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Peruvian Demonstrators Take On Trash Television

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Peruvian youth activists, journalist groups, and other professional associations have used a pair of street demonstrations to spark a public debate regarding the content and quality of the country’s television programming.

Demonstrators held their first "march against trash television" on Feb. 27 in Lima and at least eight other cities. Trash television, in this case, refers to the ultra-gory news programs, variety shows, and reality competition shows that are so prevalent—and popular, according to the ratings—on Peruvian channels.

Topping their list of demands is that broadcasters respect Article 40 of the country’s Ley de Radio y Televisión, which is supposed to protect children from certain kinds of content. "Programming that is transmitted during family hours [6 a.m. to 10 p.m.] must avoid violent, obscene, or any other content that goes against the inherent values of the family, children, and adolescents," the section reads.

Youth organizations and their allies turned their attention to the television issue after successfully opposing a youth labor law that President Ollanta Humala tried to impose last year (NotiSur, Jan. 16, 2015). Activists challenged the initiative, which restricted certain labor rights, with a series of massive street demonstrations that ultimately prompted Congress to repeal the law on Jan. 26 (NotiSur, Feb. 27, 2015)

Organizing through social-media channels, youth groups such as the Coordinadora Nacional de Juventudes Digitales and Foro Nacional de Juventudes de los Partidos Políticos have joined forces with artists and professionals, including journalists and psychologists. On Feb. 27, in Lima, hundreds of people from the various groups made their way to local television stations to protest poor-quality programming.

Organizers say media outlets, besides ignoring Article 40, are also failing in their duty (as established in the Ley de Radio y Televisión) to promote education and culture. It was with that argument in mind that the movement held a second demonstration, on March 13, to protest against advertisers that finance the television programs in question. The demonstrators specifically targeted the Ministerio de Transportes and the headquarters of the Sociedad Nacional de Anunciantes (the national advertisers association).

"We're calling on these advertisers to stop using their publicity to feed these morbid and frivolous programs that fail to comply with Article 40 of the Ley de Radio y Televisión and instead spread anti-values that harm the mental integrity of children," Max Obregón of the Colegio de Periodistas del Perú, a professional journalist association, told Diario Uno. "I hope [advertisers] take this into consideration and stop sullying their brands and their images." Obregón went on to say that the movement’s goal isn’t to censure or shut down television programs but to make sure broadcasters follow the law.

Reports surfaced that same day that Cencosud, a business consortium that includes the Paris department store brand and Metro and Wong supermarket chains, decided to stop running ads
during seven high-rated programs. Spokespeople for Cencosud made it clear, nevertheless, that the consortium will continue working with the television stations that air the programs in question. They denied, furthermore, that the decision had anything to do with the demonstrations.

"No interest in social issues"

In his interview with Diario Uno, Obregón said television station owners and managers have sold out, that they went from dealing with the dictatorship of President Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), which controlled their editorial lines, to peddling trash television, which is distorted and without values.

The secretary-general of the Coordinadora Digital de Juventudes Omar Suriel is similarly critical of television station owners, saying they are far more interested in profit than in promoting programs with greater educational content. "In reality it's Confiep [Confederación Nacional de Instituciones Empresariales Privadas] that so firmly supports these programs," he told Diario Uno. "All the high-profile companies advertising on these programs are there [in Confiep], and there’s no interest in social issues."

The president of the Consejo Consultivo de Radio y Televisión (CONCORTV) Marisol Castañeda sees the demonstrations as a "healthy" form of expression. "Citizenship is exercised in communication not just in politics," she said in an interview with Radio Exitosa. "The media should promote values. What we see instead is programming that is only meant to entertain. Article 40 ought to be respected."

Sex and discrimination

A CONCORTV study on stereotypes and discrimination in Peruvian television, done in March 2014 by lawyer Wilfredo Ardito, found that people of mixed or Andean ethnicity, even though they are a majority in Peruvian society, do not have lead roles or serve as hosts on television programs. When they do appear, it is most often in marginal situations, the study concluded.

The most visible "Andean" character on Peruvian television is La Paisana Jacinta, an indigenous campesina character who is played by a mestizo man and presented as being stereotypically dirty, uneducated, vulgar, violent, and rude.

Ardito’s study also found that the central character in youth-targeted reality shows tends to be a sensual woman whose body is emphasized by provocative clothing and by the use of certain camera frames and close-ups. Sensual female characters are also common in Peruvian comedy shows.

Ardito found that, as a general rule, Peruvian television programs and advertising ignore sectors of society that are traditionally discriminated against. The list includes Afro-Peruvians, indigenous people, the elderly, people with disabilities, the LGBT population, and anyone, for that matter, who lives outside Lima. When they do appear, people from the aforementioned groups tend to be presented in the context of tragic situations involving poverty or crime, either as victims or perpetrators.

Not enough variety?

The demonstrations against trash television have brought the issue of content—and how the television industry operates in general—very much to the forefront. Television station owners point
to the high ratings of certain shows to argue that they are simply broadcasting what people like. They also say that, if someone doesn’t like the content, he or she is free to change the channel.

Some observers, however, say things are not quite that simple. "There is a myth that we citizens have the option to choose and change. But that’s not really true. If there’s no real variety in what’s being offered, viewers can’t choose," CONCORTV’s Castañeda told the daily La República. "The other myth is that, unlike the written press, radio and television, because they operate through the radio spectrum, which is a state concession, are defined by law as a private service of public interest."

The debate is open and ongoing, with some people arguing that the 10-year-old Ley de Radio y Televisión needs to be updated and improved. Others say the law just needs to be enforced. But some people warn that greater regulation could be risky in a country whose media outlets are so highly concentrated in just a few hands.

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