

# **Contextualization and temporal complexities: an exercise from journalistic narrative**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the contextualization processes as a methodological tool in the analysis of journalistic narratives. In this sense, a discussion about the “context” is recovered from the theoretical point of view, seeking to consider the complex temporal networks in textual relations. Then, an analytical gesture is proposed based on the different ways of contextualizing a photographic image on the pages of a printed newspaper. As a methodology, we adopted the selection of a page of the newspaper *O Estado de S. Paulo*, which contains an Esso Award-winning photograph, collating with other journalistic photographs, investigating them as situated in specific contexts, but also as themselves contextualizing agents.

**Keywords:** context. historicities. temporality. journalism. narrative.

## **Introduction**

Recently, a group of Brazilian researchers (LEAL; CARVALHO, 2017, RIBEIRO; MARTINS; ANTUNES, 2017, REGO; BARBOSA, 2017, MANNA; JÁCOME, FERREIRA, 2017, among others) drew attention to the importance of noticing the implications that involve taking contextualization as a methodological gesture. In common, their works indicate the need to “denaturalize context” to stop understanding it as something “external”, some kind of background for the text and/or the communicational phenomenon. Resorting to studies both in Linguistics and in History, they assert the fundamental instability of the context and of the motions involved in processes of contextualization. For example, Ribeiro, Martins and Antunes (2017) claim that if mediatic textualities are materialized in an incessant process of

opening and closing borders, text and context should not mean opposite or stabilized poles. On the other hand, they understand that

Therefore, to talk about the construction of the real in discourse does not necessarily mean to assume an idealistic position. It just means to deny any kind of restrained separation between language and its constitutive exteriority. And it is in this sense - as a constitutive externality - that we comprehend the concept of context, the subject of our reflection here. Context is not background; it is not an external dimension to phenomena, one that establishes with them a relation of causality. [...] There is no reality prior to any type of enunciation, since (saying it again) the material and discursive instances are engendered in a unique process. (RIBEIRO; MARTINS; ANTUNES, 2017, p. 8).

When they affirm that “there is no reality prior to” the enunciation, the authors are certainly not neglecting the historical-social components that shape a social and communicational situation. It seems to us that they are attesting the productive potential found in each communicative act, which is not merely determined by previous circumstances, since it acts on them and opens possibilities of meaning, signifying and referentiality that can be more or less expansive. In this sense, as proposed by Ricoeur (2006), life is a story waiting for a narrator, and that includes a prefigured world of which any plot is a part of, at the same time that it recognizes the openness made possible by the very act of narrating and configuring a cognizable intelligibility, refigured by the clash between the world of the text and the world of the reader.

Therefore, every narrative act presupposes some level of semantic change that is a result of sedimentation and innovation processes. It is important to emphasize, following the reflections made by Ricoeur (2006), that these processes suggest that the contexts of the prefigured world are made unstable by the action of reading, which is not only an action contextually situated in specific times and places, but it is a modality of contextualization itself. Thus, a literary, historical, or journalistic narrative is eternally open to readings that interpretively arrange it beyond the meaning that were originally proposed. Consequently, each reading act is immersed in different contexts that are related to the world of the text and the world of those who read it, in a variety of cultural realities and memory triggers, but also forgetfulness.

It is this purposeful and active fluctuation that allows Manna, Jácome and Ferreira (2017) and Jácome (2020) to mark the variations in meaning and referentiality that the expression “journalism” exhibits in some historical periods in Brazil. In their perspective, the exercise of defining the connections that a phenomenon, a mediatic text, establishes with a historical moment becomes more complex. To “contextualize” is not simply to arrange, sometimes without much difficulty, the subjects of communication in a fixed historical background, one that is supposedly given in anticipation, or placed in a specific linear

chronology, in which the succession or simultaneity of events is stated. In fact, it is necessary to create challenging analytical movements in order to perceive how communicational phenomena conduct themselves in the world, how they are "...traversed and [how they] summon the different temporalities they constitute" (RIBEIRO; MARTINS; ANTUNES, 2017, p. 15), in a reflexive gesture that also makes us inquire the temporalities of those who research, those who approach these processes and phenomena. In this sense, this proposition withdraws the perspective that takes "context" or "contextualization" as a specific attribute of a particular set of narratives, as we can see, for example, in the diagnosis made by Fink and Schudson (2013) about what they evaluate to be a contextual turn of the journalism in the USA in the second half of the 20th century. Here, we propose that, methodologically, research is challenged by the temporal plots that "contextualize" communicational phenomena and processes, and, also, that the methodologies, theories, and worldviews of the researcher are a constitutive part of the contexts and of the presented strategies of intelligibility.

