

Hybrid media helps democracy breathe

By Silvio Waisbord,

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Media privatisation has not triggered many concerns about the future of public broadcasting in Latin America. In the last two decades, governments have put the finishing touches to the private model that has been dominant since the early days of radio.

Historically, broadcasting was organised around commercial principles blended with statism and clientism. Public broadcasting was never the backbone of media systems – it was not even a limb. Because it originally lacked support from powerful sectors, it never got off the ground. Unlike Africa and Asia, Latin America lacked the colonial legacy of public media upon which public broadcasting could have been built. While governments approached media technologies as propaganda tools, domestic and US business salivated at the prospects of setting up commercial broadcasting.

The idea of public broadcasting was absurd in the mind of the authoritarian governments that dominated the region between the 1930s and the 1980s. Nor were political parties enamored with it. When in power, they were happy to align with the interests of media business as long they could keep some control by running a few stations or keeping news coverage on a short leash. Only in countries where universities owned television stations (eg Bolivia, Chile) did noncommercial aspirations have, at least in principle, a better chance. However, they have never achieved their potential due to lack of political and economic support.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that when Latin American governments decided to privatise state-owned media that were economically and politically bankrupt, few observers voiced fears over the future of public broadcasting. It had neither a past to be vindicated nor a present to be defended. Who could defend state-run stations that only paid lip service to democratic ideals and functioned as personal fiefdoms and trophies? With a few exceptions, there were no powerful actors who could fight to salvage the idea of an alternative to government and private media. The spirit of public broadcasting only managed to stay alive in Chile's Television Nacional and in a few radio and television stations scattered across the region (e.g. São Paulo's TV Cultura).

The victory of commercial interests was a foregone conclusion. Concerned that any criticism or regulation would antagonise media business, political parties approached the subject gingerly. Because media attention provides vital oxygen for their political aspirations, politicians were not willing to anger powerful media moguls. Most were typically interested in obtaining personal, short-term benefits. Governments removed legal obstacles on cross-media ownership, put stations up for sale, and refrained from passing anti-trust legislation that could hold back runaway concentration. In the last decade, private interests have consolidated their grip on broadcasting in a perfect case of "state capture."

Most media markets are becoming imperfect duopolies, in which two corporations control the most important and influential media outlets (including cable and satellite television and internet portals), and an array of smaller companies own print media and broadcasting stations.

Examples include Grupo Clarín and Telefónica in Argentina, Azteca and Televisa in Mexico, Grupo Ardilla Lule and Grupo Santo Domingo in Colombia, and Grupo Cisneros and Grupo Phelps in Venezuela. They reach the vast majority of media audiences and receive the lion's share of advertising expenditures. Only in a few cases have companies managed to remain "independent" and influential within the fissures of markets dominated by such multimedia companies.

Dos amigos

Concentration and private hegemony does not mean that, under neo-liberalism, Latin American governments have lost all means to influence media operations. In small countries/markets like those in Central American countries, proximity between state and private interests remains as tight as ever. Official advertising is a substantial portion of total investments. Government decisions typically make a huge difference in the economy of media companies, particularly when the latter are interested in expanding and fighting rivals, or need to gain access to foreign inputs, or to financial lifesavers during economic crises. These conditions present government officials with plenty of opportunities to cajole media owners into attending their political needs. At times, confrontations along business/partisan lines have been heated, spilling into the headlines of major newspapers and fueling press exposés of official wrongdoing.

In bigger countries and markets, such relations are more complex. There are more media companies, bigger advertising pies, and more developed regional economies. Nonetheless, quid pro quo relations between governments and media companies are typical. Officials and moguls use available means to put pressure on, negotiate with, and obtain benefits from each other.

The current media landscape makes it difficult for traditional independent media outlets, family-owned media, university- and church-owned outlets to stay afloat. They have difficulties in raising large amounts of capital to support technological innovation, finance expansions and mergers, launch massive marketing campaigns to attract audiences, or offer sweet deals to large advertisers. If profitable, they are ripe for takeovers; if not, they perish. Going bigger is the only way to jump onto the globalisation bandwagon. Even large companies need the assistance of global investors to consolidate their power in open markets.

Not surprisingly, the space for critical media organizations is getting smaller. Governments and advertisers have carrots to attract docile coverage, and carry big legislative sticks to deal with critical media. Not satisfied with controlling economic incentives, public officials have recently shown a penchant for silencing media criticism by enacting laws that severely limit freedom of expression. Many have attempted (some successfully) to pass gag laws and enact restrictive public information laws.

Conditions are equally difficult for the alternative media, which have a long and rich tradition in the region. These continue to provide democratic, localized spaces that are somewhat protected from the greed of political and commercial interests. However, some governments have tried to take away licences from community radio and television stations to order the "chaos" of the airwaves or to squash criticisms of official policies. Many organisations that sustain "small media" (indigenous groups, shanty-town communities) suffer from chronic economic problems.

Mixed media

Media democracy in Latin America needs combined, hybrid strategies. Globalisation makes it necessary to rethink old ideas that, even if once viable, could only work when media systems were largely confined to nation-states. The complexity of the media landscape and the diverse needs of different social groups require multiple strategies. All our democratic eggs should not

be put in the public broadcasting basket, especially given the historical weakness of public service in the region.

Public broadcasting can still serve underrepresented populations. It can still be a corrective to the many shortcomings of market-based media systems. The untrammelled markets perpetuated inequalities in serving the information needs of citizens, particularly in countries with alarming levels of poverty and deepening social exclusion. Public broadcasting can still provide spaces for cultural creativity that ratings-obsessed media find inconvenient and unnecessary. But where to start is not obvious, given the historical weakness of public broadcasting in the region, and the persistent tendency to confuse public media with state media.

Nor can too many expectations be placed on the goodwill of individuals (publishers, journalists, producers) committed to democratic expression within the limitations of the present system. Imagination and political will are necessary to design institutional safeguards that protect the right of expression for a myriad of collective voices deemed irrelevant by official imperiousness and corporate greed.

The challenge is how to translate the democratic vitality found at the grassroots and in cyberspace into media diversity at the national and regional levels. Small, localised strategies require a bifocal view that does not lose sight of the conditions of the large media structures reaching mass audiences. This is particularly necessary when media access continues to be sharply unequal according to social differences. The history of Latin American media shows that when government and business are clinched in a tight embrace, democratic communication suffocates.

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