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COMMUNICATION POLICIES AND STRUCTURES

THE LATIN AMERICAN SITUATION

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At a first glance, the communication situation does not look bad in Latin America. Hundreds of modern newspapers and magazines populate the stands; radio stations are counted by the thousands; long lines are perennial around the numerous cinema houses; TV antennas show up at times even in the slums; and satellite towers are a landmark in many capital cities. The minimum standards of mass media availability per each 100 inhabitants, recommended by Unesco to the developing countries, have either been reached or clearly exceeded in average terms for the region.

As a rule, however, those media institutions are concentrated in the cities and, thus, do not reach the close to 150 million inhabitants of the rural areas. Even inside the cities and within the countryside, mass communication opportunities are markedly stratified, full access to them is enjoyed only by a very small minority characterized by high economic, social and educational levels. And even if such skewed distribution was to be corrected one day, many people may still be handicapped by the nature of media content.

Several studies have found that, with few exceptions, most of the main media markedly prefer trivial contents over those which could be useful to the national development endeavours in these countries. Other studies have, furthermore, begun to document (a) the stimulation of irrational buying behaviors; (b) the promotion of values which, in general, are alien to the local cultures and, sometimes, noxious to them; and (c) the impairment of the audience's ability to appraise critically their society and culture and, thus, seek to transform them.

Many media owners and some practitioners contend that content is the way it is because the audience wants it no better. Research, however, is increasingly finding the basic explanation in the interests, attitudes and values of those who finance the media operations. On the one hand, media ownership has often been found to be in relationships, directly or not, with the ownership of the means of production. On the other hand, the advertising which makes possible the existence of media is so decisive in this part of the world that it can hardly be deemed inconsequential.

U. S. advertising companies lead the field in most of the countries of the region and some of their main clients are the U. S. transnational corporations. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the point. Of the 170 advertising agencies operating in Mexico only four are solely in the hands of Mexicans; of the 500 million dollars yearly spent in advertising in that country, 400 million are handled by 11 U. S. agencies. The top ten agencies in Venezuela are U. S. owned or controlled; of the 78 members of the National Association of Advertisers of that country, 42 are U. S. transnational firms. Six of Argentina's ten most important agencies are U. S. affiliates or associates. One U. S. agency handles almost all advertising in the Central American countries. And the sales of two U. S. agencies in Brazil, which are the main in the country, represent twice the sales of the leading national agencies.

Advertising constitutes, evidently, a very strong transnational influence on the mass communication system of Latin America. But programming is another significant force of that nature. For instance, estimates of Latin American purchases of U. S. canned television materials have been placed between 25 and 80 million dollars per year. A study of one week of television programming in 18 cities of the region gave an average of close to one-third of contents imported from the U. S. Comic strips and comic books constitute another area of clear U. S. programming influence. Several of the major U. S. magazines have large circulation of Spanish editions stemming chiefly from affiliate or associate Latin American firms in Mexico and Venezuela. And U. S. films are predominant even in Mexico, the region's main producer of motion pictures.

The area in which U. S. influence on Latin American mass media content is overwhelmingly present is international news. Their traffic -- from the region, to the region and within the region -- is handled in the very, at least, two-thirds of the total volume by UPI and AP, with France Press being their only major but very distant competitor. Other international, quasi-regional and national news agencies are marginal. Both Latin American and U. S. analysts have pointed to the negative consequences involved for the region in such a situation, making against the U. S. agencies charges of intentional bias and systematic distortion. Rafael Caldera, former President of Venezuela, noted "Perhaps the phrase 'no news is good news' has become 'good news is no news'. Only the most deplorable incidents, be they the work of nature or man, get reported..." And the incumbent President of that country, Carlos Andres Perez, agreed: "The big press of the big countries does not report about our realities, our struggles and our goals..." Some U. S. newspapermen are among those sharing these views. Notes Hendrix: "Through the years the United States has caught an occasional glimpse of Latin America from reports of catastrophe, war, looting, piracy and political upheaval...the imbalance in the flow of news from Latin America, compared with the flow of other parts of the world today, results in a continuing distortion of perspective." Knudsen affirms: "Governments may come and go in Latin America but one thing remains constant in the U. S. press -- a seemingly implacable hostility towards social change elsewhere in the hemisphere, whether accompanied by violence or not."

A study of 14 major dailies of the region found that for them the most important international news items in a given day of 1967 were a U. S. offensive in Vietnam and a royal visit of a pair of newly-weds to the Dutch Parliament. Completely ignored was a conference of African leaders held the same day. Whereas the Dominican crisis and a military uprising in Ecuador were also passed over, news were published of the birth of a two-legged pig in Venezuela and of the capture of a witch in Colombia.

In essence, then, the mass communication situation of Latin America is characterized by the predominance of private, national and transnational, interest identified with the preservation of the status quo. As such it cannot be expected to contribute much to national development, if by it is understood something other than material advancement and economic growth favoring elites.

Only in the last ten years or so has this situation been intensely studied and only in the most recent of those years is being widely questioned. Prior to it, the scheme had only been contested occasionally by authoritarian conservative regimes and by radical political formations. Today the challenge is definitely rooted and oriented and comes from many walks of life in the broader community. It is led by change-oriented persons, groups, universities and other institutions, and even governments, that can in no way be dismissed as undemocratic.

Ruling out devices such as censorship, seizure, nationalization and expulsion, many of those contestant are attempting recourse to pluralistic and legal instruments for corrective actions, such as new regulations to be attained through public conciliation and consensus. These overall policies are felt desirable since, up to now, there have only existed few, scattered, outdated and, at times, contradictory norms to guide communication behaviors. The additional norms envisioned aim at significantly improving the situation at the national level and at alleviating, at least, the impact of its transnational determinants. They stem from more human and fair preceptions of development, of communication, and of international relations in economic, political and cultural matters. These perceptions are generating redefinitions of the prevailing concepts of "news value", "objectivity", "free flow of information", "information freedom" and "information rights", as well as of the roles of communication in society. The movement, which is not particular to Latin America but generalized among Third World countries, seeks the gradual and peaceful establishment of a "new information order" parallel to the "new economic order" which in search of justice, these countries are struggling to build.

A peak was reached in this movement in 1976 when, under the auspices of Unesco, the First Inter-Government Conference on Communication Policies was held in Costa Rica. The leadership of it rested in the hands of the government representatives of those countries which in this part of the world are closest to democracy: Costa Rica, Venezuela and Colombia. The conference produced a Declaration which synthesizes much of the emerging doctrine of communication and recommends some concrete remedial actions at national and international levels.

None of these events are, of course, taking place without opposition from the established system of communication, which sees freedom as gravely threatened by the movement. The debate is presently heated by emotional outbursts and presided by entrenched prejudices and assumptions. It is to be hoped that rational, cooperative and constructive dialogue will soon replace it. For the road towards solving the conflict should not be worsened by spreading thorns and rocks on its surface.