which try by all means to reduce them, minimize them, and even camouflage them.” (2004, p. 226)¹¹

Frequent strikes also served as ammunition for attacks from the newspaper. Goulart was constantly accused of encouraging them, in addition to supporting radicalism in relation to the basic reforms:

During the last two years of President João Goulart's administration, he has been the uncontested instigator of strike movements, to the point of creating a climate that favors their outbreak even when they are not in the interest of the Union. (*Folha de S. Paulo*, editorial, Jan 18, 1964)¹²

An IBOPE survey identifies an interesting trend regarding these strikes: as shown in Table 2, the “poor” classes generally considered them fair, while among the wealthier groups, the opposite perception prevailed.

Table 2: Question 9: In your opinion, are the strikes that have recently emerged fair, or are they unfair and unjustified?

Response	Total	Class A/B Upper class/ Middle class	Class C Lower class	Class D Lowest-income group
Fair	36%	34%	42%	31%
Unjustified	46%	51%	34%	41%
Don't know	18%	15%	24%	28%

IBOPE – Special Polls PE 054 MR0275. Public Opinion Poll conducted in Guanabara, 1st half of October 1963. No sponsor identified. Number of respondents not indicated. Data organized by the author.

For the military, this was — along with the “communist threat” and the breakdown of hierarchy — one of the serious issues of the time, which they claimed drove people to the streets demanding military intervention.

You woke up not knowing whether there would be electricity or cooking gas; you left home unsure whether there would be transport to get to and from work; even daily meals were uncertain, both in terms of acquiring food items and preparing them. (MOTTA, 2003, p. 256)¹³

¹¹ “It is known that non-answers are the scourge, the cross and the misery of research institutes, which try by all means to reduce them, minimize them and even camouflage them.” (2004, p. 226)

¹² It has been, during the last two years of President João Goulart's administration, an undisputed stimulator of strike movements to the point of creating a climate that favors their outbreak even when it is not in the Union's interest. (*Folha de São Paulo*, editorial, January 18, 1964)

¹³ People woke up with doubts about the supply of electricity and cooking gas; they left home uncertain about whether there would be transport to get there and back; even daily meals were uncertain, both in terms of obtaining food items and their preparation. (MOTTA, 2003, p. 256)

The deterioration of the economic situation and the multiplication of strikes significantly contributed to the aggravation of the political crisis and to the strengthening of the narrative that João Goulart — or the left-wing sectors that supported him — was planning a coup against the institutions. This hypothesis was repeatedly explored by the press, especially *Folha de S. Paulo*.

In an editorial published on February 20, 1964, the newspaper once again suggested that Goulart might be planning a coup, this time through a popular referendum: “[...] it is quite possible that the plebiscite aims to ask whether Mr. João Goulart should or should not remain in power at the end of his term.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Feb 20, 1964, Editorial)¹⁴

The plebiscite referred to in the editorial concerned Goulart’s proposal to hold a popular referendum on the basic reforms. *Folha*, in an ironic tone, insinuated that the president’s true intention was to measure his popularity with the electorate and possibly pave the way for an extension of his term or a re-election attempt — a scenario that the newspaper portrayed as a veiled threat to democratic order. Other editorials and articles published during the same period reinforced this interpretation, denouncing what they considered to be a “pretended” intention of re-election, even though such a possibility was not formally under public debate.

Signaling a “change in the winds,” *Folha* began to call on the Armed Forces to prevent this “coup” against the institutions. During the episode of the state of siege request, as already noted, the newspaper had called on deputies to prevent a “coup.” Now, the military “heard” that call — both from the press and from the “streets.” According to Leônidas Pires Gonçalves — a lieutenant colonel in 1964 — the entire media was against Goulart. As expressed in the famous “Enough!”¹⁵ campaign, all newspapers called on the Army to act, as did society itself: “The people asked, the people cried out for us to act.” (MOTTA, 2003, p. 87)¹⁶

The possibility of re-election, although viewed with suspicion by the press and conservative sectors, was not rejected by a broad portion of the population. According to a national IBOPE poll (Table 3), the majority of respondents were favorable to the idea that João Goulart could run for president again. In Porto Alegre, specifically, over

¹⁴ “[...] It is quite possible that the plebiscite is intended to ask whether or not Mr. João Goulart should remain in power at the end of his term.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, February 20, 1964, Editorial).

¹⁵ Title of the famous editorial published by the Rio de Janeiro newspaper *Correio da Manhã* on March 31. On the following day, the newspaper released another important editorial: “Fora” (Out).

¹⁶ “The people asked, the people shouted for us to do it.” (MOTTA, 2003, p. 87)

50% of respondents stated that they would vote for Goulart if his candidacy were permitted.

