

Media and governance in Latin America: The role of communication for development

By Paola Sartoretto¹

Introduction

A group of around sixty researchers interested in Latin American issues gathered in May 2014 at the University of Sheffield, in the United Kingdom, for the conference [“Media and Governance in Latin America – Exploring the role of communication for development”](#). Hosted jointly by the University of Sheffield’s Departments of Journalism Studies and of Hispanic Studies and the Sheffield Institute for International Development, the conference was organised by Jairo Lugo-Ocando, lecturer in Journalism Studies at Sheffield University, and a number of his PhD students who are currently doing research on Latin America. Of the sixty-five submissions received, forty were accepted for presentation and organized in ten panels. I participated in the conference with my paper [“Voices from the margins – people and the media in the struggle for land in Brazil”](#), which was included in the panel session Media and Policy Struggles.

The conference sought to provide a forum for academic debates about the role of communication in processes of governance and development, focusing on recent events in the Latin American region including protests and widespread civil society demonstrations. The papers presented covered a variety of questions related to media, development, citizen participation, civil society and governance in Latin American countries. There was a clear predominance of papers addressing news media in the region. Many of them focused particularly on issues of political coverage and the roles of news media in reporting social problems such as poverty, violence and drug trafficking. Some also presented research on community media exploring the possibilities that they represent for minorities, children and marginalized communities. In my paper on [the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement \(MST\)](#), included in the latter, I discuss MST’s communicative processes focusing on how media play a role in mobilization and representation, based on the findings from my doctoral fieldwork in Brazil.

Day 1

The event started with a keynote address by Professor Silvio Waisbord, from George Washington University in the US, who discussed the relations between state and civil society in the media reforms that are taking place in many Latin American countries. Waisbord emphasised the international interest for current developments in Latin America, and urged participants to use the region as an ‘excuse’ to discuss questions such as media reform, civil society participation and democracy. The morning panels discussed democratization processes in Mexico and Chile with a focus on current media reforms, communication and social movements, highlighting the roles of media in recent student and civil society protests and mobilizations, and political communication in the emerging democratic systems in Mexico, Brazil and Chile. After being governed by military dictatorships during long periods

in the twentieth century, many Latin American countries have, in the latest decades, succeeded in establishing democratic systems with elected representatives. In such a context, where censorship of the press and media in general are part of the living memory, the contours of the relationship between news-media and politics are shaped differently compared to advanced democracies in Europe.

In the afternoon of the conference's first day, two parallel panel sessions addressed themes such as media and democratization processes in Mexico, Puerto Rico and Cuba, and the relation between journalistic practice and democracy, with papers from Brazil, Chile and Venezuela. A recurrent issue was the legacy of the military dictatorships and its consequences for ongoing processes of media democratization and popular participation. The conflicts resulting from the commercial ethos of media in many Latin American countries were also present in many papers, and in the enthusiastic discussions after the sessions. An example is the paper presented by Carolina Matos, a lecturer at City University in London, UK, which addressed the future of Brazilian journalism in times of audience reconfiguration and increased pressure from the public. In her research, Matos found that the pressure exerted by the public has led the Brazilian media to insert public interest themes in a commercialised way. Isabel Awad, from Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, started from the coverage of citizen demands in a housing project in Santiago de Chile to discuss how neoliberalism goes beyond economics to enter news practices and the relationships between citizens and journalists.

The first day of the conference ended with two more keynote addresses, by James Painter, former head of the BBC's Latin American desk and researcher at the Reuters Institute of Journalism – Oxford University, , and by Olga Guedes Bailey, senior lecturer in media and communication at Nottingham Trent University, both in the UK. James Painter talked about climate change reporting in Latin American media and shared data from a recent study on climate change coverage. The study analysed frames and outcomes of media coverage, and questioned what the drives to cover climate change issues are. Painter underscored the role of web aggregators such as BuzzFeed in popularizing information about climate change in Latin America, pointing out that shareability is a key factor that determines the spread of information about the issue. High-profile and resource-strong politicians can also steer media coverage, in Painter's view. That was the case with former Brazilian president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva when he took one hundred journalists with him to the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, 2009. Olga Guedes Bailey, whose main research interests are in the areas of alternative media, journalism and democracy, and communication among minority and diaspora groups, talked about the June 2013 manifestations in Brazil. As a Brazilian citizen, she was in a privileged position to analyse the recent events in the country. Guedes Bailey warned against deriving generalisations from a multifaceted, complex and evolving conflict, which she characterized as the "Brazilian summer of discontent". The researcher also pointed out that the street demonstrations were a reflection of increased education levels, and argued that Brazilian media should take the opportunity to learn a lesson from the streets.

