

Public Broadcasting: The Latin American Exception

Martín Becerra, Conicet, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes & UBA, Argentina

*The following text is an edited version of a talk at the panel *The Future of Public Broadcasting: How to Win Back our Hearts?* Forum Media and Development, Berlin, November 2018.*

In his first days as the new president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro said that he would liquidate the remains of the state-owned Brazil Communications Company, which had begun to decline during the former presidency of Michel Temer after a decade of operation (the state television network was created by the former president Lula Da Silva in 2007, as part of his confrontation with Grupo Globo). Likewise, the Chilean president, Sebastián Piñera, is defunding the national television channel (TVN), and in Argentina the right-wing Macri administration has emptied resources and programming from the public cultural channel, Encuentro, and the children's signal, PakaPaka. In addition, the government reduced the budget of the main state-run television channel (Tv Pública) and eliminated the free-to-air broadcasts of football, which had previously drawn large audiences to this station. In November 2018, the Mexican Chamber of Deputies removed legislative provisions for public media autonomy by making such institutions dependent on the Secretaría de Gobernación (Ministry of the Interior). However, the project was finally aborted by the Senate.

From an agnostic and somewhat cynical perspective, there is no way for Latin American state-run media to win back hearts because there was not, as in Europe, a longstanding public media tradition. The positive experiences of Latin American public media were and are unstable (Safar and Pasquali, 2006; Gómez Orozco, 2002; Becerra and Mastrini, 2017; Bustamante and de Miguel, 2005). More than this; if public media means pluralism, free and open audience access, high quality news, general diversity of content and independence from governments, advertisers and other economic influences, then there are no such institutions in Latin America. State-run media in Latin America have no public function, as they have in Europe, North America, Japan or South Africa. In fact, wherever they exist, state-run media in Latin America depend directly on governments.

Public media - in the regions of the world where this tradition has been established – result from a stable consensus among different political groups that editorial positions and debates should occupy a space beyond the quarrels of politicians (Hallin and Mancini, 2008; Arriaza Ibarra and Nord, 2008; Moragas and Prado, 2000). This consensus is possible when there is an agreement about what ‘the public’ means. Public media reflect a concept of the public that derives from historical conditions and geographical locations, yet requires the construction of basic agreements (De Mateo and Bergès, 2009). Among them is a government commitment not to colonize the public media with its political agenda (Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003). Such consensus has not

existed in Latin American history despite the development of other public institutions, such as hospitals and schools supported by the state. As Hallin and Mancini (2008) maintain, "Latin America, to date, has been the only region in the world, except North America, where broadcasting has developed as a fundamentally commercial project" (93).

Large private media are kings of the media landscape of Latin America. Even across countries with very different socio-demographic developments and patterns, it is possible to identify common regional trends (Becerra and Mastrini, 2017). Four factors are important here: the initial commercial logic that has guided the media system in Latin America; the absence of public non-governmental media services with a real audience; strong concentrations of ownership in a few hands (Fox and Waisbord, 2002); and the centralization of content production in the main urban centers (thus relegating the outlying populations of each country to the role of consumers of content produced by others).

Property concentration and the trend toward cross-ownership of media are manifested in the absence of an institutional culture of nonprofit public media that could stimulate pluralism and diversity. This translates into an influential framework of intervention dominated by large private groups which reduces the scope for other social, economic, political or cultural actors. The combination of high private media concentration and the minimal presence of state-run media is problematic. New media (online) have appeared in all countries, but the largest of these initiatives are often part of the main media groups.

However, in recent years, the Latin American state-owned media has tried new ways of communication different from that of private commercial media. These have included thematic (cultural, local or community) television channels and public over-the-top (OTT) services. Such developments may seem obvious in other regions of the world, but having Latin American media spaces that are non-private, non-commercial and non-concentrated (state and community outlets), as is the case with the largest multimedia groups, have become a topic of analysis in the region (even when those spaces have editorial lines that are strongly associated with the government) (Segura and Waisbord, 2016). This has also contributed to the strong community media movement that has emerged in several Latin American countries.

