Public discourse, political legitimacy, and collective identity: Cases from Iraq, Brazil and China

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Abstract

Through the examination of recent developments in Iraq, Brazil and China, this paper explores the role of public communication in both a) generating, corralling, and buttressing political legitimacy, and b) negotiating, demarcating, and reproducing collective identities. The transformation of Iraq’s public sphere after the fall of the Ba’ath regime saw it shift from a tightly controlled and unified communication space to unencumbered yet fragmented spheres split along ethno-sectarian lines, buttressing sectarian politics and identities. The emergence of subaltern publics in Brazil’s favelas empowered residents to express public dissent, assert their voice, and develop pride in their community. Chinese efforts to control online public discourse provide the government with ways of managing its perceived legitimacy and foster patriotic fellowship online. Legitimation and the affirmation of identity interact and support one another in public discourse, as we illustrate.

I Introduction

Public, political communication mediates political processes by conveying information between centers of political power and ‘the people’, by publicizing the functioning of the political system and thematizing troubles or issues afflicting people, by giving voice, hosting and facilitating debate. It also includes ritualized forms of communication that perform, instantiate, and demarcate collective identities, not least by signaling who is excluded. Yet scholarship tends to focus either on political communication as a mediating process or on discourse as identity forming and affirming ritual. However, the two are deeply intertwined.

Political communication research tends to focus on processes by which information flows between the political system and the citizenry (and back again), how public discourse represents different issues, different groups, and what effects that discourse can have on political behavior, the legitimacy of government and the status of different groups. Some adopt a more citizen-centered focus, examining the way people participate in public discourse, the means through which people or groups gain voice, shape public discourse, or even assert dominance to position themselves as the ‘true’ voice of the people (drowning out other voices). In this view, public communication is key to understanding how political legitimacy is generated—how popular assent, dissent, or reluctant acquiescence of political power emerges.

But public communication is not merely an intervening factor in social and political processes, but central to the constitution of the very political community around which public discourse revolves. Questions of participation always entail questions about inclusion in, and exclusion from, public discussion. As such, public discourse involves the ritual affirmation and
negotiation of a political community’s identity—and struggles over who is a member and who is not. Here we confront democracy’s boundary question, about the composition of the demos, about participation in, and exclusion from, the political community (Downing, 2000). After all, the normative force that is often ascribed to public communication rests on the principle that all those who have a stake in a matter, should be represented in public discourse.

In this paper we conceptualize public discourse as critical to generating empirical (i.e., de facto) legitimacy and central to the affirmation and reproduction of collective identities. Processes of public communication lay the groundwork for political action by legitimating (or delegitimizing) political authority. All forms of political power seek legitimate through (the appearance of) public assent or at least the evasion of public dissent. That is why any attempt to challenge political authority also seeks to discredit its public image. These same processes that shape public perception of political authority are also critical for generating a sense of commonality and fellowship amongst members of the public which we usually call nationalism. The first section of this paper conceptualizes the legitimizing and identity-shaping roles of public discourse. Adopting this dual focus on legitimacy and identity, section two, three and four examine how public communication shapes political legitimacy and collective identity in three contemporary case studies, selected for their compelling diversity: the emergence of ethno-sectarian publics in Iraq, the development of subaltern publics in Brazil’s favelas, and China’s management of online public discourse.

**The public sphere as arena of political legitimation**

It is almost a truism that political actors who lose favor and legitimacy in public discourse lose legitimacy per se. Their claim to authority, which rests on their claim to legitimacy, vanishes. This mechanism rests on a deeper connection between the signaling power of public discourse (to signal assent or dissent) and the ability to wield power. Protests, for instance, aim to change institutional behavior by showing it to be at odds with the people’s will. Public discourse is where assent or dissent to the exercise of political authority manifests. Perhaps the most familiar concept linking public discourse, as the ‘court of public opinion’, to the legitimation of political authority, emerged from Habermas’ historical work.

Habermas (1992) sets out how the peculiar social, economic and technological developments in late 18th, early 19th century Europe emerged a sphere of public discourse, where everyday activities and problems became matters worthy of discussion and relevant to political decision-making (Benhabib, 1992; Calhoun, 1992). The development of capitalism and the emergence of the bourgeoisie—whose fortune depended on horizontal relationships of trade rather than feudalism’s vertical dependencies of patronage—produced an economic elite that felt less reliant and beholden to old systems of rule. Combined with the wider availability of print technology and the informational demands of an exchange-based economy, these developments produced patterns of communication and public discourse that articulated the bourgeoisie’s interests as distinct and independent from those of church and crown and came to be understood as an expression of public opinion. That way, a public sphere was instituted through coffee shops, German table societies, French salons, and other meeting places as well as journals and the nascent free press (Habermas, 1992; Keane, 1995). Ultimately, this emergent public, its will expressed through public discourse, came to be viewed as principle wellspring of legitimate political authority, usurping monarchs (who held authority by divine right) and displacing the feudal political order of medieval Europe (Kühl, 1968). So, in laying claim to public opinion, expressing assent or dissent, public discourse came to serve as critical to the legitimation of political authority.

Much scholarship in the communications field takes its cue from Habermas’ work and, above all, his normative conclusions about the democratic potential he recognized in public
discourse: a deliberative ideal of inclusive rational discussion, in which social differences were set aside and the force of the better argument held sway. Indeed, that those who are recipients of political decisions ought to have a say in their making is the cardinal ideal of democratic legitimacy (Held, 2004). Evidently much public discourse is far removed from these ideals (McKee, 2005). They are, after all, ideals. Nonetheless, the de facto legitimacy of political authority is closely linked to favorable public discourse—irrespective of how deliberative it is. Which is why political actors seek proximity to, or control of, news media and want to shape the political narrative they produce (Gamson and Wolfsfeld, 1993). Political power goes hand in hand with closeness to news media and command over public discourse. Lose the latter, and the former will often follow.

