

MEDIA RESPONSIBILITY AND THE QUALITY OF DEMOCRACY: HOW THE MEDIA SERVE -AND FAIL TO SERVE- DEMOCRACY LATIN AMERICA¹

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Resumen

Este trabajo intenta insertar preguntas sobre la calidad del periodismo tal como se practica en los distintos países de América Latina en el debate sobre la evolución y el fortalecimiento de las democracias saludables en esos países. Sugiere un marco para entender el papel crítico de los medios de comunicación en las sociedades democráticas; además intenta ir más allá del discurso que se concentra en "la libertad de expresión" y hace hincapié en las maneras específicas y las prácticas de noticias de los medios de comunicación pueden apoyar una democracia sana y abrir el difícil debate de cómo los medios podrían debilitar o incluso dañar la democracia. Por último, presenta una serie de criterios que podrían utilizarse en futuros estudios de casos específicos para evaluar si y cómo los medios de comunicación están sirviendo o no a la democracia.

Palabras clave: Periodismo, medios de comunicación, democracia, libertad de expresión, opinión pública.

Abstract

This paper attempts to insert questions about the quality of journalism as it is practiced in individual Latin American countries into the discussion about the evolution and strengthening of healthy democracies in those countries. It suggests a framework for understanding the critical role of news media in democratic societies; it attempts to go beyond discourse narrowly focused on "freedom of expression" and to emphasize the specific and practical ways news media support a healthy democracy and to open the difficult discussion about ways the media weaken or even harm democracy. Finally, it presents a set of criteria that might be used in further studies of specific cases to evaluate whether and how media organizations are serving or failing to serve democracy.

Keywords: Journalism, media, democracy, freedom of expression, public opinion.

Artículo recibido el 15 de diciembre de 2010; sometido a pre-revisión el 20 de diciembre de 2010; enviado a revisión el 22 de diciembre de 2010; aceptado el 2 de enero de 2011; publicado Año 2. Vol. 2. No. 1.

1. Introduction

The discussion of the press in Latin America must inevitably be framed in the context of the general crisis affecting the news media, in particular in the United States. Newspapers are closing or going into bankruptcy all over the country. The most recent are the Seattle Post Intelligencer, the Chicago Sun Times, and the Rocky Mountain News.

The San Francisco Chronicle is losing \$1 million a week; the Boston Globe (owned by the New York Times Company) announced it will lose \$85 million this year. It is a realistic possibility that in the near future one or more of America's major cities will have no daily newspaper at all. My son works at the Newark Star Ledger, the largest paper in New Jersey and the only city-wide newspaper in Newark, a gritty, unromantic complex of inner city and suburbs that is overshadowed by the glitz of nearby New York. But it is the largest city in one of our most populous states. The paper laid off 40 per cent of its staff last year -almost 100 people. Brought back from the brink of bankruptcy, it began to hire young, low-paid, relatively inexperienced journalists on one-year contracts. That's how my son got his job. It is the new world of journalism in which by all accounts the basic economic underpinnings -the business model, we like to say in the profession- is broken, with no clear vision about how to fix it.

What is in stake in this is not just my son's jobs and the jobs of the 50,000 or so newspaper journalists who make up the vast majority of news professionals. What is at stake is democracy itself.

The crisis is less urgent in Latin America newspapers, which still appear to be making money. Latin American media companies have more time to find a solution to the economic model, perhaps, but they must use that time to confront the business problems, even as they face even more serious challenges about their role in the region's now consolidated democratic environment.

We know the profession, the entire *industry* of journalism is in transition. If this transition is

only about a transition from paper to pixels, we can anticipate a relatively acceptable technological solution. Think Kindle, or its successor devices.

There is good reason to believe, unfortunately, that the problem is deeper. The new era in the media may result in the decimation of the vast brain trust of experience in this profession- those 50,000 journalists in the United States and equivalent numbers in Latin America. If that happens and the corps of working journalists is reduced to a shadow of what it was, we are in trouble. I don't mean journalism is in trouble. I mean our democracy is in trouble.

So what better time to rethink journalism in terms of its relationship to democratic societies. No time like the present. As we confront the business model crisis, it is essential to look closely at the ways journalism actually serves democracy. From the point of view of society as a whole, it is critical that the solution that emerges is one that ensures not so much the survival of one industry model or another, but that the new models for journalism -what used to be called "the press"- continue to fulfill their role in supporting democracy.

For purposes of this discussion, the point of departure is the almost universally held notion, traced to the Jeffersonian foundations of American democracy, that free society cannot exist without freedom of expression embodied in a free press. Put another way: journalism does not need democracy. But democracy needs journalism. What kind of journalism, and how to determine whether the journalism practice in a particular society actually serve democracy, is the subject of this paper.

In other words, it is not the mere existence, the presence of a free "press" that is essential to democracy. It is the quality of the press in doing its work that serves, or fails to serve, free society. It is for that reason and no other that, the "press" has been given special, explicit protections in virtually all democratic constitutions. This protection is neither abstract nor absolute. It is a right that arises from the corresponding responsibility of the "press" to fulfill its indispensable role in the proper functioning of democratic society.