Leal and Carvalho (2017) make another approach to the temporal variations found in contextualization by explaining the instabilities of pasts, presents and futures in the articulations between context, event and narrative. By also refusing the idea of context as something stable, as an external background to the communicational phenomenon, the authors refer to different theoretical perspectives and observe a "call to contextualization" that would seek to respect human action, the "essential mobility experience of the human path and of the many temporal dimensions, of presents, pasts and futures, that permeate our lives". So, to contextualize would be an effort to apprehend at least part of these "interconnections", which present themselves "in constant rearticulation" (LEAL; CARVALHO, 2017, p. 8). Once again, the implicit methodological care in this "call to contextualization" resides in the problematization of the observer's time and of the temporalities that traverses those who contextualize, those whose gaze can choose – perversely or innocently, but always wrongly – to stabilize (in the past, in the present or in the future) relationships in constant transformation.

The article we present here is based on this group of themes and perspectives that we have hastily summarized. Our proposal is to do an exercise in contextualization, which aims to simultaneously respect and explore different temporal variants associated to a certain photographic image that was published on an average newspaper page, in a period of faith in a new political-social project and democratic consolidation for Brazil. Throughout the argumentative path of this article, we attempt to describe some of the relationships that traverse and destabilize the significations, meanings, and references of this photograph, by changing our perspective as researchers. In this analytical exercise, the contextualization processes of the photographic image expose, in our understanding, the temporal complexities found both in journalistic textualities and in how we approach them.

For the methodology, we use other journalistic photographs in addition to the one captured on the newspaper page in order to better localize the methodological and conceptual challenges implicated in what we understand as context. In part, what the photographs have

in common is that they are all winners of the Esso Award and they all express gender relations based on sexism and misogyny. All of them, on the other hand, were produced to complement journalistic narratives that focus mainly on politics.

## A spatial contextualization

The photographic image below, made by Wilton Sousa Junior, was published in *O Estado de S. Paulo* on August 21, 2012, and was also reproduced on the newspaper's website. As we can see from how the scene was composed, it shows President Dilma Rousseff gazing at the floor and leaning down, as if pierced by a sword that is wielded by a military man (a metonymic connection to the arm, the glove, and the hand in the image).

**Figure 1 –**



Source: <https://www.estadao.com.br>.

What is this photo about? This is certainly not a scoop of an attack on the then President of Brazil. As it is not a visual text with literal meaning, the photograph, due to the compositional arrangement it materializes, defies any quick effort of signification and referentiality, instigating our comprehension and opening different paths for its contextualization. Just conjecturing as to whether the image is literal or not already illustrates the difficulties present in its contextualization processes, or, as we understand them, the representation of meaning, signification and referentiality relations of a text or phenomenon. After all, literalness is not an obvious or intrinsic condition of a textual unity, as it depends on the repertoires of the reader, which always evoke references from the past (an immediate past or a more distant one) and even from the present, in the moment when the reading happens *de facto*. So, this contextualization movement is one that sets a text or a text

fragment in a group of relationships that permeate it and in which it acts upon, conditioning and modulating expectations, repertoires, and articulations.

An initial movement that we can make to contextualize this photographic image is to observe the position it occupies on the newspaper's page, this sensitive receptacle of a form that constrains the image and relates it to other verbal-visual texts (MOURA, 2020; LEAL; JÁCOME, 2020). Separated from these textual units, the photographic image remains somewhat enigmatic, provocative, and it is undeniable that it would acquire different meanings if the textual ensemble in the surroundings were different. As we can see in Figure 2, the photograph is part of page A7 of the National section ("Nacional") of *O Estado de S. Paulo*. If it were a literal image of an alleged aggression against the president, it would certainly be neither so small in size nor occupy the central pages of the newspaper; it would go straight to the front page. There, where it was published, the image works simultaneously as a regular photo with caption, even having its own title ("Military honors" – "Honras militares", in the original), and as an illustration for the journalistic narrative ("Suspicious of Dilma, PMDB makes plans for 2014" – "Desconfiado de Dilma, PMDB faz plano para 2014", in the original). We will return to these textualities below.

