Media Wars in Latin America: Feuds, Seizures & Reforms

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Latin American Media

- Latin American media corporations boomed in the 1990s & dissociated from the state.
- Participant countries of ‘Bolivarian Revolution’ – advocate for 21st century socialism.
- Media dislike the left-leaning governments in Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador & Venezuela.
- All these countries except Argentina & Colombia have a deep social division & income disparities.
- Battle of media control began when Venezuela introduced the debate over the relationship between media ownership & political power.
- Political leaders believe the media is becoming as powerful as the political parties.
Origins of the feuds & the Bolivarian Strategy

• President Hugo Chávez, leader of the Bolivarian Revolution: the campaigner of media changes.

• Bolivarian States have a mutual plan to control the media (Santa María, 2010)

• Venezuela has shutdown non-state media & internet while taking control of judiciary & criminalising most forms of political opposition and dissenting opinion.

• Other leaders followed: President Evo Morales – Bolivia, President Daniel Ortega – Nicaragua & President Rafael Correa – Ecuador.

• Media was driving force in ending military dictatorships in Bolivia & Ecuador: exposed corruption of traditional political parties.

• By exposing corruption, media covered alternative choices to social movements that allowed populists leaders to win the elections.
Hugo Chávez’s administration (1999-present) is accused of using the courts to shut down the media.

After the election, media owners & editors used the media as a movement against Chávez.

2009 - Government reviewed broadcast licences for media & declared many operating without a licence or did not pay the appropriate regulatory fees

June 2010 – President of Globovisión - the last open critical TV Station escaped Venezuela after court ordered his arrest.

August 2010 – Government reversed its attempt to ban newspapers & TV stations reporting country’s increasing crime rate.

December 2010 - Venezuela moved to restrict information from the internet.

The Venezuelan National Assembly passed law without debate.

Illegal to ‘incite or promote hatred, ferment citizens anxiety or public order’.
Threats from Governments & Criminals: Mexico

- **Biggest threat**: Organised crime - Media conscious & aims to induce censorship.

- **Feb 2010** – 2 gangs: the Gulf ‘cartel’ and Zetas imposed a joint “news blackout” to control Reynosa on the Texan border.

- 3 out of 8 reporters confirmed dead because media refused to cover battle.

- Mayor’s office issued updates on Twitter.

- **July 2010** - reporters from *Televisa* – Mexico’s biggest TV network were kidnapped then freed after another channel broadcasted a video accusing the government of aiding a rival gang.
Threats from Governments & Criminals: Ecuador

- President Correa’s (2007-present) grip on the media: control 20 media companies, including 2 TV stations seized from fugitive bankers.
- New constitutional measures banning banks from owning media.
- **August 2010** – all TV and radio stations required to broadcast only government-supplied information.
- **March 21, 2011**: President Correa filed a libel lawsuit against the newspaper *El Universo* & its executives.
- Correa disliked an opinion piece that accused him of ordering an attack on a hospital during a September police revolt.
- Claiming $80 million in damages — $30 million from the newspaper & $50 million to be paid personally by executives Carlos, Cesar & Nicolas Perez & opinion editor Emilio Palacio.
- Wants these four men to spend three years in prison.
Threats from Governments and Criminals: Bolivia & Nicaragua

- Bolivia’s government passed a law allowing it to close media that publish racist content.

- Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega had a critical journalist charged with money laundering and freed 2 prisoners who had killed journalists.
Grupo Clarín – Latin America’s most profitable media corporation: TV, radio, newspapers, cable services, internet services & broadcast of football in Argentina.

Before the Kirchners’ administrations, Grupo Clarín had a strong influence over Argentine politics.

Group received criticisms from other media companies & politicians.

In 2008, feud began with Fernández de Kirchner and Argentina’s 2 largest Argentinean newspapers: La Nación & Clarín.
First conflicts (1)

- Feud ignited when the newspapers sided with the agricultural sector in its battle against increase in export duties ahead of mid-term elections.

- *Clarín* supported the sector by publishing articles favourable to them (Petras & Velmeyer, 2009).

- Argentina’s president publically held *Clarín* culpable for her party’s defeat = Vendetta.