As Arendt (1969) noted, the power of all governments, democratic and authoritarian, rests on opinion, on the perception of legitimacy. All forms of political authority seek the perception of widespread support, or at least the absence of dissent. A congenial public image helps buttress authority. And so autocrats also seek the veneer of legitimation through the accord of public discourse (even if that discourse is ‘synthetic’). It is a state’s natural interest to attempt to guide, steer, and control public information and opinion formation (Meyen, 2018, p. 1). Of course, public discourse can be deliberative and inclusive. But it can also be manipulated and exclusionary, providing a fig leaf for the exercise of political power. Spirals of silence can generate the appearance of pluralistic assent, where there is none (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). Public discourse can be moved by rumors, misinformation, mud-slinging, and ad hominem—which, while not desirable, nevertheless can help support the de facto legitimacy of a particular course of political action. That is why battles for political power are also always waged in discursive space. And it is why all governments seek the appearance of public support. For, as Arendt reminds us, when they lose even the public’s reluctant acquiescence the state must resort to information control, or even the truncheon, to control the population, the surest sign of authority loss.

The role of public discourse in the legitimation of political authority is undiminished by the (sometimes untoward) realities of political communication. We should distinguish the role of public discourse in generating the perception of legitimacy (what is sometimes called empirical or descriptive legitimacy) from the normative question what kind of requirements public communication should fulfil (e.g., inclusiveness, rationality, etc.) in order to support normative legitimacy (Hãnska, 2019).

**Public discourse as catalyst of collective identities**

The normative ideal of public discourse as a debating chamber of those affected by a political decision extends almost seamlessly into questions of identity, inclusion in, and exclusion from, the body politic. Politics is often about identity, and the politics of identity plays out in public discourse. Appeals to a shared identity (or the threat posed by others) can provide legitimation for political action. Unpopular ideas can be legitimated by ostracizing those who dissent because they are “not true members of the community”, “their view does not really matter, nor do they have our interests at heart”. The discursive legitimation and de-legitimation of authority interacts with processes of collective identity formation, such that public discourse is also the communicative cauldron in which collective identities are forged, affirmed, and reproduced. The ritual view of communication conceives public discourse as participation in mediated rituals and the sharing of symbolic forms, which together engender a sense of association and fellowship essential to the constitution and reproduction of collective identities (Carey, 2008; Madianou, 2005; Skey, 2014).

The ritual perspective draws our attention to public communication’s role in emerging, affirming, and reaffirming a sense of fellowship, commonality, and collective belonging. Public communication is suffused with mediated symbolic forms, rituals, events, practices, and micro-
linguistic features through which identity is routinely flagged (Billig, 1995; Skey, 2014). Deutsch (1966) pioneered communicative theories of identity and nationalism, arguing that public, societal communication was critical in generating the cohesion that members of a community perceive as commonality. He saw public communication as binding, or holding together, national communities from within. Anderson (1991) argued that the emergence of print technology, and the literary public spheres that it enabled by assembling different dialects into a shared vernacular (to serve larger audiences), provided the informational infrastructure required for the circulation of mass, identity-forming discourses that gave rise to national identities. Gellner (2006) spoke of a shared culture which binds an atomized society together, sustained, amongst other things, through mediated practices. Billig (1995) persuasively argued that national identities are shaped, sustained and reproduced by the way they are routinely and continuously flagged through the media’s use of language and symbols (e.g., songs, flags, sport). This extends to news and journalism, which tends to frame events in parochial terms that emphasize national over other commonalities (Hafez, 2011).

In these ways public communication can produce, affirm, and naturalize a sense of commonality and collective identity by staking out what is held in common but also by demarcating alterity, of what is different. And while most literature on the role of media and public communication in processes of identity formation focus on nationalism, we should not see collective identities as necessarily national, fixed, or stable (Madianou, 2005). Satellite TV, for instance, has been said to bring about coherent diasporic identities (Georgiou, 2006). Political communities are almost never entirely unified or homogenous—as the Trump presidency demonstrates, national identity is often internally contested. That is why a perennial question of politics is whether its goal is to work with pluralism and diversity or to strengthen the unity, coherence, and identity of the body politic. These struggles over the identity of the political community always play out in public discourse, too.

Questions of identity and legitimacy intersect in public discourse. However, they form two different bodies of scholarship with limited cross-fertilization despite clear continuities. A sense of fellowship and mutual association is required for a collectivity to function effectively as a political community. Acceptance of those who wield authority depends on them being perceived as true fellow compatriots. Yet, a sense of fellowship does not ensure democratic legitimacy. After all, the democratic ideal requires public discourse to include those affected by an issue, irrespective of their identity. The discursive nexus between identity and legitimation can play out in many ways that are removed from deliberative, democratic ideals. The perception of general assent can be conjured by demarcating membership in the political community in such a manner that dissenting voices are portrayed as nefarious interlopers or worse. Where non-congenial voices are excluded or marginalized in public discourse, disenfranchised groups will seek to create subaltern counter-public spheres, to establish representation, assert the legitimacy of their voice, and challenge established political authority (Fraser, 1992). Public discourse, in this sense, is not only where the exercise of political authority is legitimated, but also responsible for sustaining, reproducing, and even bringing into existence the very collectivity, the very body politic on whose support the (perception of) legitimate authority depends (Hänska, 2018).

Aims, objectives, and methods

This paper emerged from discussions amongst colleagues working on public discourse in Iraq, Brazil, and China, as we noticed interesting parallels in the way questions of identity and legitimation played out in these cases. All cases underwent discursive transitions in the nexus between identity and legitimation that warrant exploration and comparison. We aim to explore the ways legitimation of authority and the affirmation of a particular notion of identity of the
political community interact in diverse settings and through different kinds of media. Our objective is to understand the following:

How does the discursive legitimation of authority interact with the affirmation and demarcation of identity?