These data challenge the narrative of Goulart's alleged lack of popular appeal, frequently propagated by his opponents. Contrary to what the military and mainstream media claimed, Goulart's support base was not necessarily collapsing — at least not according to public opinion trends at the time. This discrepancy between popular reception and hegemonic discourse reinforces the need to critically examine the forms of mediation between public opinion, the press, and political power in the pre-coup conjuncture.

Table 3: Question: If President João Goulart were also allowed to run for the Presidency:

City	Would Vote	Would Not Vote	Don't Know
Fortaleza	57%	34%	9%
Recife	60%	28%	12%
Salvador	59%	32%	9%
Belo Horizonte	39%	56%	5%
Rio de Janeiro	51%	44%	5%
São Paulo	40%	52%	8%
Curitiba	41%	45%	14%
Porto Alegre	52%	44%	4%

IBOPE – Special Polls PE 060 MR0277. Public Opinion Poll conducted March 9–26, 1964, in several cities, with 500 respondents in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro and 400 in other cities. Data organized by the author.

The numbers suggested that João Goulart would be re-elected, if his candidacy for re-election were feasible. Obviously, this was a hypothetical scenario, since his eligibility would depend on both political and legal-constitutional discussions. Still, the data reveal that the possibility of his re-election was present and was considered a concrete prospect in the 1964 political horizon.



REFORMS, POPULAR MOBILIZATIONS, AND THE ADVANCE OF THE COUP

Another factor that contributed to the intensification of the institutional crisis was the set of proposals grouped under the label of “Basic Reforms.” On March 13, 1964, a large rally was held in Guanabara in support of the reforms. For many observers and analysts at the time, this event definitively marked Goulart’s turn to the left. The press reacted immediately and forcefully: editorials and news reports characterized the rally as an attempt to subvert order and reinforced the idea that the president was promoting a radicalization incompatible with the frameworks of representative democracy.

Once again, however, public opinion data allow for an alternative reading. Surveys conducted by IBOPE (Tables 4 and 5) show that the perception of the interviewees — regardless of their social status — was more favorable to the reforms than the media discourse suggested. This dissociation between the narrative conveyed by the newspapers and the population’s stance highlights the complexity of the political and media field of the period and imposes on the historian the challenge of confronting competing versions of Brazil’s recent history.

Table 4 – Question: Regarding agrarian reform, are you:

Response	Total	Class A/B	Class C	Class D
In favor	67%	67%	67%	66%
Against	12%	13%	11%	9%
Don’t know	21%	20%	22%	25%

IBOPE – Special Polls PE 061 MR0277. Public Opinion Survey conducted between February 1–8 in São Paulo with 500 respondents. No sponsor identified. Data organized by the author.

The national survey also revealed broad support for basic reforms in other parts of the country. These numbers — which reached 82% support in Rio de Janeiro — show that the views of newspapers, the military, and public opinion on the matter were quite distinct.

Table 5 – Question: Do you consider agrarian reform to be:

City	Necessary	Unnecessary	Don't Know
Fortaleza	68%	13%	19%
Recife	70%	7%	23%
Salvador	74%	9%	17%
Belo Horizonte	67%	16%	17%
Rio de Janeiro	82%	9%	9%
São Paulo	66%	13%	21%
Curitiba	61%	11%	28%
Porto Alegre	70%	17%	13%

IBOPE – Special Polls PE 060 MR0277. Public Opinion Survey conducted between March 9–26, 1964, in several cities, with 500 respondents in São Paulo and Rio and 400 in the others. Data organized by the author.

According to the newspaper, Goulart's reformist discourse was merely a rhetorical device used to mask the administrative incapacity of the government: "We have witnessed many reform proposals that amount to bombastic speeches or irresponsible platforms conceived to impress with easy promises, but entirely detached from the needs of the country." (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Jan 2, 1964, Editorial)¹⁷

However, another IBOPE survey (Table 7) indicated that the respondents did not see Goulart's actions as demagogic:

Table 6 – Question: Which of the following interpretations best reflects your opinion on the latest measures by President João Goulart?

Response	Total	Class A/B Upper class/ Middle class	Class C Lower class	Class D Lowest- income group
They are demagogic measures that seek only to boost Goulart's and PTB's popularity	10%	15%	7%	4%
They are measures of real interest to the people and the country	55%	51%	56%	60%

¹⁷ We have witnessed many reform proposals that are nothing more than bombastic speeches or irresponsible platforms designed to catch the eye with easy promises, but completely divorced from the needs of the environment. (*Folha de São Paulo*, January 2, 1964, Editorial)

They are measures to establish a communist regime in Brazil	16%	22%	13%	8%
Don't know	19%	12%	24%	28%

IBOPE – Special Polls PE 060 MR0277. Survey conducted in the cities of São Paulo (500 respondents), Araraquara (300), and Avai (150), between March 20 and 30, 1964, commissioned by the Federation of Commerce of the State of São Paulo. Only São Paulo data shown. Organized by the author.

