

PRIME-TIME

HOW A TV HOST SCORED KILLER RATINGS



CRIME

Politician and TV star Wallace Souza is alleged to have hit on a unique way of boosting the popularity of his true-crime program – by having people murdered to ensure his reporters really were first to the story. By Carmen Michael and Chiara Rimoldi



Making news: Wallace Souza is accused of creating a new low in reality TV – murdering for ratings. The crew of his popular TV show, *Canal Livre*, would regularly arrive at crime scenes before authorities.



Left: the smouldering corpse of Renato Teixeira (pictured above). Right: Teixeira's mother, Valdete Rioberia da Silva, asserts his death was ordered by TV host Wallace Souza. Above right: Souza speaks at a press conference last August. He says he is the victim of a set-up.



trafficking and possession of illegal firearms, and indicted for the murder of another victim, alleged drug trafficker Cleomir Pereira Bernardino, who was shot 17 times in 2007.

Another 16 people involved in the case are now either in jail or awaiting sentence, including Souza's bodyguard, Moacir Jorge Pessoa da Costa (aka Moa). The former military policeman had been arrested for possession of cocaine and illegal weapons in October 2008. According to his testimony, Moa had expected Souza to bail him out, but the favour never eventuated, so Moa decided to turn supergrass and lift the lid on his boss's sordid double life.

"If you look at some of the *Canal Livre* footage, Wallace and his crew are the ones that guide the police to the crime scene," says Amazonas attorney-general Otavio Gomes. "These murders were a way to gain [an increased] audience and, therefore, votes."

Such is the scale of Souza's alleged crimes that the story has made headlines around the world. But as the scandal unfolded and *Canal Livre* was taken off air in late 2008, Souza's loyal viewers reeled in disbelief. They claimed it had to be a conspiracy by rival TV shows, political enemies, and perhaps even the police. In an interview last August, Souza added drug dealers to the list of conspirators, claiming they were sick of his crusade against them. "I was the one who organised legislative enquiries into organised crime, the prison system, corruption, drug trafficking by police and paedophilia," he protested.

But investigators found Souza was himself at the head of a deadly cartel of drug dealers, police and ex-police that had been systematically destabilising Manaus for its own gain. Testimonies poured in, including alleged accounts of how Souza

As he pushed through a tangle of undergrowth towards a smouldering mass on the forest floor, the balding news reporter covered his nose with one hand and, with the other, pressed a microphone hard against his striped shirt to deliver a commentary on the latest murder in Brazil's crime-plagued Amazonas state. "It smells like a barbecue," he reported, breathlessly, as wisps of smoke drifted up from the gruesome mound. "It is a man," he confirmed. "It has the smell of burning meat."

It was September 4, 2008, and the reporter was yet again first on the scene for *Canal Livre* (which translates to *Free Channel*), a real-life crime show hosted by smooth-talking star-cum-local-politician Wallace Souza. Over the previous 19 years, the program had become must-see TV among the residents of the Amazonas capital of Manaus, a city of 1.7 million people in a state that sprawls across 1.5 million square kilometres, much of it densely forested. Sitting inside her ramshackle farmhouse on the outskirts of the city, 69-year-old Valdete Rioberia da Silva was as shocked as any viewer by the horrific scene. "I used to watch *Canal Livre* every day," she reveals. "I would stop eating, drinking – whatever I was doing – and run to watch it."

Had she known exactly what she was witnessing on that late summer's day, da Silva may well have stopped breathing, too. The burning, mutilated corpse that filled her television screen, she would later discover, was that of her son, Renato Fernandes Teixeira. "The impression is

that it was in the early hours," the reporter continued. "It was an execution."

Teixeira, a suspected drug mule in Manaus's cocaine smuggling trade, had been missing for a week. "My daughter went to identify the body," explains da Silva, gazing blankly at the river that runs past her home. "There was a missing hand, a missing foot. We only recognised [him] because of his watch. He had been tied with wire, tortured, cut, his belly stuffed with cloth and then burnt, probably still alive. I cried my heart out. You can't understand what it feels like to think of your son burning."

Given Teixeira's line of work, there could have been any number of suspects in his murder. But his mother has come to believe there is only one. "*Canal Livre* killed my son," she insists. And she's not the only person pointing the finger at the very crime show that brought Teixeira's death to light. In fact, police expect to charge Souza – who used his television fame to launch a career in local politics – with organising the murders of at least five men involved in Manaus's escalating drug war.

It's alleged the swarthy 51 year old and his son, Raphael, 26, commissioned the killings to boost *Canal Livre's* ratings, strengthen Souza's political reputation as a fearless crime fighter, and bump off his rivals in the city's drug trade.