**Figure 2 –**



Source: <https://www.estadao.com.br>.

On the page presented in Figure 2, the verbal-visual composition is complemented by two advertisements: an institutional one, from São Paulo Foundation (Fundação São Paulo), which maintains the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo; and another one for a Hyundai car. Although they do not have an instant connection with the content of the political narrative involving President Dilma Rousseff, the advertisements point out to meanings present in Brazilian reality for a long time and indicate consumption conditions that are associated to the PT (Workers' Party) governments. In the first case, São Paulo Foundation provides clarifications on the contract signed with the Ministry of Agriculture, affirming its legality, signaling the recurrent problem of corruption as a component of Brazilian reality, a theme that is referred to in a generic way in the narrative about the PMDB's discontent with Dilma Rousseff, which can be found in the text that occupies the upper left quarter of the page. The car advertisement, in turn, allows us to make associations with the consumption growth of this category of durable goods, mainly verified after Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's second term, which benefited vast segments of the middle class.

Hence, the newspaper page rapidly offers itself as an initial space for some of the contextualization relationships to take effect. Looking specifically at its journalistic content, in the photo caption, we are informed that the photograph refers to a graduation ceremony at the Academia das Agulhas Negras, in which the cadets received swords for completing their training. The president's gaze and inclination correspond, then, to her going down the stage set for the ceremony and to a reverence intended to another authority. So, this first text locates the photo in a past and, at least at first sight, sticks it to a specific referent. However, the text is surrounded by another, much larger text, that discloses the conflicts between the PMDB representatives and the president, suggesting the imminence of a rupture in the government alliance and the possibility of PMDB having its own candidate for the 2014 elections. As we know, this threat did not materialize in the electoral process and the party kept Michel Temer as vice president. Nevertheless, the rupture occurred during Dilma Rousseff's second term, culminating in her questionable impeachment.

And then, in the articulation between verbal texts and visual text, an interesting game of meanings and referentialities is established. For instance, if the caption indicates a reduction in the field of significations of the photographic image, the news narrative turns it wider again. The informative title that announces the photograph, "Military honors", also opens itself to multiple meanings, some of them positive (honors referring either to the sentiment from the president to the cadets, or from the cadets to the president), and others negative (an alleged, deadly discontentment of the military with Dilma Rousseff). The fact that the photograph is positioned in the right corner of the news, below the title that unifies these information units, suggests that the photo is an illustration of the headline "Suspicious of Dilma, PMDB makes plans for 2014" ("Desconfiado de Dilma, PMDB faz

plano para 2014”). It is, therefore, an interesting case of narrative fitting, in which the visual text and the photo caption, despite referring to another event - the graduation -, are embedded in a main narrative - the political feud -, to which they assign other dimensions of meaning, especially when analyzed now, in the “future” of the image. In this sense, a contextualization gesture is able to see in those present broader temporal relations that involve both a mobilization of the past and an action fecund of future. As Santos (2016, p. 1) points out, when we interpretate an image, we are simultaneously facing a “welcomed” history and a “guessed” history.

## A contextualization in history

The photo of President Dilma Rousseff, taken by Wilton de Sousa Júnior, won the 2012 Esso Journalism Award, and was titled “Touché”. The award is known for being a reference in Brazilian journalism, recognizing the works that distinguish themselves by quality. It is composed by several categories, such as best feature story and best photograph, both for print media, in addition to the categories destined for broadcast and digital. To produce a competitive informative image aiming for the Esso Award is a regular objective of many photojournalists, something that requires attention to detail and the composition, discernment for informational potential and agility to capture a “good flagrant”. It is assumed, therefore, that for a photograph to deserve the award, it must contain something more than plain information, being able to trigger polysemic meanings, provoke emotions, raise awareness for an individual or social drama, among other possibilities. Almost always, they are photographs that “becomes history” for being paradigmatic registers of a time, of people, of a “context”.

