

#### Artículo de reflexión

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Brasil

## Discourses on humor, freedom of expression, and offense in articles published by two Brazilian newspapers between 2012 and 2016

## Discursos sobre el humor, la libertad de expresión y la ofensa en artículos publicado en dos periódicos brasileños entre el 2012 y el 2016

## Discursos sobre humor, liberdade de expressão e ofensa em artigos publicados por dois jornais brasileiros entre 2012 e 2016

### Abstract

This paper performs a discursive analysis of discourses on humor, freedom of expression, and offense in two important Brazilian newspapers. Journalistic articles published in *Folha de S. Paulo* and *O Estado de S. Paulo* between 2012 and 2016 are examined. We demonstrate that controversies related to humorous expression in public debate are marked by discourses on collisions between fundamental rights. The analyzed corpus is composed of 36 texts, in which a predominance of a liberal discourse on freedom of expression predominates. Our discussion of the findings indicates that journalistic material is characterized by the invisibilization or the framing of the other through simplistic categories. In conclusion, we discuss the role of communication field in such debates, highlighting the urgent need of a media criticism that is ethically committed to the representation of otherness.

**Keywords:** Discourse analysis, Journalism, Humor, Offense, Media criticism



### Resumen

Este artículo propone analizar los discursos sobre humor, libertad de expresión y ofensa que emergen en periódicos brasileños. Como punto de partida a lo análisis discursivo, tomamos materias publicadas en dos importantes vehículos de

Brasil, Folha de S. Paulo y O Estado de S. Paulo, entre 2012 y 2016. Como buscaremos mostrar a lo largo de este trabajo, las polémicas involucrando manifestaciones humorísticas traídas a luz en la esfera pública están marcadas por discursos sobre la colisión entre derechos fundamentales. Con este fin, se analizó un corpus de 36 textos periodísticos, cuyo estudio indicó el predominio de un discurso liberal sobre la libertad de expresión entre los vehículos investigados. Además, la discusión de nuestros hallazgos indican que el material periodístico se caracteriza por la insensibilización del Otro o por el encuadramiento del Otro a partir de categorías binarias. Como conclusión, proponemos discutir el papel del campo de la Comunicación en este debate, destacando la urgencia de una crítica de medios comprometida con la representación de alteridad.

Conflicto de intereses: La autora ha declarado que no existen intereses en competencia.

**Palabras clave:** Análisis del Discurso, Periodismo, Humor, Ofensa, Crítica de Medios.

## Resumo

Este artigo propõe analisar os discursos sobre humor, liberdade de expressão e ofensa que emergem em jornais brasileiros. Como ponto de partida à análise discursiva, tomamos matérias publicadas em dois importantes veículos do Brasil, Folha de S. Paulo e O Estado de S. Paulo, entre 2012 e 2016. Como procuraremos mostrar ao longo deste trabalho, as polêmicas envolvendo manifestações humorísticas trazidas à luz na esfera pública são marcadas por discursos sobre a colisão entre direitos fundamentais. Para tal, foi analisado um corpus formado por 36 textos jornalísticos, cujo estudo indicou a predominância de um discurso liberal sobre liberdade de expressão entre os veículos pesquisados. Além disso, a discussão de nossos achados indica que o material jornalístico é caracterizado pela invisibilização do Outro ou pelo enquadramento do Outro a partir de categorias binárias. Como conclusão, propomos discutir o papel do campo da Comunicação nesse debate, destacando a urgência de uma crítica de mídia comprometida com a representação da alteridade.

**Palavras-chave:** Análise do Discurso, Jornalismo, Humor, Ofensa, Crítica de Mídia.

## Introduction

Representation is not to be understood merely as a conceptual premise of linguistic activity, but as a way in which intervention into a system of *enunciability* – following Foucault’s concept of the archive – related to a specific time and place. Consideration of the capillarity of power and its link to discursive practices recall Foucault’s words, for whom language and discourse are more than simply legitimizing elements of political strategy: “[...] discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, 1981: 52).

Taking a pragmatic approach to language, here, oppression is understood as passing through the performative character of representations that, far from being neutral, articulate relations of power, not only through the ideological marks of discourse, but also and above all through their irruption within specific dynamics of power. Therefore, enunciations always maintain the intention of marking their enunciators’ position and,

consequently, of determining a place, often one of submission place, to the receptor (Mondal, 2014).

