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Philip Kitzberger

**No 151**

**November 2010**

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# **The Media Activism of Latin America's Leftist Governments: Does Ideology Matter?**

## **Abstract**

Has Latin America's left turn mattered in media politics? Does ideology impact governments' practices and policies regarding media and journalistic institutions? Through an empirical assessment of discourses on the media, of direct-communication practices, and of media regulation policies on the part of the recent leftist governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay, and Venezuela, this paper stresses the existence of a specific media activism on the part of leftist governments in Latin America. While showing that the current binary distinctions that stress the existence of two lefts—"populist" and "nonpopulist"—obscure important commonalities and continuities, the author also demonstrates that it is the existence of certain institutional and structural constraints that best accounts for the differences among the various leftist governments in Latin America. In sum, the paper challenges the prevailing neglect of ideology as a relevant factor in explaining developments in government-media relationships in the region.

Keywords: media, journalism, Latin America, government, ideology, leftism

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Der mediale Aktivismus der lateinamerikanischen Linksregierungen:**

#### **Hat Ideologie einen Einfluss?**

Hat sich Lateinamerikas Linksruck auf die Medienpolitik ausgewirkt? Hat Ideologie auf die Politik und Einstellung der Regierungen gegenüber Medien und Presse einen Einfluss? Durch eine empirische Feststellung von öffentlichen Regierungsmediendiskursen, direkten Kommunikationsvorrichtungen und Medienregulierungspolitik in den jüngsten linksorientierten Regierungen in Argentinien, Bolivien, Brasilien, Chile, Ecuador, Uruguay und Venezuela, hebt diese Arbeit die Existenz eines spezifischen Medienaktivismus der regionalen Linksregierungen hervor. Während gezeigt wird, dass binarische Unterscheidungen zwischen einer „populistischen“ und einer „nichtpopulistischen“ Linken wichtige Gemeinsamkeiten und Kontinuitäten verdunkeln, belegt die Arbeit, dass, jenseits der Gemeinsamkeiten, das Vorhandensein gewisser Zwangskontexte die Unterschiede zwischen den verschiedenen linken Regierungserfahrungen in Lateinamerika besser erklärt. Diese Arbeit stellt somit die herrschende Vernachlässigung von Ideologie als relevantem Faktor für die Erklärung der regionalen Verhältnisse zwischen Regierungen und Medien in Frage.

# **The Media Activism of Latin America's Leftist Governments: Does Ideology Matter?**

**Philip Kitzberger**

## **Article**

1. Introduction
2. Assessing and Explaining Media Activism on the Part of Leftist Latin American Governments
3. The Country Experiences
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## **1. Introduction**

In recent years Latin America has witnessed a wave of leftist governments. In spite of their common self-identification as part of a new regional left and their egalitarian claims of social justice and political inclusion, these governments differ in terms of leadership, mobilization, and policy orientation. Among the most noteworthy features of these new political experiences has been the rise in news media-government conflict and oppositional polarization. These "media wars" have been fought openly in front of the public. But rather than the governments' leftist orientation, the cause has predominantly been said to be the populist or au-

thoritarian character of the heads of government—Hugo Chávez, Evo Morales, Néstor Kirchner or Rafael Correa—which is seen as inimical to Western standards of press freedom. Though the two leaders are not that radical, the rapport between Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva and Tabaré Vázquez, both of whose governments are viewed as “moderate” or “nonpopulist” leftist, and the media institutions in their respective countries has also been uneasy. Nevertheless, their governments’ conflicts with the media—in contrast to those of the formerly mentioned leaders—been deemed “normal” and within liberal-democratic parameters (Petkoff 2005, Castañeda 2006).<sup>1</sup>

In fact, little attention has been paid to ideology as a factor which might account for recent changes in media–government relations in the region and overall.<sup>2</sup> Ideological identities aside, the growing confrontation between governments and the media, in Latin America and elsewhere, has been seen as part of a trend of increasing media proactivity on the part of governments’ executive branches. This proactivity has been seen as a response to the challenge of a political field colonized by an autonomous and powerful media logic (Gaber 2000, Negrine 2007, Helms 2008).

Should the indifference to ideology be reconsidered given the recent re-politicization brought about by Latin America’s left turn? Does this left turn matter in media politics? More specifically, do the attitudes of the so-called “populist” leftists (Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Argentina) towards media and journalism have something in common with other “modern” leftist governments, such as those in Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile? Has ideological identity had an impact on all these governments’ practices and policies regarding the media and journalistic institutions? While not denying the importance of other factors in traditional supra-ideological governmental repertoires with respect to press and media, this paper demonstrates that ideology is indeed relevant in explaining some of the recent features of governmental communications and media policies in Latin America.