2. The battleground has changed

How these criteria are applied may be different in each historical period. The press during

the American colonial era when Thomas Jefferson wrote his treatises, with its emphasis on polemics, partisan advocacy and blurring of fantasy and fact, is a far cry from the objectivity and avowed political neutrality of 20th century U.S. reporting.

Among Latin American journalists, partisan side-taking and mixing of opinion and fact in reporting has always differed in important ways from the practice of their counterparts to the north. It is important to state at the outset that it is not "objectivity" or "nonpartisanship" that qualifies a news media organization as fully supporting democracy. If that were true, few news organizations in Latin America -or Europe for that matter- would be seen as fulfilling their democratic role, an obvious absurdity.

The democratic values criterion be even be applied in examining the positive and negative effect of the press in times of dictatorship, of such recent memory Latin America. During those periods of authoritarian governments with more or less absolute controls on the press, the role of the news media can be measured by the extent to which they defended -or failed to defend- basic human rights, and pushed -or failed to push- for the re-establishment of democratic rule. The record was mixed in each country, along with the degree of direct repression, economic pressures and other restrictions news organizations faced, but the difference was always clear between news media serving the interests of the dictatorships and those doing their utmost to prepare the ground for a return to democratic values. The role of the press could -and should- be judged on its most fundamental value: defense of freedom of expression and other democratic values, even in their absence.

In times of democracy, the news media's role, seen from the point of view of democracy, is different and more complex. Freedom does not make journalism's task easier, just less dangerous. The main problem ceases to be repression. Corruption is more likely to be the all consuming societal problem in newly democratic governments. Information, restricted under dictatorship, becomes a flood; newly empowered citizens need not only reliable information but a forum of exchange with their leaders and with each other.

Journalism in freedom becomes more challenging and journalists are called to develop a different and more sophisticated reporter's toolkit. Above all, the times of democracy demand

independent news organizations and watchdog journalism -credible investigative reporting to scrutinize the workings of government and private business. Citizens need complete, accurate, rigorously reported and analyzed information. And they demand to read and hear a diversity of voices on a much wider political, ethnic and social spectrum than had been allowed in the media in the past. In short, times of democracy such as the present demand greater emphasis on the social responsibility of the news media, even as rights of free expression are increasingly secured.

Yet, the bitter past struggles to win these rights may have had the effect of muddling the goal of achieving the higher quality journalism demanded by democracy. Focus continues to be on resistance to regulation, censorship and government interference during a time in which those battles have by and large resulted in victory. News organizations resist, or simply fail to contemplate in any systemic way, the particular social responsibilities of the media. This one-dimensional focus on "freedom of expression" created an atmosphere of absolutism of another sort, in which media sought to expand their rights to write, say and show whatever they wanted, or whatever increased profits and audience. This attitude was carried over from the defensiveness *vis-à-vis* government in the past and was reinforced by legitimate resistance to all forms of media regulation except self-regulation. Moreover, in some countries attacks on journalists, even murders, most often carried out by non-governmental actors, underlined the need for continuing vigilance for the rights and protections of a free press.

What has been missing until recently has been frank and detailed conversation on the connection between media and democracy and the implications of that relationship for inevitable changes that are overtaking media all over the world and in particular in Latin American.

3. Cases to test media performance in democracy's crises

This conversation should take place in the context of real-life situations, situations of democracy under stress in Latin America.

The question should be posed in each case: How did the news media perform in these situa-

tions? Specifically did their action, including not only coverage but also activities outside the newsroom, tend to strengthen or weaken democracy and promote or diminish the society's ability to resolve crises with democratic, peaceful methods?

There are plenty of crises situations in recent Latin American history to provide cases for such examination. Still, there has been very little systematic study of the effectiveness of journalism in practice in Latin America.² The examples here are anecdotal and preliminary.

3.1. Venezuela: A Poster Child of Media Failure

The presidency of Hugo Chavez has presented a multiplicity of test cases for the role of the media amidst situations of democratic stress. The examples cut both ways as both the government and major media institutions have been accused of actions severely damaging the country's democracy. The most notable case involves media organizations actions surrounding the unsuccessful coup against Chavez in 2002. The media role continues to be hotly disputed in two areas of activity: opposition media coverage before the coup has been seen to advocate a military overthrow of Chavez, and once the tide turned in favor of Chavez, both newspapers and television abandoned almost any attempt to inform the public what was going on, an abdication of the most universally recognized task of journalism.

The 2002 coup provided a unique and extreme example of the involvement of the press as protagonist in a crisis of democracy. The role of the opposition press has been widely criticized for its open advocacy of the military coup attempt, which ultimately failed. In an interview with the author, the president of one of the leading television news organization acknowledged the error and expressed regret that his reporters failed to scrutinize their opposition political allies with a critical eye, leading to a situation in which the media organizations to easily went along with an ill conceived and antidemocratic effort to remove President Hugo Chavez by force. News organizations, particularly television but also newspapers, lost credibility *vis-à-vis* the general public, contributed to the exacerbation of polarization that affects Venezuelan society years later, and ironically appeared to have the effect of weakening the very opposition political organizations they sought to promo-

te. Political organizations were weakened by being subordinated to the media, which became a more important protagonist in the eyes of the public than the political parties. The uncritical attitude or reporters and editors toward their political allies, in the explanation of the media leader, resulted in the media organizations failing to expose the flawed strategy of the opposition (for example, the initial pursuit of non democratic solutions and the later self-defeating strategy of abstentionism).

