

An open letter to the international academic community of Communication on the political situation in Brazil

Dear colleagues,

We, the presidents of academic and scientific institutions of Communication in Brazil, have been following, with some concern, the traumatic and indelible facts behind the current history of our country. It is quite significant that the year that Brazil celebrates the 30-year anniversary of its 1988 Federal Constitution, known as the “Citizen Constitution”, is marked by a horrific event: the brutal murder of councilwoman Marielle Franco and her driver, Anderson Gomes.

This murder is not a one-off or, as the hegemonic media would like you to believe, just one more murder out of the hundreds of women, young people of color and those who live in slums who are murdered every year, especially in Rio de Janeiro. This political crime committed against a person who fought for the rights of disadvantaged groups and for freedom of expression, in addition to the pressing need to identify and punish those responsible, require some reflection on how our social climate is organized and on the issues of neglect and impunity that have made it possible for this murder to take place.

We are living in a world where the rights and the safety we have had over the last 70 years are disappearing and disregarded, particularly those concerning the world of labor. This is exacerbated in countries like Brazil, where the non-compliance and fragility with which these rights were implemented in the first place have made our society even more distressed. Even though the deeper, root causes of this conservative change of course, which includes the attacks on constituted rights, should be investigated from within the existing large geopolitical and economic change around and the role of Latin America and Brazil in this scene, the paths of our recent history are quite concerning.

President Michel Temer’s government was created out of an “exception”; from the country’s questionable financial situation which not only disregards the history of political achievements but also, as many specialists have warned, jeopardizes the future of our population.

As an example, we look at two sectors which are important to our field: investments in Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) and actions taken for higher education. Contrary to the global trend of country’s investing more of their GDP in Science and Technology, there is a 20-year limit placed on primary spending, enforced by an amendment to the constitution in 2016 (EC95), which also pertains to important sectors, and successive cuts to the budgets and contingencies of institutions that manage, finance and prepare public policies for Science and Technology which have compromised centers, programs and research projects.

In order to “solve” this lack in public investment the public/private partnerships (PPP) could be expanded either by a “private investment fund for research” or “flexible” working arrangements that allow full-time professor/researchers from public institutions to dedicate 8 hours a week towards developing projects and studies in conjunction with private companies. These mechanisms are possible strategies for raising funds and creating a legal and institutional environment for scientific and technological development and innovation in the country, which are dissociated from strong policies that not only prevent unnecessary private interference but also reduces existing inequalities in fields of knowledge, particularly basic research and humanities. Even still, they run the risk of further complicating national autonomy in strategic sectors.

Recent events observed in higher education in our country are serious and alarming. Apart from not investing in infrastructure and in people, in educational support and in researching and reducing student policies in federal and state universities, we have seen coercive management installed over the last few months. Elisaldo Carlini, professor at São Paulo Federal University, and a very highly respected researcher specializing in narcotics, had a law suit filed against him by the Federal Police, and was subpoenaed by a public prosecutor from São Paulo to “apologize for a crime”.

Private higher education, which benefits from legislation giving large monopolies control of 80% of the country’s colleges and the recent labor reform favoring private capital, dismissed a large number of professors and researchers in December 2017, once again compromising the training and quality these institutions need.

If you don’t consider these examples serious enough, the increased military control marks a clear change of course in the government’s agenda for 2018, the year in which the general elections will take place. Since the federal, state and municipal governments have failed to provide basic social services to the population of the city of Rio de Janeiro, it has become a target for federal/military intervention, strengthened by the creation of the Ministry of Public Safety. As a result, the city has become a hotbed for many homicides, including that of Marielle, and increased territorial disputes between drug traffickers and the military.

The wave of protests that followed Marielle Franco’s murder and her driver show the outrage of the Brazilian population not only against urban violence and for freedom of expression, but for a complete process that gives this population a number of rights, including the fundamental right to life, and against neglecting basic social policies.

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