

Media, freedom and poverty: A Latin American perspective

Alfonso Gumucio -Dagron

When did we lose our trust in the mass media in Latin America? I cannot remember, but it was at least two decades ago, when my generation started to work on a thousand and one projects of alternative media to combat the hegemonic state-owned or private mass media. We were known as radical activists who opposed the increasing power of mainstream newspapers, television and radio stations. Many looked on us with scepticism, either because we were under-developed Quixotes fighting against the powerful windmills of media conglomerates or because our language was black and white: we were convinced that economic and political interests dominated media houses and everything that appeared in print.

It seems we were not that far from the truth. Now everyone seems to agree that mainstream media are far from representing the genuine voices of people, on the contrary, they increasingly represent the power of money. Media conglomerates grow bigger by the day, while alternative options are crushed with legal arguments drawn by the marry alliance between private media and government servants. It has taken many years for emblematic intellectuals, such as Ignacio Ramonet, to acknowledge that the so-called 'fourth power' has colluded with economic and political interests, and to suggest that we need to build from scratch a 'fifth power' that will genuinely represent people.

Media landscape in the region

Much has changed in Latin American mass media in the past 25 years. These changes paralleled the political and social changes that brought back democracy to most of our countries, after two decades of military dictatorships and authoritarian governments.

During the 1960s and 1970s public media were utilised by governments to propagandise their policies and political views. Although independent radio and daily journals existed, they were often punished with censorship and political pressures. In most countries, independent television came to life only after 1980, in a process similar to that of European television. Hundreds of television channels were created in countries where the size of the audience didn't justify such an explosion.

After a couple of decades of looking back, it is not very certain that the privatisation of mass media has resulted in any positive changes for society. Globalisation has created more dependency, and has contributed to the annihilation of independent media that existed even under the difficult circumstances of military dictatorships. My own country, Bolivia, is a good example. This is the country that nurtured the first network of miners' radio stations, famous because of their three decades of struggle for democracy and freedom of expression.

It is also the country that allowed the creation of university television channels that broadcast to the general population, at a time when the only authorised television station was state-owned. With the liberalisation of the economy and the distribution of private licences for new television stations, the university TV channels declined and disappeared. The miners' radio stations lost political influence when liberal economic recipes forced the government to shut down the state-owned mining sector. It took many years to obtain legislation that would protect community-based participatory media, and globalisation blew every effort out in a few months. Privatisation of the airwaves has deprived our citizens of a natural collective patrimony which is now enjoyed exclusively by a small number of rich owners of media conglomerates.

In countries such as Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, media conglomerates have grown so powerful that they now extend their tentacles across geographic borders. Televisa owns networks in the United States and its influence is enormous in the whole region. In spite of language constraints, Brazilian multi-media conglomerate O Globo, is also one of the most influential, with over a hundred television channels, journals and radio stations. Grupo Clarín in Argentina, Grupo Cisneros in Venezuela or Corporación Caracol in Colombia are all clusters of journals, television and radio stations, but also supermarkets, hotels, construction business and other investments with huge influence in shaping the politics of each country. The popular Monopoly of the seventies has swept the continent for real. The only difference is that instead of hotels, the concentration of economic power is around media, because media, the former 'fourth power', serves both political and economic ambitions very well.

Concentration and loss of diversity

There was a time when the region fought to have its own voice. The support came from UNESCO's famous 'MacBride Report', which denounced the imbalances within media from the 'first' world and media from the 'third world'. This equation was so clearly affecting development and social change in developing nations, that the report became a strong political statement against neo-colonialism. Latin America created its own news agency, ALASEI, short-lived after funding dried up and accusations of being an instrument of 'communist' governments increased. With the exception of IPS (International Press Service) and a few national agencies such as Notimex and Prensa Latina, the region is back to the old times when Associated Press dominated around 70% of all news in circulation.

The higher concentration of media houses in fewer hands has resulted in a loss of diversity and quality of programming. Particularly television has become the most standardised medium in the region. The same soap operas, the same news and the same entertainment are found country by country. It is almost impossible to discern a thread of Latin American identity in Latin American television, or maybe yes, ironically, in soap operas. The choice of programming might be a little larger in two or three countries in the region, but the general pattern is depressing: we are all looking at the same screen, and it is not our own screen.

The Latin American reality is absent, or seen through the eyes of CNN in Spanish. Cable TV is everywhere in the cities and only accessible to those that can pay for it, not for the majority that lives on a couple of dollars a day. The choice is far from being the variety of '500 stations' that

were promised to everyone a couple of decades ago. Today, an average of 50 channels are offered in a regular cable package, and the same ones will be seen from the south of Argentina to the north of Mexico.

Given this lack of diversity and the excess of misrepresentation, one tends to regret the absence of the much maligned and privatised old state media, which at least had a sense of mission and a vision of national interests. Local programming on social issues has disappeared from private television, leaving room for all kinds of low level and bad taste entertainment that sells well. Our mass media are only a bad reflection of the worst commercial media in the United States.

