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Communication in processes of social change in Latin America: Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela

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Abstract

Research introduction and methodology. In this research, four cases of social change processes in Latin America have been analyzed, paying special attention to the relationship between media, democracy and power. A selection of countries has been chosen because of their specific characteristics, as they represent different models of communication democratization: Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela. **Results.** Similar results have been observed in the social change processes, bound to communication in Latin America, while identifying some differences related to the particular characteristics of each media system owing to the diversity of social and economic processes and structures. **Conclusions.** The research results reveal a social imaginary based on the democratization of communication and, on the other hand, on the achievement of a true diversity of voices on media scenarios, which may favour a social change in the medium and long term.

Keywords

Communication; Social Change; Latin America; Democratization.

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Traslate by **Margarita Jorge Alonso**

1. Introduction

The beginning of the 21st century (and in some cases the end of the 20th century) has meant the entry into the Latin American political scene of a group of governments linked to proposals from the left. Although it is true that they are in many cases far from what might be considered "traditional left" and they are very different among them. Despite of the differences, there are common elements of a significant character that allow us to deal with these realities globally. The countries selected on this occasion are those in which has been a most evident confrontation with the communication companies, but we could also incorporate Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay and so on into this group.

First of all it is necessary to contextualize the discourse about media and social change in recent Latin American history itself (Zallo, 2014, 2009, Bustamante 2008). And this is so since the familiarity with what happened in this region may be determined by the language. Cultural and historical reasons, but also the relation between Spain and the several Latin American nations, strengthened by the continuous migratory flows and even the economic and business relationships, foster a greater interest and information in Spain than in other European countries (Díaz Nosty and Beaumont, 2010; Vidal Beneyto, 2008).

The political developments of several Latin American countries in the last few years have many similarities, which are inserted in the same context of search for alternatives to neoliberal policies imposed by international organizations (IMF, CMO, BM mainly) during the eighties of the last century.

Latin America has been marked in its historical development by the interventionism of the United States and its support to consecutive dictatorial governments, in most cases of a military nature. In the early twentieth century, coinciding with a phase of imperialist expansionism of the USA, President Theodore Roosevelt formulates the Corollary of 1904 (Roosevelt Corollary), which revitalizes the interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. This is what would be called the Big Stick policy, in defense of the American economic interests. The logic of the "backyard", derived from the so-called "Monroe Doctrine", marks out, therefore, the Latin America history full of North American armed interventions, invasions, support to coups d'état, hidden interventions of the CIA, training of military and police units known as the "School of the Americas", and countless actions of political, economic and symbolic nature that have sought and achieved to subordinate policies of different States beyond the south of *Rio Grande* to the political and economic interests of the United States, especially the policies of their large corporations.

This reality becomes more acute after World War II and, as a preferential visible instrument to transmit the political control of the USA over the region, the OAS was created in 1948. The defense of US economic interests leads to its successive States to oppose not only left-wing government alternatives, but also the strictly nationalists, preferring, in many cases, the dialogue with military dictatorships. The implementation of neoliberal policies, even by the democratic governments that emerged after the disappearance of the military dictatorships and the payment of the foreign debt created by these military governments, ends up in a network of social emergency situations and responses of the majority of the Latin American people in the eighties and nineties of the 20th century. This response, articulated around old movements like the labour

one in conjunction with the new social movements, caused the fall of many governments in the new democratic period and crystallized into political choices which were characterized by political programs that, among their proposals, incorporated the renationalization of natural resources and a preferential attention to social policies. All of this within the framework of a discourse of strengthening state structures facing markets and based on the democratic legitimacy of the political power.

The rise to power of Hugo Chavez in 1998 in Venezuela, and the rise of Evo Morales and Rafael Correa in 2006 were followed by constituent processes. The new Constitutions expressed a willingness to change with regard to the previous governments and all of them, although mostly the Ecuadorian one, described the communication rights of citizenship as an extension of the classic right of freedom of speech.

The Argentine case differs formally in the absence of a constitutional process, as the Argentine Constitution dates from 1853 and it has been subsequently modified; the last time it was in 1994. However, the rise to power of Nestor Kirchner in 2003 may be included as part of this block of change as the focus of his economic policy were on the renationalization of companies before privatized and social policies in order to save large segments of population from exclusion and boost the economy in this way. Such policies were carried on by President Cristina Fernández that assumes power in 2007. The results seem successful in the light of the World Bank data, which confirmed that the middle class in Argentina passed from just over 9 million in 2003 to nearly 19 in 2009.

