The conference aims to provide a platform for a variety of academic discussions on "theory" and "praxis" based on original researches that will broaden our insights into the field of political science. It also aims to constitute a forum for prolific exchanges between different theoretical perspectives, interests and concerns prevalent within this exciting field of study. In addition to this, we like to discuss on subjects in disciplines other than political science hoping to engage in trans-disciplinary dialogues that will be helpful for adding to our understanding of what political theory may mean for people today living in rapidly changing national, social and cultural contexts.

Our hope is to initiate fruitful discussions for expanding the horizons of political theory which aims to overcome the limits of traditional boundaries, mainstream perspectives and concerns.
NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPASSES:
THEORIZING AND EXPERIENCING POLITICS
NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND IMPASSES: THEORIZING AND EXPERIENCING POLITICS

POLITSCI '13 CONFERENCE
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS
OCTOBER 31 – NOVEMBER 2, 2013
İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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AN EXAMINATION INTO CONTEMPORARY LATIN AMERICAN POLITICAL JOURNALISM

ANTONIO CASTILLO

Abstract
Latin American political journalism is in crisis. This is bad news, especially when a more assertive, adversarial, critical and independent political journalism is needed more than ever in the Latin American media. It is true this is not new. Political reporting has traditionally been either hijacked or suppressed by democratic and non-democratic governments alike. And while the latter resorted to deadly measures; the former has resorted to financial and legal actions. What is also true this time around – in the post-dictatorship context – is that political journalism has been rapidly losing its key function, to make the political class accountable and the political discourse healthier. This article is a meta-assessment into the reasons for the decline in political journalism and how this is affecting the quality of democracy in the region.

Key words: Political journalism, Latin America, democracies, accountability, politics

Introduction
Thais de Luna is a Brazilian political journalist who, like many of her colleagues in Latin America, is trying to do ‘the right thing’ (2013: Interview). ‘Journalists work really hard to find what the government, president, governors, the congress, is doing right and doing wrong and to show this to the population,’ she points out.

As a Latin American journalist myself—and academic—I can confirm her assertion. Most of political journalists in Latin America region have a genuine aspiration to make politicians accountable. However, the gap between this aspiration and the reality has grown larger as time passes by. To do ‘the right thing’—to be the an effective, independent and assertive watchdog of political action—seems harder than ever in a region that is still struggling with anti-democratic norms, with weak legal systems and an increasing level of violence against journalists.

Political reporting in this vast region is experiencing all the same malaise as the global mainstream political journalism. The rising effects of the so-called media political management by political minders and spin-doctors and the high level of commercial media monopolies have deeply damaged political reporting.

For many Latin American governments—as former Latin American correspondent for the Guardian Guardian Rory Carroll points out— the media have become a political obstacle. ‘Television networks, radio stations and newspapers have become political battlegrounds pitting media owners and journalists against governments in South America,’ he observed (2010).

While I will make some references to the electronic media—as part of this political battleground—this article will focus on print journalism, especially newspapers. This is on the basis that daily newspapers still play a central role in setting the agenda for other media news sources (Walsbord, 2004: 1078). As Walsborad
rightly points out – this is maybe in part because newspapers have historically been more independent of state control ‘and thus relatively less fearful than television journalists’ (Waisbord, 2000: xiv).

**Political journalism principles**

The histories of political journalism and democracy are closely connected. Max Weber described in his *Politics as Vocation*, when he observed that journalism ‘remains under all circumstances one of the most important avenues of professional political activity’ (in Gerth & Mills, 1946: 98).

The connection between political reporting and political democracy was theorized as closely interwined. So much so that scholar James Carey concluded that journalism is another name for democracy (1996). ‘You cannot have journalism without democracy,’ he wrote. As journalism scholars have suggested, journalism – especially political reporting – is historically associated with democracy and politics (McNair, 2000).

