Colombia’s Transition into the Digital Age

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Introduction

Colombia is a country marked by internal conflict and corruption yet is still one of Latin America’s leading economies and democracies. Digitization, the switch from analog to digital television and the move from traditional media platforms, like print and radio, to more modern mediums, like television and Internet, is transforming Colombia and transitioning the country into the digital age. This technological shift deeply influences Colombia’s political economy of communication by forcing political, economic, and social change.

From media ownership and government regulation to consumer habits and norms, the country’s communication sector is rapidly adapting to the modern era for better or for worse. “In political terms, the communication system may serve to enhance democracy, or to deny it, or some combination of the two” (McChesney & Schiller, 2003, p.1). In Colombia, this enhancement of democracy can be seen in the transition from consumer to prosumer and with the increase in political revolutions that were facilitated through social media. The denial of democracy can be observed in the recent concentration of media ownership and in the corrupt practices of the former CNTV, a regulatory agency that abused its responsibility as a gatekeeper of the digital realm. Overall, digitization presents opportunities and risks for Colombian society, government, business, and media. The current state of the country’s political economy of communication must be analyzed through the lens of digitization to fully understand Colombia’s current situation and its potential future outcomes.
The Political Economy of Communication in Colombia

In *Comparing Media Systems*, Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004) explore the relationship between media and political systems while analyzing the principal patterns that have shaped certain regions’ media systems. They identify three major models in regard to media system development: the Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist, and Liberal models. The Polarized Pluralist model is characterized by strong state media intervention, low newspaper circulation, elite-oriented press, and strong state involvement in the economy. The Democratic Corporatist model is distinguished by strong state intervention but with press freedom protection, high newspaper circulation, early development of mass-circulation press, and significant government involvement in the economy. Lastly, the Liberal model is characterized by a market-dominated media sector, medium newspaper circulation, early development of mass-circulation press, and weaker state involvement in the economy (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Colombia is somewhat of a hybrid between the Polarized Pluralist model and the Liberal model based on its blend of characteristics.

Colombia has a strong private media sector with companies like Caracol and RCN dominating the media market. In addition, private newspapers, private radio stations, and private television channels are far more popular than their public counterparts. The Latin American country also has low newspaper circulation with approximately 33 percent of the population regularly reading newspapers (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). Nevertheless, the Colombian press is elite-oriented, because journalists are forced to self-censor due to the consistent threat of harassment or assassination if they report against powerful individuals or interest groups (Infoasaid, 2012). Despite this large degree of press control, the Colombian government plays a limited role in the economy, which grew 5.9 percent in 2011 (Infoasaid, 2012). Capitalist
endeavors are prospering in Colombia. The Latin American country is the third largest coffee exporter and the fourth largest coal exporter in the world (Infoasaid, 2012).

**Digitization**

Digitization is another important factor that must be taken into account when studying Colombia’s political economy of communication. Colombia is currently in the middle of the switchover from analog to digital television. Full analog shutdown is scheduled to occur on December 31, 2019. Television is also by far the most popular home appliance in Colombia with 94.3 percent of all Colombian households owning a television set (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). Since it is the most popular appliance, it is also the most popular medium for media consumption. Television is where most Colombians receive their news; however, the Internet is rapidly growing in popularity as well. Internet penetration reached 35.9 percent in 2010, surpassing the printed press in popularity. Social media sites like Facebook are receiving millions of unique Colombian visitors each month and are becoming an integral part of modern Colombian culture. Social media is being used not only for social interactions but for political elections, protests, and civil mobilizations in the form of digital activism (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). This new wave of digitization has spurred changes in media ownership, political regulation, journalism practices, and media consumption.

**Media Ownership and Political Regulation**

According to Robert W. McChesney (2013, p.73), “media content industries tend to be oligopolistic, with only a few firms dominating production in each sector.” This is especially true in Colombia’s television sector. Two private channels, RCN and Caracol, dominate the television audience share (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). According to the Estudio General de Medios (EGM) annual survey, 96.6 percent of television viewers watch RCN and Caracol on a
regular basis. For years, the government has tried to break up this duopoly by issuing a license to a third national commercial television channel, yet no new license had been distributed as of December 2012 (Infoasaid, 2012).

Policy is another important area that has been affected by the digitization process. In Colombia, three regulatory bodies are in charge of the digital spectrum: the ANTV, the CRC, and the MinTic. The ANTV, the National Authority for Television (formerly the CNTV), is in charge of television regulation and is currently addressing the television duopoly issue. The CRC, the Regulation Commission of Telecommunications, regulates market issues for fixed and mobile telephones and the Internet, and the MinTic, the Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications, regulates radio and related technical issues (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012).