To what extent are these discursive processes characterized by struggle and conflict?

This exploratory, qualitative paper, based on three different research projects (results of which were published here: Amaral, 2019a; Amaral, 2019b; Bahiya, 2018; Bahiya, 2019), brackets the normative ideals of inclusiveness and deliberation in public discourse to focus on discursive processes and struggles over empirical (i.e., de facto) legitimacy—whether through ideal and inclusive or, less-ideal, nefarious or autocratic means. We also ask how such legitimizing discourses intersect and interact with identity forming discourses—irrespective of the exclusions, divisions and other problems that may ensue from these. Adopting this dual focus on legitimacy and identity, we explore the transformation of public discourse in Iraq after the fall of the Ba’ath regime, the way Brazil’s favelas are represented and participate in public discourse, and how China’s government tries to manage its discursive legitimation and patriotic identities online.

Our objectives are met by bringing together reflections from these three studies. The research is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with Iraqi journalists and media activists from Rio’s favelas. Interviews with Iraqi journalists aimed to understand the transformation of the Iraqi media system (Bahiya, 2018), while interviews with Brazilian media activists aimed to understand their media practices. We also draw on quantitative content analyses of Brazilian newspaper reporting on the favelas (Amaral, 2019a) as well as on a qualitative content analysis of social media posts on Sina Weibo and WeChat moments that emerged after the Tianjin explosion in August 2015 (Sui, expected 2020). Content analyses of Brazilian newspapers aimed to understand the representation of the favelas in the mainstream press, while a content analysis of social media posts mapped the evolution of discourse around Tianjin explosion, in particular the intersection between the preferred official and dissenting narratives.

All three case studies examine a particular historical moment, drawing on exploratory rather than representative research designs. As such, the research does not allow us to generalize either about these countries or about the relationship between identity and legitimation in public discourse. Rather, our aim was to illustrate how discursive legitimation of authority can intersect and interact with the demarcation of identity in public discourse. Important recent developments since our research was carried out, for example in China, are not fully covered by this study.

The emergence of Iraq’s ethno-sectarian publics

Since the American-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath regime, Iraq’s media system has undergone a radical transformation that reveals the deep interconnection between public discourse, collective identities, and the legitimation of a particular politics. Iraq’s public sphere was heavily controlled under the Ba’ath regime. During and after the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), Hussein sought to control domestic tensions at all cost, to keep the peace between Sunnis (ca. 20%), Shias (ca. 65%), and Kurds (15-20%) in Iraq. Keeping a tight grip on the country, sectarian identities were not allowed to surface, a fact also reflected in Iraq’s unified, mass-mediated public sphere.1 In fact, under Hussein, ‘Iraqiness’ was largely a secular identity “where a majority of citizens identified with their national identity rather than their ethnic or religious identity” (Kirmanj, 2013, p. 10). The country was served by two TV stations (a third was

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1 It should be noted that the Shiite majority was marginalized by the Ba’ath regime.
founded by Uday Hussein in 1991/92) and three newspapers, which were all closely government-controlled and focused mainly on the Hussein Regime and family, without allowing sectarian issues to surface in public discourse, thus acting as an umbrella for all Iraqis.

The Ba’ath regime’s removal through the American-led coalition ushered in an era of unencumbered communication after 2003, as restrictions on free media outlets vanished overnight. Ba’ath-era media outlets abruptly collapsed while Iraq’s media sector completely shifted from being a tightly controlled and censored system which served as the propaganda apparatus of Hussein’s regime into one where controls on establishing media outlets were removed creating a free and very diverse system (Zanger, 2005, p. 106). Privately owned news outlets and media establishments rapidly multiplied. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, the media sector has flourished and journalists found themselves free to write, criticize, foster public discussion, and express opinions. In Iraq, which is considered an emerging democracy after 30 years of dictatorial rule, media became a space for public discussion and opinion and generally began fulfilling the functions of a fourth estate. According to Al-Marashi (2007, p. 6), “the media has taken on a public advocacy role as well, pressing policy makers to address deficiencies and shortcomings in providing security and infrastructure needs by highlighting these problems and giving Iraqi citizens a platform to express their views”. According to Isakhan (2008, 1-19) and Rugh (2004), between 2003 and 2004 alone, more than two hundred independent newspapers, over 20 radio stations, and 15-17 Iraqi-owned TV stations were established. The use of satellite dishes also swept the country as prohibitions against their use disappeared, leading to one of the world’s highest penetration rates for satellite TV (Cochrane, 2006). Free, Iraqi-owned and operated outlets quite literally flooded the market.

Political issues were the main focus of new publications and broadcasts, but domestic issues, features, entertainment, and sport also received more airtime (Isakhan, 2008, p. 1-19). This rapid expansion of new media outlets served as avenues for free expression, allowing Iraqis to call for reforms to address a range of political and socio-economic problems (Price, Griffin, and Al-Marashi, 2007). The dizzying boom of non-state media within months of the removal of Hussein was one of the greatest media advances in the country, which some described as a ‘golden age of journalism’. After more than three decades of authoritarian control, censorship, and persecutions during the Ba’ath regime, this new media freedom was undoubtedly satisfying for many Iraqis (Al-Deen, 2005, p. 2).

Notwithstanding these new freedoms, domestic media were constrained by structures imposed by the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the new Iraqi government’s media regulations (Al-Rawi, 2013, p. 381). The CPA established the Iraqi Governing Council in July 2003, which included 25 members who had been chosen according to their ethnic and religious origins (Diamond, 2005). As a result of American policies, a political system founded on ethno-sectarian division took shape, and Iraq transformed into a de facto Shia state. The same ethno-sectarian divisions that came to shape Iraq’s post-war political process also shaped Iraq’s media system and public discourse. New media freedoms created opportunities for ethno-sectarian forces to fragment the public sphere—which, unified before 2003, split into Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish ‘sphericules’. Iraq’s media came to affirm and strengthen sectarian identities and fuel sectarian politics.

