

LATIN AMERICAN MEDIA & THE STATE: BEYOND THE OLD SYMBIOSIS

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Introduction

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Observers of Latin America have long regarded the pervasive relationship between the region's governments and its privately owned media, especially its TV-based conglomerates and its often *oficialista* newspapers, as one of accommodation or interdependence.¹ For much of the twentieth century, hegemonic governments, whether military dictatorships or the lengthy *dictablanda* perpetrated by Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), prolonged their rule in part by relying on compliant media to collectively act as a ministry of propaganda; in turn, TV hegemons such as Brazil's Grupo Globo, Mexico's Televisa, and El Salvador's Eserski family were permitted to maintain their quasi-monopolistic status, while newspapers retained generous state subsidies, which in most cases they needed for their survival.

During the last two decades of the century, as first Argentina, then Brazil, Chile, several Central American states, and Mexico embraced electoral democracy, the symbiosis largely persisted, in what Manuel Alejandro Guerrero and Mireya Márquez Ramírez have termed a "captured-liberal" model.² Rather than punishing major broadcasters and newspapers for past sins of monopolistic practice or bias against political opposition, democratically elected governments saw greater utility in preserving a friendly mass media. This was particularly true of television, which itself saw the usefulness of a friendly state, especially—as tended to predominate from the mid-1980s—a neoliberal one; such regimes would permit Globo and Televisa to expand into satellite TV and even telephone services. Multimedia groups such as Argentina's Clarín and multi-industry groups

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such as Venezuela's Cisneros and Colombia's Ardila Lülle and Santo Domingo similarly expanded their media assets in the 1990s.

But as of around 2000, when a “pink tide” started to sweep the region and brought a string of leftist and center-left leaders to power, first in Venezuela, then in Brazil, Argentina, and elsewhere, the old symbioses began to be eroded. (Colombia, as explained below, was the major exception here.) In part, the change was politically driven: in Venezuela, one half of the historic broadcast duopoly, RCTV, effectively disappeared in 2007, when Hugo Chávez refused to renew its license, while in Argentina, Cristina Kirchner enacted a 2009 Media Law that threatened Grupo Clarín with the forced sale of its pay-TV assets; both moves seemed motivated, at least to some extent, by the critical stances the companies had taken towards governmental corruption and inefficiency.³ In part, the change was propelled by a consolidation of industry trends that arose in the 1990s: the growing popularity of cable and satellite television, along with a strengthening of junior broadcast rivals, meant that nightly newscasts on Televisa and TV Globo were no longer the all-powerful megaphones of yore; print media, staffed by a new generation of more idealistic and cosmopolitan reporters and buoyed by expanded advertising revenues, were in most countries assuming more of a watchdog role.⁴ And in part the change was pragmatic, as some media barons decided that democracy was good for business, since competing parties would spend more on campaign ads. Televisa owner-CEO Emilio Azcárraga Jean expressed exactly that argument in 1999, and his networks proceeded to give fairly equal coverage to all three candidates in the presidential campaign of 2000.⁵

In the 2010s, however, and in several places a few years before, symbiosis began to make something of a return. Televisa became a key ally of Felipe Calderón (2006-12) in his ill-executed war on drugs, all the while cultivating the opposition-party politician, Enrique Peña Nieto, who would replace him; Televisa's backing of Peña Nieto would pay off handsomely over the next six years, with protections under a new Telecoms Law and close to US\$400 million in federal advertising.⁶ After 12 years of *kirchnerismo*, Clarín welcomed the 2015 arrival of Mauricio Macri, who soon reformed Cristina Kirchner's Media Law and allowed the conglomerate to finalize a long-sought merger of its pay-TV unit with a rival operator.⁷ During the 2018 election in Brazil, Globo's main broadcast rivals Record and SBT—in contrast to Globo itself—openly supported Jair Bolsonaro, a tactic that apparently reaped them greater government ad spend that year and a yet higher share after Bolsonaro took office in January 2019.⁸ Also during the 2010s, print media across the region felt the pinch as readers and advertisers accelerated their migration to the Internet; this made some newspapers return to the old subsidies-for-sycophancy exchange that had undergirded print economics in much of Latin America during the previous century. Such

support, which mostly took the form of government advertising, now became important to broadcasters too, as their audiences shrank in the face of pay-TV and streaming services,⁹ a trend that incentivized greater *oficialismo*.