The data indicate that support for basic reforms was more prominent among lower-income segments. Still, even among the socially advantaged, the prevailing view was not that the reform proposals were demagogic or part of a communist conspiracy. Once again, we observe a dissonance between the “popular voices” captured by opinion polls and the dominant discourse in the mainstream press, which insisted on portraying the reforms as a threat to the prevailing social and economic order.

According to Ferreira (2011, p. 429): “The March 13 rally unified right-wing conspirators — civilians and military alike — in their actions to depose the president, and also affected liberal sectors, raising serious doubts among them about Goulart’s true intentions.”¹⁸ Thus, segments of the middle class and the bourgeoisie took to the streets to demand the president's removal. The *Marcha da Família com Deus, pela Liberdade* (March of the Family with God for Liberty) — held in São Paulo on March 19 — was a direct response to the Guanabara rally. This demonstration was also presented as a popular outcry against a “moral crisis.”

A few days later, on March 26, 1964, another episode further escalated the political tension: *Revolta dos Marinheiros* (Sailors’ Revolt) in Rio de Janeiro. Often cited as the immediate trigger for the coup, the revolt was, in reality, only the spark for a coup process already underway. *Folha de S. Paulo*, in line with its editorial stance, firmly sided with “order,” criticizing both the uprising and the way the president handled the crisis. In an editorial published on March 29, the newspaper stated: “The solution given by the President of the Republic to the Navy crisis has all the characteristics of capitulation. Indiscipline emerged victorious, and the undisciplined deserve nothing less than a medal of honor.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Mar 29, 1964, Editorial)¹⁹

¹⁸ “[...] The March 13 rally unified the right-wing conspirators, civilians and military, in their actions to depose the president, and also acted among the liberals, casting serious suspicions among them about Goulart’s real intentions.”

¹⁹ “The solution given by the President of the Republic to the crisis in the Navy has all the characteristics of a capitulation. Indiscipline has emerged victorious and the undisciplined are only missing a medal of honor for their merit.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, March 29, 1964, Editorial).

In the following days, the political scenario became even more unstable. On March 30, during a speech at the Automóvel Clube do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro, talking to sergeants and supporters, Goulart adopted a more radical tone, reaffirming his commitment to the basic reforms and criticizing conservative and military sectors. The press responded harshly, interpreting the speech as a provocation and as new evidence that the president intended to break with institutional legality. “If the March 13 rally was unfortunate (...) even more unfortunate was the president’s speech the day before yesterday, in which Mr. João Goulart seemed to challenge the entire military officer corps.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Apr 1, 1964, Editorial)²⁰

The speech, broadcast live on television, accelerated the coup that has originally planned for April 2. On March 31, General Olímpio Mourão Filho, commander of the 4th Military Region based in Juiz de Fora (MG), ordered his troops to march toward Rio de Janeiro, launching the military action. From that moment, support for the movement grew rapidly, including among officers previously considered legalists.

According to Ferreira (2011, p. 453): “The majority of the officer corps in all three branches, until then reluctant to violate institutions, began to give in to the arguments of the coup minority. For them, the very survival of the military institution was at stake.”²¹ The perception of generalized chaos and threat to the Armed Forces’ hierarchy — continually fed by events such as the *Revolta dos Marinheiros* and Goulart’s speech — became central in the decision of many officers who had previously resisted institutional rupture.

It is not plausible, however, to attribute the officers’ adherence solely to the influence of the press. The perception of disorder and collapse was real and widely shared. The role of the media — particularly *Folha de S. Paulo* — seems to have been less about shaping opinion and more about providing symbolic legitimacy for military intervention, portraying the coup as a necessary act to preserve order and legality.

On April 2, after the ousting of João Goulart, *Folha* published an editorial justifying the military action as a constitutional defense: “The terms of the II Army commander’s manifesto are clear. There was no rebellion against the law. In fact, the Armed Forces

²⁰ If the rally on March 13 was unfortunate (...) even more unfortunate was the presidential demonstration the day before yesterday, in which Mr. João Goulart seems to have wanted to launch a challenge to all the officers of the military corporations. (*Folha de São Paulo*, April 1, 1964, Editorial)

²¹ “the majority of the officers of the three forces, until then reluctant to strike at the institutions, began to give in to the arguments of the coup-plotting minority. For them, the military corporation itself was at risk.”

are meant to protect the nation and guarantee constitutional powers, the law, and order.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Apr 2, 1964, Editorial)²²

With the rise of General Humberto de Alencar Castello Branco to the presidency, the newspaper's editorial line remained favorable to the new regime. In an editorial titled “*O presidente de todos*” “The President of All,” *Folha* expressed strong support for the new head of the Executive, reinforcing his image as moderate and committed to democracy.

