Manuel Alejandro Guerrero y Mireya Márquez-Ramírez
Media Systems and Communication Policies in Latin America
Palgrave MacMillan, 2014

All media is local. This is probably one of the central conclusions of this important book. The local political and corporate actors, the professional culture, and the type of state, are determinist forces in shaping the media. A select group of Latin American scholars describe national media systems and discourage one from overemphasizing global trends. Those are the "limitations of the media 'globalization'" that Silvio Waisbord describes in the first chapter.

This collective work explains that Latin American countries have hybrid media systems that are captured, or held hostage to a large degree, to political and economic interests. The principal thesis of the book is that this capturing of the media affects the goals of the public policies on media, and also the watchdog role of journalism. The editors propose a common framework that is useful to understanding the media in the different Latin American countries.

The book includes research portraying in detail the media systems in ten countries. A common set of issues emerge from these portrayals defining a model of how media works in the region.

Public policies depend on the quality of state enforcement. And in this region, almost all countries have a wide gap between the law and state action. That gap is a democratic brick with a lot of consequences to democracy and, obviously, to the media system.

The framework needs some additional analysis to try to detect when the media system improves the quality of democracy. If it is very static, the framework will put all the countries in the same place. There are similarities, but also a lot of differences.

The Latin American media systems have experienced a historical voyage of confluence and divergence between American and European media models. The American-style big media commercialism has coexisted with European state intervention, especially in the area of news and political information. The states have promoted particularism rather than a universal view of journalism. State-run media and the state-sponsored private media created something akin to propaganda machines.

The authors clearly describe cases of the "captured liberal" model. The media is "captured" because political and economic actors provoke "low regulatory efficiency" (Guerrero, 57); and it is "liberal" because "it keeps the formalities of a predominant commercial media system" (Guerrero, 59).

Latin America still has huge oligopolies and monopolies, both of public and private nature. The chapters about México and Guatemala clearly describe situations of abusive private concentration, and the chapter on Venezuela is an example of state concentration. The media-based presidency, described by Venezuelan scholar Andres Cañizalez, may be the most important example of official and para-official concentration of media, including an important cooptation of private media.

Some chapters criticize lineal visions about how the media will develop during the transition to democracy. In these cases, despite increasing liberties in the new democracies, the mass media have had mixed performance that has not automatically produced better journalism. The Chilean, Mexican, and Peruvian cases are examples of this kind. The weaknesses of the journalistic profession reinforce commercialism, sensationalism, and other negative outputs that limit the quality of journalism. In the specific case of Guatemala, "since the arrival of democracy, patterns of harassment and political persecution to media and journalists have changed, but have not ended". As in other countries, there is an important presence of organized crime (Gramajo, 150). In Mexico, Márquez-Ramirez says the democracy has failed to deliver on its promise of a vibrant media. She argues that authoritarianism and commercialism limit journalism.

In all cases the development of a journalistic ethos is a force that democratizes the media system, but is limited by the different types of capture. A Chilean scholar, Rodrigo Araya, evokes the professional culture of journalists as a major force in shaping media. This is an issue that is commonly underestimated in our regional literature, where journalists are seen as passive actors without any chance of influencing a process governed by market forces or big political actors. In his view, a “Eurocentric dominant ideology of journalism” (Araya, 255) limits the democratizing force that journalism is expected to play in a democracy. Expressing an opposite point of view, he contends that pluralism has diminished, not grown, during the political transition. In his own words, “despite the apparent advance of political democracy, the ideological plurality of the media reduced instead of increasing, and thus the public space weakened rather than strengthened” (Araya, 255).”

In recent years, the countries of Latin America have seen a wave of legislation to regulate the media. This has marked the return of the states to proactive media policies. But in some cases this legislation has resulted in politically oriented policies enforced with bias by states to protect their friends and punish enemies. In the chapters about Bolivia, Venezuela and Argentina, renowned scholars try to explain these situations with nuanced and balanced arguments. In Bolivia, Quintanilla wrote, “Constitutional reform and regulations have drastically diminished criticism against his [Evo Morales] government and policies” (Quintanilla, 191).

As with other public policies designed to strengthen democracy, media policies have run into a wall as the values expressed in the new regulations have not been given life through state actions. Private actors that captured media have protected themselves by waving the “free press” flag. Sometimes, pluralism by force can become a force against pluralism. Civil society is always an important actor, and in most countries it has built coalitions to participate in reforms (like in El Salvador). But while state-run media could be the best tool for ensuring media pluralism, in most countries it is precisely the opposite: the media with the lowest degree of pluralism. In other countries state media, for the most part, does not exist.

The editors conclude that in many instances the “media policy has been a discursive practice that results for blackmailing, threats, or domination for the benefit of either media groups or political elites, often in the contentious field of partisan or highly polarized politics” (Guerrero, Ramirez, 296).

One of the editors remarks that the “captured liberal” model does not “encompass the new media digital landscape, which is increasing developing, more varied, and pluralistic” (Guerrero, 60). Also Protzel, who researched the Peruvian case, says that “the weight of the greater media was diminished” (Protzel, 96). So we can conclude that Latin American politics have spent a lot of time regulating twentieth-century media.

Now it is for sure that these media systems are changing, but we have not yet articulated a model that could capture the current hybridization between the old and the new. We don´t know yet if we are close to discovering a new type of captive media, or if the digital revolution can fulfill the vision of a free press.

Fernando J. RUIZ
fruiz@austra.edu.ar