From the very beginning, sectarians realized that they needed their own media to justify their authority, and advance and buttress their political goals. Consequently, most newly established newspapers, TV channels, radio stations, and even websites served particular ethno-sectarian groups, laying the groundwork for a deeply segmented public discourse. It is no exaggeration to say that free media increased sectarian divisions, which were suppressed under the Ba’ath regime. How could this happen, given that Iraq’s media was one of the priorities of the U.S. government before the invasion of Iraq in 2003? According to Ricchiardi (2011, p. 16), “months before the invasion, Department of Defense (DoD) planners presented an in-house
briefing on how to create a post-Hussein independent media network and control information. The working assumption was that free expression was a prerequisite for legitimate post-Hussein government.” Remaking Iraq’s media sector on the principle that freedom of expression was fundamental to all other freedoms inadvertently paved the way for sectarianism to colonize the public sphere.

The CPA and DoD contracted private companies to create the independent Iraqi Media Network (IMN), patterned after the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Yet contractors had no experience in media development and in-turn delegated consultants to create al-Iraqiya television network, two radio stations, and the newspaper al-Sabah. The US government portrayed IMN as a national public voice that transcended political and sectarian divides. Yet, after the CPA was disbanded in June 2004 and the interim Iraqi government took over the network, the government’s Shia majority gained control over several sectors in the country, including the media (Cochrane, 2006; Isakhan, 2008, p. 4-7). As IMN fell under the tight control of the Iraqi government, it became a Shiite propaganda tool (Ricchiardi, 2011). Several independent Sunni TV channels subsequently came under government pressure, closed down, and began satellite broadcasting from abroad (Al-Rawi, 2013, p. 384-386; Amos, 2010).

Illustrating shifts in the symbolic forms and mediated rituals that came to shape Iraq’s ethno-sectarian public discourse is instructive: While the Sunni form of the call to prayer was broadcast under Hussein, now the Shiite form is used by El-Iraqiya. Historical narratives were re-invented. For instance, the Ba’ath regime portrayed those fallen in the Iran-Iraq war as martyrs, while now Shia-dominated news outlets (including public broadcasters) argue that they are not martyrs because they were fighting the fellow Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran. The dress of TV presenters also has symbolic value. While female presenters in Shiite media are always veiled, usually showing no hair, female presenters on Sunni TV channels often wear no scarf at all or do so less restrictively. The news agenda also follows sectarian orientation, with Sunni channels shadowing news from Saudi Arabia and Sunni countries while Shia channels are more attached to news from Iran and Bahrein, often focusing on the plight of Bahraini Shias. Kurdish media tirelessly provide justification for an independent state and obviously broadcast in Kurdish. Al-Marashi (2007, p. 14) states that the “media in Iraq has been characterized as conflict media in which ethnic factions among the Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens, and religious-sectarian factions among the Sunni, Shi’a and Christians, all have their own means of communicating to their ethno-sectarian constituencies in Iraq and abroad in the Iraqi diaspora”. Indeed, the allegiance of a channel can be divined from the voices they transmit, whether accents are from Sunni Anbar or Mosul, or Shia Basra, Najef, or Karbala. And so, sectarian symbols, narratives, and linguistic features began to carve-up Iraq’s public sphere, to the point that the vast majority of media outlets are now aligned, with minority (Sunni) outlets operating from outside Iraq to avoid government closure—and all this after the CPA had spent 500 Million USD trying to build inclusive media in Iraq (Al-Rawi, 2013, p. 380-386).

Sectarian divisions also found their way into online and social media, in particular Facebook, Iraq’s most important platform. Islamists increasingly use social media to disseminate their ideologies and promote religious conservatism, deeply impacting civil life in Iraq, especially for women (Bahiya, 2018). While social media served as an important outlet for women to escape these restrictions, the growing influence of Islamism online has led many Iraqi women to adopt male online pseudonyms to evade these strictures. Others use online media to oppose sectarian politics, advocate reconciliation, call for reforms, and provide a space to voice their dissatisfaction with the Iraqi government (Bahiya, 2018). For instance, dozens of protests inspired by the ‘Arab Spring’ were organized and launched using social media, beginning in February 2011. The government responded by instituting a media blackout and downplaying the significance of protests (Bahiya, 2015).
An unencumbered public sphere in which different religious and ethnic groups were supposed to gain voice effectively fractured public discourse and fragmented national identity. Free media became a vehicle for re-affirming and strengthening ethno-sectarian identities and asserting the legitimacy of their rule while denying the legitimacy of other groups. Sectarian divisions emerged with a vengeance, as the secular umbrella of ‘Iraqiness’ that had hitherto unified an ethnically and religiously diverse people vanished. In this sense, Iraq’s public sphere may be nominally free, but as media became mouthpieces for ethno-political factions, it was pervaded by struggles for domination and a retreat of common ground. These sectarian divisions have led the country to the brink of civil war, as al-Marashi (2007, p. 104) warned in his study on Iraq’s press system that ethno-sectarian ‘media empires’ were providing the psychological groundwork for bitter divisiveness and conflict and needed to be addressed for the sake of the country’s stability.

Identity forming and affirming sectarian discourse and communicative legitimation of sectarian politics intersected in unexpectedly negative ways in Iraq.

Subaltern publics in Brazil’s favelas

A central question that scholars of the public sphere grapple with is whether it is desirable to have a single-unified public sphere (Iraq’s experience suggests the benefits of unity) or to have multiple, overlapping public sphericules, as Gitlin (1998) calls them. What happens when a particular group, in the case of Iraq the Shiite majority, seek to dominate public discourse, to represent their own views and interests as those of the population at large? Fraser (1992) argues that when the public sphere is dominated by a majority that establish a hegemonic public discourse to the exclusion of others, marginalized groups form subaltern counterpublics, “where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 123). These emerge in parallel to the main, and dominant, public sphere. An interesting instance is the way the residents of Brazil’s favela’s (urban slums) use media to circulate oppositional ideas, counter mainstream narratives, assert their voices, and challenge the state’s legitimacy.

