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Governments Fight Media Concentration

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On Aug. 28, the daily Clarín, Argentina's leading newspaper and the flagship company of a media giant that includes dozens of magazines, newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels as well as the only newsprint factory in the country, devoted its front page and the first twenty pages of the edition to lashing out at the government. "Limits Must Be Set on the President," ran the front-page headline that day and is the paper's principal theme most days.

In that edition, as in all editions since early 2008, Clarín described President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as "authoritarian," "undemocratic," "corrupt," and "the standard-bearer of censorship and gagging policies." And it added "Chavista," an adjective used, coincidentally, by all the rightist Latin American media for the clear purpose of discrediting their respective governments, in reference to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Despite having leveled that broadside against the president, Clarín contends that in Argentina "the government tramples on freedoms of the press and information."

On Aug. 31, this time in Venezuela, the rightist El Nacional carried the shocking headline, "The Government Assassinated Franklin Brito." Brito was a small landowner who reportedly suffered emotional problems and whom the opposition turned into a hero, encouraging him to go on several hunger strikes. He died in a military hospital Aug. 30.

The same day, the daily Tal Cual did not speak directly about a coup but asked, "What would Venezuela be like without Chávez?" And, in its main edition, El Universal carried the suggestive headline, "The Venezuelan Holocaust," and, in language reminiscent of the Cold War, said that "21st century socialism [touted by Chávez] is cold, hard Marxism, concentrated, pure communism, dictatorship."

El Nacional, Tal Cual, and El Universal have been saying the same thing for years and continue freely selling papers, but, like Clarín, they claim every day that "the government tramples on freedoms of the press and information."

The succession of editions of the same papers, written in the same tone, is the best proof that, after decades of dictatorships, the continent is living a splendid period of freedoms.

Link between informational and political democracy

"Without informational democracy, there is no political democracy." With that brief but pointed phrase, the nearly 2,000 Latin American journalists who met in 1998 in Buenos Aires at the Primer Congreso Mundial de las Comunicaciones touched upon the issue that until then had been taboo: the media that monopolized information, transmitted only what served their interests, and, arguing a hypothetical defense of press freedom, prevented society from debating and deciding on regulating their activities.

Those were the times in Latin America when the now-discredited neoliberal model was imposed, enabling economic concentration in strategic sectors, a time when banks, telephone companies, and
entertainment multinationals began to acquire newspapers, radio and television stations, publishing houses, and companies producing cultural content.

Thirteen years later, Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Uruguay are echoing the slogan of the communications workers and, with greater or lesser emphasis, beginning to legislate, putting limits on media monopolies and preserving press and expression rights, but putting them for the first time on a par with the right of the public to receive accurate information.

Between Aug. 10 and 12, Ecuador, Brazil, and Venezuela took steps along the path that in October 2009 (NotiSur, Nov. 13, 2009) made Argentina the first country to enact, after passage by two-thirds of the Congress, an audiovisual communications law (Ley de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual), popularly known as the media law (Ley de Medios).

In each of the three countries, it was the government that raised the alarm about the danger of media concentration. In all cases, the dominant business and economic groups unified their discourse. In all cases, to the word "law," they attached the adjective "polemic," presenting that perspective to their radio listeners, TV viewers, and readers. Although passed by two-thirds of Argentine legislators, the media law is still referred to as "the polemic law."

The Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP) or Inter American Press Association (IAPA)—a business organization that includes media owners from Canada to Argentina, and which has played a baneful role in Latin American democratic history in the 20th century—took charge of spreading the annoying business lament, and throughout the region, the media began to utter words such as "censorship," "gag laws," "dictatorial laws," and "threats to press freedom."

Although in no country did the law that was passed or the legislative studies proposed call for censorship, gag orders, or restrictions on freedoms, the enormous power of the monopolies—and of the SIP—ensured that the world was totally disinformed, told that in Latina America press freedom no longer existed.

On the Web pages of the principal dailies, radio stations, and TV channels, the reader can confirm that throughout the region the most absolute freedoms exist.

"We, the media, are living in an exceptional time, something only comparable to the years of freedoms that existed in Chile during the government of [the late President] Salvador Allende [1970-1973]." said Federico Fassano, director and owner of the daily La República of Montevideo, the paper with the second-largest circulation in Uruguay.

Countries move to democratize media

Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa started the ball rolling on Aug. 10, when he addressed bankers and reminded them that, "before the end of October, you will be obliged to sell media companies or any other businesses not specifically related to financial activities."

Correa was referring to Article 312 of the Constitution approved in 2008 by 64% of Ecuadorans (NotiSur, Oct. 10, 2008), which says, "Participation in the control of capital, investment, or ownership of social communications media is prohibited for financial entities or groups and their shareholders."

This action was taken because, in late 1999, amid an economic crisis and days before Jan. 9, 2000, when Ecuador adopted the US dollar as the national legal currency, many bankers sold off part of
their holdings to invest in newspapers, radio stations, and TV channels, thus becoming owners of 80% of the media in the country. Since then, three governments were toppled in disguised coups—Jamil Mahuad (1998-2000), Gustavo Noboa (2000-2003), and Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005)—instigated by the new owners of the old newspapers.

The next day, it was Brazil's turn. Minister of Institutional Relations Alexandre Padilha announced on Aug. 11 that, before the end of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's term on Jan. 1, 2011, the government would send a media bill to Congress based on recommendations from the Conferência Nacional de Comunicação (CONFECOM), an organization in which citizens and agencies throughout the country participate.

CONFECOM had suggested the need to revise the existing model, dominated by monopolies that have become major actors that draw up the political agenda of their countries. And it had pointed out that, in the absence of effective leadership among sectors of the political right, the media direct them and feed them ideologically.

In late 2009, at the closing ceremony of CONFECOM, Lula had challenged those whom he defined as "information monopolies." Without naming it, he was referring to the O Globo conglomerate, a monster that has a network of TV channels that reaches 95% of the audience of that enormous country, in addition to dailies and hundreds of radio stations.

On Aug. 12, when Venezuelan Vice President Elías Jaua submitted a bill to the Asamblea Nacional (AN) to regulate participation of financial institutions in the media, the regional political leadership was already familiar with the issue. "We aim to dismantle this existing model in which mercantile, industrial, commercial, and financial interests are combined with all human beings' right to the freedom to communicate and be informed," said Jaua.

He then referred to "the perverse relationship between commercial interests and the media that disinforms society and that many times has been the vehicle that caused serious harm to the people."

The vice president was referring concretely to Banco Federal, part owner of the extreme opposition TV enterprise Globovision, which broadcast false information facilitating Banco Federal's swindle of half a million depositors.

In Bolivia, Paraguay, and Uruguay, Presidents Evo Morales, Fernando Lugo, and José Mujica are moving in the same direction.

Although the governments of the six countries are not coordinating their strategies, the bills already passed or in process have much in common. Essentially, they aim to demonopolize the sector. And they embody a common vision on the need for unrestricted defense of freedom of expression and the right of society to receive accurate and diverse information, for a three-way distribution (public, private, and community sectors) of radio and TV frequencies, and for the defense of the national content production from the perspective of cultural diversity.

Where some coordination seems apparent is among the sectors that will be affected by democratization of the media. The same groups that resort to every tactic to discredit the effort and paint it with the "Chavista" brush. The right has joined the SIP's formidable campaign, which, under the hegemonic media's ideological tutelage, tries in each country to regroup and present to the people a common project with which to confront progressive governments that propose...
disarming the destabilizing power of the large media monopolies and making into law what was always taboo.

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