It was in the early seventeenth century that the modern notion of political journalism began its tradition. Adversorial, inquisitorial and independence from the state were thought to be the main characteristics. The English Civil War – and its aftermath – as Conboy points out (2004) – became backdrop to a political journalism that played a central role in the conflict between those who supported absolute monarchy and those who advocated for democratic reforms. Extrapolated to Latin American journalism, this is called *periodismo de trincheras* (journalism of the barricades).

It was also in the French Revolution of 1789 (Popkin, 1991; Hartley, 1996) and in the American War of Independence (Starr, 2004) that political journalism began undertaking the basic principles that until today frame – at least in theory – the work of political journalists. It is a political journalism being performed in a democratic Habermasian public sphere (Habermas, 1989) and it has an independent role as watchdog of those holding power (Siebert, 1963). This is the ideal.

Political reporting has been traditionally regarded as part of an exclusive press club. The political reporter becomes closely involved – perhaps at times too close – with politicians certainly, but also with public servants and policy makers. They make decisions that affect people. In the traditional public service role, political journalists are called upon to explain how these decisions will affect citizens. However, and despite this noble task, one has to agree with Waisbord’s question whether journalism can contribute to ‘strengthening effective and democratic states’ (2000a).

Assessing their seminal principles, one has to say that political journalists – in democratic contexts – are agents of knowledge, the knowledge citizens need to be able to take part in the political process, from electing those who will serve them to making them accountable. Telling people what is going on enhances political engagement. People can react and express their views, demands and aspirations. And they can be expressed in a wide range of ways – from letters to editors to quotes given to journalists or by well-informed presence in voting places. And as an agent of political engagement, political journalism is called upon to explain events and issues so audiences can understand.
A key demand for political journalists – unfortunately not always addressed – is to put stories or commentaries in context, telling people how they may affect them. Explanation is clearly one of the most important functions played by political journalists.

In Latin America, political journalism has been historically regarded as an agent of political education (Santibañez, 1994:34). Historically – Santibañez observes – there has been a mutual dependency between political journalism and political action (2012). In Chile – as was the case in many other Latin American countries – the press took this role very seriously from the beginning as a pro-independence voice deeply influenced by the French enlightenment.

Journalism, especially political reporting, has played a crucial role in building nations and civic societies. As Waisbord has pointed out, journalism addresses an audience that becomes part of an ‘imaged community’ and fosters national identities (2000a). In Colombia, for example, this ‘imaged community’ has been at the heart of the collaboration between media and non-government organizations to resist violence, a problem that has marked the five decades of civil war in this country.

The political journalism function is to serve as a vehicle of public expression and political accountability. The dilemmas that Latin American political journalism faces are very much the same as those faced by global political journalism. And perhaps the central dilemma is how to make politicians tell the truth. Because as The Economist provocatively put it, lying is for politicians an ‘essential’ trait (2009).

‘In fact, dishonesty is unavoidable for almost all politicians,’ wrote The Economist.

It is obvious but it needs to be stated. The coverage of politics is mentally framed by the sense that politicians are deceiving and therefore political reporters have an in-built reaction: they don’t believe everything they are told, especially when it comes to making promises or boasting achievements.

The power of political reporting lies on its gatekeeping authority. This refers to the topics, political agents and ideas that will be chosen and filtered into the news agenda. These are topics, personalities and messages that will influence the public debate (Bennett & Entman, 2001)

The Latin American print press emerged in Latin America with a political vocation. Early newspapers were conceived as political enterprises rather than commercial business. In Peru for example, the majority of newspapers that appeared between 1918 and 1928 became political tools of a small group of wealthy business people closely linked to conservative and right wing ideologies of the period.

The case of Chile is similar. El Mercurio, one of the oldest newspapers in the Spanish-speaking world, was established as a political megaphone for the politically conservative views of Chile’s bourgeoisie. And in Colombia most newspapers up to today play the political role of legitimization of the business class. Overwhelmingly, the greatest majority of the mass circulation and hegemonic print press belong to conservative individuals, families or institutions. These are political segments closely allied to the authoritarian ideological tendencies behind the military dictatorships that have ruled Latin America in various periods.