Nonetheless, state-media relations are today more complex and variegated than in eras past, and a full embrace of the old interdependent model, and thus a return to a culture of self-censorship, seems unlikely. First, democratization may not have fulfilled all expectations but it has generally strengthened institutions, such as judiciaries, regulators, and human rights commissions, that provide checks on executive power and material for critical stories; democratization also encouraged NGOs to adopt a more prominent social role, which in some cases has included an investigative one. Second, several generations of reporters and editors, who cut their teeth under democratization, remain committed to independent, watchdog journalism, even though industry salaries are ever more precarious. Third, the Internet has made journalism more difficult to coopt, as news portals require much lower start-up and operating costs than legacy media, and some receive support from outside sources like the Open Society Foundations and SembraMedia.¹⁰ (that said, the negative repercussions of the Internet are clear: a weakening of traditional media in their watchdog role, with reduced resources for engaging in investigation, fact-checking politicians, and counterbalancing strident voices and falsehoods on social media.) Finally, for reasons sometimes personal, sometimes ideological, sometimes owing to the agency of their employees, the bigger media players do not always behave the way that social scientists predict: witness the willingness of Grupo Globo, often deemed incorrigibly conservative (in both senses), to back Lula in 2002 and to criticize Bolsonaro in 2019. The diversity of the current set of media-state relationships, together with a subtler appreciation of relations under democratization, is the main underlying theme of this dossier.

Surveying a wide range of local studies of print media in Brazil, Heloiza Herscovitz finds that while the country's top three newspapers were unsurprisingly enthusiastic about the neoliberal project of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), the attitudes of two of them towards the center-left candidacy and government of Lula da Silva (2003-10) were fairly neutral, even sympathetic, at least until the proliferation of corruption scandals during his final year. Again unsurprisingly, during her recession-plagued second term, Dilma Rousseff (2011-16) found the main newspapers particularly adversarial, running regular—and selective—stories on Workers' Party corruption scandals, thereby exacerbating those scandals and almost certainly contributing to her eventual impeachment. However, the return to power of the Right, with the election of Bolsonaro, has not restored the old coziness between the state and the press, far from it.

In El Salvador, which emerged from 12 years of civil war in 1992, media ownership has been highly concentrated, with one family dominating television and newspaper readership largely divided between two family-owned dailies. As Sonja Wolf shows, by privileging business concerns over the public interest, these three families allowed their media to be mouthpieces for the state, whether under the conservative ARENA party (1989-2009) or under the once-socialist but now centrist FMLN (2009-19). Both parties rewarded these families with plenty of state advertising. So far, so symbiotic, but what muddies the picture is the increasingly impactful watchdog role of the news portal *El Faro*, which since its 1998 founding has built a reputation for investigative journalism, to the extent that its scoops often elicit follow-up coverage from the two main newspapers.

Micaela Iturralde offers a refreshingly nuanced view of a media giant in her analysis of Grupo Clarín's flagship enterprise, the newspaper *Clarín*, and its attention to controversial human rights issues under the presidencies of Raúl Alfonsín and Carlos Menem (1983-99). Argentina's bestselling daily had been labelled an apologist for the country's military dictatorship, but its lukewarm attitude to the centralist Alfonsín, its initial enthusiasm for the neoliberal Menem, and its consistent advocacy for a state policy based on national reconciliation rather than bringing dirty-war generals to trial cannot be explained as a mere function of conservative elitism. To *Clarín*, reconciliation was a matter of Christian forgiveness, and when Menem's government showed signs of corruption in the early 1990s, the paper assumed an important watchdog role, in spite of the regime's decision to repeal the legislation that had prevented *Clarín* from acquiring a broadcast television station.