Around 11 million people (6% of Brazilians) live in favelas, where they face shortages of essential public services such as sanitation and garbage collection, and are excluded from basic public safety. In São Paulo, the largest city in the country, 20% of the population lives in slums, followed by Rio de Janeiro, where the favelas are home to 19% of the population (IBGE 2010). The favelas’ residents were always viewed as a subordinate group and represented accordingly in public discourse. According to Zaluar and Alvito (2006), only three years after the appearance of the first Rio slum, it was already perceived as unsanitary and lawless, occupied by ‘vagabonds’ and ‘bandits’. A report on Rio’s first census from 1948 read that “‘blacks and browns’ prevailed in the favelas because they are ‘hereditarily backward’, lacking ambition and maladjusted to modern social needs” (Zaluar and Alvito, 2006, p. 13).

Public discourse on the favelas has changed over the decades. In the 1970s, the discourse centered on sanitary problems, describing the favelas as an eyesore. By the early 1980s, the typical representation was of poverty and deprivation, with little emphasis on crime or violence. In the 1990s, the focus started to shift with almost half the news (43%) focusing on crime and violence (Vaz and Baiense, 2011). The image of pervasive criminality and favelas “as the epicentre of urban violence” really took root in popular imagination from the 2000s (Baroni, Aguiar, and Rodrigues, 2011, p. 313), becoming the hegemonic discourse in the media from 2010 (Amaral 2019a, p. 238), virtually decreeing that every favelado is or will become a thug. This broad discourse on favelas as crime-ridden epicenters of disorder was (and remains) pervasive in the media—

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2 Sectarian tensions reached their height in 2005/2006 when thousands of Iraqis died in quasi-civil-war-like conflict.
something that residents would have been painfully aware of through their consumption of national TV.

These depictions are compounded by the absence of residents’ voices in news reports about favelas. A study conducted between 2004 and 2006 found that as the press focused on “drug dealing, police brutality, violence and crime, […] the voices and perspectives of slum dwellers are rarely represented” (Baroni, Aguiar, and Rodrigues, 2011, p. 310). If you live in a favela, your community is unlikely to receive positive news coverage in Brazil’s media, much less will your own views, interests, or priorities ever be flagged as important or legitimate matters of public concern. The favelas are talked about but not heard. As Ramalho notes, media coverage oscillates between an excessive emphasis on violence (with reports almost always from a single source, the police, since entering the favelas became too dangerous for the press) and unusual reports of exceptional cases, like the girl from a favela who gained a place at a dance school in Germany […]. The typical resident, who is neither criminal nor a rare case of virtuosity, goes unnoticed, is ignored along with the urban problems […] that are far-reaching and little discussed. (Ramalho, 2007, p. 131)

Given this systematic exclusion from the mainstream public sphere, the suppression of voice, and the attendant inability to raise legitimate concerns, it is unsurprising that residents would seek their own, alternative channels to assert their voice and affirm a more positive representation of their community. Community radio, papers, and journals appeared. For example, eleven-year-old Rene Silva founded Voz da Comunidade (recently renamed Voz das Comunidades) in 2005 to serve the local community and report good news from the favela, since the Complexo do Alemão, where Rene lived, only ever made the news “when the content referred to drug dealing and trafficking wars” (Abreu, 2013, p. 26). Indeed, by providing airtime for local voices, community media provided a critical contrast to mainstream media. Custódio (2017) describes the case of Rádio Santa Marta (2010-11), a community radio station in a favela nestled in Rio’s wealthy south, which was recognizably set-apart from national media because it broadcast in the favela’s vernacular, lending it a familiar legitimacy that other media lacked.³

The favela’s public sphere changed rapidly with the mainstreaming of online and mobile media (smartphones were critical to giving residents internet access). Nowadays, around 52% of residents could be classified as internet users, with this figure rising to 78% amongst 16- to 29-year-olds (Meirelles and Athayde, 2014). Using WhatsApp groups, Facebook, Twitter, text messages, e-mails, live video streams, blogs, podcasts, and more, residents increasingly made their own voices and demands heard and wrote their own history (Custódio, 2017)—building their own public spheres in the process. In late 2010, for example, five young residents of Morro do Adeus became celebrities by live-reporting the siege of Complexo do Alemão during one of the biggest police operations in the past decade (Meirelles and Athayde, 2014, p. 93). Rene Silva (founder of Voz da Comunidade, 17 years at the time), Igor Santos (15), Débora (11), Gabi (12), and Jackson Alves (13), used Voz da Comunidade’s Twitter profile to narrate live footage of the police entry into the favela, the reaction of the drug dealers, and the panic among the residents, all witnessed through the windows of their homes. With the mainstream media struggling to cover events (since they lacked access) the @vozdacomunidade Twitter account became the main source of information about the police movements in the favela that morning (Amaral, 2019a).

With the rise of grass-roots reporting through social media, violent events inside favelas rarely pass without the appearance of comments, alerts, photos, and also videos recorded and

³ Local vernacular is a marker of exclusion. For instance, a resident of Santa Marta speaking the favela’s tongue (slang) would be unable to gain work in the wealthy high-rises just 200 meters from home, unless they switched dialect (Custódio, 2017).
shared by residents. These videos often become essential evidence to establish what actually occurred, and counter national news narratives. In 2015, for example, Alan Lima and Chauan Cezario were shot by police inside the Palmeirinha favela. One of them died and the other was injured and later arrested. The Police alleged that the youths were armed and shot in their car. A video recorded before Alan died, however, shows a group of unarmed adolescents playing in the street when the police opened fire. Only with the release of this video on social media was the family able to disprove the official version of events (Soares, 2017). Indeed, before the widespread adoption of social media, public criticism of police violence was virtually impossible because residents obeyed a ‘law of silence’ which obliged them to not speak with journalist, whom residents viewed as merely propagating the biased mainstream narrative (Amaral, 2019a, p. 37). The emergence of subaltern publics allowed residents to publicize the illegitimate nature of the way public authorities, first and foremost the police, operated in their neighborhoods (Amaral, 2019b).