As Venezuelan media observer Andrés Cañizález described it, "Here you had the convergence in the media of two things: grave journalistic errors -to the extreme of silencing information on the most important news events- and taking political positions to the extreme of advocating a non-democratic, insurrectional path. They [the news media] lost the guiding star of democratic discourse" (Cañizález quoted Dinges, 2005).³

The events of 2002 weakened not only Venezuela's political opposition but opened a flank of attack against the press soon exploited by Chavez. First he passed a set of laws restricting television coverage and strengthening criminal libel laws. Then, last year Chavez refused to renew the operating license of RCTV, one of the most popular over-air television channels and one of the media organizations most closely identified with the abortive coup of 2002 and subsequent opposition to Chavez. Attacks on Globovision news channel, reduced to cable distribution, have continued.

Venezuela is clearly a *sui generis* case. While dramatic, the confrontation between government and the news media in Venezuela is not necessarily symptomatic of the media problems in the rest of Latin America.

3.2. Colombia: The DAS and union leader assassinations

In a country where investigative journalism skills are as well developed as anywhere in Latin America, the news media's fairness was tested by its publication of allegations that President Alvaro Uribe's executive branch intelligence service (DAS) had been infiltrated by rightwing paramilitary groups and had carried out assassinations of labor union leaders and academics. Uribe responded by attacking the news media for being dishonest and malicious and the stories were harming democratic institutions.

3.3. México: Good news and bad news

Mexico provides a host of case studies on both sides of the debate about media effectiveness in democracy. Unquestionably the press played a critical but not universally positive role during the countries transition by free election to democracy and the end of the PRI's 70 year hold on power. In recent decades, the Mexican press, few but important exceptions, was subject to heavy government influence through systems of effective informal control. Journalists were routinely paid by government sources, the government unabashedly rationed its monopoly on newsprint to keep publishers on a short leash, and in several cases the government intervened directly to remove dissenting top editors (the most notorious of which was the raid on the offices of Excelsior in 1976 to depose editor Julio Scherrer). In the soft authoritarianism of the PRI regime, the press was more coopted than repressed. Independent television was virtually nonexistent.

Nevertheless, there were important examples of strong journalistic leadership persisted in the adverse environment to create space for independent journalism, most notably the owner of the Monterrey newspaper El Norte, Alejandro Junco de la Vega. Junco modernized his family's newspaper when he took the reins in 1971, pushing systematically for improved journalistic quality (using the US journalism values he picked up at the University of Texas) and most critically building a foundation of profitability that allowed the paper to resist government pressure when it inevitably came in the form of an attempted boycott of newsprint. One of his revolutionary tools for reform was to pay his journalists higher salaries, thus freeing them from the need and temptation to accept payoffs from government sources.

Junco established the newspaper Reforma in Mexico City in 1993, overcoming government control of the newsstand distribution system exercised through a compliant union. The two newspapers and their financial success and growing credibility and reputation for quality (not just opposition viewpoints) were indispensable factors in the country's breaking of the PRI monopoly and the peaceful transition to a pluralistic political system. The first non-PRI president, elected 2000, was not incidentally from Monterrey.

More recently, the press in Mexico faces the challenge of out of control drug wars in which

many journalists have died and coverage has been drastically cut back or emasculated. There is open discussion in U.S. intelligence circles of the possibility that Mexico, with Pakistan, might become a "failed state". All of these situations provide rich material for an examination of the help or harm by news media during these moments of great societal flux. In particular, Junco's newspaper El Norte has introduced systems of citizen participation in the editorial process that is unique in Latin America and appear to be outstanding examples of innovations in the direction of democratic effectiveness. The El Norte newsroom would be a terrific topic for systematic academic research.

3.4 Guatemala: Faltering government, healthy press

Few countries face such serious problems of basic governance as Guatemala, where it was revealed last year government anti-narcotics police were involved in the kidnapping and murder of Salvadoran officials, followed by the murder of the suspects while in a government prison. The relatively healthy and credible media, particularly the major newspapers, are called upon to take an inordinately important role in leading Guatemala through this long-running crisis of governance. In Guatemala, it can be argued, the press is healthier than the country's democracy.

The national newspapers generally had the reputation of passivity *vis-à-vis* the governments of the moment, whether they were violent as in the 1980s or less violent and more corrupt in more recent years. Critical coverage, much less investigative journalism, was practically unheard of. This changed with the launch of a new newspaper, Siglo 21, in 1990, in the same year Guatemala's 30-year long civil war finally ended in a peace agreement. The new paper set a new standard for journalistic quality. But 1996 it was the second largest paper in the country, behind Prensa Libre, in circulation and advertising revenue. Siglo 21 introduced investigative journalism for the first time in a country in which more than 100,000 people, mostly indigenous, had been slaughtered with impunity by the military establishment still in power. Despite death threats (which in Guatemala are never taken as bluffs), the paper prospered and in 1996 editor Jose Ruben Zamora created another newspaper, El Periódico, on the same model of quality.