Although the semantic dimension implied in all political disputes has been an object of awareness for a long time, over recent decades, we have observed the emergence of epistemological reconfigurations of perception concerning the interweaving of language and power. Increasingly, having a symbolic or discursive plan is not considered an accessory or complementary element in political action but rather a fundamental component to the establishment of power relations. In the Brazilian case, this type of discourse has been circulating at least since the beginning of the 1990s, when they drew public attention stemming from controversies around the power of words to crystallize prejudices, such as in discussions associated with so-called political correctness.

Here, we seem to witness a discursive formation that emerges from two main epistemological shifts. On the one hand, we see the *linguistic turn* of the twentieth century; on the other, there is the current emergence of discussion of *identity politics* in academia and politics (Hall, 1994). According to Stuart Hall, through the linguistic turn, our relationship with reality and social life comes to be recognized as being mediated through and within language, and it is seen that language and discourse are fundamental to the operations of power. At the same time, shared social identities emerge as mobilizing factors, reflecting the expansion of the political sphere toward spaces of informal social interaction and scenarios of everyday life (Hall, 1994).

This context is fundamental to this investigation because it allows us to understand the discursive network in which many contemporary Brazilian controversies concerning humorous productions emerge, such as those which are self-described as politically incorrect.

Here, we reflect on the contours of the public debate regarding humor, freedom of expression, and offense in Brazil. To achieve this goal, we present here a case study of publications in two major Brazilian newspapers: *O Estado de S. Paulo* and *Folha de S. Paulo*. We propose to track and analyze discourses in both newspapers regarding controversies over humorous media productions and the debate on freedom of expression. The period of our observation extends from 2012 to 2016. We base our analyses on Maingueneau's (2008) and Charaudeau's (2010) considerations, using the following two concepts in particular: *interdiscursivity* and *circulating discourse*.

At the same time, following the reflections of Mondal (2014) and Barendt (2007), we problematize the liberal discourse on freedom of expression to outline some paths for a more complex justification of protected free expression. To clarify the role of the field of communication in this debate, we propose that it is necessary to develop a media criticism that is ethically committed to the challenge of the representation of otherness. Our proposal is a theoretical contribution to complicate the understanding of freedom of expression.



## Corpus description and analytical paths

Drawing on five years of journalistic production in two newspapers, we found 36 texts (15 texts from *O Estado de S. Paulo* and 21 from *Folha de S. Paulo*) that broach topics and episodes related to humor, freedom of expression, and conflicts between democratic values and constitutional rights. *O Estado de S. Paulo* published fewer texts on such themes in the given period than *Folha de S. Paulo*, probably because the latter traditionally allocates more space to opinion articles.

The majority of found material in both focuses on the terrorist attack against the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015. Of the texts published by *O Estado de S. Paulo*, 73% concern that episode, and 43% of the *Folha de S. Paulo* texts are directly related to it. This concentration not by chance. Beyond the shock and horror caused by the attack – its terrorist motive clearly mobilizes journalistic criteria of newsworthiness – the death of twelve people working at *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters evokes crucial aspects of prevalent discourses on freedom of expression in liberal democracies in the West.

The first step to be taken in our analysis of this research corpus is to map semantic repetitions that reinforce themselves and indicate the positivity of the discourses that cross and constitute journalistic articles. Here, *isotopy* is an important concept. As Patrick Charaudeau and Dominique Maingueneau point out, isotopy relates to procedures that construct the coherence of a discursive sequence: “Based on the redundancy of a same trait in the development of enunciations, such coherence is mainly concerned with the semantic organization of the text”<sup>1</sup> (Charaudeau, Maingueneau, 2008: 292). Among the range of conceptual possibilities of isotopy typology, we are interested in strictly semantic isotopies, which repeat the same categories of meaning.