Figures from the world of politics caught in unusual situations are often the focus of Esso Award winning photographs, such as the one produced by Enro Scheneider, who received the award in 1961 (Figure 3). In this photograph, the former president Jânio Quadros appears with his legs in different positions as to which way to go, creating a metaphor for the indecisiveness that marked his short stint in the presidency of Brazil, having resigned under the allegation of difficulties imposed by supposed “occult forces”. Read in retrospect, the photograph indicates, in addition to the political errand of Jânio Quadros at the time of the click, the political instability of the 1960s in Brazil, which would lead to the 1964 civil-military coup d'état.

**Figure 3 –**



Foto: Eno Schenider

Source: <https://www12.senado.leg.br/noticias/materias/2011/08/25/janio-uma-foto-que-interpretou-a-historia>.

Photographs that did not win the Esso Award also stand out in Brazilian political history because they opt for a direction that is the opposite of the perceptive capture of a scoop, as they are the result of an agreed pose between the figure and the person who photographs. Such is the case of the photograph of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso sitting in the mayor of São Paulo's chair on the day before the 1985 municipal elections, as registered by photographer Reginaldo Manente (Figure 4). Cardoso claims that there was a publication agreement, and the photo would be published only if the results were favorable to him, a pact that was not fulfilled by *Folha de S. Paulo*, who decided to publish the photo on its front page before the supposedly settled day. In despite of any explanation, the photograph has entered Brazilian political history as a synonym for arrogance and carelessness with electoral processes.

**Figure 4 –**



Source: <http://m.acervo.estadao.com.br/noticias/acervo,janio-desinfetou-cadeira-que-fhc-sentou-,8805,0.htm>.

Jânio Quadros, who won that municipal election, contradicting the expectations created by the opinion polls, took Cardoso's photo as a motto for political action. He purposefully "let" himself be photographed disinfecting the chair that was precociously used by the one who ended up defeated (Figure 5, the authorship was not identified, being attributed on several internet pages to "Acervo Estadão" (Estadão Archive)).

**Figure 5 –**



Source: <http://www.osarrafo.com.br/v1/2016/09/15/contando-com-o-ovo-no-fiofo-da-galinha/>

If in the presidential campaign of the 1960s Jânio Quadros used a broom as his symbol for sweeping corruption and other ills of the Brazilian society, in 1985 the disinfection was done with insecticide, a metaphor for a more drastic cleaning, since the product is used against beings associated with abjection, like cockroaches, for example. In any case, the disinfection at that time was not generic, but specific, therefore, it would also evoke the meaning that there was a urgency to rid the chair of eventual pestilences left by someone who unduly sat in it.

Many other journalistic photographs, whether they did or did not win the Esso or some other award, including the ones that result from combined poses, could be used as examples of the relationships that exist between the political world and journalism. The elaboration of this repertoire, this “imaginary museum”, is not “natural” or “obvious”, because it depends on actions that aspire to establish significations and references, whether these actions come from those who are facing the challenges of a research or from any other person engaged in a reading activity (VAZ, 2010, VAZ; BIONDI; 2016, VAZ; VALLE, 2017). By shifting our gaze from the page to a potential photographic series, we not only reposition ourselves before the relationships between journalistic photographs and its imbrications with politics and its individuals, but we also materialize different possibilities of meaning.

Likewise, the temporal connections that permeate the photograph in our contextualization efforts also change. In this brief intertextual movement that we carried out, we tried to highlight, besides the historical relationships between journalistic narrative and crucial political moments in Brazilian history, the multiple possibilities of readings in which temporalities and contexts acquire a complexity that goes beyond what is supposedly evident. It is these wide possibilities of reading, referencing and signifying (of contextualization, in short) that the photographs that have become paradigms of decisive historical moments for Brazilian political relations offer, by spreading meanings over and above the specific time of their making.