Partly in reaction to the competition from the feisty new papers, the dean of the Guatemalan press, Prensa Libre, also began to modernize both in presentation, circulation methods and journalism quality. Interlocked by family relationships, the Siglo 21, El Periodico and Prensa Libre papers have solidified their independence, expanded newspaper readership to previously unserved indigenous populations (especially with the creation of El Nuevo Diario by the owners of Prensa Libre) and acted as credible advocates for democracy, even as the weakened governments teeter.

3.5. Perú: Pulling Punches in support of democracy?

The news media have been major actors on both sides of the spectrum of support of democracy in Peru, during the chaotic Fujimori government and its aftermath. On the one hand, there were the shocking video taped revelations that some media owners were receiving government bribes.

On the other hand, a media leader has pioneered an unusually explicit campaign to channel news media support for democratic principles. Alejandro Miró Quesada, the editor of the leading newspaper, El Comercio, and a former president of the Inter-American Press Association, has described the interplay between news media and the ups and downs of Peruvian democracy in several ground-breaking speeches. He points out that despite the support of 80 percent of the population and "large part of the media" for the Fujimori's "self-coup" in 1992, the result was autocracy and deterioration of democracy that the country is only now recovering from. The experience changed the way he conducted the editorial policy of his newspaper in subsequent years. He writes⁴:

"In the face of political convenience [a pale translation of his phrase "facilismo político"], the defense of democratic institutions is not always easy or popular for the communications media.

"For example, in El Comercio... , we have taken up the difficult task of supporting democratic continuity so that President Toledo is able to complete his five-year term... [even though] he has only 10 percent popular support."

The decision was complicated by the coun-

ter examples of political instability in neighboring countries and open to misinterpretation in his own country:

"The citizens do not always understand that, when a communications medium acts to defend principles, its action does not imply that it is taking an editorial position in favor of the government. What it is doing, as in this case, is to defend editorially the governability of the country over and above partisan considerations; it does it to maintain the democratic and economic stability of the country, not to support the government of the moment."

Miró Quesada insists the paper's approach did not amount to pulling punches and that it merely refrained from the kind of irresponsible and poorly sources attacks that characterized other media. Still, to even enunciated the argument that in times of instability, the press is responsible for toning its coverage so as not to destabilize a weak democracy is unheard of, certainly in the United States journalistic circles. Here, the counter argument is to "let the chips fall where they may," to hit 'em hard, and declare it is not the media's if a government is destabilized. I would argue, with Alejandro Miró Quesada, that it IS the problem of the press.

3.6. Argentina

An obvious example for examination of the role of the media is its performance during the economic collapse of 2002 and the country's confrontation with international lenders. The discussion is parallel to what is happening now in the United States: did the financial press close its eyes to the coming economic meltdown.

3.7. Chile

Chile is often cited as an example of success on many fronts, not least in economic growth, but also in forging a successful democracy in the wake of the Pinochet dictatorship, which ended only in 1990. Yet the situation of the news media in Chile deserves scrutiny in terms of the interaction between media and democracy. In fact, a remarkable lack of media diversity was imposed by the dictatorship, which closed and confiscated newspapers and radios associated with the leftist government

Pinochet overthrew. The resulting media duopoly, in which two media companies were allowed to prosper during the authoritarian period, continues to dominate and limit the diversity of Chilean journalism.

Two attempts to launch daily newspapers have failed, the first, *La Época*, lasted almost five years, playing an important role in the democratic removal of the dictatorship, but collapsing economically in the new democracy. The second paper, *Diario Siete*, a thin political tabloid with outstanding investigative reporting but little else, lasted less than a year, folding when its pro-government financial backers declined to continue to cover the paper's losses.

The government of the left-of-center Concertación has done little to remedy the situation left by Pinochet. To the contrary, the government is currently fighting in an international arbitration procedure to prevent the re-launching of one of the newspapers that had been illegally confiscated by the dictatorship, the popular and raucous tabloid *Clarín*, which until the 1973 coup had a circulation equal or greater than *El Mercurio* (Dinges, 2007a; and Dinges, 2007b).

3.8. Costa Rica, Poster Child for Investigative reporting

Three former presidents have been indicted on corruption charges in Costa Rica, partly due to the Watergate-quality reporting to the investigative reporting staff of *La Nación*. The story is chronicled in the recent book *Los Watergate Latino* (González & Cárdenas, 2006).⁵

These examples are among the many anecdotes that can be analyzed to illuminate the ways actions of the news media help and hurt democracy.

What follows is an attempt to outline the factors that should be included in such a measurement. It is founded on the hypothesis that high quality journalism serves democracy better than poor quality journalism. And that of the various indicators of quality, those that are most fundamental to democracy can be summarize as follows.

4. Measuring Media Quality using democracy as a scale

Remarkably little has been written about the specific ways news media support or hinder democracy. I offer a schema of factors as a starting point to further elaboration and application to specific case studies. I have found the work of media scholars Michal Schudson and Jeffrey Scheuer very useful in my attempt to provide measurable criteria that can be used in Latin America (Schudson, 2008; Scheuer, 2008).

4.1. Information and access to information

The media provide information citizens need to participate in public life and to evaluate the effectiveness of their elected leaders. The quality of the information is foremost: is it accurate and complete? Is it presented fairly, without bias or spin? If presented by a politically aligned news organization, is the presentation of opposition views reasonably free of distortion and outright falsehood?

