Latin America: Is media reform enough?

Katherine Reilly

A wave of pro-public media reforms is sweeping through Latin America. Across the region, left-leaning governments have put in place new legal frameworks designed to undermine private media control and encourage public or community broadcasting. But even as these reforms give greater voice to the people, Latin American economies are becoming increasingly dependent on primary commodity trade with China, a move which threatens the autonomous development trajectories of Latin American states. This raises an important question: in a globally networked information age economy, are democratic media reforms enough? Or should media reforms also be evaluated in terms of their relationship with economic development and distributive justice?

By now most observers are familiar with Latin America’s so-called “Pink Tide”, the wave of millennial electoral victories that, after decades of conservative and oligarchic rule, brought left-leaning leaders to power in most countries of the region. These governments have ushered in a new post-neoliberal era, especially in South America, where presidents ranging from the feisty and outspoken socialist Hugo Chavez to the diplomatic statesman Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva have introduced significant social reforms designed to empower the popular classes. Of particular note, countries throughout the region have re-introduced social welfare spending programs that provide a basic income to poor families.

But left-wing reforms have not stopped at questions of taxation and expenditure. Left-leaning governments have also opened the door to more fundamental discussions about the nature of democratic institutions. Any doubts about the significance of the Latin American Left Turn can be put to rest by the depth and breadth of the region’s current wave of media reforms. Throughout the region new laws are being introduced that put limits on the power of private media, and create new opportunities for public, state and community broadcasters. These reforms can be understood as part of a major effort to renegotiate the social contract between citizens and governments.

Latin America’s exciting wave of media reforms

It has been easy for outsiders to dismiss the region’s media reforms as an exercise in populism. During Latin America’s period of military dictatorships (1970-90), state-run broadcast media were a common means through which to express state control. But during the twinned wave of neoliberal reform and democratization that took place during the 1990s, state-run media all but disappeared in the region. Public media were privatized, spectrum laws were reformed to give priority to those who could purchase licenses at high prices, and community media remained clandestine throughout the region.

Today, given the region’s history with authoritarianism, it has been tempting to characterize media reforms as a swing of the pendulum, away from “freedom” and towards “control”. Outside observers have painted today’s rise in state-run media as an effort to entrench left-leaning authoritarian dictatorships. But this is an unfortunately narrow analysis of the changes that are taking place in Latin America.
In fact, new communication laws in Venezuela (2000/2010), Argentina (2009), Bolivia (2011) and Ecuador (ongoing) are designed to regulate equitable distribution of the broadcast spectrum between private interests, public organizations (including the state and its various institutions, provinces and municipalities, universities, and the like), and community interests (including indigenous communities). The law currently being debated in Ecuador also contemplates legal limits on media ownership as well as national production of both content and advertising. What is more, significant battles around community radio have been carried out in Mexico (2005), Uruguay (2006) and Chile (2010), albeit with varying outcomes. Finally, Brazil is holding consultations, known as Confecom, to discuss the merits of media reform in that country.

The importance of these reforms cannot be overstated. Neoliberalism robbed Latin American states of their ability to connect with citizens. While information and money gained in their ability to circulate freely, citizens saw little change in their ability to express freedom. The result was a series of hollowed out democracies that acquired unfortunate descriptors such as fragile, incomplete or violent. Meanwhile, private interests became very powerful indeed.

Media reforms that divide spectrum resources between the public, private and community serve to repair the relationship between state and citizen in four significant ways: First, they reduce the power of private media, forcing it to abandon its role as a powerful interlocutor between state and citizen. Second, they help enable the state to assume a more powerful role in directing the development of the national economy. In particular, access to media allows developmental states to advance agendas that may be unpopular with entrenched elites.

Third, new media laws give citizens access to the media so that they are better able to inform government about their needs and desires. Finally, new media laws wrest control from international media interests, which often work in tandem with elite owners of domestic media, or otherwise limit the space for autonomous development trajectories and democratic process.

Overall, the media reforms taking place in Latin America create greater media diversity, greater domestic control, and spaces through which to imagine alternative (non-neoliberal) development trajectories. With this in mind, it becomes clear that populism is a theoretical distraction or rhetorical trick. What is taking place in Latin America today is nothing less than a renegotiation of the social contract between citizens and the state. Media is playing a key role in the reorganization of this relationship, both as a target of reforms, and as a conduit for healthy democratic debate.

**But is media reform enough?**

As exciting as these reforms are, there may be significant limits to what they can achieve. The types of media reforms being contemplated in Latin America are clearly meant to create adjustments in democratic relationships. Will these changes also address unequal economic relationships?

Current changes to media laws focus almost exclusively on what we might label the “traditional” media (radio, newspapers, television, advertising). Drawing on Latin America’s long history of land reform struggles, these “resources” (i.e. media spectrum licenses) are characterized as national patrimony. In other words, the media are treated like an instrument
or tool that all sectors of society should be able to access. Media reform is, therefore, a means to redistribute power between the state, the market and the public sphere.

