

R.C. COLE (ed.): *Communication in Latin America: Journalism, Mass Media, and Society*. Wilmington, Delaware, Scholarly Resources, Jaguar Books on Latin America, 1996.

The reorganization of media systems has been a critical challenge for societies undergoing processes of democratization, such as in Latin America and Eastern Europe.¹ A major issue in the study of this challenge—the change of communication philosophies, structures, and practices—constitutes the backbone of this volume.

Great expectations are raised by the ambitious title – journalism, mass media, and society— and by the book's structure – chapters on issues in Latin American media, followed by selected case-studies. They are satisfied, in part, by the academic and intellectual stature of most of the contributors; by a fairly successful attempt to integrate Latin American heterogeneity into one framework; by the provision of important historical insights (Salwen on pre-Castro corrupt Cuban media) and some new data (Lavieri on Argentinian press freedom), as well as by Nichols's innovative views on the use of the media for propaganda and original materials on media history, structure, and function, particularly in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina.

Useful information is offered on Latin American institutional restructuring, on the influence of political, technological, and economic factors on media control and freedom, and on professional and training efforts. Factual data range from Unesco-style tables –on population, literacy, income, broadcasting stations and receivers, and newspaper circulation— to more substantive findings on violence against journalists, information sources in presidential elections, and patterns of media use and penetration.

Press freedom and professionalism are central themes. They emphasize a shift from open repression to more liberal control and depict current dilemmas that reflect the price of a process where subtler methods replace payoffs, "embutes," "mordidas," harassment, and physical harm. Thus, in Mexico, "the political cost of being corrupt is higher than it used to be..." (p. 136). The Argentinian press is relatively free, although attacks on journalists and "inherited attitudes have made it difficult for the media to achieve their proper role..." (p. 183). Also, the findings of a 1994 Argentinian poll, that people trust journalists more than politicians (p. 197), imply that media credibility has increased since the days when they failed to meet even minimal standards (p. 151). But Latin American journalism is still confronting its heritage of professional risks: 18 journalists were slain in 1994, and 144 in the previous six years (p. 247); of manipulative control, through taxation, licensing, and legislation; of self-censorship on the part of private owners who

seek government advertising and subsidies; and of traditional hesitation to criticize government actions.

The book is an important addition to the literature on Latin America. It could benefit from constructive criticism of two major weaknesses. The first is a conservative ideological position, apparent in the overall satisfaction with the fact that Latin American media "are evolving toward standards of the Western mass communication model... private enterprise... and advertising... the financial underpinning of the media... for communicating the latest products, styles, and trends" (p. xvi); and expressed in the hopes that Latin American journalism come closer to the US model, that the new electronic media foster "freer" communication, and that the March 1994 Declaration of Chapultepec, advocating freedom from governmental control, bear a bright promise (p. 249). Anchored in the "dominant paradigm",² which adopts Western, US-made standards as models for a global definition of needs, processes and institutions, this position is not devoid of some misleading reductionism and ethnocentrism. The book's agenda is thus limited mostly to questions of freedom from government pressure, ignoring other central issues, such as mass media political economy,³ and professional ethics. Although corporate hegemony is recognized in some chapters (e.g. Mexico and Brazil), most contributors overlook the impact of Latin American market pressures, concentration of power, and cross-ownership on the disempowerment of journalists, and on the quality of media democratization.

Dilemmas of journalism ethics, that together with problems of press freedom have accompanied social and political change in Latin America, are also ignored. Less concern with the North would have permitted to approach this topic, perhaps expanding Buckman's (too) brief comment on the simultaneous democratization of Latin America and Eastern Europe (p. 4). The chaotic media ethics anomie found in Eastern Europe⁴ could have been paralleled with Latin America, allowing for the exploration of historical consistency and coincidence.

The second weakness is epistemological. The focus on press freedom from government is indeed important, but it does not match the wider scope promised in the book's title. Montgomery's excellent profiles of women journalists do not really deliver the larger discussion implicit in the title of her chapter: "The Role of Women in Latin American Mass Media;" and Buckman's meticulous overview leaves out crucial aspects of his "The Current State of the Mass Media in Latin America." Likewise, neither the chapter's nor the editor's conclusions, subtitled "Towards the New Millenium," acknowledge some major trends in Latin American media and journalism. One would benefit from some reference to the shift from the old debate – between the Western myth of "free flow of communication" and the leftist

outcry against "cultural imperialism"⁵ – to the current interest in the expected impact on Latin America of media globalization, localization and "glocalization";⁶ and from some attention to crucial questions, such as whether the fall of the Eastern Block has indeed left an ideological void in Latin American media research and practice, and whether democratization is expected to reduce Latin American media dependency.⁷

Some final observations might contribute to future editions. An index would help orient the reader. More references to Latin American media research⁸ would be useful, at least for comparison, and a stronger Latin American presence among the contributors would be welcome. Out of fourteen chapters, only two, among the best in the book, were written entirely or in part by Latin Americans: Argentinian Omar Lavieri's and Chilean Ricardo Trotti's.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, C. Jakubowicz's account of the process in Poland, in P. Dahlgreen and C. Sparks (eds.), *Communication and Citizenship*, London, Routledge, 1991.
2. A. Portes's "On the Sociology of National Development," *American Sociological Review*, 82, 1, July 1976; and E. Rogers's "Communication and Development: The Passing of the Dominant Paradigm," *Communication Research*, April 1976, are excellent analyses of the paradigm.
3. See C. Hamelink, *Trends in World Communication*, Penang, Malaysia, Southbound, 1994; J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, *Mass Media and Society*, London, Edward Arnold, 1991; Dahlgreen and Sparks, *op. cit.*
4. Analyzed, for example, by M. Coman, "Le Cas Roumain," in R. Tessier (ed.), *La Transition en Roumanie: Communications et Qualité de la Vie*, Montreal, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1995.
5. Raised by scholars, such as H. Schiller in the US; J. Halloran, A. Mattelart, K. Nordenstreng and C. Hamelink in Europe; and L.R. Beltrán, F. Reyes Matta, R. Roncagliolo, G. Fregoso, and others in Latin America; reported in S. McBride's *Many Voices, One World*, Paris, Unesco, 1980, and T. McPhail's *Electronic Colonialism*, Newbury Park, Sage, 1981.
6. See R. Robertson, "Globalisation or Glocalisation?," *Journal of International Communication*, 1, 1, 1994; P. Bruckner, "The Edge of Babel," *Partisan Review*, LXIII, 2, 1996.
7. Virtue and Heise state in the book that "the death of the New World Information and Communication Order... promoted by the USSR and Cuba" (p.201) disoriented Latin American scholars. For more accurate information on the NWICO, see T. McPhail, *op. cit.*
8. Pioneering works by P. Freire, E. Varon, A. Pasquali, L.R. Beltrán, M. Kaplun, and more recent research by J.M. de Melo, J.M. Barbero, J.D. Bordenave, S. Mattos, S. Caparelli, R. Festa, C. Gómez-Mont, V. Fuenzalida, J. Sánchez, and others, could make up part of the references; for full lists, see J.M. de Melo and S. Reimao (eds.), *Comunicação e Sociedade: O Pensamento Latino-Americano em Comunicação*, São Paulo, IMS, 1996; and T. Tufte, "Latin American Media Studies," in *Living with the Rubbish Queen*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 1994.