The idea that the news media have a role in serving an "informed citizenry" is too often oversimplified and has almost become a meaningless commonplace. I think our discussion of this vital issue has been somewhat misconstrued, especially among leaders in the news business -where it counts most- but also in academia, in the communications schools and media studies faculties.

The "informed citizenry" idea is not wrong of course, but it is often discussed as if the media's role were to educate individual citizens to participate in direct democracy, in town hall meetings of the mythical and no longer existing era of unmediated democracy. If Thomas Jefferson had that in mind, it isn't the way things have worked out.

Since this is somewhat heretical, I'll cite an authority, the communications sociologist Michael Schudson, who together with my mentor James Carey, can be our guides in this new thinking.

Here's Schudson:

My goal is to understand journalism's special place in democracies, especially how to think through its mission once we stop equating democracy with maximum feasible participation or direct popular rule. Scholar, journalists, and citizens alike should

learn to recognize the ways that institutions can help as well as hinder democratic government." (Schudson, 2008).

Journalism's role is to support the complex systems of leadership and institutions that make up representative democracy. Much of what journalists produce is intended not as information for everyone to take to the voting booth but to inform what Schudson calls "the inner circle of attentive citizens".

Thus "informing citizens" has a dual role. Giving people what they want and need to know to improve their lives and be good voters and citizens. This includes both the "voter guide" part and the "news you can use" part.

I also like Scheuer's formulation of the role of information in democracy: "As a mechanism for seeking or maintaining power, information is the chief alternative to force, and democracy is a way of organizing society around information rather than around force." One might add "economic power" to the mechanisms that often short circuit democracy and which can be countered by high quality information provided to citizen and citizen advocates.

A second critical function in the media's informational role is to promote access to information. Not only should journalists use existing freedom of information laws to seek documents produced in the conduct of public business, they should become active advocates for improvements in these laws in Latin America. This is a pioneering area in which significant advances have been made in recent years in the region.

5. The Watchdog Role

The second role is the *watchdog, explanatory and analytical* role of journalists. In a phrase: *investigative reporting*. In my view this function is not only the most important for democracy, it is the single most underperforming aspect of journalism in Latin America.

Investigative journalism keeps those in power honest because they know the smart journalists are watching. Ordinary people may not follow all the investigation and analysis, but they want to know someone is watching on their behalf, and that someone -that inner circle of activists

and political leaders- will do something about it when wrongdoing is discovered.

This includes intersecting with the institutions set up in a democracy to police itself, and to advocate on behalf of those institutions where they do not exist. These include FOIA and open government laws and practices, which are woefully weak in Latin America. They include systematic relationships and reporting on more established good-government agencies such as electoral commissions and the "Contraloría" (an agency in many countries akin the U.S. Government Accountability Office- GAO)

Journalism has a normative function that is often eschewed by the journalists on the rationale that it is advocacy. But I would submit that journalism's unique role in democracy removes this restriction. Latin American journalists especially should be less reticent in advocating on behalf of democracy. This is the focus on the constitutional systems of checks and balances that create limited government and rule of law.

It is a corrective to "populist" or authoritarian democracy: the idea that once elected, the government has all the power, subject only to the next election or plebiscite. Venezuela is the example. But Bush's "presidential absolutism" is similar. To paraphrase Richard Nixon's: If the president does it, it is legal."

In addition to the broad array of information about public events the news media bring to readers and listeners, the media should be judged on the extent to which they ferret out the secrets and the hidden part of public life, particularly when it involves abuse of power, corruption and flawed laws and regulations. No aspect of journalism is more fundamental to democracy than the promise that abuses will be exposed and those using public power for personal gain will be punished.

All kinds of investigative journalism do not serve democracy equally. Personal denunciation, use of anonymous sources in furtherance of political agendas, fear-mongering of the public with sensationalistic "investigations" of minor health risks in daily life often are portrayed as investigative reporting, but probably have little positive effect on the health of democracy and might even be seen as damaging by fostering cynicism and diminishing media credibility.

The guide post of investigative journalism is simply the rule of law. The material of investigative journalism is whether laws are being abused, and

whether laws on the books are flawed. Its main effect is the defeat of the expectation of impunity.

5.1. Forum for public debate

The media are often least effective in what is potentially the richest arena of democratic activity: creation of a forum for wide and diverse exchange of facts, views and policy alternatives. The media are most likely to provide the views of public officials to citizens and routinely reproduce the debate among political leaders. But they are less effective in creating feedback channels from people to leaders. Creation of forums for people to exchange view with one another has until recently been almost entirely absent, but is experiencing a resurgence in on-line media devices such as blogs and chat rooms.

Schudson is eloquent in describing the various aspects of Journalism's community building function. He adds the factor empathy to the journalist's list of responsibilities. Showing ordinary people regularly in the press and on television, especially when they are representative of non-elite groups (ethnic minorities, the poor, for example) removes the distance between these people and the elites. It is also the idea of putting people in the news as actors, not victims.

5.2. Mobilization

Finally, it may violate the canons of U.S. journalism and its theology of objectivity, but it is undeniable that the media historically and in most free countries of the world has an unabashed role in effecting social change. Democracy demands of journalists not that they be neutral or nonpartisan but that the news media as a whole present all relevant points of view. As individual organizations crusading media often bring to bear important social force to effect change.