So far, Souza has been indicted for drug trafficking, possession of illegal firearms, intimidation of witnesses and forming a criminal gang – charges that may be extended to include paedophilia. Raphael has been convicted of drug



Left: another victim lies dead at a crime scene, which Souza's TV show gains exclusive access to. Above: Brazilian police display arms, munitions and money allegedly confiscated from Souza's home last April. Right: the TV star's son, Raphael, on his arrest. He faces murder, drugs and weapons charges.

and Raphael extorted and terrorised local businesses, trafficked drugs, and engaged in cocaine-fuelled orgies with transvestites

and prostitutes. Behind his glittering public persona, Souza's depravity knew no bounds. In one case, the divorced father was accused of using a dwarf to canvas local schools for young girls.

Stood down from political office last October (as a lawmaker, legislative immunity prevented him from being arrested), Souza spent four days on the run before turning himself in to authorities in Manaus. Questions now abound in the local media about how he could have operated unchecked and who else might have known his secrets. His parting words from parliament suggest others might be involved. "May he who is not guilty throw the first stone," he thundered.

With its rampant drug trade and spiralling crime rate, it's hard to believe Manaus used to be Brazil's wealthiest city. Once a prosperous centre for rubber production, its position as the hub for cocaine trafficking from Colombia has seen the rainforest city blighted by drug-related violence.

So when three hoods jumped a man outside a fish shop in the southern neighbourhood of Raíz in May 2008, it looked like just another drug deal gone wrong. The victim, known as Fabiano, opened his mouth to protest, but the bullets came faster than his words. By the time residents came out on to the street, Fabiano's blood filled the gutter and the black getaway car was just a blur in the distance.

When the corpse of Fabiano's suspected killer was, in turn, found riddled with 20 bullet holes and dumped outside the city's samba party hall three months later, no-one batted an eyelid. True to form, a crew from *Canal Livre* was first on the scene, the hefty Raphael gazing intently down at the corpse through the lens of his video camera. When the footage appeared on television, few people disagreed

with Souza's trademark opening gambit: "The only good criminal is a dead one."

"Where justice doesn't go, Wallace will," viewers would say of his uncanny knack for being first at a crime scene – sometimes even as the crime was taking place.

Run by Souza and his brother, Carlos (who is also an elected Brazilian politician), with the help of Raphael, *Canal Livre* made its name busting crime on the anarchic streets of the city's troubled east zone. "The Brothers Brave", as they popularly became known, produced one of the highest-rating TV shows ever to screen in the region.

"The success of *Canal Livre* represents the failure of justice in our state," explains Professor Ivânia Vieira, professor of social communication at the Federal University of Amazonas. "The

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existence of social injustice brought up the need for immediate justice, which is exactly what Wallace delivered."

He is alleged to have done so without fear of retribution. More than 4000km from Rio de Janeiro, and cut off from the national road networks by the labyrinthine Amazon river, Manaus is a long way from the centres of Brazilian power. Souza operated within an intricate web of protection that included policemen, judges, prosecutors and his own family. (While rumours abound about brother Carlos's involvement in the crimes, the laws of impunity for public officials prevent an official investigation taking place while he remains vice-mayor of Manaus.)

It was fertile ground, too, for the thugish young Raphael. "That's my boy," Souza often boasted to his many security guards about his son, who was

known for terrorising the community with impulsive acts of violence. In one case, witnesses at a car wash testified that Raphael indiscriminately shot a gun, for no conceivable reason, while his car was being cleaned.

"Raphael was spoilt ... and boyish. He had a terrible reputation as a violent person," explains Joana Queiroz, an investigative journalist with the Manaus *A Crítica* newspaper, who has followed the case and since been threatened by Raphael's father. "[Souza] gave him weapons as presents, taught him to shoot and bought him cars."

But according to the statement from Souza's former bodyguard, Moa, the wanton acts of mayhem were anything but random. It was Souza's specific intention, Moa claimed, to destabilise Manaus. Moa recalled a meeting at Souza's

residence in the affluent central suburb of Parque 10 de Novembro, at which the politician announced his intention to "terrorise the city". Moa claims a gang, including at least two policemen, was ordered to commit homicides, smash up bus stops, vandalise public toilets and do anything to "demoralise the work of the Secretary of Public Security in Manaus".

After these nightly attacks on the city, Souza would send out his cameras to fan the flames of public outrage. As a TV host, he could switch from thunderous indignation to tearful anguish in an instant, cynically manipulating the emotions of his viewers. "Nowadays, it seems *everyone* is killing," he would lament with a sigh of exasperation. "The fact is that human rights only serve to protect criminals." Souza knew his audience. They were poor, ►

hardworking, and fed up with violence. To them, Souza was a hero of forgotten people. “When he entered the communities,” says Professor Vieira, “it was like God had arrived.”

“He went to the places that the state doesn’t reach,” explains attorney-general Gomes. “He always spoke from the poorest and most fragile parts of Manaus. The state simply doesn’t get there. There is a lack of health care and security, and these places are extremely dangerous. People thought he was a redeemer of the weak, the ones that police were not able to protect.”