Yesterday, the nation heard from the President of the Republic, during his inauguration, the words it longed to hear (...). We are pleased to note that his inaugural speech reaffirmed all our expectations and renewed our hope that a new phase has indeed begun for Brazil. (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Apr 16, 1964)²³

Another revealing editorial was titled “The Necessary Sacrifice”:

Our words today are addressed, in a very special way, to all those who understand (...) that the redemption of the homeland requires more than daily work and trust (...). They are directed to those willing to sacrifice their interests, goods, and rights so that the nation may be reborn, fully democratized. (*Folha de S. Paulo*, Apr 21, 1964)²⁴

The shift in *Folha de S. Paulo*'s editorial stance is particularly revealing. During João Goulart's presidency, the newspaper systematically attacked him, portraying him as a threat to institutional order and legal rights. After the 1964 coup, however, the same publication began to defend the suppression of constitutional guarantees as a necessary — and even desirable — step toward restoring democracy. This rhetorical inversion, though paradoxical, reveals the legitimizing function that part of the press played in the context of the democratic breakdown.

²² “The terms of the manifesto of the commander of the II Army are clear. There was no rebellion against the law. In fact, the Armed Forces are intended to protect the country and guarantee constitutional powers, law and order.” (*Folha de S. Paulo*, April 2, 1964, Editorial).

²³ Yesterday, the nation heard from the President of the Republic, at his inauguration ceremony, the words it longed to hear (...). It is with satisfaction that we record that his inauguration speech reaffirmed all our expectations and reinvigorated our hope that a new phase has truly begun for Brazil. (April 16, 1964)

²⁴ Our words today are addressed in a very special way to all those who understand (...) that for the redemption of the country it is necessary to give more than just daily work and trust (...). They are addressed to those who are willing to sacrifice interests, assets and rights so that the nation may re-emerge as soon as possible, fully democratized. (April 21, 1964)



CONCLUSION

From the evidence presented, it becomes clear that *Folha de S. Paulo* played an active role in the effort to destabilize Goulart's government. Through the construction of a narrative of chaos, the emphasis on military insubordination, and the constant evocation of the communist threat, the newspaper helped fuel the crisis atmosphere and pave the way for military intervention. However, the data analyzed indicate that this effort did not consistently translate into widespread public opposition to the government or to the basic reforms. On the contrary, public opinion polls suggest considerable support for the proposed social changes, especially among the lower classes.

These tensions between the press, public opinion, and political power reveal the complexity of the pre-coup context and indicate the need for analytical approaches that interweave multiple dimensions — discursive, institutional, and social — in assessing the role of the media in processes of democratic rupture.

If manipulation were truly the powerful ghost it is made out to be, society would be nothing more than a kind of corral dominated by Machiavellian overseers. (...) The power of manipulation has been exaggerated both by its critics and by its opportunists. The former imagine secret top-level agreements to dominate hearts and minds — an expression they are quite fond of — without those hearts and minds even noticing what is happening around them. (...) The latter want to take advantage of manipulation's supposed power: they believe they can endlessly fool citizens with their recurrent lies. (BUCCI, 2000, p. 177)²⁵

Indeed, it is hardly plausible to claim that the media possess absolute power of manipulation. The reader, endowed with critical capacity, can reinterpret, accept, or reject the news based on their individual trajectory, convictions, and expectations. As previously noted, the newspaper communicates more incisively with its own “public” — that is, with those who already share the same opinions and values upheld by that outlet. In this sense — as the opinion polls analyzed suggest — criticism of the Goulart government was sharper among the more affluent sectors of society.

Thus, the press played a relevant role, especially in reinforcing discourses already consolidated within certain social groups. This does not mean, however, that its historical responsibility should be minimized, as the media were systematically

²⁵ Se a manipulação fosse realmente o fantasma poderoso que dizem ser, a sociedade seria apenas uma espécie de curral dominado por capatazes maquiavélicos. (...) O poder da manipulação vem sendo exacerbado tanto pelos seus críticos como pelos seus aproveitadores. Os primeiros enxergam acordos de cúpula secretos para dominar corações e mentes — expressão que lhes é muito cara — sem que os corações e mentes se dêem conta do que acontece em sua volta. (...) Já os aproveitadores querem tirar vantagem da possibilidade de manipulação: acreditam que podem enganar ininterruptamente os cidadãos com suas mentiras recorrentes. (BUCCI, 2000, p. 177)



employed as central instruments in legitimizing military action, acting as supposed spokespersons for public opinion.



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