Day 2

The second day of the conference started with keynote lectures by James Watt, lecturer in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Sheffield, and Ella McPherson, Fellow in

Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, both in the UK. In his lecture “Dying for the truth: the Mexican drug war and freedom of the press”, Peter Watt highlighted the role of new social movements in the fight against drug traffic, emphasizing that these new social actors have been able to set media agendas in the country. Ella MacPherson discussed her recent fieldwork on Mexican newsrooms in the lecture “Contesting credibility: human rights reporting in Mexico”. One of her main findings is that credibility has a high value for news outlets, such that journalists seek authoritative sources. However, since many NGOs are discredited by editors as expert sources because of questionable profits, high salaries among executives and hidden agendas, it becomes difficult for journalists to find trustworthy sources in the so-called ‘third sector’. This in turn results in less pluralism in Mexican mainstream newspapers and implies that reporters and editors end up relying on the same official sources, making it difficult for small organizations to be heard and seen in Mexican press.

The second day of the conference continued with two panels in the morning: one on communication, civic society and development, and one on media and conflict. I chose to attend the first panel, which was related with my own research interests. The papers discussed the limits, challenges and possibilities for citizen, alternative and minority media from different perspectives. Two papers addressed indigenous radios in Latin America, showing that even though internet is almost ubiquitous in certain parts of the world, radio is well alive as a form of community media. Another paper discussed how non-profit investigative journalism organizations manage social media and one presentation analysed communicative citizenship in the case of a media production project in a school in the Colombian town of Belén de los Andaquíes. During the discussion with the public, questions were raised about the limits of alternative media, particularly whether community radios and other small-scale media can have an impact in a national or transnational public sphere.

In the afternoon, I presented my paper in the session on media and policy struggles. Papers in this panel addressed the role of media in a range of policy struggles, from the conflict between fishermen and the Mexican oil regime to educational policy in Chile. Once again, questions were raised about the impact and effects of media reporting on different social issues. The last panel in the conference focused on media, populism and change and included papers that discussed the post-Fidel Castro era, the construction of “the Venezuelan people” in populist Venezuelan newspapers, media democratization and the Latin American “new left”, and the challenges faced by TeleSUR in becoming a regional public media.

The conference ended with a short informal address by Professor Silvio Waisbord, who replaced Peruvian researcher Rosa María Alfaro, who could not come to the conference. In his closing talk, Silvio Waisbord emphasized once again the need to move beyond the geographical and to use the Latin American problems and challenges to discuss media, democracy and participation in broader scales. After these two intense days, the conference organizers were very satisfied with the outcome. Jairo Lugo-Ocando, who hopes to be able to repeat the conference in 2015, noted at the end that a conference on Latin American issues should be more linguistically plural and offer the possibility of presenting and discussing in the Latin American languages (Spanish and Portuguese).

As is frequently the case with very specific conferences that gather people with an interest in the same topic, discussions extended well beyond the panel sessions, and continued during

coffee-breaks, lunches and dinners. Even if the theme was geographically limited to Latin America, the topics discussed were relevant outside the region as well, and the questions raised about the democratization of the media, the dominance of commercial interests in the sector and the relations between media and inequality extrapolate the geographic limits of Latin America.

The view that news-media have a fundamental role for democracy was present in many of the papers. In this sense, *development* was understood in terms of democratization and the inclusion of marginalized groups in political discussions. This understanding is an expression of the fields of study represented in the conference. Most presenters came from the discipline of media and communication, and a small minority came from development studies, which explains the strong focus on news-media, journalistic practices and communication initiatives. So-called alternative media were also discussed in some of the papers from political-economic and content perspectives, but also in connection to recent protests and organised action.

Concluding remarks

A noteworthy aspect of the conference was the fact that the majority of presenters were Latin Americans based in European universities, with some Europeans interested in studying Latin-American themes. Among the keynote presenters there was a balance between European scholars and Latin Americans based in European and North American institutions. The large amount of Latin American researchers based in Northern institutions indicates openness towards, and an interest in, creating a fruitful environment for the diversity of views. Whether Professor Waisbord's proposition that scholars could and should use Latin America as an excuse to discuss broader issues will be embraced will depend in my view on a combination of factors: on the one hand, on Latin-Americanists' understanding of their research objects as connected to international and global processes, and on the other hand, on whether Northern scholars will reassess their views on universalism and locality.

"Media and Governance in Latin America" was an interesting conference. Its format, which included many social gatherings for a two-day conference, and the small venue, fostered discussion and the exchange of ideas among the participants. There was a clear predominance of papers that explored news-media, journalism and their relation with politics. The relevance of discussing this relationship in light of Latin America's current socio-political scenario is undeniable if we consider that Brazil and Mexico, Latin America's most populous countries, are the worst ranked in the continent when it comes to press-freedom according to the international organization [Reporters Without Borders](#)². Nevertheless, a broader scope of analysis – including the perspective of international aid in order to highlight geopolitical aspects of development in the region – would draw a broader audience to a future edition of the conference. Inviting keynotes from scholars based in Latin American countries that represent the epistemological and methodological diversity of communication and development as a field would also make a more robust conference in the international arena and possibly lead to fruitful and rich discussions for the participants. In my view, these two ways of broadening the scope of the conference would contribute to a locally based discussion touching upon questions that extrapolate geographical boundaries, as proposed by Silvio Waisbord.

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² Brazil ranks 111 and Mexico 152 among 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2014, compiled by Reporters Without Borders. The full report was retrieved from the hyperlink above on 12/10/2014.