After the identification of the main isotopic features that mark the articles, we can characterize the circulating discourses that cross the pages of the newspapers. According to Charaudeau, circulating discourse is “an empirical sum of statements with definitional aim on what are the beings, the actions, the events, their characteristics, their behaviors and the judgments attached to them”<sup>2</sup> (CHARAUDEAU, 2010: 118). In that sense, journalism is not an origin of discourse; it is rather a mediator or arranger of already circulating discourses in a given historical-social context (creating a mediation that is obviously partial and opaque way).

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1 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “Fundada na redundância de um mesmo traço no desenvolvimento dos enunciados, tal coerência diz respeito principalmente à organização semântica do texto”.

2 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “[...] uma soma empírica de enunciados com visada definicional sobre o que são os seres, as ações, os acontecimentos, suas características, seus comportamentos e os julgamentos a eles ligados”.

## Circulating discourses in journalistic articles

In our research corpus, journalistic articles host two main circulating discourses, both of which are well delimited and prominent in public debate. The first one concerns humor. We highlight three major isotopic marks in this discourse. The first reiterates that humor is a wilder type of cultural production or, in some cases, a less domestic or more spontaneous one; in this understanding, humor can present truths that would otherwise remain hidden. This conception is particularly evident in an article published on January 26, 2015, by *Folha de S. Paulo*.

He [Freud] classifies two types of humor. One, shallow, scraped, explores individual or behavioral characteristics. Freud discards it and dwells on the humor that reveals and exposes the nature of things, attacks moral dogmas, representatives of institutions and serious ideas, which are believed to be untouchable.

To this humor of the word, the cartoon brings a new visual dimension: it uses resources of the language of dreams, establishes explosive references of immediate understanding, reorganizes reality by dismantling hidden mechanisms. Its irreverence troubles the powerful. It does not project the real, it proposes another system of explanation of reality. The public, between author and object of the charge, laughs at discovering the reality that was hidden.<sup>3</sup> (Ceccon, 2015, *online*)

The second isotopic mark, derived from the first, relates to the idea that humor is authorized to say things that are inconvenient or even offensive, since it is not to be taken literally. This conception is presupposed, for example, in an article written by Luiz Felipe Pondé, published in *Folha* in 2014, which discussed controversies attached to videos created by the Brazilian comedy group *Porta dos Fundos* that contain parodies of biblical passages considered disrespectful by religious leaders: “Humor cannot be considered to be ‘lack of respect’. Humor is not a police case. When the public vocabulary has this bias, we are on the threshold of censorship”<sup>4</sup> (Pondé, 2014, *online*).

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3 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “Ele [Freud] classifica dois tipos de humor. Um, raso, escrachado, explora características individuais ou comportamentais. Freud o descarta e se debruça sobre o humor que desvela e expõe a natureza das coisas, ataca portadores de dogmas morais, representantes de instituições e ideias sérias, que se creem intocáveis.

A esse humor da palavra, a charge traz nova dimensão visual: usa recursos da linguagem dos sonhos, estabelece referências explosivas de imediata compreensão, reorganiza a realidade desmontando mecanismos ocultos. Sua irreverência incomoda os poderosos. Não projeta o real, propõe outro sistema de explicação da realidade. O público, entre autor e objeto da charge, ri ao descobrir a realidade que estava escondida”.

4 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “O humor não pode ser considerado ‘falta de respeito’. Humor não é caso de polícia. Quando o vocabulário público toma esse viés, estamos às portas da censura”.



The third isotopic mark that characterizes the circulating discourse on humor in newspapers comes from the first two: because it is both *less serious* – more irreverent, less literal – as well as *more serious* – more revealing, less submissive – humor is a fundamental form for the expression of democratic values. This perspective appears, for example, in the article “The First Victim is Humor,” written by Eugênio Bucci and published in *O Estado de S. Paulo* on January 8, 2015. The text focuses on the terrorist attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters:

By killing irony, by cutting it at the root (and by the neck), the perpetrators of carnage sought to kill the very spirit of modernity. If there is a distinctive feature of modernity, it is irony, this skeptical sophistication of the human spirit that goes through the refusal of the argument of authority – and the more or less ostentatious ridicule of the blistering figure of authority. Irony doubts power because it knows that the subject, in public and in private, does not govern all his acts and all his words. While some salute and others kneel, irony laughs.<sup>5</sup> (Bucci, 2015, *online*)

In relation to the humor discourse, we highlight a second circulating discourse that is fundamental to the construction of enunciations in journalistic articles: liberal discourse on the freedom of expression. The first isotopic mark of this discourse is the presupposition that speech and action must be separated, and on this basis, verbal expression can be understood as less capable – or in some cases, incapable – of generating harm. This idea is implicit in the majority of journalistic texts that compose our corpus, either through silence regarding possible damage generated by the manifestations in focus or through the granting of a voice to the affirmation of superiority of free expression in comparison to demands for reparation from the offended.