Policies are typically made by elites and self-interested commercial interests unless there is popular-public intervention (McChesney, 2013). Before the ANTV, there was the CNTV, which received a lot of flak for being a highly-politicized organ. It became known for its political ties, corruption, and blatant favoritism and was soon restructured and renamed the ANTV. The ANTV is a smaller agency with less power and a greater degree of transparency (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012).

These governmental organizations are known as gatekeepers in the digitization process. “Gatekeeping is a process that influences the passage of information and media,” (Looms, 2011, p.7) referring to mechanisms, or gatekeepers, that either facilitate or impede the flow of news. The CNTV operated in favor of elitist interests, impeding proper television regulation, which ultimately obstructed television programming and the information received by the general public. These regulatory agencies shape the future of Colombian digitization through the establishment of rules and laws that ultimately affect businesses and consumers alike.
Journalism Practices

The Internet and social media have greatly affected Colombian journalism practices, especially in urban areas like Bogotá. There are three main changes in news production that should be addressed. The first is the change in the news cycle. The immediacy of the Internet has drastically shortened the news cycle, meaning stories must be completed in a much shorter time frame than prior to the invention of the Internet. Second, the Internet has prompted new methods of news gathering, including web searches, email, and social media. Many public officials and celebrities have joined social media networks, including Colombian ex-President Alvaro Uribe. He has become an avid Twitter user, and some of his Tweets have become newsworthy themselves. Third, is the audience’s role in the production of news. Many online news outlets have comment sections that allow audience interaction and comments. Not all Colombian news outlets are taking full advantage of these types of platforms, but La Silla Vacia, a politically-independent and exclusively-online news source, makes a point to respond to their users’ questions and comments. They even allow their readers to produce and publish their own stories with the assistance of a staff editor (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). This innovative news outlet understands the importance of engagement and the shift from traditional consumer to active prosumer.

Media Consumption

The popularity and time spent on social media websites, like Facebook, that are characterized by a high level of active participation has led to the transition from consumer to prosumer (Fenton, 2012). Prosumers consume content while also producing content. They “work to produce specific information and to put it into circulation” (Cesareo, 2011, p.411). In Colombia, Facebook has been used to organize political protests, including one of the largest
demonstrations ever held against the FARC guerrilla organization (Infoasaid, 2012). “The digital social networks based on the Internet and on wireless platforms are decisive tools for mobilizing, for organizing, for deliberating, for coordinating, and for deciding” (Castells, 2012, p.229). Social media can rally large groups fighting for a common cause in ways that were unfathomable before the Internet.

On January 4, 2008, Oscar Morales created a Facebook group in opposition of the FARC leftist guerrilla movement. Due to the Facebook group’s mushrooming popularity, Morales and a few other leaders, who were also members of the Facebook group, decided to organize a protest. On February 4, 2008, over 10 million people protested on the streets of 20 cities in Colombia and 45 cities across the globe to march against the FARC (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). This historic protest was mobilized by Facebook, social media, and the Internet as a whole. The Internet and social media have drastically changed media consumption, democracy, and politics in Colombia and around the world.

Discussion

By studying Colombia’s political economy of communication through the lens of digitization, it becomes clear how technological advances are intertwined with the country’s media ownership, political regulation, journalism practices, and media consumption. Digitization is changing Colombia’s media plane and shaping the country’s future. Unlike the United States and Japan, Colombia is in the midst of its switchover from analog to digital television, and Internet access is still a work in progress, especially in the more rural regions (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012). A future study that would help shed some light on this transitional period would be a comparative analysis of the political economy of media before the digital switchover began compared with the political economy of media after complete analog shutdown is carried out on
the tentative date of December 31, 2019. This study would show how technology has changed the political, economic, and social landscapes of Colombia. It would also serve as a guide for other less-developed countries who are planning to make similar changes.

Another potential future study would be an analysis of the political protests in Colombia that were orchestrated by way of social media. The methods used to organize and execute the protests should be examined as well as the demonstrations’ impacts on politics and society. This study would allow researchers to identify patterns and trends in protests driven by social media while gaining a better understanding of these types of demonstrations’ effects on Colombia. As Robert W. McChesney and Dan Schiller (2003) indicate, communication can either help or hinder democracy. By understanding the political economy of communication in Colombia and other parts of the world, one can better understand technology’s influence on communication and how that influence helps shape democracy.
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References