During the decade 2005-2015, some governments in the region, identified as populist or 'new left' (Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Lula da Silva in Brazil, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, among others), used state-run media to confront large and concentrated private groups. They have had some success in this regard, mainly in Ecuador with the former president Rafael Correa, in Bolivia with President Evo Morales and in Argentina with the former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Becerra, 2015). But the inherent difficulty of using state-run media to confront private groups and subordinate them to the government's editorial line is that governments change. In this context, the most important issue is the 'public' quality of state-run media across the region.

Most recently, since 2016, current right-wing governments in Latin America (Temer and Bolsonaro in Brazil, Macri in Argentina, Piñera in Chile, even Lenin Moreno in Ecuador) are very close to large private, concentrated media groups (such as Clarin or El Mercurio). Consequently, such governments do not acknowledge the relevance of public media for political and economic reasons (in Latin America the state media participate in the advertising market). Who loses with the absence of public media? In short, society. When there are no public media (as opposed to state-run media), the right to plural information and diverse content is overruled by the practices of commercial exploitation or by the official use of the media. Society is thus shaped by the empire of

commercial mass messages provided by large private media groups or by government politicians and institutions.

Despite this general pattern, the trajectory of state-run media in the region has developed in interesting ways in terms of both programming and social outreach. In some cases, such media are conditioned by successive governments with particular political and cultural orientations (there are even internal fights over media policy within the same administration). These spasmodic changes in direction have weakened both the public function of state media and the sustainability of audiences. Because state media as propaganda vehicles cannot stimulate or guarantee social participation, they cannot attract the interest of the public. Consequently, in terms of influence, this kind of state media is often relegated to a secondary role in the media system. This leaves the impression that audiences are satisfied by private programming (for example in Brazil with Globo, or in Mexico with Televisa) (see Gómez, 2017). Meanwhile, the state-run media covered only some of the content or formats that private operators did not explore.

Precisely because the state media acted in a subsidiary role and, in many cases, experienced a loss of prestige, they did not challenge the predominance of private commercial media. Until a few years ago in Latin America, state-run media did not aspire to compete for audiences or to improve their performance. Nor did they aim to contribute to social cohesion and the provision of what Aníbal Ford (1999) called "socially necessary or relevant" content. In some countries (we cannot generalize this), Latin American governments' attention to state-run media had moments of originality. This occurred with the creation of the cultural channel Encuentro and the children's channel PakaPaka in Argentina and with the attempt to build a new television network to cover the entire territory of Brazil. The intention in these cases was to modify the commercial media system by producing new regulation and by transforming the governmental role in broadcast operations. This happened mainly during the first 15 years of this century in countries with very different political processes, such as Brazil, Venezuela, Uruguay, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile.

In those countries with the tendency to change media regulations in relation to larger media groups, two movements in communication policies are worth mentioning. On the one hand, there is public discussion concerning the need to adopt new rules of the game. On the other, this process of changing communication policies and regulations sometimes provides a new role for governments as direct communication outlets that could bypass the traditional role played by commercial media as mediators between state institutions and the public. Here, we must say that governments did not always respect freedom of expression, as the Presidencies of Correa and Equador and Maduro in Venezuela show with their criminal prosecution of critical journalists.

In any case, the new technological conditions of convergence between audiovisual media, internet and telecommunications, is an unprecedented challenge for the creation or provision of public broadcasting. As Mastrini (2011) pointed out:

...historically, public services used the scarcity of frequencies and the protection of diversity and cultural identity as a justification for their existence. But the new digital environment generates conditions for multiple operators in open and infinite broadcasting through the Internet. This has been taken advantage of by the private sector, which has sought to recognize the supremacy of commercial services in the transition from the analogue to the digital environment (5).

In Latin America, lacking a tradition of powerful public media, the challenge for such institutions is greater now than ever.

Against this background, the future of public media in Latin America carries a new significance. What is the 'public space' that should be addressed (or protected) in a market-driven system of production and circulation of information and entertainment? The European past on this matter is relevant, but that past will not influence the future of Latin America because their societies and public institutions are historically different. Consequently, the potentialities of public space are also different. In this regard, recent experiences of state-run media in Latin America help us to assess its limitations and advance non-commercial content in countries accustomed to the government use of media technologies.