El Mercurio in Chile – in particular – has been widely considered the most important political agenda-setting news media (Sunkel, 1994; Dermota, 2003). Illustrating the power of this newspaper US journalist and author Léon-Dermota
points out: 'No politician can survive without appearing on El Mercurio’s pages' (Dermota 2003: 138).

In the first half of the twentieth century in Latin America the hegemonic political press came under challenge by the left and union driven journalism. It was the beginning of the partisan press that became the political voice of left wing parties and other organizations. But this didn’t stop here; the emerging political centre – such as Christian democratic parties – also joined this media landscape.

It was a fragmented scenario where the ‘press of the left’, the ‘press of the centre’ and the ‘press of the right’ fought for the political mind and soul of Latin Americans. Perhaps with some variations this was the trend in most Latin American countries. This partially ended during the dark years of the military regimes that ruled most Latin American countries in the 1970s till the 1990s. The political press was the first target of the military dictatorships. It was either swiftly wiped out or allowed to circulate as an instrument of political demobilisation. As O’Donnell observed, the press depoliticised and depolitised society by diminishing the political awareness and the capacity of civil society to resist violations of its social and political rights (1979).

There was lot of hopes when the transition to democracy began in many Latin American countries in the 1990s, hopes that political reporting would get back to the front page of newspapers. Dissapointment soon replaced hope. ‘In Uruguay there is no journalism able to control politicians,’ said journalist and editor José Benítez (2013: Interview). Benítez points out that there are very few news organizations engaged in political investigative reporting and therefore press is unable to make politicians accountable.

In my book Chilean Transition to democracy and the media I wrote: ‘the transition to democracy in Chile didn’t start well for the media and journalists’ (2009: 15). I illustrated it with the case of investigative journalist Francisco Martorell who was forced into exile after receiving legal threats - and a certain jail sentence - due to an exposé into some diplomatic scandals. This was a decade – 1990-2000- that didn’t end well either for journalists. This time it was the turn of political journalist and now academic Alejandra Matus whose devastating investigation into the malpractice of the Chilean judiciary forced her to exile in the US.

These two cases became symbols of the unfulfilled promises of a post-dictatorship context where assertive, independent and even confrontational political journalism would flourish. After all, political journalism is not only about making authorities accountable, but it also is a facilitator and socialiser of democratic norms. Ascanio Cavallo, one of the most respected political writers in Chile, observes that political reporting has experienced the same fears as the rest of the population, a fear of political regression to a painful past (2013: Interview). This is the reason that ‘politics was left out of the news agenda.’

Without political journalism democracies are weaker and less effective. It is the case that – as Patric O’Neil observes –journalism may be able to contribute to political transition and democratization. But he also points out this depends on the form and function of the media in a given society, shaped by cultural, socioeconomic and political factors (1991).

And this is perhaps the core problem. The failure of this unfulfilled, unwritten, but taken for granted promise of democracies to truly commit to media diversity, to
freedom of expression and to the dismantling of repressive legal threats, that has deprived citizens of an effective political journalism culture. As sociologist Thomas Moulían pointed out, a public sphere structurally restricted has characterized the transition to democracy; by a monopolised media and by a legal structure that poses substantial limitations to freedom of expression (1997).

The existence of an effective political journalism requires a stable and functional state. It is beyond doubt that political journalism is not viable as long as states are unable to meet some its obligations (Waisbord, 2000). As Curran points out: ‘the most Important site of politics is the state.’ This is where laws are framed and enforced.’ (2002:136). Despite the wave of democracies sweeping the region, most Latin American countries can’t claim to have stable and functional states.

Morris and Waisbord said that ‘states matter because they remain the primarily repository of power and authority within the geographical borders that affect media systems (2001). However the conclusion seems to be questionable insofar as the state has been historically regarded as an impediment to political press.