- In 2009 – President endeavoured to introduce new law through congress to decentralise the media.

- Days before new law went to congress (Dec. 10, 2009), government tax inspectors raided The Clarín Group offices.

- New law attempted to divide airwaves into thirds: equally shared by the government, the private sector and non-profit organisations.
First conflicts (2)

- 70% of radio, 60% broadcast TV to be produced in Argentina & decrease number of radio, cable & TV licenses one company could hold.

- Debate as to whether new law was aimed to reprimand the Clarín Group or to have more direct control of the media.

- Bill was defeated in Congress after 4 months of street protests & blockades.

- First time a president has lost a congressional vote since 2003 & blamed defeat on the former government supporter: the Clarín.

- Previous media laws were enacted during country’s military dictatorship in 1980.

- Only private companies could hold broadcast licences and grew without regulation.
Further dilemmas for Clarín

Nationalisation of football broadcasting

- Television broadcasting rights for all Argentine football matches held by Clarín Group cable channel TyC Sports since 1992.
- August 2009 – pay-per-view cable contract terminated by the Argentine football association & given to state channel Canal Siete [Channel 7].

Cablevisión

- **August 2010** – Federal Judge supported Government appeal of Grupo Clarín’s TV cable network providers Cablevisión & DirecTV increase of rates.

Noble siblings case

- Marcela & Felipe, adoptive children of owner Ernestina Herrera de Noble
- Suspicions they were stolen as babies during the military dictatorship.
- Accuse the President of making political use of their case, using them as pawns in her quarrel with their mother’s company, which the government denies.
Case of: *Papel Prensa*

- Only Argentine producer of cellulose – raw material for newspapers.
- Company is owned by Argentine government, *Clarín & La Nación* which was bought during military dictatorship in the 1970s.
- President Fernández de Kirchner claimed that the newspapers are benefitting from crimes against humanity committed under military rule.
- Gravier brothers “were tortured & forced” to sell at a bargain price.
- “Government is interested when it comes to controlling newsprint” – *Buenos Aires Herald*.
- Isidoro Gravier – family member who negotiated sale said ‘it was done without threats and in total freedom.’
Rules of the game

- Form **groups**.
- **3 Question slides** will be indicated with: **Q**
- **3 Answers slides** will be indicated with: **A**
- **Time limits** apply for each question.
- The **group** with the **most correct answers** **WINS**! **Good luck!**
Q1. Criticisms of the Argentine government by Mary O’Grady from The Wall Street Journal included “Kirchnerism…

A) flooding will produce environmental change…;

B) is cracking down on the free press…;

C) is still full of serious concerns…

D) concerns itself about freedom of press & its attempts are taken out of proportion…
B) “Kirchnerism... is cracking down on the free press...;
A) Less than 30 % of Latin American political leaders believed that the media were the real powers in the region, far more than the government, congress, courts & American Embassy.

B) Around 65 % of Latin American political leaders believed that the media were the real powers in the region, far more than the government, congress, courts & American Embassy.

C) More than 88 % of Latin American political leaders believed that the media were the real powers in the region, far more than the government, congress, courts & American Embassy.
A2: Correct Answer

B) Around 65% of Latin American political leaders believed that the media were the real powers in the region, far more than the government, congress, courts & American Embassy.
Q3: True or False?
Did President Hugo Chávez deny licenses to two small TV channels and 38 radio stations — four of them the same week in March that Argentina’s University of La Plata honoured him for *journalistic excellence*.

a) True  

b) False
A3: Correct Answer

a) True
Conclusion

- Latin America’s governments have shifted from direct censorship tactics of controlling the press — beating or jailing journalists.

- Instead using indirect tactics. i.e. denunciations, lawsuits and broadcast-license rejections can accomplish the same objectives without drawing blood.

- During the 1990s, Argentinean Press was considered one of the freest in Latin America.

- Fernández de Kirchner’s administration taking advantage to exert greater control over media coverage of government performance to influence public opinion

- Despite a decade defined by the rise of populist leaders who have promised to help the downtrodden, they do not like critical coverage & have sought to censor media output.
I hope that you have enjoyed this presentation.