The second isotopic mark is a defense of the importance of tolerating contradictory opinions to allow the truth to surface, which presupposes a confidence in the capacity of human rationality to separate truth from lies. This defense of a supposed free market of ideas, according to which good ideas naturally supplant bad ones, appears presupposed, for example, in an editorial published on January 8, 2015, in *Folha de S. Paulo*, also regarding the *Charlie Hebdo* case:

In an environment in which some young Westerners are fascinated by Muslim radicalism, the effort and courage required to disarm obscurantism, once

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5 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “Matando a ironia, cortando-a pela raiz (e pelo pescoço), os autores da carnificina pretendiam matar o próprio espírito da modernidade. Se existe um traço distintivo da modernidade, é a ironia, essa sofisticação cética do espírito humano que passa pela recusa do argumento da autoridade – e pela ridicularização, mais ou menos ostensiva, da figura empolada da autoridade. A ironia duvida do poder porque sabe que o sujeito, em público e em privado, não governa todos os seus atos e todas as suas palavras. Enquanto uns batem continência e outros se ajoelham, a ironia ri”.



again and as always, pass for freedom of expression and – more than ever – for the talent of mocking, of joking, of laughing.<sup>6</sup> (Folha de S. Paulo, 2015, *online*)

The third isotopic mark on freedom of expression highlighted here stems from the first two. If expression is less capable of generating harm than other forms of conduct, and since it is necessary to allow ideas – including false or offensive ones – to come to surface to allow truth to be uncovered, we have sufficient reason to believe that freedom of expression in particular must be protected. In the same way, we are introduced to the idea that any form of controlling expression, even in service of other democratic rights, becomes censorship.

Due to this perception, among the texts of our *corpus*, the predominant understanding sees the relationship between freedom of expression and other fundamental rights, especially that of human dignity, as in conflict. It is recurrently asserted in our corpus, explicitly or implicitly, that broader protections afforded to diffuse rights would entail a threat to freedom of expression. We read, for example, in an article in *Folha de S. Paulo*: “Brazil nowadays is a country divided between a liberal culture, centered on the individual and on the valorization of autonomy and self-responsibility, and an authoritarian one, centered on the ‘collective’ and the cult of resentment and dependence”<sup>7</sup> (Pondé, 2014, *online*). In other words: the more protection of dignity and diffuse rights, the less freedom.

We should note that, despite the existence of the discursive regularities we identify, the texts of our *corpus* are not unanimous in their conception of freedom of expression and humor. Dissonant voices are heard, especially in relation to the recognition of the offensive potential of some forms of expression. An example quotation from an article by Antonio Prata published in *Folha de S. Paulo* follows:

Humor is an ambiguous toy. When we laugh at our weaknesses, we admit defects that, without this welcome anesthetic, we would be unable to face. Disarming us, laughter drives us closer to the other – after all, we are all partners in this pierced boat.

Laughing at the weakest is the opposite. In this case, laughter serves to camouflage our weaknesses by pointing out them (or inventing them) in others. [...]

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6 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “Num ambiente em que alguns jovens ocidentais se sentem fascinados pelo radicalismo muçulmano, o esforço e a coragem exigidos para desarmar o obscurantismo passam, mais uma vez e como sempre, pela liberdade de expressão e – mais do que nunca – pelo talento de trocar, de brincar, de rir”.

7 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “O Brasil hoje é um país rasgado entre uma cultura liberal, centrada no indivíduo e na valorização da autonomia e autorresponsabilidade, e uma autoritária, centrada no ‘coletivo’ e no culto do ressentimento e da dependência”.