### **Other contextualizations: the haunting of conservatism**

When we look again at the photographic image published in 2012, now in another specific historical moment, one more shift of gaze is carried out. It is no longer just a matter of observing the photograph in the times and page spaces on which it initially circulated, nor of reassembling a historical series of photojournalistic images of Brazilian politicians. As we position ourselves in this historical present, the photo also journeys in time, perhaps in an even more complex way. After all, it can make heterogeneous temporal relations become simultaneous, forming an arrangement in which pasts, presents and futures of different attributes are intertwined. Respecting the limits of this article, we will briefly present two perspectives in which this blend becomes recognizable.

A militant against the civil-military dictatorial regime that ruled Brazil after the 1964 coup, Dilma Rousseff was not only the first woman ever to occupy the presidency of Brazil, but also a left-wing politician arrested and tortured by that regime, a fact that ignited many conservative political sectors in Brazil to go against her. The photographic image that suggests the possibility of a sword piercing the president's body, given this historical reference, acquires a perverse outline then. Now, it refers less to a commemoration or a regular event in the president's routine, like it did in the historical present of the publication and of the graduation at the Academia das Agulhas Negras. The photo can now be read as a metaphorical allusion to the obliteration that the military executed against women and men who fought the dictatorship (GREEN, 2018), from which the president managed to escape.

It is important to remember that the signs displayed during the protests favorable to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff - whose possibilities are hinted in PMDB's "discontentment and suspiciousness", as informed in the text of the page we analyzed - lamented that she had not been murdered by the military, in addition to many other signs that clamored for the military to take the power back. During the impeachment voting in the Chamber of Deputies, Jair Bolsonaro, then a deputy, dedicated his vote to Colonel Brilhante Ustra, a notorious torturer who represented, in Bolsonaro's words, "Dilma Rousseff's horror". The echoes of obsessive attitudes carried out by the civil-military dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985 are, then, materialized in that photograph, bringing up a past that insists on haunting Brazilian society, who has been living, since becoming officially independent of Portugal, interchangeable periods of democratic and other authoritarian governments, either under civil or military command.

From a political articulation's perspective, the journalistic text informs us of a discontentment within a political party that has been historically attached to the power, including the time when it assumed a condition of "consented opposition" to the 1964 dictatorial regime (GREEN, 2018), under its previous name, MDB, which was recently readopted. Even though it was important for representing some kind of opposition to the civil-military dictatorship, the MDB, inserted in a bipartisan system, ended up legitimizing the abolishment of all other parties, of any ideological orientation, which is, in fact, a reason why it was capable of bringing together people who, in democratic conditions, would be affiliated to other parties. Therefore, it is not by chance that the journalistic narrative about discontentment and suspiciousness against President Dilma Rousseff highlights some PMDB senators who would stand as dissidents, an indication of the diversity of political positions contained within the party.

But if the newspaper's page, with its arrangement of textualities, insinuates a haunting past, this haunting would not be only in the threat of military government, but it could also allow us to refer to the tensions that have defined the Brazilian political scene since the end of the civil-military dictatorship. From 1985 to 2019, through alliances with parties as

disparate as the PSDB (it is important to notice that this party was founded by dissidents from the PMDB) and the PT, or by the coup disguised of legitimate impeachment against Dilma Rousseff (CARVALHO, 2019), the PMDB has been present in all governments, occupying ministries and other strategic offices. The discontentment activities of the PMDB did not result in their own candidacy in the 2014 presidential elections, won by Dilma Rousseff with Michel Temer as her vice president, but they ended up culminating in the articulations that resulted in the impeachment and the PMDB formally returning to occupy the Palácio do Planalto.

So, to who does the hand that wields the sword that pierces through Dilma Rousseff belong? To the PMDB? To the military in power today? Whatever the answer may be, the photograph acquires a premonitory trait for anticipating, in 2012, a series of events that led to the fall of Dilma Rousseff and the rise of these other groups to power. The astonishment caused by this premonition comes not only from the past, from the allusion to the civil-military dictatorship, but also from the future that the photographic image projects, which, right now, constitutes our yesterday and our today.

In another reading possibility - of contextualization - the photograph published in *O Estado de S. Paulo* on August 21, 2012 can be seen as the (metonymic or metaphorical) materialization of sexist and misogynist cultural beliefs. After all, the photo suggests a woman who bends under the yoke of the sword (a "masculine" symbol par excellence) wielded by the man. In this sense, this photographic image is capable of activating another contextual network that concerns misogyny and the ways in which this "desire for extinction" has materialized in other images, not only of Rousseff, but of other female presidents in South America, like Cristina Kirchner, from Argentina.