The son of a former politician, Francisco Wallace Cavalcante de Souza was born and raised in the affluent neighbourhoods of Manaus – far from the margins of society that he would later go on to exploit. He studied business at university and trained as an orator, giving church seminars, before joining the police force in his early 20s.

Few opportunities existed to make a decent living in the ’80s. It was at the tail end of the military dictatorship and corruption ran rampant throughout the country, while hyperinflation strangled the Brazilian economy. It was common knowledge that the lowly paid Brazilian police lived off graft and corruption.

For Souza, it was an early education in how things worked. In 1984, he was sacked from his job as an investigator for the Civil Police following claims he extorted a bank worker. Souza protested his innocence. “There is no motive for this,” he railed. “It is a completely inconsistent and absurd accusation.” The charges were dismissed and his former colleagues roundly supported him.

“He [came across] as a caring person,” explains Queiroz, who has known Souza since 1989. “Even when I wrote an article [about his work on *Canal Livre*] and he spent an hour giving out to me on television, he would always be lovely to me when we met.”

If the police force taught Souza graft, it was media that schooled him in the art of wielding power. In 1989, he launched *Canal Livre*, starting one of the most successful careers in Amazonian television history. Before too long, he leveraged that popularity to launch a political career. In 1998, Souza was the most popular member elected to the

Legislative Assembly of the State of Amazonas – a record he’d repeat in 2004 and 2006 – and eventually he became leader of the conservative-leaning Brazilian Progressive Party.

With his political career in meteoric ascension, Souza pushed his personal limits, indulging in cocaine and the services of transvestites. At the riverside Pier do Tropical Hotel – a popular departure point for tourist cruises on the Amazon – he’d hire up to six prostitutes at a time for drug-fuelled orgies with his son and crew of criminals and corrupt cops.

On weekdays, according to Queiroz, Souza would use a dwarf named Anão – one of his loyal gang members – to canvas local schools for under-age girls, luring them with the offer of a trip on Souza’s boat or in his expensive car. (Late last year, a national task force investigating crimes of sexual exploitation and paedophilia was due to hear the testimony of the mother of a 14-year-old girl who claims the child was seduced by the TV star.)

On the day he was expelled from office, Souza apologised to his children and their mothers for the suffering he’d

shows on television Rio Negro (which is now called Band Amazon) – and the intensity of their content increases when elections roll around.

Vigilante-style media is particularly popular. Rival politician and TV host Sabino Castelo Branco – who also rose to political power through his show – competed with Souza to be the first at crime scenes. On one occasion, Souza and Branco emerged from a house where a man had taken hostages, each holding one of the offender’s arms.

While investigators claim Souza’s empire had started to unravel in October 2008, after Moa spilled the beans, some say it’s unfathomable that a mere loose-lipped bodyguard could compromise his powerful empire. A more tantalising clue may lie in a rumoured falling-out between Souza and TV Rio Negro owner and conservative party powerbroker Francisco Garcia. Although both men deny it, the feud is said to have cost Souza the party leadership in early 2007. It was Garcia who axed *Canal Livre*, citing a minor contractual dispute, but many Brazilians are questioning whether

“People thought [Souza] was a redeemer of the weak, the ones that police were not able to protect” Attorney-General Otavio Gomes

caused. He had been married twice and had one child, Raphael, with his first wife, public servant Ana Júlia Saraiva, and two with a woman named Vilani Gomes de Oliveira. Souza was divorced at the time of his arrest, but local newspaper *Hoje em Dia* reports that authorities are investigating an online chat in which Souza allegedly proposed to the 14-year-old girl, who was 13 at the time.

Despite the jailing of Souza and his son, their influence appears to remain strong. On October 24, 2009, the fifth witness to make a statement about Souza, a military policeman named Juarez José dos Santos, was shot dead outside a bar in Manaus. Six days later, police arrested a woman who was carrying more than \$130,000, which she claims was to pay for hits on two key judges in the case, as well as the Amazonas Secretary of Intelligence, Tomás Vasconcelos.

As in some other countries, such as Italy, politics and media remain closely entwined in Brazil. In Manaus, another three politicians run crime

senior political figures might have known what Souza was doing behind the scenes.

As the public waits for all to be laid bare, Souza and his son languish in cells at the Manaus police barracks among the criminals they pretended to deeply despise. Souza may shortly be moved to Brazil’s maximum-security prison in Campo Grande, Rio de Janeiro, home to the country’s most dangerous outlaws, including his former bodyguard, Moa. It would be an interesting reunion. Raphael was being held at the main penal institute of Manaus, but was transferred last June after receiving death threats. His mother became the latest family member to take up the crusade for justice, imploring authorities to arrange for better treatment of her son, pointing out that he cried regularly on the phone to her and that inmates taunted him constantly with, “Raphael, you are going to die in here.”

“For the love of God, the things he has to endure,” she pleaded, with no trace of irony, “no human being should ever have to endure.” ■