It is not that there are forbidden subjects for humor: one can joke about religion, color, gender. The question [...] is which side of the joke you put yourself.<sup>8</sup> (Prata, 2012, *online*).

We might also highlight another dissonant example in our corpus: on March 31, 2012, *O Estado de S. Paulo* published an article entitled “The Joke That Oppresses,” by Conrado Hübner Mendes. The author asserts that the protection of democratically recognized principles, in cases of evident offenses against stigmatized social groups, for example, does not represent a diminution of freedom of expression but rather an important effort to promote values such as tolerance and equality that are fundamental to the exercise of freedom itself. However, this is an exceptional case: among most of the analyzed texts, the prevailing understanding that prevails is that the protection of rights that may limit forms of expression is an enemy of freedom of expression.

## Results, discussion, and some problematizations

The two atypical examples we mention above, similar to other very specific cases found in our corpus, are illustrative of the existence of discourses that are alternative to the liberal conception of freedom of expression. Nevertheless, as with all exceptions, these cases in part simply confirm the existence of the rule: by positioning themselves as marginalized discourses, these alternative visions exhibit the existence of a hegemonic vision that they intend to problematize. Therefore, it should be noted that the presence of semantic repetitions in the texts, far from entailing an univocal view, is on the contrary representative of a prevalence in a significant part of journalistic production of an understanding of freedom of expression as an absolute value, immune to restrictions or limits. This implies a distinct non-recognition of the legitimacy of many forms of offense.

This conception is especially conspicuous in cases of conflicts between rights involving humorous publications in newspapers, such as cartoons: in the texts we analyze here, freedom of press is presented as requiring or deserving protection that is even stronger than other forms of expression. This view is associated with the understood public function of journalism, namely, spreading information; this a fundamental element among democratic values and confers legitimacy to journalism itself. Charges and cartoons, in this view, are described as being doubly worthy of special protection: because they rely on a discourse on humor and because they occupy space in journalism.

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8 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “O humor é um brinque-do ambíguo. Quando rimos de nossas fraquezas, admitimos defeitos que, sem essa bem-vinda anestesia, seríamos incapazes de encarar. Desarmando-nos, o riso nos irmana com o próximo – afinal, somos todos companheiros nesta barca furada.

Rir do mais fraco é o contrário. Nesse caso, o riso serve para camuflar nossas fraquezas, apontando-as (ou inventando-as) nos outros. [...]

Não é que haja assuntos proibidos para o humor: pode-se fazer piada com religião, cor, gênero. A questão [...] é de que lado da piada você se coloca”.



This positioning is particularly evident in the journalistic articles on the *Charlie Hebdo* case from January 2015. Beyond the upheaval caused by the episode, the engagement of the newspapers in defense of freedom of the press is a central factor that justifies the majority presence of this case in our corpus. At the same time, the coverage of the *Charlie Hebdo* case is exceptional among the remaining analyzed texts: here, the defense of freedom of expression becomes passionate, in an unitary assertion of this principle as an absolute value and as a great and distinctive feature of the Western world.

The most important point regarding the decisive presence of the *Charlie Hebdo* case in the debates in our corpus seems to lie in the fact that, by placing the issue of the other at the center of debate, the episode refers to the very condition of possibility of liberal discourse on freedom of expression. According to Maingueneau (2008), this interdiscursive relationship underlies the identity of discourse, which means that there is no identity without otherness:

The constitutive character of interdiscursive relationship makes the semantic interaction between discourses seem like a translation process, of regulated inter-understanding. Each one introduces the Other into its closure, translating its utterances into the categories of the Same, and thus its relation to this Other always takes place in the form of the “simulacrum” which is constructed of it.<sup>9</sup> (Maingueneau, 2008: 21)

Hence, we may understand why the terrorist attack against *Charlie Hebdo* is understood in the Western world as an attack against freedom of expression. This attempt to interpret the other in terms of the same highlights the impossibility of full understanding of discursive otherness. This interdiscursive tension brings to light discursively regulated interincomprehension as described by Maingueneau: precisely at this point, the identity of the liberal discourse of freedom of expression is crystallized, that is, by the explication of its contrary, in the form of terror itself. In other words, the importance of freedom of expression in liberal democracies is more easily defended if its opposite is identified.