2. Methodological issues

On the qualitative character methodology used in the present study it has been used the comparative law, a method preferably linked to the field of legal research and applied to the legislations on communication of Bolivia, Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela. It has also been resorted historiographical techniques as the consultation of primary sources as regards to the normative discourse of the states under study and to other documents of multinational nature. It has also been conducted a bibliographic and journalistic review of the studies that have gone deeply into the Latin American subregion.

The analysis of the legislative evolution expressed in the four proposed cases has counted, then, on the combined help of historiographical tools of comparative law (VV.AA. 2004; Malmstrom, 1976) and also on the critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Forero Hurtado and Pardo, 2013; Van Dijk, 2010, 2008), in order to tackle both normative and media discourses from a critical perspective supported by the scientific community.

In this sense, there has been an exhaustive work of identifying the different phases and players involved in each of the processes of social change of our case studies in Latin America related to communication.

3. Media and political power in Latin America. Processes of concentration of media ownership and public policy strategy

The right metaphor, used in debates about communication of the I World Social Forum celebrated in 2001 in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, in which capitalism was compared with a

car and was stated that the production of messages, the mass media, had gone from being the lights to turn it into the engine, placed communication companies at the heart of capitalism. The double dimension of economic profitability and creation of hegemony turn communication into one of the strategic sectors of this new phase of capitalism and the message as one of the most valuable commodity. The integration and concentration of media ownership processes have resulted in the creation of large conglomerates that place civil rights associated to communication in the hands of large corporations (Díaz Nosty, 2013; Arsenault and Castells, 2008). The possible independence of the media was in this way further undermined by outside interests, mainly those of the financial sector.

The media group *PRISA* is perhaps the most suitable example of this process in the Hispanic world. Although we could talk about *Grupo Globo* in Brazil, *Televisa* in Mexico, *Grupo Clarín* in Argentina and *Cisneros* in Venezuela, the other four largest Latin American media groups, the increased internationalization of *PRISA* and its dimension as a bridge between Europe and Latin America help us to visualize better business strategies and their reflection in the informative story globally (Llorente and Cuenca, 2013). The economic and financial origins that have caused the entry to its shareholders of the venture capital fund *Liberty* and the financial institutions *CaixaBank*, *Santander* and *HSBC* have strongly linked the group, clearly reflected in its board of directors, the financial sector and the speculative economy. And this has been reflected in the processing of information, beyond the editorial inclinations of the media group.

The processes of change briefly described previously have also focused their interest on the media systems and the need to face their discourses with the explicit purpose of building a new hegemony. As Dênis de Morães states, one of the main challenges for any thought against the hegemony is to make socially comprehensible the needs of change, which he defines as "progressive and permanent", of social relations and power (Morães 2011). The governments that are leading these processes of social change are acting in this direction, not only with the creation of public resources but also with the regulation of new regulatory frameworks.

The lack of plurality of Latin American media scenes and the tendentious comparison of free enterprise to freedom of speech by corporations have described a scene of confrontation that has had a clear echo in the media (Martín Becerra, 2014). In the case of *PRISA* group, which has been affected not only with regard to the media of the group but also and significantly in its publishing activity, especially *Santillana*, dedicated to textbooks, the aggressiveness shown in the information that concerns governments like those of Venezuela and Argentina has contributed significantly to damage the image of independence of media in the *Group*, especially the newspaper *El País*.

The denunciation of danger that entailed these concentration of media ownership processes, the need to democratize communication and incorporate it into the fundamental rights, both individual and social, is not new. The NWICO, as proposed in the McBride Report, collected these premises over 30 years ago as an inescapable basis for democratization and development of the different countries in the world. What was really new is that it had made an impression in public policies. The McBride Report was published a year after Margaret Thatcher's rise to power and a year before Ronald Reagan became US president. In the words of Yves Eudes, the implementation of ultraliberal policies, especially in Latin America that entails privatization and deregulation processes, facilitated the creation of such large corporations to "control the consciences".

Therefore, the need to increase information pluralism as a direct response of the concentration of media ownership processes becomes essential in all processes of democratization that have taken place in recent years in Latin America. The establishment of new game rules, for this group of states, aims to incorporate social, economic and cultural rights as part of this process. Demands of social organizations and movements have come together with the willingness of governments to initiate legislative processes that attend this need to open spaces to antagonists, fragmentary or all-encompassing discourses that enable to measure what they have in relation to social practice.

