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Book Review

Media Systems and Communication Policies in Latin America

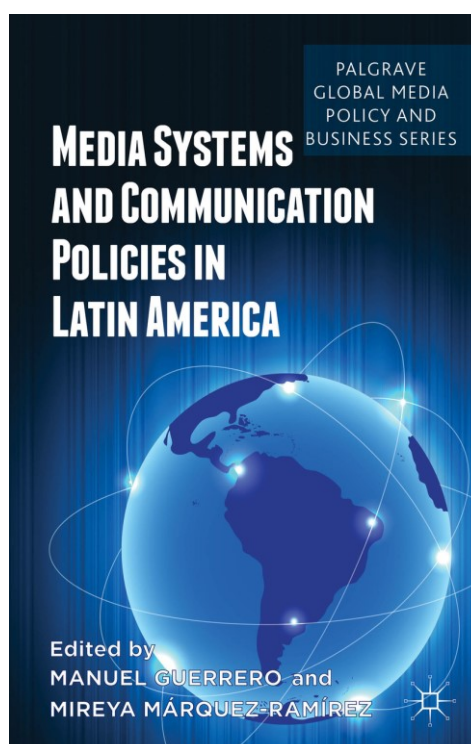
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In *Media Systems and Communication Policies in Latin America*, Manuel Alejandro Guerrero and Mireya Márquez-Ramírez have gathered the work of renowned Latin American scholars from the field of Media and Communication Studies in order to discuss continuities and changes within Latin American media systems. The editors aim to update the English language literature on the media systems of the region; the literature on this subject is scarce and does not properly reflect the dynamic changes that have taken place during the last fifteen years in the region, especially in Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador.

Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez delve into the history of the media in the region, which is known for its collaboration with former authoritarian regimes during the 1960s up to the 1980s. Over decades, alliances and client relationships between the media, military dictatorships and political elites (who are often also media owners) led to a concentration of control over Latin



American media by a few families and later on by a few media barons and groups such as *Globo* in Brazil, *Televisa* and *TV Azteca* in Mexico and *Clarín* in Argentina. These relationships between the media and political elites also continued during the democratization process where the owners of media outlets took advantage of democratic liberalization and privatization during the 1980s as well as the application of neoliberal politics during the 1990s.

The editors provide a useful framework to analyse and compare different media systems in Latin American countries. Firstly, they contest the typology of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (liberal, democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist media systems) and delve into the similarities between the Latin American case and the media landscape in Southern Europe, as proposed by Hallin and Stylianos Papathanassopoulos in an earlier paper in 2002. Hallin and Papathanassopoulos use the examples of Brazil, Mexico and Colombia to compare Latin American media systems to countries in the Mediterranean (Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal). The media systems in these countries are characterized as polarized pluralist media systems, whereas in Northern and central European countries, political parties are represented in the media and the state and government intervene regarding content and editorial policies. Furthermore, the polarized pluralist model is characterized by client relationships between media, business and political sectors. However, Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez feel it is necessary to delineate a new ideal hybrid type for Latin America according to recent developments. Thus, by analysing the changes in the Latin American media sector, the editors and contributors of this book explore the specific hybrid and alternative patterns in the region going beyond this model. In Latin America, neither commercial media nor state intervention is synonymous with liberalization or enhancement and protection of the common interest; privately owned media can also be politically and economically instrumentalized.

Although the concentration of media property within a few private groups and the control of the media landscape by them are still central characteristics of the media in the majority of the countries in the region, there are new developments linked to various left-oriented politicians taking office, such as Hugo Chávez and later Nicolás Maduro (Venezuela), Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (Argentina), Eduardo Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia). By creating a new legal framework on media policy and reforming existing media laws, these presidents chose to take action on the issue of the concentration of media ownership in a few hands in order to combat the historical media concentration on hegemonic traditional media groups linked to traditional political and economic elites who are often enemies of these governments. However, the editors express their doubts about the apparent good intentions behind these decisions, and stress that media policies have become a standard object in the political discourse in Latin America used by both sides of the dispute. On the one hand, left-oriented governments claim that new media policies and media-related legal systems are used to put an end to the media hegemony of the elites and to allow marginalized groups to access and participate

in the media. On the other hand, hegemonic media and oppositional political actors accuse these governments of limiting the right to public expression of contrary opinions by regulating media policies and by setting up a media-related legal system according to their liking.

The editors go on to prove that left-oriented leaders claim they are combating the concentration of media ownership and the interests of economic elites therein. These leaders argue that they had improved access to the media for traditionally excluded and marginalized groups. However, the authors show that media owners blame the left-wing governments for limiting freedom of the press by introducing these regulations, and they argue that even progressive media policies can be used to penalize unfavourable media agendas by punishing oppositional media, for example with regulations regarding media property or by expropriating and assigning new media licenses to media agents that are on better terms with the government.

With these new considerations in mind, the first two chapters come up with a general framework to analyse the developments in the region, looking specifically at certain historical situations and global changes. In the first chapter, Silvio Waisbord argues that the changes in political and media relations taking place in Latin America cannot be interpreted by looking at them through the lens of the globalization paradigm. He argues that domestic politics should be included in global media studies.

In the second chapter, Manuel Alejandro Guerrero carves out a specific model of media systems, which can be applied to the situation in Latin America. He calls this ideal type “captured liberal model”, an oxymoron which reflects the contradictions of public life in Latin America. The absence and dissolution of media regulations as a consequence of neoliberal politics or through severe mistakes in applying regulations (e.g. the trend toward concentration of media markets; the influence of public spending on advertising; the colonization of media structures by the political class and of political spaces by media agents) lead to the interference of political actors in media coverage and journalistic practices (e.g. absence of adequate mechanisms of protection for journalists; influence of political and corporate interests in journalistic work).

Subsequent chapters show and analyse the situation in various countries: Colombia (Chapter 3); Peru (Chapter 4); Argentina (Chapters 5 and 10); El Salvador (Chapter 6); Guatemala (Chapter 7); Venezuela (Chapter 8); Bolivia (Chapter 9); Brazil (Chapters 11 and 12); Chile (Chapter 14) and Mexico (Chapter 15). In chapter 13, Stella Puente offers an analysis of the market orientation of Spanish-language publishing industries.

Finally, the editors conclude that Latin American media systems share a common historical development of being molded after the US commercial model, which, in

theory, makes a formal distinction between state and media markets. However, local, private advertising markets are not strong enough to support the entire media structure. In practice, Latin American media depends on local and national government advertising and government-assigned funds. Additionally, media structures have been consolidated and strongly depend on various political groups. Media owners took advantage of authoritarian regimes and after the transition to democracy, media ownership structures remained virtually intact. Moreover, privatization and deregulation processes encouraged the formation and consolidation of media conglomerates. Finally, the trend towards deregulation as well as weak and inefficient law or the discretionary application of law can be contributed to the private economy (e.g. the analysed cases of Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador and Peru) and political interests (Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela) taking over the media system.

This book is a compulsory reading for anyone researching Latin American media, because it offers an up-to-date look at media developments in the region. The question remains, however, whether the relatively new developments in Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador are not yet another new hybrid manifestation which is different from the “captured liberal model”, marked by a strong state intervention in media politics and, above all, by struggles between state, media, economic and political actors. Placing these cases under the same umbrella of the captured liberal model underestimates the role of state interventions concerning the emergence of these four specific cases where liberalism is decreasing. In this context, media and audiences are caught in a type of “tug of war”, between the state on the one side, tugging and trying to grab power from the historical hegemonic media barons on the other side. Time will tell which side will win this “tug of war” taking place in Latin America.