We cannot even establish how 'national' are national media in most countries of the region, because the privatisation process has brought bigger commercial interests, even from other regions, as key players. A Mexican living in Miami owns four out of five television channels in Guatemala. Political interests have been weighing heavily on the editorial policies of major print and electronic media. We now know for certain that El Mercurio, the major Chilean newspaper, received funds from the CIA to support Pinochet's military coup against Allende. That was long time ago, but the information has recently been declassified. The plot of Venezuelan private television channels and daily journals against President Chavez has been also openly acknowledged; even The New York Times published an editorial in celebration of the coup, which failed after a few hours.

Not only media corporations have lost credit because of their direct intervention into politics, but people are also tired of seeing mass media self-appointed as the supreme judges of society. Political and commercial power walk hand-in-hand in Latin America, as they do in any other region. The very few independent voices – mainly through print media and community radio - struggle to keep a few paths open, but they often succumb to pressures and even violent attacks from the circles of economic and political power.

There are many examples, the recent assassination of well-known journalist Carlos Guadamuz in Nicaragua is symbolic of many other journalists that risk their lives everyday. In Guatemala, 80 community radio stations, mostly located in poor Mayan villages, have been declared 'illegal'. The pressure is not as strong from the government as it is from the private radio owners who for the past year have been running ads several times a day urging the government to take action against the 'pirate' radio stations.

A deficit in mass media content

Mainstream media are failing to represent the social, economic and cultural challenges of Latin America. Devoted to entertainment and manipulation of political information, mass media are not promoting dialogue, understanding, peace or any other attitude that helps society cope with the issues of increased poverty and marginalisation. The logic of profit prevents any commitment of mainstream media to society. When issues of freedom of expression are debated, it is corporate freedom that is promoted, not the freedom of expression of people or journalists.

Journalists in the mainstream media have never before faced such a degraded environment. Many end up playing the game of corporate interests and manage their profession as any other business. Those that want to act according to professional ethics have a hard time, unable to research and write on topics that may not please their bosses. For a young reporter, the filters that stand between him or her and the readers or listeners are enormous; personal integrity has become a synonym for 'trouble-maker'.

In terms of content, mainstream media are urban-centred and have turned their back on the rural population, which still comprises half of most of the countries in the region. Development issues rank far behind all the other best-selling topics: sports, crime, sex scandals, or politics. That is why in rural and marginalised urban areas, communities struggle to create the means to make their own voices heard.

The classic checklist for a beginner journalist is irrelevant in a context where the real 'Ws' are:

Who owns the media?

What agenda dominates information flows?

Where resides the actual power of decision-making?

Which are the limits on journalists reporting freely?

Why should people support mainstream media that do not support people?

A journalist is no longer a Quixote armed with a typewriter. He or she is now trapped in a spider's web of censorship and self-censorship. Every day he or she faces a difficult choice between personal ethics and corporate agendas.

The anti-government bashing wave that facilitated the neo-liberal privatisation strategy has left nation-states powerless. Private commercial media avoid any regulation and get away with it, no longer concerned about the phantom of the New World Information and Communication Order that tried to limit its political influence and give more power to the people. 'The best media policy is no policy at all', say the powerful media owners.

A communication system for the people

Building an alternative communication system to serve the whole of society and not only the powerful is the task ahead. There is much to learn from the rich experiences of alternative media and community-based communication, because that has been the only outlet for true freedom of expression for decades. Latin America has a wealth of experiences that started in the late 1940s with the first community radio stations in Colombia and Bolivia. During the 1980s the network of miners' radio stations had become so essential in the information and communication landscape, that people would turn the dial to these stations in times of political crisis, as they were better trusted than commercial or government media. It is no surprise that during military coups the miners' radio stations were considered an important tactical objective and were often attacked and destroyed. It is vital to learn from these experiences that grew out of the people, mostly without any external influence.

Any new communication system that sincerely seeks to re-establish diversity and plurality in mass media should articulate important dichotomies, such as: diffusion-reception, public-private, impersonal-interpersonal, content-infrastructure, access-ownership, local-national, urban-rural, collective social justice-individual freedom of expression (based on José Luis Exeni's categories).

Some indicators are leading the way towards the construction of a 'fifth power'. However, if the concept ends up reproducing the same vertical structures, there is a great risk of creating another power that will reinforce political and economic interests. We need a new communication paradigm in the region, which will learn from the growing social movements and will be followed closely by the emerging citizen's watch organisations. The Veeduría Ciudadana, in Peru, is one example of how organised people can keep an eye on mainstream media.

Universities should stop producing journalists and start producing communicators, professionals with a strategic view of communication, instead of a fixation for mass media. We need communicators that can work in development programmes and not just as peons of private media conglomerates or image sellers in commercial or political outlets. We have around six hundred faculties or departments of 'social communication' in Latin America, but 99% of them are just the old journalist schools with a new fancy name. The content of studies has not changed at all for the last 30 years, the only additions being 'marketing', 'public and corporate relations' or 'new technologies'. There are no more than ten academic programmes in the region that prepare a different type of communicator.

However, social changes need an enabling environment in order to happen. It is time once again to place at the top of the agenda the debate on public communication policies that private commercial media do not want to hear about.

Alfonso Gumucio Dagron is the Managing Director of the Communication for Social Change Consortium, Guatemala City.