It is the discourse characterization as a social practice rather than just as a product, with the capacity to favor, support and consolidate the processes of social change, where it has been affected mainly from social organizations when demanding the opening of communicative spaces, but one cannot forget that governments have been those that have implemented legislative initiatives that may allow this opening. This has meant a direct confrontation with media corporations which have come to occupy positions of belligerency against governments that have placed them, not only as mouthpiece of political opposition forces, but also as truly promoters, if not, creators of them.

The V World Meeting of Intellectuals and Artists for Humanity, held in Cochabamba in May 2007, placed the center of the debate on the role of media and the formulation of communication rights as fundamental human rights.

The Cochabamba Declaration, according to this approach, begins with a paragraph that presents a diagnosis and a strong commitment to incorporate communication to the social change strategies.

"In the transition from resistances facing neoliberalism to the offensives against this model, the role of the media is crucial. Therefore, today more than ever we demonstrate against the uncontrollable, undemocratic and unpunished power of large media that try to impose their view of reality and values. These oligopolies serve to economic and political interests of shareholders, financiers and advertisers."

Once again in Cochabamba, the Declaration of the VII ALBA- TCP Summit gathered on October 17, 2009 retakes the issue on one of its points, stating that:

"The media have to develop their social activities with responsibility, sense of ethics and public service for all citizens, and not as instruments of sectarian interests of minorities, or be used as instruments of disinformation and political destabilization".

The presence in Latin America of a strong line of thought, for decades, in the academic field, about the democratization of communication has produced a response from many social practices that have been putting together a set of experiences and organizations that have revitalized these processes (Martín Barbero, 1999). The expansion of the public, not only on a nationwide, but also on a social scale, has been one of its most productive theoretical but also practical contributions. This has had its consequences on the public policies undertaken, with a strong presence in the regulatory frameworks (Ramos and Sierra, 2014).

Facing such positions, Latin American press companies also took positions and formulated a subscribed-published Statement, on August 20, 2009, by *the Asociación Nacional de la Prensa* of

Chile, the *Consejo de la Prensa Peruana*, the *Asociación de Diarios Colombianos*, the *Asociación de Entidades Periodísticas* of Argentina, the *Asociación Ecuatoriana de Editores de Periódicos*, the *Associação Nacional de Jornais* of Brazil and the *Asociación Nacional de la Prensa* of Bolivia. The statement entitled "Sustained deterioration of freedom of speech in the region," claimed that state regulation of any aspect related to communication that could affect the free enterprise constitutes a direct attack on freedom of speech.

To this conglomeration of company press associations have united stable structures created from the media; among these it is noteworthy the Inter American Press Association (IAPA), which brings together over 1300 publications from over 30 countries. It was created in Habana in 1943 and it has played a fundamental role, first by supporting dictatorships and hounding progressive governments and systematic boycotting, especially from the publishing houses to governments that advocate social change in Latin America nowadays, raising the flag of freedom of speech against the regulation. The former president of the Federation of Journalists of Ecuador, Alberto Maldonado, in a joint strategy of discredit to the attempts of social change, accused to the *IAPA*, *Reporters Without Borders*, *Grupo de Diarios América* and a number of organizations funded by the USA embassies.

The challenge of democratizing the public space, also the media one, faces therefore the direct opposition of communications companies, and the appearance of digitalization has not led to democratization processes.

As stated by the current director of the International Center for Advanced Studies in Communication for Latin America (CIESPAL) Francisco Sierra (2013), digitalization has also implied, in addition to greater access to the layers technology that are more and more wide in the society, the multiplicity of channels, services, products ... This reality, united to the media concurrence, has prompted even more the concentration of media ownership of these in fewer and fewer hands (Bolaño, 2013; Prince, Abbott & Morgan, 2011; UNESCO, 2008).

In addition we should also consider the fact that in the context of economic globalization content production has been internationalized and homogenized to a great extent (Diaz Nosty 2013). And in this context of globalization, with economies of scale, cost reduction has led to the growth of profits and reinvestment in new companies that have made grow corporations and interrelation with other sectors, especially that of finance, with the media sector.

This context has favored an increased presence of multinationals, not only of the *PRISA* group, but also the *Time Warner*, *Viacom*, *Disney*, *Bertelsmann*. In turn, the increased weight of large corporations has favored monopolistic practices that in the media discourse, especially the informative one, have had its counterpart in the *de facto* impossibility of finding channels for a no longer antagonistic discourse, but only an alternative one.

The whole process has concentrated the various stages of production, processing, distribution and diffusion of messages in the same hands. But even from the own logic of the supposed free market, these dynamics have led to the elimination of small companies or their reduction to providers of subcontracted services, primarily for content adaptation to local contexts, and therefore they have closed the market to the entry of competitors in favor of a small group of oligopolies.