Most Latin America, as is also the case of many post-dictatorship countries in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa, can’t claim the title of fully fledged functional states. Largely they are unable to perform key democratic functions – from tax collection to citizen’s protection (Koonings & Kruijt, 2002; Milliken & Krause, 2002; Reno, 1997; Yannis, 2002).

Weakness of the law

Journalism in general and political journalism in particular, has always been vulnerable and sensitive to how laws are enforced. Libel laws, the lack of source protections and the lack of access to information have seriously impaired political reporting and media democracy (Cain, Egan & Fabbri, 2006; Hughes & Lawson, 2005; Stotzky, 2004). And while it is true that some countries in Latin America have made advances in this area, still laws such as defamation and ‘sunshine laws’ – or open access to information – persist.

The weakness of the rule of law is an important factor that needs to be cited as a major obstacle to political reporting in the region. It is certain that when the laws remain weak, legislations to foster, promote and protect political reporting won’t be effective. Freedom of speech legislation and press laws are rarely applied and impunity reigns.

Ecuador has been often cited a country that has used – or misused – the law to control political reporting. In the last few years Ecuador’s President Correa has frequently used libel and contempt laws to discourage press criticism (Cerbino and Ramos, 2009). In 2009, he brought a lawsuit for contempt against the daily La Hora and its president. The charges; he refused to retract comments from a political editorial that was critical of the president.

However, the lawsuit was dismissed. A judge considered the political editorial did not offend the President. The legal purge by President Correa has continued. President Correa also brought charges of ‘insult’ against the leading daily El Universo and one of its columnists in 2011. He also brought a lawsuit against two journalists who authored a book that denounced his brother for corruption and favoritism in state contracts.
President Rafael Correa has described the media as his 'greatest enemy.' He has described journalists as 'corrupt, mediocre, and shameless.' President Correa proposed a bill to create a media watchdog and oblige those who work in the industry to have a journalism degree. Critics dubbed it the ley mordaza (gag law), and have delayed it in congress.

In 2010, twenty columnists and contributors to the Ecuadorian state newspaper El Telegrafo said they would no longer write for the paper because of alleged censorship. El Telegrafo was a private newspaper until 2007 when it was taken over by the government amid debt and legal problems. In a signed letter sent to media outlets, the writers said they were quitting to protest 'acts of censorship and the violation of the rights of free expression and press freedom' (The Associated Press, 2010).

El Telegrafo's director and sections editor were removed from their posts and the deputy director resigned amid a disagreement with management over the direction the newspaper was headed. A management order directed that the newspaper's editorial section not publish 'commentaries, strategic information and other strictly internal information' written by the columnists and contributors.'

Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega has followed President Correa's bad example. President Ortega has ignored the request for access to information and has established a regime of media intimidation (Lauría and Simon, 2009). The former leader of the Sandinistas has made himself an isolated and secretive figure. In a March interview with Al Jazeera English, the only interview he's done since taking office, Ortega told the late David Frost that Nicaragua is fighting 'a media war, a war of ideas.'

Political reporters have faced a political leader who has never given an official press conference. His political agenda is virtually unknown. Political reporters attempting to cover state matters have been unable to access to government officials. And even his health is a state secret. President Ortega perceives journalism as an instrument of war (Lauría & Simon, 2009).

In Bolivia, President Morales sponsored the so-called 'Law against racism and all forms of discrimination' in 2010 (Indigenous People Issues and Resources, 2010). Freedom of expression groups and journalistic organizations questioned two articles that, in their views, were intended to control content. Article 16 stipulates economic penalties and the suspension of broadcasting licenses for media that publicize or promote 'racist and discriminatory ideas'. And Article 23 determined that journalists and media owners - accused of racism - were unable to claim special legal status.

In Venezuela, where journalism has been at the heart of the media war under the late President Hugo Chavez and has continued under President Maduro – the 2004 Law on Social Responsibility in Radio and Television also establishes controls on media content. Article 8 bans messages that 'incite or promote hatred', 'foment citizens' anxiety or alter public order', 'disrespect authorities', 'encourage assassination', or 'constitute war propaganda' (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2010).