The U.S. model of neutrality in my view has become exhausted and has devolved into disparagement of politics and cynicism. Far from empowering citizens in a democracy, its effect is to persuade people that they are without power in a corrupt system. That "nothing can be done."

This is a rich area of study for Latin America, where conditions of media diversity are found alongside an openness to advocate change.

6. Efforts to improve news media quality

If it is a given that the constitutional protections afforded journalists and news media are not absolute, and that they imply a positive responsibility on the part of news media to serve democracy, then the question must be raised as to which institutions have the authority, if any, to oblige the news media to live up to their responsibility.

This is not a new question, although this paper attempts to frame it in the fresh context of democracy rather than the traditional emphasis on the countervailing protections due citizens, government officials and economic interests whose interests might be (and often are) damaged by the actions of the news media. In a somewhat different and more positive context, news media and journalists themselves have embarked on serious programs and projects in recent years to upgrade the profession, improve journalist skills, and enhance credibility by stricter adherence to ethical guidelines.

These efforts have been of mixed utility in some cases and matters of dispute in others.

6.1. Government regulation

The idea that the state has authority to regulate the news media is strong in Latin America, certainly much stronger than in the United States. There are continuing initiatives to legislate standards for journalistic performance as a way to oblige "responsible" news coverage and to dampen often banal and prurient television programming. The Venezuela law of social responsibility is a recent example, but it is by no means the exception in Latin America. Chile, for example, has established a semi-independent broadcast monitoring entity with the power to criticize and levy mild sanctions for television programming it finds run counter to public interest.

Journalists and news media have opposed laws attempting to define media responsibility and impose remedies for media mistakes, outside the civil remedies provided by libel laws.

There has been a favorable trend in recent years in that many countries have derogated criminal libel laws ("*desacato*") which not only punish violations with possible jail time but also provide special protection to government officials and dig-

nitaries most likely -and deserving- of news media scrutiny.

Venezuela's recent legislation has put such attempts to tighten media controls in a bad light, but it should not be taken for granted that media organizations will always be successful in resisting new government regulations. In Paraguay, for example, both outgoing president Nicanor Duarte has called freedom of the press "an illusion," and both he and Fernando Lugo, the most popular candidate in elections to be held in April have said they favor new laws regulating the press.

News media resistance to government regulation may well be successful, at least in the great majority of countries. But without pro-active reform by journalists and other civic institutions the news media will risk seeing their credibility further eroded and being perceived by the wider society as becoming a factor in the deterioration of democracy.

6.2. Media initiatives

The alternative to government regulation is the idea that the media should set their own rules for quality and ethics, and that media consumers will punish poor performance by switching to other news providers. This theory places inordinate faith in the magic of the marketplace and is met with skepticism by many outsiders to the world of media. It also fails to address the fact that many prosperous media organizations that make no attempt to adhere to journalistic standards and proclaim openly that their combination of sensationalism, sex and violence pay off with high "ratings."

Nevertheless, considerable progress has been made in recent years in propagation of codes of standards for professional journalism, particularly codes of ethics codes intended to be enforced internally by each news organization.

Another mechanism of self-regulation in many countries is the Colegio de Periodismo -the Journalism Association- sometimes with legislative sanction. The *colegios* have tended to function as self-interest organizations protecting prerogatives and jobs of journalists and in some countries are dominated by people with journalism degrees who do not work in the news media. When *colegios* have attempted to restrict the practice of journalism to those certified by the organization or holding journalism degrees, they have meet with

resistance from those who consider such restrictions a violation of press freedom.

News organizations in many cases, although hardly as a general rule, have invested heavily in newsrooms with an evident improvement in quality. This has resulted in somewhat higher salaries for journalists and relatively stable staffing levels in news organizations. Profit margins for the media have continued to be stable. There have been major improvements in newspaper design and production efficiency. These investments are directly and indirectly associated with improvements in quality, although to what extent these improvements correlate with strengthened democracy remains to be investigated further.

There is a countervailing trend that gives cause for concern.

An obvious way to improve quality would be to ensure the retention and promotion of those journalists, especially experienced reporters, who cover the most important stories concerning governance. Yet the opposite seems to happen. Low salaries and other disincentives encourage the most experienced reporters to stop doing shoe leather journalism and instead to become editors or opinion columnists, who are rewarded with higher salaries and greater prestige than street reporters. They are often replaced on the street by less experienced young journalists working at the bottom of the pay scale.

Perhaps the most significant force in promoting improved media quality is the strengthening and multiplication of media organizations. Principal among them is the Inter-American Press Association, which as an organization of newspaper owners has redirected its efforts in recent years to protection of journalists, ethics and professional training, in addition to its traditional focus on freedom of expression. The 2006 Hemisphere Conference on Journalism Values in the 21st Century gave explicit treatment to topics such as the role of news media in free societies, independence from advertisers as well as from government, in addition to more traditional discussions of ethics, sources and questions of truth and accuracy.

Another important development is the creation of new organizations of journalists, such as the Forum of Argentine Journalists (FOPEA), whose activities in support of journalists have emphasized ethics and journalism quality, while attempting to integrate provincial and capital journalists around common interests.