The articulation of the dominant discourse about the premise that turns public services into merchandise and where the market takes the place of political space compares falsely the freedom, obviously of elites, with the principle of equality, and it usurps the speech of citizens defense facing the legitimate democratic representation when this gives priority to the interests of social majorities against those of large corporations. Without ignoring the crucial role that the US has through the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the articulation, justification and international spreading of this discourse (Kingstone, Young and Aubrey, 2013).

It has been tried to build the social imaginary from the hegemony of elites ideology, but the arrival of the new left governments of Latin America has meant the first break with this dominant discourse (Bolaño, Meire Argao Jesus and Santos, 2010). As an example we could mention the distortion that meant that all Bolivian media affirmed the loss of the Bolivian citizenship faith in Evo Morales with an eye on the revocation of the referendum in his first term of office and also that this uniform discourse (of analysts, poll manipulators, leader writers ...) was denied by a decisive victory of 67.4% of the votes cast (Anria, 2013).

3.1. Bolivia

Evo Morales' rise to power articulates one of the most important symbolic changes in recent years. The presumption by an Indian to be president in a society where public spaces have traditionally been denied to native people gives a central importance in the new discourse of change to multiculturalism and fight against racism (Rovira Kaltwasser, 2014). The emphasis of the government focuses on the inescapable need to mark communicative public strategies to guarantee this cultural change.

This is so because the Bolivian situation differs fundamentally in one aspect: the own scale of the Bolivian economy, which makes the size of media groups much smaller and a more atomized scene. The government has not yet proposed the establishment of a regulatory framework because in a legislative level, rules referring to communication are dispersed in a series of decrees and laws in which the communication is tackled tangentially.

With regard, then, to the regulatory dimension we will say that it is the 2009 Constitution in its chapter VII on Social Communication, where a framework, that until now it has not had further development, has been formulated. The chapter 106 is dedicated to freedom of speech, but in the 107 the clear direction of where to address both public policies and a possible law is laid down.

"III. Social media will not be able to form, directly or indirectly, monopolies or oligopolies.

IV. The State shall support the creation of community media on equal terms and opportunities "(Bolivian Constitution, 2009).

Moreover, the greater fragmentation of the media space has not encouraged the multiplicity of voices, since all media are aligned with similar ideological positions, as we discussed earlier in the example of the referendum.

The state has created three resources *Bolivia TV*, the radio *Patria Nueva* and the newspaper *Cambio* as well as a public news agency. The accusations of lack of independence and governmentism have been continuous, although the presence of public media is still of little

relevance. The community media, that in Bolivia were pioneers and in their beginning were closely linked to the labor movement through the famous mining radios, have practically disappeared today, keeping meager audience shares (Badillo Matos, Ramos and Martin, 2013).

The multiplicity of channels shows, in an even more obvious way, a glaring absence in the Bolivian panorama of self-produced contents. This constitutes one of the burdens that hinder democratization of public spaces, especially the communicative space.

The Act 26,522 of Audiovisual Communication Services was approved in Argentina in 2009. This act repeals the then in force Broadcasting Act 22,285, enacted in 1980 by the military dictatorship. This marked the end of both the communication policies of the military dictatorship, still in force through the permanence of the regulatory framework, as well as the end of the subsequent neoliberal reforms that had helped in the creation of media oligopolies and a transnationalized development of communication.

The regulation arises from both the legislative intention and the own article as a framework that enables the advance of the democratization and decentralization of communications. It involves a diversification of the offer and the need for social participation in the contents. The more than 300 organizations that participated in the Coalition for a Democratic Broadcasting and the articulation of 24 participatory forums constituted a decisive impulse to get to the enactment of this act, but there is no doubt that it was Cristina Fernandez' government which placed on the agenda and the public debate the problem that for the democratization of Argentina the concentration of media ownership involved four aspects: first, it was stated the incompatibility of the telephone companies with the media operation system (Garibotto, 2014). It was also highlighted a commitment to public service- with the creation of the *RTA*- with its companies *Canal 7*, *R. Nacional* and its decentralized stations. Thirdly it was defined some limits to the concentration of media ownership, in the case of the cable, in a crossed way with other properties, it was created an implementation authority to control, of notable governmental influence, and also a Federal Authority of Audiovisual Communication Service (AFSCA).

