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COMMUNICATION POLICIES AND STRUCTURES: LATIN AMERICA

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At a first glance, the communication situation in Latin America does not look too bad. Hundreds of modern newspapers and magazines populate the news stands; radio stations are counted by the thousands; long queues are normal at the numerous cinemas; TV antennas can be seen even in the slums; and satellite stations are a landmark in many capital cities. The minimum standards of mass media availability per each 100 inhabitants, as recommended by UNESCO to the developing countries, have either been reached, in average terms for the region, or clearly exceeded.

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

Several studies have found that, with few exceptions, most major media have a decided preference for trivia over more serious matters that might be useful to the national development endeavours. Other studies have begun to document the stimulation of irrational buying behaviours; the promotion of values that, in general, are alien to local cultures and, sometimes noxious to them; and the impairment of the audience's ability to appraise critically their society and culture, and thus seek to transform both of them.

Many owners and some practitioners say that programme content is the way it is because the audience wants it no better. Research is increasingly finding, however, that the basic explanation lies with those who finance the programme (or newspaper) — with their interests, attitudes and values. For instance, ownership of a media outlet has often been found to be related, directly or indirectly, to ownership of the means of production. And questions of advertising can hardly be deemed inconsequential.

US advertising companies lead the field in most Latin American countries. Some of their main clients are the US transnational corporations. Of the 170 advertising agencies operating in Mexico only four are solely in the hands of Mexicans; of the \$500 million yearly spent in advertising in that country, \$400 million are handled by 11 US agencies. The top ten agencies in Venezuela are US owned or controlled; of the 78 members of the National Association of Advertisers of that country, 42 are US transnational firms. Six of Argentina's ten most important agencies are US affiliates or associates. One US agency handles almost all advertising in the Central American countries. And the sales of two US agencies in Brazil, which are the largest in the country, represent twice the sales of the leading national agencies. Advertising is clearly a very strong transnational influence on the mass communication system of Latin America.

Programming is another significant force. For instance, estimates of Latin America's purchases of US television materials range between \$25 and \$80 million 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 USA. Comic strips and comic books constitute another area of clear US influence. Several of the major US magazines have large circulation Spanish editions stemming chiefly from affiliate or associate Latin American firms in Mexico and Venezuela. And US firms are predominant even in Mexico, the region's main producer of motion pictures.

US influence on Latin American mass media content is overwhelming in the case of international news. US traffic from the region, to the region and within the region is handled by UPI and AP, who are responsible for over two-thirds of the total, with Agence France-Presse being their only major but still very distant competitor. Other international, quasi-regional and national news agencies are marginal. Both Latin American and US analysts have charged the US agencies with 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 our realities, our struggles and our goals'.

Some US newspapermen share 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 US press — a seemingly implacable hostility towards social change elsewhere in the hemisphere, whether accompanied by violence or not.'

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

In essence, then, the situation of mass communication in Latin America is characterised by the predominance of private, national and transnational interests identified with the preservation of the *status quo*. As such it cannot be expected to contribute much to national development, if by that is understood something other than material advancement and economic growth favouring 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 it being widely questioned. Today's challenge is firmly 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.

Censorship, seizure, nationalisation and expulsion, as tactics for change, have been ruled out. Instead, many of these individuals and organisations are attempting to set up, through public conciliation and consensus, pluralistic legal instruments, and new regulations. So far, only a few, scattered, outdated and, at times, contradictory norms are available to guide communication behaviour.

These additional norms would aim to significantly improve the situation at the national level and to alleviate, at least, the impact of its transnational determinants. They stem from a whole range of more human and fair perceptions of development, communication, and 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 general 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. Its leadership 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 synthesised much of the emerging doctrine of communication and recommended 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. The debate is presently heated by emotional outbursts and distorted by entrenched prejudices and assumptions. It is to be hoped that a rational, co-operative and constructive dialogue will soon replace it.