

ALÓ PRESIDENTE – PRESS AND POLITICS IN LATIN AMERICA¹

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It hasn't been looking good for press and media freedom in Latin America for some considerable time now. Cuba, Venezuela and other states subscribing to so-called 21st century socialism bear the principal responsibility for this. Recently, however, media weakened by the onslaughts of globalism, Internet competition and the financial crisis have also been forced to try to assert themselves in the face of other governments as well. There are indications of a fundamental shift in the balance of power between press and politics. For years the press in many Latin American states came to symbolize the battle for human rights and the protection of democracy. It was with considerable courage, for example, that the Buenos Aires Herald in Argentina, Paraguay's Radio ñandutí or Nicaragua's La Prensa pressed on with their critical reporting undaunted by even the most vicious of dictators. Transition research carried out by political scientists accordingly ascribes a key role to Latin American journalists in the wave of re-democratization that took place throughout the 1980s. When in the 1990s, in states such as Venezuela, Ecuador or Bolivia, the traditional parties collapsed under the enormous weight of corruption allegations, it appeared to make sense in many places to expect journalists to assume a moral leadership role. This was followed a few years later by the stellar rise of some already powerful media companies, such as Mexico's Televisa, Brazil's Rede Globo or the Argentine Clarín Group. Today these three don't only dominate their domestic markets: they even have a place in the global media landscape. For example, Televisa, with a turnover of nearly €3 billion worldwide, is in 42nd place in the list of the 50 largest media corporations, and Rede Globo has for many years been pushing its own productions in both European and African markets.² This expansionary trend has gone hand in hand with a strong movement toward corporate diversity. This applies not only to sectors with similar holdings but also to ownership structures, which have become increasingly less transparent due to national and international inter-dependencies and shareholdings.

As is happening in other countries, both the media and journalists in Latin America are increasingly losing their function as privileged political gate-

¹ This article is based on a study commissioned by the Latin American media program (Medienprogramm Lateinamerika). The provisional publication date is March 2010. On this theme cf. Martín Dinatale and Alejandra Gallo: Luz, cámara ... ¡Gobiernos! Nuevos Paradigmas de la comunicación presidencial en América Latina (Buenos Aires: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung).

² Cf. Institute for Media and Communication Policy (ed.), Ranking –die ersten 50 größten Medienkonzerne 2008, <http://www.mediadb.eu/rankings> [December 3 2009].

keepers. One important reason for this has been the loss of technologically derived competitive advantage. New technologies iron out the differences, "flattening the world", as Thomas Friedman has it in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book.³ When it comes to finding a similarly profitable alternative to the outmoded advertising-driven model, Latin American media have yet to find any answers. This is particularly problematic in the case of Latin America, where the state has always been far and away the largest source of advertising. Worse still, Latin American media, in their response to these developments, seem to be making the editorial and commercial mistake of over-sensationalizing things and neglecting their staff.

This of course varies from case to case. It is, however, striking how Latin American journalists lost credibility and trustworthiness in the years between 1995 and 2005. Different surveys have all confirmed this tendency.⁴ It may be that this loss of respect has helped make journalists much more susceptible to attack in recent years. It is apparent that the practice of deriding the media and journalists no longer carries the same kind of social stigma ("attack on press freedom") as it did just a few years ago. The call to rein in the media has in the meantime almost hit the mainstream, which probably explains why populists such as presidents Chávez and Morales jumped on the bandwagon relatively quickly. The demand for media, as well as political, accountability to society is clearly no longer politically incorrect, irrespective of what exactly is meant by it. This was also the conclusion of a company representative from the Clarín Group at the 65th General Assembly of the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa/Inter American Press Association SIP/IAPA at the beginning of November 2009 in Buenos Aires.⁵ In his address he expressed concern over the ongoing resurgence in Latin America of the idea that it was the task of governments to keep the media under control, referring to a corresponding Latinobarómetro survey of 2004. According to the survey, this idea was supported by 37 percent of those questioned. What is forgotten in this context, however, is the fact that, in many cases, private media corporations view what can often justifiably be called their monopoly in a completely uncritical light, rejecting as censorship any attempts to question it.

A war of words – and actions – is hotting up on the part of politicians of all stripes, all of whom are making similar criticisms. The Nobel Peace Prize winner and president of Costa Rica, O. Arias, recently accused the media across the board of primarily pursuing economic interests. Even Brazil's president da Silva seems at least to be flirting with such positions. Only re-

³ Cf. Thomas L. Friedman, *The world is flat. A brief history of the 21st century* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux April 2005).