And finally, and regarding to the content, it was established minimum percentages of own production and national contents in the entire system and the obligatory nature of national or local news. Likewise, the cinema was driven by a turnover percentage and a purchase of broadcasting rights of Argentine films, and the reservation of a third of the spectrum for community and nonprofit media; although four years later the Technical Plan that would make it viable was still pending and it was only partially applied. There have been some difficulties, so the initial enthusiasm has become a certain feeling of disappointment, especially the delays in the implementation (implementation of a social subsidy for the cable, limits on advertising time and content production, a minimum share of the viewing figures to the national cinema as there is no record of compliance, delays in competitions, etc.), the excess of "governmentalism" or the ruling party of public media, with limited transparency, or the precautionary suspension of four substantial articles, those concerning the license limits which were appealed by Clarín and later rejected by the court.

All this has taken place in the context of a strong confrontation with private media, especially with the dominant *Grupo Clarín*, but also the *PRISA* group and *CNN* in Spanish. Clarín, who has been accused of collusion with several *de facto* and oligarchic powers, as much for his past support to the military dictatorship as for his role in the events related to the mobilizations, which

among others caused the fall of De la Rúa's government in the early years of this century, especially in the case of the murdered of Kosteki and Santillán.

3.3. Ecuador

In the case of Ecuador, the Communication Law of 2013 establishes the universal service of Radio, Television and internet (Article 35), and a strong support to public service. In its Article 15 is stated a strong political of shares (60% of the daily programming will be allocated to broadcast national production contents, including a 10% of independent national production). National music should represent a 50% of the music programming content. In its Article 36 will be also established a reserve of up to 5% of content programming for indigenous people. This is looking for an equitable distribution of radio frequencies and it establishes that radio and television frequencies will distribute a 33% to media public, 33% for private media, and 34% for community media. It also establishes limits on concentration of media ownership: no more than one concession of radio frequency in MW, of radio in FM and a television frequency to the same natural person or legal entity in the whole country. A single producer cannot concentrate more than 25% of the hourly share.

These measures have enormously stirred up the Ecuadorian media space, characterized by the prevalence of media linked to a reduced group of families belonging to oligarchy and by an increasing penetration in recent years of the *PRISA* group through franchises of *Prisa Radio* and the extension of *Radio Caracol*. In view of the debacle of the opposition political parties, media become once again the real political players against government action.

3.4. Venezuela

Perhaps the most paradigmatic case of confrontation between the private media and the government was the Venezuelan case. This confrontation has spread far beyond Venezuela and has involved the whole of Latin American media corporations and those that, as the *PRISA* group, have interests in Latin America.

The demonization of Chavez, first, and his successor, the current President Maduro, is remarkable not only for the intensity of the hatred expressed, discredits, insults ... including the example that showed up the lack of corroboration of sources on the false photography at the hospital, but also by persistence. Since Chávez came to power, confrontations have been continuous maintaining unalterable virulence levels.

However, the legislative debate has not ended yet. The passing of the bill of the Popular Communication Law by the Venezuelan parliament in November 2011 marked the beginning of a not only legal but also social debate, which remains frozen and without a closing date, however. In spite of this, the National Council of Popular Communication, in which are represented all community media, has carried out some contributions and amendments and it continues with the debate during the year 2013. Some of the articles of the bill have involved a serious confrontation with media companies, especially with the Brazilian corporation *Globo* (Bentes, 2013).

Despite the lack of a regulatory framework, the Venezuelan government has been one of the most active in the region when it comes to public media creation (Frajman, 2014). The media

conglomerate integrated into the now called Bolivarian System of Communication and Information that has even its international reflection on channel *Telesur*, it has led to the most visible and most important action by far of the Venezuelan communication public policies.

The leadership role of Venezuela in coordinating governments that advocate social change to deal as a whole with different political, economic and social issues, among others the offensive against oligopolies of communication in the region, is perhaps the ultimate reason of the international media campaign against Hugo Chavez that continues even after his death.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The reconstruction of public spaces in Latin America is essential after decades of neoliberalism that went deeply into the submission to US economic interests. It has expanded the gap of inequalities and it has subjected the region to a horrendous pillaging through massive privatizations and the increasing concentration of media ownership. This becomes an unavoidable task for democratic consolidation.

This challenge depends to a greatly extent on achieving a real plurality of voices in the communication scenes that favors social change in the medium and long term. A social change based on a cultural change, which allows the creation of new hegemonies.

The state should therefore become a guarantor of the neutrality of these public spaces guaranteeing the material conditions of access to all citizens and different social groups. In the communication field, this involves to legislate in order to allow a sharing among the three main players: the state, private sector and the so called civil society. It should also ensure that these legislative measures are inserted into a plural and democratic public debate, which favors the creation of a new social bloc that promotes and strengthens these kinds of policies.

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