But media reform has so far been defined in very narrow terms. It has focused almost entirely on traditional media broadcast resources. Less attention has been focused on distribution channels. Throughout the region, telecommunications providers continue to be held privately (with the exception of fixed line provision in some cases) under regulations that continue to follow strongly neoliberal principles. What this means is that there is little state intervention when it comes to, for example, facilitating telecommunications access in poor communities, whether internet, cell phones or fixed lines.

What is more, media reforms in the region studiously avoid regulating the Internet as a form of mediation. Blogging, tweeting and social media are exempt from consideration under the new media laws being passed throughout the region – which is not unexpected given the challenges and implications of monitoring social media. But the commercial aspects of internet, including issues related to intellectual property rights, distributed or “peer” software production, cloud computing, and the like are also excluded from current discussions.

The heavy focus on broadcast media to the exclusion of distribution is troubling for at least two reasons. First, and most obviously, we can ask whether reform of democratic institutions can be fully achieved in the digital age when it is limited to only the traditional media. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, we can ask whether reform of democratic institutions can be sustained without parallel reforms to economic institutions.

Students of democracy have long recognized that it is one thing to have access to the right to vote. It is quite another to have access to the freedom and opportunity that comes with economic autonomy. In a digital age, similarly, it is one thing to have access to media spectrum. It is quite another thing to have the sort of economic autonomy that allows you to produce media, or influence the system of media production and distribution.

Here we run up against a troubling truth. The governments that have made the greatest advances in media reform in Latin America are also the governments that rely most heavily on a narrow range of primary resources exports to finance social reforms. They are also the countries in Latin America that have made the least advances in terms of high technology and digital upgrading in manufacturing sectors.

**Winning the battle, losing the war**

What this suggests is that we need to look closely at the relationship between economic development and media production in Latin America. Is it enough for citizens to have access to a chunk of the domestic radio spectrum? Thinking instrumentally, what can radio access get you in a globalized economic system? At best this allows for the type of popular support that can keep a socialist government in power, so that it can continue to redistribute economic resources within the country. This is fine in the short-term, and may in the medium-term help to rebalance economic opportunity, but what about the long-term economic development of the country, and long term prospects for redistribution?

In a globalized capitalist economy, the health of the economy, and ergo, the distribution of economic resources, is intimately tied to regional and international networks—and those networks are themselves today digital. As a result, continuation of domestic economic redistribution relies on economic diversification, and in a digital age, this means that domestic economies must move in the direction of high-tech manufacturing, innovation, and digital production, such that national markets can ‘plug in’ to global markets in an
advantageous way. (What is more, there are also compelling ecological reasons to move away from reliance on primary resource exports.)

In this sense, while media reformers in Latin America are winning the battle, they may be losing the war. Recent research suggests that China’s gains in the area of high-technology production are eroding Latin America’s gains in the same area. In their recent book The Dragon in the Room (Stanford University Press, 2010), for example, Gallagher and Porzecanski find that Latin American high tech exports have remained low-wage and low-skilled, whereas China’s exports have steadily diversified into higher-wage, high-skill and high-value-added consumer products. They also find that 95% of all high-tech exports from Latin America are under threat from Chinese competition. This suggests that the focus on media reform may go hand-in-hand with a de-industrialization of Latin American economies.

What is more, the same research finds that Latin American economies have been strongly influenced by China’s demand for raw material exports. Latin American exports to China grew by 370% since 2000, and of this 74% were primary commodities. Sadly, taken together, these two trends suggests that broadcast media reforms in Latin America may be at risk of falling back in time to an era during which domestic battles for control of the media were one avenue of struggle for control of the state, which in turn enabled control over resources. If this were to recur, then media reform would backfire, resulting in greater political polarization (for example between left and right wing domestic forces) rather than greater plurality.

In short, media reform helps achieve a plurality of voices that fight for distribution of opportunity, then gains may be made. But should messaging become co-opted by clientelistic power networks organized around poles of power that use media to fight for control of the state, then the outcomes may not match the hoped for result.

Towards a political economy of Latin American media reform

Altogether, if citizens truly want to renegotiate the social contract in Latin America, then they need to gain greater control not only over traditional broadcast resources, but also over the digital media that establishes the foundations for production in the globalized capitalist economy.

This means that researchers, activists and policy-makers also need to reorient their activities. The current fascination with media reform in Latin America has given us communication politics without political economy of communication. In other words, there is a great deal of concern about media’s role in reforming democratic institutions, but comparatively less focus on the role of communications in commerce. As I have tried to show throughout this article, the danger with this is that our focus on democratic advances causes us to overlook the relationship of these gains to economic restructuring.

Another way of saying the same thing is that the institutional question of how to organize a democracy has unfortunately been separated from the economic question of how to organize society. The result overall is that Latin American economies become reliant on resource exports. This causes strong domestic political competition for access to power, and also stunts spaces for indigenous information age innovation. Social reforms are therefore in jeopardy because they lack parallel economic reforms.

Planning for sustained social reform requires careful forward thinking. Insofar as the global economic crisis and the rise of China are reshaping the global context for informational capitalism, Latin American countries need to consider their positioning within
international networks for governance and trade. New thinking needs to tackle the question of how to bring markets under the control of democratic states in the global information age. It is only by combining media reforms with information age economic upgrading that Latin American countries will find a lasting, positive social compromise.

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