⁴ Cf. Latinobarómetro, *Surveys from the years 1995-2008*, available for viewing at www.latinobarometro.org [December 3 2009]. Cf. also: PEW Research Center for the people & the press, <http://people-press.org/report/543/> [December 3 2009].

⁵ SIP/IAPA (Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa) is an association of organizations comprising the most important North and South American press corporations, <http://www.sipiapa.org> [December 3 2009].

cently, the online edition of Globo published a report claiming that the party leadership was working on a resolution to force legally regulated "social control" on private media. The cry was that the current system of licensing was no longer fit for purpose, preferring as it did "commercial groups at the expense of the public interest". A further interesting case is that of the newly-elected president of El Salvador, Mauricio Funes, who formerly worked as a journalist. His education minister S. Sánchez Serén has presented a reform initiative to parliament which promises that the media will have to expect "strong and serious" regulation.⁶ Irrespective of how threatening such positions and actions really are when taken individually, it is undeniable that such statements are being made with one voice by the political establishment. What is of particular concern in this connection is the striking surge in the number of journalists being murdered. Such very different organizations as Reporters without Borders and the SIP/IAPA agree that, for the first time in years, the number of Latin American journalists being murdered has started to rise again.

At the same time, individual political players have been doing their homework. Non-governmental organizations and social movements above all have been learning how to make more professional use of new communications technology, but governments, political groups and electoral platforms are close behind them. In many state bodies and ministries throughout Latin America it is no longer unusual to come across a press officer. What is more important still: these jobs are being done by appropriately trained staff, which is not a matter of course in countries where civil service jobs are widely viewed as a sinecure. External communications consultants are also being hired much more frequently and as a matter of course than was the case 15 or 20 years ago. Paradoxically, this development has (also) been advanced by journalists. With some justification they have long bemoaned the closeness and lack of transparency of government PR work – and that of political parties and groups. Individual governments have recognized that access to state budgets and infrastructure has given them many more ways of bringing public opinion on message. This applies all the more where the media are having to fight for their very existence. It must however be said that the professionalization of government communication has broadly been limited to the technical level. Only a few cases have revealed even the first inklings of strategic communication planning.

In Latin America, a strong feeling of mutual mistrust appears to have developed between media corporations, journalists and politicians, which, in some cases, has tipped over into hostility. This will only become acutely dangerous

⁶ Cf. Oscar Arias, "...son, ante todo, empresas, corporaciones quebuscan producir utilidades", in: La Nación (San José, Costa Rica), 28.08.2009; "PT defende controle público e sanções à imprensa", in: Globo online (Rio de Janeiro, Brasilien), 19.11.2009, <http://oglobo.globo.com/pais/noblat/posts/2009/11/19/pt-defende-controle-publico-sancoes-imprensa-242570.asp> December 32009]; "Educación pide regular medios de comunicación", in: ElMundo (San Salvador, El Salvador), 26.11.2009.

for all sides when one of them really has to fight for its life. In a democracy, politics and the press live together in a necessary symbiosis, albeit one which is characterized by conflict. They depend on each other. They fulfil different, sometimes contradictory functions but are completely dependent on each other for their very existence. But what happens when one of the sides is fatally weakened; when technological innovations mean that the media with their customary role as watchdog suddenly find their existence in jeopardy? Who will then assume the role of watchdog or guardian of democracy – bloggers or people's journalists? Will it even be possible to make a living from well-informed, quality investigative journalism outside the charmed circles of large media corporations? Most important of all – what consequences will all this have for democracy? Can democracy thrive without critical media?

These are questions which don't just concern Latin American politicians, journalists and media types. It is in Latin America, however, that journalists and journalism as a profession are already becoming the biggest losers in the face of these tendencies.

The line-up of dangers confronting the media and journalists in Latin America is undergoing a quantum shift, even if the old, familiar risks remain dominant in the public perception. Organized crime, political corruption, and state harassment not only continue to be responsible for the vast majority of breaches of press freedom, they also cause the most deaths amongst journalists. It isn't drug cartels, Mara gangs, or corrupt militaries, or politicians who pose the greatest threat to the future of media corporations and journalism as a profession, however. It isn't even authoritarian leaders like Chávez or Correa. The greatest danger comes from both politicians and journalists who believe that modern technology will allow one to exist without the other.

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