**Figure 6 –**



Source: <https://www.istoe.com.br>; <https://www.revista-noticias.com.ar>.

As we can see in the group of images in Figure 6, composed of flagrant and edited photographs and an illustration, it is recurrent to evoke the imaginary of the “witch-hunts” or the distrust of the rational capacity of women in power. In this perspective, there are other hauntings, other pasts, futures and presents are summoned, and another set of connections – temporal ones, but not only - are made visible.

### Some final thoughts

The contextual opening that we have proposed to and from the page of *O Estado de S. Paulo* is also inspired by the contributions of Gonzalo Abril on the risk of immanentism in semiotic approaches, considering that textualities imply complex games of visuality and visibilities / invisibilities. According to Abril,

Any text effectively refers to one or more universes of meaning, that is, to a set of representations of the world, history, or social relations, which constitutes groups of categories (conceptual fields), images (aesthetic figures, sentimental topics, imaginaries, etc.), and endless typification. But in addition, the universes of meaning are articulated to a deeper level, the symbolic level, which implies not only the production and circulation of meanings, but also relationship, link, and mediation. A symbolic universe performs the function of a deep structure for the universes of meaning of a society: it is the level that sustains its cosmologies and mythologies, the shared representations of time and space, the basic categorical frames, the symbols of collective identity that govern the assignments of meaning of what is personal and what is of other. (ABRIL, 2009, p. 137-138).

Taken as a set that can make sense in terms of journalistic information, as well as advertising information, the newspaper's page offers valuable hints on Brazilian political and cultural imaginaries and symbols. It is a verbal-visual text that allows movements through different temporalities, in line with the perspective of contextualization that we have adopted here. In the methodological exercise we proposed, the instabilities of the "text", the "context" and the "gaze" (the researchers' gaze, in this case) do not appear as something undesirable or something to be overcome in a knowledge gesture that stabilizes meanings and connections. On the contrary, it is exactly these instabilities that allow more vigorous readings, relationships of meaning, knowledge production.

In this sense, it seems urgent to us the need to incorporate this methodological gesture in journalistic analysis as a way of apprehending, in a less immanent and more productive fashion, the complex temporal relations that journalistic narratives engender. "Contextualizing", therefore, appears as a prolific challenge, a task that is unavoidably difficult, since it implies articulating many relationships for proposing meanings, significations and references. It is an operation, an action whose results produce a plausible understanding, a knowledge in transit, and never the stabilization of the world.

In other words, thinking about journalistic textualities proceeding from ideas like context and temporalities throws doubt on a series of presuppositions of the so-called journalism theories that cling to explanatory principles with pretensions to produce a-historical and non-contextual universality. Newsworthiness criteria, news values, gatekeeping and other "mantras" repeated to exhaustion may, inspired by the ideas of context and temporalities, be subjected to more refined theoretical and methodological reviews that could indicate their heuristic weaknesses and even their impertinence in some investigations of journalistic phenomena.

As we have tried to evidence in our analysis here, understanding the polysemic textualities of a single newspaper page from the methodological potential of context requires

opening ourselves to a multiplicity of meanings and readings. This gesture also invites us to perform intertextual analyzes, bringing forth connections within and outside the page. To do so, other photographs were essential to understanding meaning logics in journalistic photographs that have political figures as main subjects. They are, simultaneously, situated in specific contexts and creators of their own contexts, in a game of temporalities in which pasts, presents and futures are entangled.

If the photographs and illustrations of female presidents attest Dilma Rousseff and Cristina Kirchner as two of the first and few women elected to the presidency of their countries in Latin America, an indication of fragile political and cultural advances, they are more vehement witnesses of the persistence of sexism and misogyny. In this sense, journalism aids in the comprehension of these sexist dynamics, being itself a perpetuator of them, nonetheless. In other words, following the issues we addressed here when discussing context, journalism, sexism and misogyny are simultaneously explained by contextual relations and creators of these relations, configuring an inside and an outside, past, present and future as plots whose complexities are always challenging.

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