Weakness of the role is also reflected in the inability of the judiciary to keep a lid on violence against journalists. Closely associated – like in a bad dream – 'the judiciary is marred by a culture of impunity' (Durán 2013: Interview). Insecurity is
one of the main problems for political reporters in large swaths of Latin American countries.

Political reporting can’t perform its traditionally given role without a guarantee of state protection. It is not only state violence that threatens political reporting; it is also the so-called ‘private violence’ (Kaldor, 1999) that is engulfing large parts of Latin America. In this Hobbesian context the main threat comes from drug lords in Mexico, paramilitary forces in Colombia or highly organized urban gangs in Central America countries.

These are Latin American states — among others — that have lost the ability to control and eradicate the sources of private violence. Carolyn Nordstrom, an anthropologist, observes that organized crime is ‘more organized than the state’ (2004:133). In this lawless context, journalists have to wear bulletproof vests — as if in a war zone — or write articles ‘without bylines’ (Castillo, 2005: 41-41). The situation of Mexican journalists is ‘complicated not only due to the violence; but also because of censorship and corruption,’ said Dr. Claudia Magallanes, a media academic and researcher at the Universidad Iberoamericana, in Puebla. The main source of danger for journalists is ‘organized crime and the second is the government’ (Magallanes, 2010: Interview).

And the weakness of the law is also related to the State’s inability or at times unwillingness to break the highly concentrated commercial media landscape. This produced in most Latin American countries a highly ideologically concentrated political news scenario. Latin American media — at least the mainstream media — is one of the least plural in the world. Chilean journalist and author Olivia Mönckeberg writes about the ‘visible fact that there is no media plurality, especially in print media’ (2001, 9). For Mönckeberg this is especially worrisome insofar as it is the print media that forms opinion in Chile and that sets the agenda for the rest of the media.

Apart from the vulnerability of journalism to a nation-state legal and institutional framework, this is also highly vulnerable to the decisions of those who hold economic power. Journalists and scholars agree that media concentration by authoritarian media policies constrain political reporting. Giulio Andreotti is a journalist from Paraguay, a country that has lived under military dictatorship and is still struggling with a weak democratic system. ‘In Paraguay, as is the case in most Latin American countries, the press is not really free, it responds to the mandates of wealthy proprietors’ (2013: Interview).

This context tends to incubate a political system based on cronyism and repression of dissident journalists while others are carefully groomed as lapdog journalists (Chua, 2002; Milton, 2001; Tarock, 2001). This is the case in Paraguay. Andreotti points to what he calls periodistas asalariados (paid journalists). These are journalists who are groomed by politicians or government agencies with a ‘salary.’ Their role — he said — is to report only positive political stories while neglecting any independent and adversarial probe into the political and policy agenda.

These lapdog journalists become what the legendary English Marxist thinker Ralph Miliband called ‘agencies of legitimation and organs of conservative propaganda.’ They operate, he observes — under crucial constraints:

‘The first and most important of these constraints is that newspapers are part of capitalist enterprise — not only business but big business... [A] second important
constraint is that newspapers are part of the world of business in a different sense as well, namely in the sense that they depend on the custom of advertisers. Proprietors may or may not choose to exercise direct influence on their newspapers; and the direct influence of advertisers may not in any case be substantial. But the fact that newspapers are an intrinsic part of the world of business fosters a strong climate of orthodoxy for the people who work in them. So does the concern of editors and senior journalists to maintain good relations with government and ministers, civil servants, and other important people in the political and administrative establishment.’ (Miliband, 1982: 84-6)

It is the economic power – as Miliband suggest above - that determines what political journalism has to be communicated to citizens. The political and economic interests of the media may affect how an issue is presented and the amount of coverage it receives. That is, the media may not act as a mechanism of social accountability if their political or economic interests would threaten.