6.3. National media councils

Two countries, Perú and Panamá, have created widely praised media councils, which enlist prestigious figures from inside and outside the media to set and enforce ethics and journalistic standards. The Peruvian Consejo de la Prensa has 23 members among media organizations and has had an active agenda of conferences on ethics as well as deliberating on actual cases of alleged violations.

Yet one of the founders, Alejandro Miró, of El Comercio, has concluded that the initiative has not reversed the falling prestige of the news media:

"We are in constant action. We have invited legislators and judges to seminars intended to create mutual understanding. ... We have established an Ethics Tribunal in order to delegate to an autonomous entity the arbitration of controversial situations. We have, we have, we have done so many things. But in spite of our efforts, overwhelmed by this whole negative situation I mentioned before, the [negative] environment has prevailed. Thus, adding up positives and negatives, the result has been a diminution of our credibility. We must, therefore, now take much more dynamic action to confront this evil" (Miró, 2005b).

6.4. Independent investigative centers

Investigative journalism is at the top of everyone's list of high quality journalism that supports a well functioning democracy. Investigations conducted by journalists in a variety of countries, most prominently Costa Rica, have led to Watergate-like revelations leading to criminal charges against top government officials. Yet there has been little evidence in recent years that media organizations have made the investments needed to produce the regular investigative work that will root out corruption in government and private enterprise. In many countries there seems to be less serious investigative reporting, not more.

Several new organizations have stepped into this breach with initiatives to carry out investigative journalism under the aegis of non-profit organizations.

A recent worldwide survey of such investigative centers identifies five in Latin America, in Brazil, Colombia, Chile, México and Perú. Among

the report's conclusions is that "Non profit investigative reporting centers have proved to be viable organizations that can provide unique training and reporting, while serving as models of excellence that help to professionalize the local journalism community" (Kaplan, December 7, 2007).⁶ The Mexican center was created in conjunction with the well known U.S. organization, Investigative Reporters and Editors.

In Chile, the author proposed and co-founded the Centro de Investigación e Información Periodística (CIPER) and the US nonprofit Center for Investigation and Information (CIINFO). CIPER is sponsored financially by the media company COPESA, owner of La Tercera newspaper, and by funds raised by CIINFO from the Open Society Foundation and the Ford Foundation. CIPER functions with a staff of seven journalists and is editorially independent of La Tercera. In addition to an agenda of public affairs investigations, the center seeks the declassification of public documents using freedom of information provisions in Chilean laws. It has won several awards for quality journalism in its first two years of operation. It publishes online at www.ciperchile.cl.

The impact of this new way of doing journalistic investigations is yet to be determined, but in the context of a wider global movement toward non-profit journalism fueled by the internet and computer assisted reporting techniques, the initiative bears watching by those seeking to promote high quality journalism in the service of democracy.

The Chilean political commentator, Patricio Navia, wrote that the center's investigations had become regular reading for public intellectuals and opinion leaders and that "CIPER has set a new standard of professionalism in Chilean journalism" (cit. Kaplan, December 7, 2007).

CIINFO is currently in the preliminary stages of organizing other investigative centers in Venezuela, and two other countries. The CIINFO model emphasizes that the majority of financing must come from private investors and/or media companies in the country in which the Center operates, and that they should not depend on international funding for their survival. So far the model is promising as far as sustainability and high quality journalism is concerned.

7. Measuring Media Quality

For all the talk, literally over centuries, about the indispensable need for free expression and free media for a democracy to function, remarkably little has been written to explore the questions of what kind of news media best serve democracy and how can such qualities in the media be recognized and perhaps even measured.⁷ Perhaps it is too simple a question. But it is hard to accept the simple answer that all free media serve democracy, ipso facto. Can it really be that simple, that it doesn't matter what kind of journalism is practiced in the media as long as the media are free from government interference and refrain from clearly destructive practices such as libel and incitement to violence? Obviously not. Common sense obliges us to seek to distinguish among journalistic products and practices that better serve democracy, and those that make it less healthy.

A paper by Rick Stapenhurst of the World Bank Institute contains an index that approaches the question in the most basic terms. It is a "Correlation Between Corruption and Press Freedom." Two sets of available data are put in relation to one another: the *Press Freedom World Wide* index and the *Index on Corruption from Transparency International*. Not surprisingly, a relatively high correlation is found, 0.69, between high levels of press freedom and low levels of corruption. Yet the data clearly point to countries where there is a free press and high corruption as well as examples of relatively low corruption in countries with little freedom of the press (Stapenhurst, 2000: 2).

A more precise answer would seem to lie in what kind of media are at work in each situation, a point that Stapenhurst makes. But he also notes that there is a dearth of studies about what kind of media best fight corruption. "While the role that a free press can play in investigating, reporting and thereby helping combat corruption is now well recognized, assessments and descriptions of the precise means by which news media can perform this function appear to be scarce" (Stapenhurst, 2000).⁸

What would a more elaborate scheme to measure the effectiveness of news media for democracy look like? There is no reason to believe we cannot measure the effectiveness of the news media in supporting democracy. It is simply that it appears not to have been done yet. This may be a side effect of the tendency of the news me-

dia to measure itself only in terms of freedom of expression, freedom from repression and the struggles of the past. There are plenty of organizations monitoring freedom of expression, continuing repression and jailing of journalists in some countries (notably Cuba in Latin America), which underlines that these organizations have a critical role for the foreseeable future. There are also a plethora of media monitoring and media criticism organizations. But these organizations, at best, monitor failings in journalistic values such as fairness, accuracy and balance as well as ethical lapses. At worst, media monitors serve agendas that are central to neither journalism nor democracy—such as narrow check lists of political correctness for political or social causes.