While criticism of police violence remains the most common topic on community media, a flurry of initiatives have arisen, not only to provide trusted news sources for residents but as a space for the promotion of residents’ rights and the dissemination of positive cultural and community events. Community media is frequently used to mobilize residents to solve problems, for instance, by organizing cleaning parties or the construction of new buildings. Sometimes it is used to raise issues about living standards with a city’s mayor. The Facebook page Maré Vive, for example, is run by a group of residents of the Complexo da Maré to share news about the favela, raise complaints, warn about clashes, publicize events, run lost-and-found services, and issue alerts about missing people and pets.

The uptake of the internet in Brazil’s favelas offered new opportunities for residents to be seen and heard, to self-represent a positive image of their communities and develop a sense of fellowship and belonging by collectively seizing initiatives. The emergence of subaltern publics in the favelas provided both a source and vehicle for pride in the community, creating ‘airtime’ for local, familiar-sounding voices from within the community, as in the case of Rádio Santa Marta. Thus, the emergence of counter-discourses through subaltern publics also played an important role in the transformation the favelas’ identity, not least by broadcasting in local vernacular. Given that Brazilian media used to represent them in overwhelmingly negative and subordinate terms, residents would have found little to be proud of in their media image, knowing themselves only as victim of prejudice, and, for instance, finding it almost impossible to secure a job. The emergence of black pride through the grass-roots efforts of the favelas’ majority black population is another case in point. Mainstream Brazilian media has caught on, making greater efforts to seek positive stories on the favelas.

The central role of public discourse in legitimizing (and delegitimizing) political action by communicating public assent or dissent is manifest in Brazil’s subaltern publics. By creating their own counter-discourse, favela residents emphatically rejected their marginalization in Brazil’s mainstream public discourse and asserted their voice. They signaled both the political legitimacy of their concerns while declaring the way police operates in favelas illegitimate. In speaking, sharing information, and discussing community issues in their own vernacular, residents also gained opportunities to define themselves and develop pride in their community—illustrating the ways public communication undergirds a sense of fellowship and commonality that defines community.

Managing online public discourse and ‘rumor’ control in China

If perceived legitimacy depends on what is said in public, the temptation is great to intercede in public discourse, to shape and manage it. The mainstreaming of the internet and widespread adoption of social and mobile media heralded new communicative freedoms but also new
opportunities for control. Regulating the public sphere is not necessarily a bad thing. It can conjure the appearance of public assent where it would otherwise be withheld but can also help prevent detrimental social fragmentation and even civil strife, as witnessed in Iraq. Some of the most extensive efforts to control online discourse have been afoot in mainland China since the internet’s arrival around 1994. A wide range of political and technical measures have been put in place over more than two decades to control internet services, content, and expression, increasingly challenging the received wisdom that online communication cannot be effectively controlled (Denyer, 2016).

Early efforts to manage online communication were somewhat haphazard, with insufficient coordination between various administrative and technical capabilities and censors relying on the same techniques used to regulate mass media. Things changed with Xi Jinping’s presidency. Spooked by the mobilization of the Arab Spring protest, the government started taking online public discourse more seriously, creating the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) to coordinate and streamline various internet control systems (Creemers, 2017, p. 94). The overarching aim was to make information control compatible with economic development and modernization.

The government takes an extensive view of the kind of content it seeks to control, which can include information deemed harmful to society such as pornography, content that glorifies violence or illegal drug ads, but also politically sensitive information, unsanctioned opinion, political humor or rumors (Alsabah, 2016, p. 4). The government is also unapologetic about its efforts, viewing them as essential to public safety and wellbeing. Restricting access to foreign content is easy. The so-called Great Firewall blocks domain-level access to sites and services hosting undesirable content, including Twitter, Facebook, The New York Times, BBC, and also various academic journals (Bland, 2017). It has been argued that this allows the government to square the circle of controlling online communication, while actively promoting the development of domestic technology by shielding domestic players from foreign competition (Gracie, 2014).

Domain-level filtering is mostly ineffective to manage content or control rumors that emerge domestically and are propagated through peer-to-peer communication. Here, automated keyword-based filtering across many Chinese communication platforms and search engines targets messages rather than domains (e.g., instant messages matching a blocked keyword will simply never be transmitted). Furthermore, manual human censorship is critical for monitoring social media posts. Central, regional, municipal, and city governments employ censors to scan for, and remove, undesirable content. Because the law holds ISPs and platform operators responsible for their users’ behavior and for the content hosted and disseminated through their service, they also implement technological and human measures to censor communications—regularly removing posts, closing blogs and forums, or deleting user accounts (Alsabah, 2016, p. 5). Local cyberspace administrators are required to monitor compliance of platform operators, to summon and reprimand representatives for noncompliance, and possibly take punitive action (Southern Weekly, 2015). However, it should be noted that not all platforms are equally restrictive, with censorship on WeChat lighter than on Weibo, for example (Tu, 2016, p. 346). Increasingly big data and artificial intelligence technologies are also deployed in networked rumor control to track the vectors of distribution from source to destination and map propagation paths in real time: For instance, allowing keyword-based censorship to tighten dynamically as the number of people engaging with a topic increases (Ruan, Knockel, Ng, and Crete-Nishihata, 2016).