The essay by Diego García Ramírez and Carlos Charry Joya on Colombian television is the outlier in this dossier, in the sense that it shows, between the early 1990s and the present, an ever-greater complicity between the state and media owners, as the industry gradually winds up in the hands of two well-established multi-industrial conglomerates, Santo Domingo and Ardila Lülle. For decades, Colombia had had the most fragmented arrangement of private investment in television in all Latin America, but by the early 2000s it had fostered a de facto duopoly, and textual analysis of the legal reforms that permitted this shows a clear ideological project to favor big business. Today, Colombians get their national TV news almost entirely from the two conglomerates, who have a deep vested interest in not rocking the ship of state.

Rounding out the dossier, Jo Tuckman of *The Guardian* assesses the role of foreign correspondents in Mexico, which hosts more of them than anywhere else in Latin America. Since the era of President Carlos Salinas (1988-94), Mexican politicians and journalists alike have paid great attention to overseas media. This has generally been a good thing. Although some of their coverage has proven

too flattering, foreign media are rarely subject to the financial incentives towards self-censorship that have traditionally prevailed locally and they have offered important overviews of political controversies and investigative exposés. But foreign influence may be on the wane: over the last decade or so, just as many overseas papers have slimmed down or closed their bureaus, local news portals and reporting collectives have flourished. Indeed, they too are helping resist a return to the old state-media symbiosis, and vitally so, given attempts by recent presidents—including the incumbent, Andrés Manuel López Obrador—to co-opt the press anew via large or selective ad buys.

Altogether, this dossier (with the important exception of the Colombian contribution) offers a slightly more optimistic assessment than do Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez of the benefits of democratization and neoliberalism with respect to diversity of media ownership and plurality of viewpoints. One might add that the biggest conglomerates, Televisa and Globo, have shrunk in comparison with their leviathan status in the early 1990s. In 2010 Globo felt obliged to sell off its massive pay-TV/broadband operator NET, while Televisa has divested its satellite holdings, music recording division, concert operator, and one of its two top-flight soccer teams, and it recently hung a for-sale sign on its historic radio division. Neither commands the broadcast share—70 percent for Globo, 90 percent for Televisa—of 25-30 years ago; they are both now closer to 50 percent, still impressive but much diminished, and yet more so when pay-TV and streaming services are taken into account.¹¹

The greater concern today, as suggested by Herscovitz, Tuckman, and Wolf, is a new wave of semi-authoritarian populism, a pan-ideological phenomenon of which Mexico's left-wing López Obrador and Brazil's right-wing Bolsonaro are the continent's exemplars, with El Salvador's Nayib Bukele a younger, ideologically vague exponent.¹² Over the 6-12 months that the three men have spent in office as of this writing, each has expressed repeated disdain for legacy media, especially newspapers. This might not matter so much were it not for the fact that they are very able self-propagandizers, AMLO through his five-a-week televised and livestreamed press conferences, Bolsonaro and Bukele via Twitter. There is as yet no evidence that their countries' newspapers have enjoyed the equivalent of the "Trump bump" experienced by the *New York Times* since 2016. On the contrary, and particularly in economically stagnant Mexico, cover sales and ad revenues continue to fall and layoffs persist.

How will Latin America's media react to the new semi-authoritarian populism? Will television and print media respond to the challenge of providing balance and holding the demagogic to account? A few have begun to do so—TV Globo and the top three newspapers in Brazil (especially *Folha de S. Paulo*), *Reforma* and *Proceso* in Mexico—but will reduced government advertising, other state-driven

pressures, and/or recession cause them to rein in their watchdog tendencies, as occurred at Grupo Clarín two decades ago? How effectively will the news portals and young reporting collectives be able to speak truth to power? The last decade has seen such media blossom, but in a digital landscape abuzz with *oficialista* bots, Twitter-shaming of critical journalists, and upstart politically funded websites masquerading as reliable news sources (Mexico’s unconvincingly named *Sin Línea* and *El Soberano*, for instance), will online watchdog reporting build on its initial promise or will it fail to rise above niche-audience status? Should *EIAL* revisit media-state relations in five years’ time, there is sure to be plenty to discuss.