Political journalism in Latin America has also been subjected to another problem generated by a weak legal system and by states unable to guarantee an open media system. This refers to the access to information and transparency. In the last few years ‘right to know’ campaigns have become louder (Michener, 2009). As Michener points out uneven attention to transparency policy is a global phenomenon with serious implications for institutional effectiveness, especially given the significant connection between news coverage and the strength of right to information laws.

Since 2008 several Latin American countries have enacted laws that would allow journalists access to information (United States Department of State, 2010). Chile, Guatemala, Uruguay and Brazil are among those countries. Michener points out that firm reporting helped Chile and Guatemala raise public awareness and advance laws in spite of years of political and administrative foot-dragging. In Brazil and Uruguay the attempts were less firm but still the laws have allowed some level of access to information and transparency.

However, there is still a context where stepping on government’s policy actions – or inactions - can cost news organizations advertising and access to government officials; among other threats. Guatemala’s President Álvaro Portillo seems to be oblivious to the proposed access to Information laws (Isaacs, 2010). During 2001-2003, the government imposed a total media free zone.

Brazil is perhaps where transparency laws have been most effective. And this has been driven by a society eager to have an effective political journalism landscape. In Brazil, print press is the most trusted institution, even more than private companies and ONGs (Arias, 2013). The ability of the political press to cover massive scandals of corruption within the government of President Dilma Rousseff was possible due to a vigorous access to Information system. The major scandal of political corruption has also touched even the always-popular former president Lula da Silva. The other positive aspect is that the print press has maintained its high level circulation in contrast to other Latin American print publications. This is – perhaps- the reward for vigorous political reporting and it also reflects that citizens aspirations to have an effective political press.

**Crisis in political reporting**

However, there is little doubt that the adversarial, independent and watchdog role played by political journalism have been severely eroded in the last few years.
As Barnett and Gaber observe, the ‘twenty first century crisis in political journalism’ as one of heightening economic, political and technological pressures combining ‘inexorably’ to produce a ‘more conformist, less critical reporting environment which is increasingly likely to prove supportive to incumbent governments’ (Barnett and Gaber, 2001:2). Both authors also point to the ‘increasingly hostile and irresponsible tenor of political journalism’, and ‘the hounding of politicians’ by a ‘cynical and corrosive media.’

The declining role of political journalism as a mediator between citizens and the political power has also been accompanied by poor quality of political information. It is largely trivialized and the contest for power is no more than a horse race competition. Entertainment seems to be the main objective of political news these days. The political coverage of political campaigns tends to have a strong focus on personalities and banalities. Policies, the economy, society and foreign affairs are superficially and sporadically reported (Valente, 2008).

Behind this ‘entertainment’ objective lays a tendency towards what US journalist and scholar James Fallows calls hyperadversarialism (1996). While adversarialism is the dignified way to probe the political action, hyperadversarialism becomes the less dignified way of sensationalizing the political debate. It has a great dose of theatricality, scandal and drama. Hyperadversarialism brings to the front page of newspapers and to the electronic news media the dose of entertainment that appeals to commercial demands.

The dumbing down of political coverage has seriously affected the engagement of the citizens with political conversation. It is a scenario where political news reporting has become a mere ‘side show’ (Jasper, 2011). There is little doubt that commercial competitive pressures on the media, and the consequent commercialization of journalism, have driven the standards of political journalism down, undermining democracy itself.

These ideas and arguments around modern political journalism were prominent in the 1990s, exemplified by Blumler and Gurevitch’s The Crisis of Public Communication (1995), Bob Franklin’s Packaging Politics (1994) and other key texts of that decade.

Recently the work of Anderson and Ward (2007:67) in The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies laments the rise of ‘soft news’ over ‘hard news,’ leading them to the pessimistic conclusion that ‘it is increasingly unlikely that much of the future news provision in the UK will meet the informational needs of a democracy.’