That is why controversies around Islam have historically been so decisive in shaping the debate over freedom of expression in the Western world, as Anshuman Mondal (2014) points out. In our case study, the articles reviewed, almost in their totality, do not even recognize the legitimate possibility of offense provoked by *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. Consequently, these texts present the conflict at hand only in terms of freedom of expression as against terror. Of course, there is an evidently unacceptable dimension to any terrorist attack, which is not minimized under the human rights view. However,

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9 Translation from Portuguese by the author. In Portuguese: “O caráter constitutivo da relação interdiscursiva faz a interação semântica entre os discursos parecer um processo de tradução, de interincompreensão regulada. Cada um introduz o Outro em seu fechamento, traduzindo seus enunciados nas categorias do Mesmo e, assim, sua relação com esse Outro se dá sempre sob a forma do ‘simulacro’ que dele se constrói”.

the journalistic articles examined here present a simplistic perspective in which Islam is unproblematically associated with terror. In other words, the validity of any other value or right beyond freedom of expression is not recognized as relevant to the discussion of the offensive potential of cartoons.

This process, which can make the other invisible or frame the other in binary categories, is a striking feature of discussions about Islam in contemporary Western world. According to Anshuman Mondal (2014), at the end of the 1980s, due to the controversies surrounding the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, a liberal conviction emerged against Islam. This discourse gained strength with the reaction against multiculturalism and resulted in an alignment between the rightist liberal wing (according to neoliberal discourse, Islam is a geopolitical enemy that must be fought to maintain the economic and military superiority of the West) and the leftist liberal wing (for which Islam is a focus of suppression of freedom). Based on this, Mondal (2014) proposes his hypothesis of the fetishization of freedom of expression, based on an absolute (abstract, universalizing, and idealistic) conception, which develops into an opposition to hate-crime laws and the prohibition of genocide denial.

In the case reviewed here, many of the identified isotopic marks – the rigid separation between speech and action, an absolute defense of the free market of ideas, and the understanding that any form of control of expression may lead to censorship – are characteristic of absolutist discourses on freedom of expression. Another common trait identified by Mondal is the frequent accusation that liberals make against other liberals, denouncing their commitment to the imperatives of social, cultural, and religious power. The logical presupposition of all these claims, says Mondal (2014), is the idea that power represents an outside threat to liberalism; in other words, the presupposition is that liberalism is not a discourse linked to the engendering of power relations.

The author identifies several parallels between the structures of thought that characterize both liberal absolutist arguments and Islamic fundamentalism: defense of precious and fragile values against a common enemy; identification of internal enemies to be fought or eliminated; invocation of the argumentative strategy of the slippery slope, namely, that anything ceded to the enemy would lead down a path of no return (Mondal, 2014).

Thus, a series of problematizations can be addressed to absolutist discourse on the freedom of expression. Mondal (2014) invokes, for example, an idea similar to a position defended also by Barendt (2007): for him, there is no freedom without equality. Likewise, there is no equality of conditions for participation in the free market of ideas. From this perspective, absolutist liberal discourse on the freedom of expression erases all implications of power distribution. This disregard for liberal discourse on the implications of power, according to Mondal's analysis (2014), has the ideological function of masking the existence of power relations, and this enables the hegemonic position of liberalism itself in Western democracies to be hidden.

Relative to balancing rights, it is also necessary to seek proposals to justify freedom of expression that can complicate the recurrent liberal positions in the public debate.

Here, Barendt (2007) proposes a shift of focus from individual rights to collective rights, such that freedom of expression would come under protection because it is a public good. In this perspective, it would be fundamental to consider two principles, namely, first, the principle of pluralism or in other words, that freedom of expression is important and must be valued because it validates different lifestyles, which may even be in conflict with each other but must be tolerated, and second, a principle of tolerance because what is at stake is the acceptance of different forms of life. This is why, for Barendt, “freedom of expression establishes and represents a public culture of acceptance and tolerance” (Barendt, 2007: 31).