Author bio

Martín Becerra is a professor at the National University of Quilmes and UBA in communications policy. He is also member of the CONICET (Argentina). He is the author of a number of books and articles including: *La concentración infocomunicacional en América Latina (2000-2015): Nuevos medios y tecnologías, menos actores*, with Guillermo Mastrini (2017); *De la concentración a la convergencia. Medios, políticas y redes* (2015); *Cajas mágicas: el renacimiento de la TV pública en América Latina* with Ángel García Castillejo, Óscar Santamaría y Luis Arroyo (2013); and *Wiki Media Leaks: La relación entre medios y gobiernos de América Latina bajo el prisma de WikiLeaks*, with Sebastián Lacunza (2012).

References

- Arriaza Ibarra K and Nord L (2008) What is public service on the internet? Digital challenges for media policy. *Mimeo*. ECREA, Barcelona.
- Becerra M and Waisbord S (2015) *Principios y 'buenas prácticas' para los medios públicos in América Latina*, UNESCO, Montevideo. Available at: <https://martinbecerra.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/paper-unesco-medios-publicos-becerra-waisbord-jun2015.pdf>
- Becerra M (2015) *De la concentración a la convergencia. Políticas de medios en Argentina y América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.
- Becerra M and Mastrini G (2017) *La concentración infocomunicacional en América Latina (2000-2015): nuevos medios y tecnologías, menos actores*. Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes.
- Bustamante E and De Miguel JC (2005) Los grupos de comunicación iberoamericanos a la hora de la convergencia. *Diálogos de la Comunicación* 72 (13 May). Lima: Felafacs.
- Bustamante E (2006) Hacia un servicio público democrático. *Tendencias*. Fundación Telefónica. Available at <http://www.infoamerica.org/TENDENCIAS/tendencias/tendencias06/pdfs/26.pdf>
- De Mateo R and Bergès L (2009) *Los retos de las televisiones públicas: financiación, servicio público y libre mercado*. Sevilla: Comunicación Social.
- Ford A (1999) *La marca de la bestia. Identificación, desigualdades e infoentretenimiento en la sociedad contemporánea*. Buenos Aires: Norma.
- Fox E (1999) *Latin American Broadcasting. From Tango to Telenovela*. Luton: University of Luton Press.
- Fox E and Waisbord S (eds) (2002) *Latin Politics, Global Media*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
- Fuenzalida V (2000) *La televisión pública en América Latina, reforma o privatización*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

- Gómez R (2017) Televisa. In: Birkinbine B, Gómez R and Wasko J (eds) *Global Media Giants*. London: Routledge, pp. 111-124.
- Gómez Orozco G (ed) (2002). *Historias de la televisión en América Latina*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Hallin D and Mancini P (2008) *Sistemas mediáticos comparados*. Hacer: Barcelona.
- Marín Pulgarín AM (2006) Televisión pública en Colombia: del monopolio estatal a la descentralización. *Radiotelevisión de servicio público: un manual de mejores prácticas*, UNESCO, San José de Costa Rica. Available at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001415/141584s.pdf>
- Mastrini G (2011) Medios públicos y derecho a la comunicación: una aproximación desde América Latina. *Lecciones del Portal InCom*, Instituto de la Comunicación de la Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, http://www.portalcomunicacion.com/uploads/pdf/65_esp.pdf
- Mastrini G and Becerra M (eds) (2017) *Medios en guerra. Balance, crítica y desguace de las políticas de comunicación 2003-2016*. Buenos Aires: Biblos.
- Moragas M and Prado E (2000) *La televisión pública a l'era digital*. Barcelona: Pòrtic.
- Pasquali A (1991) *El orden reina: escritos sobre comunicaciones*. Caracas: Monte Avila.
- Rincón O (ed) (2001) *Televisión pública: Del consumidor al ciudadano*. Convenio Andrés Bello: Bogotá.
- Safar E and Pasquali A (2006) La radiotelevisión pública en Venezuela. *Radiotelevisión de servicio público: un manual de mejores prácticas*, UNESCO, San José de Costa Rica, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001415/141584s.pdf>
- Segura S and Waisbord S (2016) *Media Movements: Civil Society and Media Policy Reform in Latin America*. London, UK: Zed Books.
- Sinclair J (1999) *Latin American Television: A Global View*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Cuilenburg J and McQuail D (2003) Media policy paradigm shifts: towards a new communications policy paradigm. *European Journal of Communication* 18 (2): 181-207.