The government also recognized that censorship alone will not win over and marshal public opinion on the social web, where the bureaucratic language of ideological propaganda had little traction with younger internet users (Gierow, Luc, and Shi-Kupfer, 2016, p. 4). Censorship is supplemented by government astroturkers or ‘internet commentators’ (colloquially ‘50-cent army members’) who post comments across the web to nudge and warp public discourse by suffusing it with the preferred official narrative (Han 2015; Wang, Juffermans, and Du, 2016).
These posts—of which, by some estimates, there are around half a billion annually—are an important instrument for occupying the public sphere. Together these measures manage, distort, and suppress online public discourse (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013; 2017, p. 484).

Efforts to control the distribution of online rumors (which can be true or entirely false) make an interesting case study. Generally, when rumors concern people’s livelihood, the government will not take measures to control them, even though relevant departments will refute them. For example, in December 2016, Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Henan, and Shandong and other regions suffered significant levels of fog and haze. Rumors like “the haze contains ammonium sulfate, which can cause death” or “more than 60 kinds of drug-resistant bacteria are detected in Beijing haze, while the antibiotics are ineffective” were circulated widely. Though officials refuted them, no efforts were made to purge them (CCTV News Center, 2017). In other circumstances, rumors are actively combatted, mostly by deletion and keyword-filtering, though legislation allows detention or even imprisonment for spreading rumors online (BBC, 2015).

For example, in the 24 hours following a warehouse explosion in the Tianjin Port on August 12, 2015, social media was buzzing with discussions, including more than 56 million microblog posts on Weibo (China’s Twitter), with some topics related to the explosion receiving up to 7.5 billion views (Wang 2016, p. 210). Because official information is often slow to emerge as officials must run a series of checks to ensure they meet ideological standards (Gierow, Luc, and Shi-Kupfer, 2016), social media chatter and speculations takes hold in the interim. Some posts argued that 1000 people had died in the explosion (it took over two weeks for official figures of 173 fatalities to be released) (News Ifeng, 2015). The rumors that prompted most active efforts to censor information alleged that one of the warehouse proprietors responsible for the explosion was a former vice-mayor’s son, thus spinning a story of official involvement, negligence, even graft (News Ifeng, 2015). Researchers recorded a spike in removal of messages on Weibo after the explosion (Tatlow, 2015) while it was reported that around 50 websites were shut (Sonnad, 2015). According to Foreign Policy magazine, a post reading “Don’t pray; seek accountability” was the second most censored post of the year (Lim, 2015). While many rescue workers at the scene were injured or even died (12 died), official news outlets and government astroturfers attempted to shape a patriotic narrative by focusing on their bravery and sacrifice, elevating rescue workers as symbols of national pride. However, this official narrative had little traction amongst netizens, with online rumors continuing to focus on needless deaths caused by government failures to adequately train and equip many of the young and inexperienced fire fighters.

On July 5, 2009 in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang (a region with a majority of Muslim Uyghurs), a demonstration turned into a riot. Subsequent clashes lead to 197 deaths, 1721 injuries, and substantial property damage. Officials were particularly suspicious of the social organization function of domestic web 2.0, and after the riots, douban.com (discussion forums) ceased allowing the creation of groups for a time while the facility to create new QQ (a messenger app) groups was suspended. Moreover, the government disconnected the network for text messages and international direct dialing in the whole territory of Xinjiang, making it the ‘lonely island’ of the internet. Searches for “Urumqi”, “Xinjiang”, or “Uighur” also returned no results (Blanchard, 2009). The official narrative, disseminated by news outlets and suffused by astroturfers, blamed foreign influences for fomenting unrest and the Uyghurs for being anti-party, disorderly, and unpatriotic independentist rioters (Gallagher and Miller, 2017). Normal internet access, open mobile phone, SMS, and international calling services were only gradually being restored for Xinjiang users at the end of December (South Weekend, 2009).

During the period when this paper was under review, parts of the Uyghur population were imprisoned in camps, a clear escalation of the discursive practices described here. Unfortunately, the scope of our study does not cover these most recent developments.
Though it is hard to know exactly how, when, and why communication is censored, given the obvious opacity of various legislative, political, and technical measures, some patterns appear clear. Anti-corruption and anti-pollution protests as well as ethnic riots have driven the expansion of efforts to censor and control public discourse online. The annual National People’s Congress is also a period of expanded censorship, where browsing speeds slow down and VPN services struggle (Cadell and Li, 2017; Denyer, 2016). While much online discussion, even vitriolic criticism of the government, is allowed, evidence suggests that censorship is specifically targeted to forestall “collective action by silencing comments that represent, reinforce, or spur social mobilization, regardless of content” (King, Pan, and Roberts, 2013, p. 326). Rumors that reveal the formation of latent networks that could reach a tipping-point and snowball into collective action, unrest, instability, or threaten public safety are a primary target of censors (Alsabah, 2016, p. 4). During the 2014 Hong Kong protests, mainland Chinese access to Instagram (where many protest photos were being shared) was blocked (McDonald, 2016). There is also evidence of self-censorship, as people internalize rules and steer clear of posting unsanctioned content to avoid getting in trouble (Xu, Mao, and Halderman, 2011), a phenomenon augmented by the implementation of real-name registration (in January 2015, WeChat reported that 80% of its users had registered with their actual name) (Creemers, 2017, p. 96).

As noted, efforts to shape public discourse also rely on filling it with ‘suitable content’ that espouses the preferred official narrative. Several measures support this goal. Only accredited news outlets and journalists are allowed to publish news online; discussions about news stories are required to link to a licensed news outlet (Alsabah, 2016), and websites cannot link to foreign news sites without prior approval. Astroturfers diffuse official narratives through online forums and social media. The aim is to sideline or even expunge any alternative to the sanctioned narrative. Searching for details of the ethnic uprising in Xinjiang, for example, will return little other than the official narrative. However, searching for the Tianjin explosion does still return various alternative accounts, perhaps because of the failure of the sanctioned narrative to gain traction at the time.