These concerns are echoed in Latin America too. In Chile, Felipe Portales – a key analyst of the Chilean media – observed: ‘the mass media information products brutalize the population.’ Harsh commentary indeed, but it is also no far off from the mark. Portales points to the long silence about the hunger strike by indigenous political prisoners and the way the rescue of the Chilean miners was covered as evidence of the failure of the news media to fulfill its function.

In his book Los mitos de la democracia chilena (2010) Portales is critical of the political journalism practiced in Chile. He points to the perpetuation of the political and economic hegemonic views without exploring the opposing views. He has not doubt that the high level of media concentration in the hands of conservative individuals is behind this democratic deficit in political journalism.
Portales is also critical of the lack of context and analysis in Chile’s political reporting. He cites the case of some of the free trade agreements Chile has signed with dozens of countries around the world. These are usually portrayed as an achievement for Chile without explaining the why and the negative repercussions. In Chile, he said, nobody knows exactly what the agreement entails, who will profit and who will be negatively affected.

The analysis of the crisis of political reporting in the region wouldn’t be complete without examining the impact of political populism on the news media sphere. Populism is a response to the liberal democratic tradition represented by individual rights and by a market economy. Populism uses the rhetoric of popular democracy, indigenous nationalism and social equality.

As Panizza has observed, populism sees itself as a movement that overcomes the social and political gaps of liberal democracy. Theorists believe that liberal democracy’s institutional and social weaknesses pave the way for populism (2005). Alibar Gaete points out that the relation between populism and liberalism can also be used to explore the articulation between democracy and journalism (2007; 2010).

Populism rejects the notion of journalism as a profession that exercises control over news production. Instead, it is seen as an occupation fully dependent on political and economic forces. Populism flatly rejects the public trustee model of ‘professional journalism’. It dismisses its core ideals (e.g. evenhandedness, objectivity, fourth estate, independence, and watchdog reporting) as illusory given the political-economic context of media systems (Garcia de Madariaga and Solis Dominguez, 2008; Samar and Garcia, 2011).

In the last decade, Latin American has seen the resurgence of populism. It has been the decade of the late Nestor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernandez in Argentina; Evo Morales in Bolivia; Rafael Correa in Ecuador; Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua; and the late Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. These are left leaning governments with a strong popular and populist vocation. They are indeed populist governments with strong commitment with the improvement — socially and economically — of the pobres (poor people) of their respective countries. This can’t be taken away from them.

However less commendable is the way they have dealt with the media. It has to be said that the Latin American commercial media is not the paragon of democracy and has served the interest of the powerful. However, it has also to be said that the anti-media policies instigated by these populist government can’t be endorsed.

One key strategy of these governments has been the concerted policy to increase funding - and the expansion — of state-owned media outlets (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2000–2011; Organization of American States, 2011). Perhaps less laudable is the fact they they have also continued with the discretionany allocation of government advertising and the manipulation of economic and financial decisions to favor allies and punish enemies.

Community media have been the backbone of the political-communication structure of the governments of Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez, particularly in their battles against leading commercial media. In Venezuela, according to official statistics, there are 244 radio stations, 37 television stations, and over 200 newspapers run by communities (Gobierno Bolivariano de Venezuela, 2010).
The government has regularly provided them with equipment and funding (Cañizalez, 2009). After the 2002 coup, during which community media defended the embattled Chavez (Castillo, 2003), the government lauded their contribution to the revolutionary project and called for a regulatory framework.

Good, honest journalists, the late President Chavez said, are those who have 'the responsibility of patriotic consciousness and commitment, and the memory of the [Venezuelan] people' (Da Corte, 2011). 'Populist journalism' has been given different names. It has been called 'militant journalism' in Argentina, 'necessary journalism' in Venezuela, 'Sandinista journalism' in Nicaragua (Cuadra García, 2009; Simpson, 2009) and 'committed journalism' in Ecuador (Punín Larrea, 2011).