Notes

1. Venicio de Lima, “The State, Television, and Political Power in Brazil”, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 5 (1988), pp. 108-128; Jon Vanden Heuvel and Everette E. Dennis, *Changing Patterns: Latin America’s Vital Media* (New York: Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, 1995), p. 14; Elizabeth Fox, *Latin American Broadcasting: From Tango to Telenovela* (Luton: Univ. of Luton Press, 1997), pp. 34, 37, 58f; Silvio Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2000), pp. 14-17; Claudia Fernández & Andrew Paxman, *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2013 [2000]), esp. pp. 22f, 49f.
2. Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez (eds.), *Media Systems and Communication Policies in Latin America* (London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 9-13; cf. Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, “The Captured-Liberal Model: Media Systems, Journalism and Communication in Latin America,” *International Journal of Hispanic Media*, 7 (Aug. 2014). “Captured-liberal” refers to a system that is ostensibly free-market but in which media policy is largely determined by media owners who in turn provide continued support to the state.
3. “Chávez silences critical TV station”, *The Guardian*, 23 May 2007, www.theguardian.com/media/2007/may/23/venezuela.broadcasting; “Battle Between Argentine Media Empire and President Heats Up Over a Law”, *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/12/01/world/americas/media-law-ratchets-up-battle-between-kirchner-and-clarin-in-argentina.html.
4. Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism*; Rosental Calmon Alves, “From Lapdog to Watchdog: The role of the press in Latin America’s democratization”, in H. de Burgh (ed.), *Making Journalists: Diverse models, Global Issues* (London: Routledge, 2005); Sallie Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), chs. 4, 9 & 10. Hughes (p. 231) notes a drastic, recession-driven retreat from investigative journalism in Argentina between 1999 and 2005, but such reporting would revive with major corruption scandals in 2007-08.
5. Fernández & Paxman, *El Tigre*, p. 599f.
6. “Televisoras se llevan 13 mil mdp, diarios más de 4 mil mdp”, *Animal Político*, 6 June 2019, www.animalpolitico.com/2019/06/televisa-imagen-azteca-medios-publicidad-oficial-eqn/.

7. “El Grupo Clarín arrasa desde la llegada de Mauricio Macri”, *El País*, 6 July 2017, https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/07/05/argentina/1499281826_210689.html.
8. “Governo Bolsonaro reduz publicidade na Globo e prioriza SBT e Record”, *Poder360*, 12 Nov. 2019, www.poder360.com.br/midia/governo-bolsonaro-reduz-publicidade-na-globo-e-prioriza-sbt-e-record/.
9. For example, in first-quarter 2019, Nielsen-IBOPE found that Mexico’s nationwide viewing broke down as follows: streaming services: 20 percent; pay-TV: 29 percent; broadcast 51 percent; *Reporte trimestral de audiencias de radio y televisión con perspectiva de género, enero-marzo 2019* (Mexico City: IFT, 2019), p. 13.
10. See www.opensocietyfoundations.org/what-we-do/themes/journalism and www.sembramedia.org/who-we-are/.
11. “Ibope outubro: 70% das TVs no país sintonizaram só canais abertos,” *UOL*, 15 Nov. 2019, <https://tvefamosos.uol.com.br/noticias/ooops/2019/11/15/ibope-outubro-70-das-tvs-no-pais-sintonizaram-so-canais-abertos.htm>. Unlike in South America, audience figures in Mexico are rarely made public, and Televisa ceased to record its share in its annual reports after 2011, by when it had declined to 70 percent. Rival TV Azteca, in its first-quarter 2019 report, put Televisa’s national share, in a two-way match, at 63 percent; accounting for third-ranked player Imagen TV and local channels the figure would be roughly 50 percent, while accounting for pay-TV and streaming too, Televisa’s viewing share would be a mere 25 percent; cf. footnote 9, above.
12. On Latin American populism as much more of a style than an ideology, see Alan Knight, “Populism and Neo-Populism in Latin America, Especially Mexico,” *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 30:2 (1998). On the specific commonalities of such politically opposed leaders as López Obrador and Bolsonaro, see also “The surprising similarities between AMLO and Jair Bolsonaro,” *The Economist*, 5 Dec. 2019.