This official narrative disseminated through news outlets, and diffused online, arguably plays an important role in buttressing Chinese nationalism. It typically seeks to occupy online spheres (where possible in alliance with netizens) with discourse couched in nationalistic language, drawing on patriotic tropes, that criticizes or blames foreign powers (above all, Japan and the USA), and praises the quality of Chinese leadership (see, for example, Guo, 2018). It focused on the patriotism of rescue workers after the Tianjin explosion and on the role of foreign interlopers in the Urumqi ethnic riots. McDonald (2016) suggests that this patriotic official narrative aims to promote shared national values and ideals, creating an online space “that promotes and sustains the imagined community of the nation state” (pp. 44-45). As Meyen (2018) observes, state ideology and patriotism can be important factors in eroding press freedom. Though, according to Schneider (2018), it would be wrong to view this patriotic online discourse as top-down indoctrination that is passively absorbed. Instead, state-guided patriotic narratives interact with fertile bottom-up nationalist sentiment—and in this respect online discussion is not suppressed but rather encouraged. Indeed, the good citizen is encouraged to contribute to patriotic postings (Yang, 2017). King et al. (2017, p. 499) argue that this “cheerleading China” narrative promoted through official posts does not so much aim to convert skeptics as distract everyone else. With an estimated 710 million Chinese internet users (CNNIC, 2016), netizens and social media platforms play an important role sustaining identity-affirming discourse and enacting collective rituals of remembering (Han, 2016). And so, through patriotic online

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5 While the 2019 Hong Kong protests are not covered by this paper, it is worth noting efforts that were made to extend censorship beyond the great firewall, including pressuring Apple to remove an app used by protesters from its app store.
encounters, people “are willing to think of themselves as part of an ‘imagined community’” of fellow citizens (McDonald, 2016, p. 179). Netizens collaborate with state-guided patriotic narratives in sustaining large-scale identity-forming discourses and legitimizing the state.

In China, a technologically sophisticated system has emerged to manage online public discourse by constraining, removing, and rebutting undesirable information. It serves to remove plain falsehoods (misinformation), unsanctioned opinions, and to advance the preferred official narrative that both legitimizes the government and promotes a sense of fellowship and patriotism.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to explore how the discursive legitimation of authority interacts with discursive, ritual affirmations and demarcations of identity and how these processes may be characterized by struggle and conflict. In Iraq, the removal of controls over the media, after the fall of the Ba’ath regime, aimed to strengthen the link between free expression and legitimate government. Instead, it fragmented the public sphere, mirroring the sectarian nature of post-Hussein Iraqi politics, and provided the communicative foundations for violent sectarian strife. The second-order consequences of free communication can be far from benign, as political authority came to depend on a deeply sectarian discourse that fused the legitimacy of government to ethno-sectarian identity. Another picture emerged in Brazil’s favelas, where wider accessibility of communication tools has allowed hitherto subordinated and marginalized communities to assert their voices and define their own identity. Here, the ability to establish subaltern public discourses appears to have been more beneficial than detrimental, giving voice to long subjugated communities, creating opportunities for public dissent, and providing the symbolic resources to write their own history. In China, a sophisticated and wide-reaching system for controlling online communication has emerged. It is deployed both to remove unsanctioned content and foster an official discourse congenial to the government, buttressing its perceived legitimacy. The preferred, official, patriotic narrative aims to foster nationalism, a sense of commonality and fellowship amongst Chinese internet users (conclusions summarized in Table 1). These cases illustrate the ways discursive legitimation interacts and intersects with the discursive demarcation of the political community’s identity (and exclusion therefrom).

Table 1: Summary of the ways legitimation and identity formation interact in public discourse.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>Iraq’s gradual shift from a tightly controlled public discourse that legitimated the Hussein regime to a more unencumbered but fragmented public discourse that legitimated Shia political goals in strictly ethno-sectarian terms was important to the emergence of ethno-sectarian strife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>The erstwhile marginalization of favelas in public discourse lead to the emergence of subaltern counter-discourses through which residents signaled dissent and asserted the legitimacy of their voices. Often broadcast in local vernacular, community media gave many residents the symbolic resources to tell their own story, define their own identity, and generate a sense of pride and recognition around subaltern identities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>Available evidence suggests that dynamic censorship and astroturfing is sometimes combined to foster patriotic narratives that praise the government and blame foreign interlopers. However, these state-sanctioned patriotic narratives often coalesce with fertile bottom-up nationalism in which netizens organically ‘cheerlead China’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While these limited case studies do not allow wider generalization, they can nevertheless illustrate the critical role public communication plays in the justification of political authority and the formation of collective identities. No matter what context we examine, all forms of government rely on the perception of legitimacy, which depends on its representation in public discourse. But because legitimacy depends on ‘the people’s’ assent, public discourse also involves struggles to define who ‘the people’ truly are. These collective identities rely on the circulation of shared narratives, symbols of kinship and commonality, and participation in mediated rituals—such as ‘cheerleading China’. There is substantive scholarship that focuses on the role of public discourse in legitimating government. There is equally substantive scholarship focused on the way discourse shapes the identity of the very political community from which government derives its legitimacy. Communicative process of legitimation and identity formation interact, interlace, and enforce each other. Public discourse is critical to the way the exercise of political authority gains (perceived) legitimacy. And the same discourse involves publicly mediated rituals crucial to the way a sense of commonality, fellowship, and collective identity is affirmed and reproduced, and indeed the way alterity is defined.

That is why future scholarship should explore the intersection between these bodies of literature and between these discursive functions: between the role of public discourse in representing certain interests and legitimating government as well as its role in affirming and shaping the identity of the interests it purports to represent. For, we cannot fully understand the representative and legitimating function of public discourse without also understanding its role in shaping identities and defining those interests that truly matter to the legitimacy of government.

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