It would seem to be in the interest of the media organizations as well as journalists to create and apply a new way to measure the effectiveness of the news media, one that monitors the news media in terms of their role in supporting or harming a well functioning democracy. In these times of relatively low threat levels to freedom of expression, we should not only monitor the threats that persist, but endeavor to describe and assess the precise ways the free media carry out their constitutionally protected role in supporting democracy.

The most important criteria are described in detail above, to wit, to measure journalism's information, investigative, mobilization and forum functions.

There are other measures of news media quality that should be included. These have a clear connection to the effectiveness of democracy and can be measured. Among them are the presence and extent of:

- Media independence from government, political and economic interests;
- Diversity of news media organizations. Is there several fully staffed news organization or only one or two? Are significant pockets of opinion or ethnic groups left without regular access to the media?
- Professionalization and career security for journalists. Are salaries high enough to reduce the temptation of journalists to moonlight or seek money through activities that directly or indirectly create conflicts of interest? Is there a career ladder that allows journalists to advan-

- ce through a lifetime of satisfying work.
- Fairness. Regardless of the presence or absence of partisanship in news media, is there an ambience of fairness in coverage of all sides in a given issue?
 - Self-censorship. This seems to be particularly rampant in many countries of Latin America and persists even in the most democratic countries. A survey in Colombia found that between 31 percent and 48 percent of the 200 journalists questioned said they sacrificed professional principles or changed stories out of fear of losing their job (Observatorio de Medios, 2007).
 - Banality (*farándula*, celebrity news). It is unclear to what extent tabloids, so-called "*prensa chicha*", soft pornography and similar phenomena in the media have any effect on democracy, positive or negative. It seems they would represent a negative factor only if they function as an obstacle to other quality factors.
 - Subjective factors such as credibility and trust conveyed by citizens toward the media, and the lack of such trust. Likewise, the prevalence of cynicism v. a sense of democratic mission on the part of journalists.

No measure of media effectiveness can ignore financial and business factors. The question to be probed is not whether media organizations should make a profit. If they don't, they cease to exist. But rather to what extent business considerations such as circulation, advertising revenue, ratings and cost cutting impinge on the quality of the journalism practiced in such a way that democracy is no longer served or served less well. Similarly, do business factors (such as the presence of a few powerful advertisers) compromise the economic independence of the news organization? Are adequate safeguards in place to prevent outside influence on journalists from advertisers? Are advertisers able with impunity to put pressure on news organizations, and punish them economically for running unfavorable stories?

It might also be asked whether there is a point above which too much pursuit of profit is bad for democracy, at least when it comes to the operations of news organizations. (Additional relevant

external factors such as concentration of media ownership and leverage on the media through government advertising will be treated in other papers.)

All of these questions, while sometimes uncomfortable, have factual answers that can be compiled and correlated in a multi-factor index of media and democracy. This framework of analysis can be carried out by the media themselves, inside each corporation. But it should also be carried out by entities independent of media, government and political agendas.

It is important that the dialogue regarding the effectiveness of media for democracy not be conducted in isolation from broad participation of citizens, who are after all the most important stakeholders. In addition to citizens and journalists, there should also be a place at the table and a voice for the politicians and government functionaries whose actions are most commonly reported in the media. Governments deserve a voice, not regulatory control, in any authentic effort to take seriously the responsibility of the news media toward the functioning of democracy.

Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Meeting on The Press and Public Policy in Latin America sponsored by the Inter American Dialogue in January 2008.
- 2 An exception is Rosental Calmon Alves (Alves, 2005).
- 3 My own analysis of the Venezuela press in the aftermath of the crisis can be found in Dinges, 2005.
- 4 See Miró, 2005a and Miró, 2005b. These speeches should serve as basic texts in the proposed endeavor to develop ways to measure the effectiveness of news media in supporting democracy.
- 5 The authors chronicle a dozen cases in which investigative reporting has led to exposure of corruption in high places and has resulted in punishment or disgrace, including the jailing of two Costa Rican former presidents, Rafael Ángel Calderón y Miguel Ángel Rodríguez.
- 6 In Latin America, the report lists four organizations: Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism, Sao Paulo; Center for Journalism and Public Ethics (Centro de Periodismo y Ética Pública), Mexico, D.F.; Chilean Center for Investigative Journalism and Information (Centro de Investigación e Información Periodística de Chile (CIPER), Santiago, Chile; Consejo de Redacción, Bogotá, Colombia;

- and Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS), Lima, Perú.
- 7 If this assertion is incorrect, the author would greatly appreciate getting information and citations of works that address these questions.
- 8 Staphenurst, note 7: "No mention is made of journalism or the news media (...) among the 150 entries" of the World Bank's annotated bibliography on corruption. Another corruption bibliography, by Michael Johnston of Colgate, is similarly bereft of references to journalism.

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