This vision refers to the connections between freedom of expression and other values that help justify it. At this point, two topics for which the connections between free expression and other democratic values create problems for philosophers and courts should be noted: the question of diversity and, above all, the articulation between dignity and equality, which relates to controversies around hate speech. Barendt’s views on these two topics is relevant, insofar as the perspective outlined here is representative of an important criticism of human rights from a position – historically predominant in liberal democracies – that understands rights as exclusionary. Instead, it would be possible to argue that freedom of expression can be limited to preserve its underlying values, which would entail not less freedom but freedom. This understanding incorporates the relationship between freedom of expression and human dignity as a relation of complementarity.

Therefore, it should be noted that Barendt (2007) makes a fundamental contribution to the systematization of the argument that can represent important criticisms of liberal thinking regarding freedom of expression. In particular, the author holds that the values of dignity and equality cannot be ignored, especially where they are constitutionally recognized (although these are complex concepts and it can be difficult to define their scope and weight in relation to the limits of the exercise of free expression). If human dignity is a value that underlies freedom of expression, it would be coherent to think that the two principles are not mutually exclusionary, and that freedom of expression itself can find legitimacy based on respect for human dignity and rationality.

## Final considerations

Controversies that arise in the public sphere due to disputes over humorous expressions, such as those we have discussed throughout this paper, are often marked by discourses that refer to a collision between fundamental rights: on the one hand, freedom of expression and communication, and on the other, the right of personality, the protection of intimacy, honor, image, and dignity.

In light of discussion of otherness and cultural difference, freedom of expression is increasingly seen – paraphrasing Mondal (2014) – as a difficult freedom. According to this author, individual and community are deeply inseparable, which implies the need to consider freedom of expression beyond individual rights. Therefore, the polarization of individual versus community reflects the absence of a concept of freedom of expression



that would be unsuitable for mediating liberal and non-liberal ideas of freedom, restraint, and common good. In this space, the author envisions the possibility of building a concept of freedom of expression that would be capable of articulating, in a dialogical way, traditionally dichotomous views.

We believe that reflection on this difficult freedom must not only take place at the level of normative discussion but also beyond it. The field of communication field can offer important contributions regarding the role of the representations constructed by media discourse and, specially, the role of media criticism that would be capable of considering the ethical dimension of representation, related to the affirmation or the refusal of a position of care and responsibility toward the other. Media criticism, since it also participates in and integrates the circuit of cultural mediation and circulating discourse, cannot shy away from a consideration of the growing visibility that recognition policies are now acquiring, as Fraser and Honneth (2006) point out. It is remarkable that the demands of social justice are increasingly turning to the construction of a world that accepts difference.

In this sense, taking the concept of offense, as proposed by Mondal (2014), we can think of the critic's task as evaluating the ethical adequacy or inadequacy of media representations, taking into account their textual contents and the political arrangements where they appear. According to the author, offense is not inherent in words; in fact, it depends on the relations that govern the specific occasions of speech. Thus, according to this perspective, giving offense or taking offense are performative acts that build power relations and have the power of interpellation. Therefore, to identify the offensiveness of a particular act of speech, one must take discursive circumstances into account – the history and memory that cross the subjects – and the power relations at play in speech acts. Here, the possibility of discussing the ethical validity of a given act of speech depends on the identification of the location of power.

Mondal himself offers some important clues to help advance this reflection. According to him, the answer to the problem of cultural difference – and, above all, the conflicts between cultural difference and the defense of freedom of expression, as conceived by liberal positions – lies in the dialogical construction, between content producers (authors) and audiences (readers), of the ethical or moral limits capable of determining the political legitimacy of statements and representations. For this, it is necessary to take into account both textuality as mediator of social relations and moral responsibility as shared among the individuals involved in such interactions (Mondal, 2014).

In fact, it might even seem utopian to expect this limit to be spontaneously drawn between content senders and receivers, especially within the logic of established media, which tends to erase the other. Precisely for this reason, Mondal's (2014) proposals seem to emphasize the urgency of constructing a media criticism that is ethically engaged in the discussion of the political status of representation.

Rather than pointing out a limit in the name of the other, media criticism must seek to bring the voice of the other into its discourse – its values, its moral standards, and its point of view. This could contribute to the illumination of the power relations activated in

the play of representation and discourse. It must, eventually, help build increasingly plural and open spaces from where it would be possible to critically examine representations and discourses present in media productions.

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