Political journalism and governments have had a deep competition for the control of the public agenda. In this context the media became a political actor in a polarized milieu. In Argentina, for example, the governments of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and the late Néstor Kirchner have put at the center of the public agenda the control for the 'political message.' In this context, Argentinean journalism has experienced a convoluted period where censorship, privatization and government attempts to control the media landscape have brought about confrontation and conflict (Ripoll, 2013).

In this polarized context, political journalism becomes highly ideological and highly subjective. Partiality and balance are not concepts frequently cited. This is the reason that political journalism in the region is not a mere conduit of the voices of the political power, but it is also the actual political voice. The alignment between political parties and political news reporting tends to become far more evident during the debate of critical social and political topics in the national agenda.

During the controversial agricultural policies in the first period of President Cristina Fernández, 2007-2011, this political alignment was manifested by the pro-government position taken by the centre left Página 12 newspaper and the anti-government position taken by the centre right La Nación newspaper. This is what Hallin and Mancini call 'political parallelism' (2004).

This is a concept that describes the thematic political links that bring together political journalism and political power. This story goes back to 2009 when President Fernández asked the Health Ministry to establish an ad hoc commission to investigate the effects of agrochemicals on the health of the population. In April and May 2009, both newspapers published widely on the transgenic agriculture and on the use of glyphosate, a broad-spectrum systemic herbicide used to kill weeds, especially annual broadleaf weeds and grasses known to compete with commercial crops grown around the globe.

On April 13, 2009, Página 12 published an investigation conducted by the University of Buenos Aires. The investigation showed the negative effects of glyphosate on the health of the population (Aranda, 2009a). While Página 12 political coverage aligned itself with the political position of the government, La Nación framed the story in a very different way. In two editorials, in 2009, the newspaper condemned the government for the establishment of the committee. It also put in question the negative effects of the transgenics and the use of glyphosate by landowners.

Political parallelism has to be analysed in the context of media framing (Gitlin, 1980). In the light of this the political coverage of La Nación tends to emphasize the
conflict between the government and landowners instead of examining the actual effect of the agricultural measures introduced by the government.

In Página 12 on the other hand, the media framing of the story tends to approach the transgenic and the use of glyphosate as negative to health. The newspaper frames the story around the actions of the social movement, peasants and indigenous. And while La Nación reinforces a political message around the interests of the government, Página 12 emphasises the economic interest of those behind the use of transgenics and glyphosate.

This political parallelism, illustrated in this case by the political alignment of two Argentinean newspapers with or against the government health policy, illustrates how a technical issue was rapidly politicised and the scientific angle was displaced from the news agenda. This case of political parallelism – journalism and government – the interpretation made by all social actors about this technical issue is socialized through sympathetic journalists and publications.

This is – in a sense – the attempt for legitimization via the use of the media as the imagined public sphere. In addition, it is possible to argue that in this political parallelism extreme views and a non-negotiable approach tend to dominate the political coverage. And in summary it is a political journalism promoting and defending a political agenda.

Conclusion

In a broad examination into political journalism in Latin America, it is conceivable to note that it is a field of news practice that is crisis. In a region where political polarization is not uncommon, political journalism is at the centre of this polarization. Political journalism has been regarded as a mediator between the political power and citizens.

Political reporters provide the information citizens need to have in order to act in the political sphere. This is the tradition. However this is not happening. As Brazilian journalist told me in an interview, ‘we try to do the right thing.’ However this has become an elusive aspiration. Political constraints, weak legal systems, economic concentration of the media and perhaps a fear of political regression are factors that can be cited behind the demise of political journalism in Latin America.

In a seminal work by Australian scholar Julianne Schultz, she wrote that former Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser had prided himself on his ability to get politics off the front page, and during the first years of his leadership he succeeded (Schultz, 1985). This is what has also happened in many Latin American political journalism spheres.

Politics has been taken off the front page of newspapers or has become highly manipulated by the political elite. Weak laws, incomplete democracies, populism, and violence are among the most devastating causes of the malaise that afflicts Latin American political journalism.

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