By exploring the impact of leftist identity, ideas, and agendas on some governments, the paper stresses that there is some specificity in the media activism of leftist governments. Those governments that have been part of Latin America’s so-called left turn, though they face extremely diverse constraints, share certain critical views that influence their public communication practices and their media policy agendas.

Nonetheless, as this paper argues, these common views do not stem from a shared leftist essence. Rather, the commonality originates in the legacy of neoliberalism. The market reforms

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<sup>1</sup> Politicized accounts of the left have viewed this differently, blaming regional media for functioning as the “frontline combat groups” of economic establishments which, incapable of retaining political power in the electoral arena, bitterly resist these governments’ reformist agendas by means of denying their legitimacy (O’Scaughnessy 2007, Kozloff 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Comparative political communications research has shown little interest in ideological orientations, since its establishment as a research field has been linked to the convergent homogenization of media systems and to the worldwide depoliticization and standardization of media management techniques by political actors. This may change following the recent political polarization of US networks.

of the 1990s led to unprecedented change in the Latin American media landscape (Waisbord 2000, Hughes 2006, Lugo Ocando 2008). Expansion, concentration, and commercialization gave media institutions a new relevance in social and political life. With the backlash against neoliberalism, these institutions' association with social and economic elites and their lack of discursive autonomy and distance in relation to the latter exposed the media as instruments of the powerful, thereby revitalizing media-critical discourses and dormant reformist traditions in the region. In those countries where governments claiming leftist identities or agendas emerged, these latter views penetrated government strategies, practices, and policy agendas.

Section 2 of this paper assesses the empirical phenomenon for three interrelated dimensions of this media activism: (1) government discourse on and understanding of the media, (2) direct-communication devices and attitudes regarding journalism, and (3) media regulation policies. This condensed description and a brief outline of the variation among the cases allows for the evaluation of contending explanations of leftist Latin American governments' media activism. It is argued that the current dyadic distinctions between the populist and nonpopulist left obscure important commonalities, while the nuances and contrasts in the media politics of the various governments can be better viewed when placed on a continuum according to the historical, structural, and institutional constraints these governments have faced.

Section 3 provides more detailed narrative descriptions, in accordance with the three dimensions, of the experiences of the Kirchners in Argentina, Lagos and Bachelet in Chile, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Lula in Brazil, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. The final and concluding section considers the phenomena assessed in the paper from the perspective of broader global and regional trends and advances some further observations on the diffusion of leftist views in governmental media activism.

## 2. Assessing and Explaining Media Activism on the Part of Leftist Latin American Governments

### *Governments' Public Media Discourse*

The first dimension that characterizes leftist governments is their discourse about press and media. The former share a critical vision of the latter institutions' role in society and politics. However, what makes them stand out from other governments is that most of them have *gone public* with these critiques, although with varying intensity and political success.<sup>3</sup> This strategy, aimed at *unveiling* the media institutions' true nature and providing evidence of the bias and partisanship behind their self-presentation as impartial bodies, seeks to undermine their credibility and public legitimacy.

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<sup>3</sup> "Going public" has been described as a political strategy that seeks to mobilize support for a given policy through direct public appeals so as to curb resistance from other institutional actors (Kernell 1997).



It has been argued that publicly criticizing the media for “bad news” biases or “stigmatizing” them as “oppositional weapons” in order to undermine their influence has been common to most Latin American executives (Ruiz 2010). What distinguishes the leftist governments as a subgroup in this regard is that most of their public allusions are framed by some common ideological assumptions. Although all political and social actors in the region have come to perceive the media as increasingly influential and have developed some practical responses, this response on the part of the left has taken a particular form. A common nucleus can be observed beyond particular contexts and inflections. The core assumption is that media and journalistic institutions are, despite their claims of neutrality, powerful social actors linked to the upper classes, social elites, or powerful corporations. Be they instrumentalist perspectives that view the press as the mouthpiece of the establishment or structural perspectives that view the media as constructors of neoliberal common sense through anonymous logics, these visions share the idea that within the media sphere power is not distributed democratically but according to social power. In fact, media power is viewed as essential to the maintenance of the status quo. Hostility on the part of the media is therefore interpreted as part of the resistance by the upper classes and established powerful interests to the reformist and democratizing agendas of progressive governments.

Consequently, these characterizations alternatively call for the democratization of access and voice in the media sphere, for reforms to media structures, or even for Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategies. In some cases these claims are framed in terms of radical participatory views of democracy, while in others they are referenced in terms of representative democracy. However, they all share the idea that voice equalization is essential to democracy. This democratic imperative, as will be seen further on, underlies public- and alternative-media policies.

Public confrontation between presidents and the media has been a salient feature of politics in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina. In one in two public appearances, Chávez makes negative references to the media. Correa, Morales and the Kirchners probably follow close behind him.<sup>4</sup> Though existent, this type of public confrontation has been more sporadic in Brazil and Uruguay; in Chile it is nonexistent. In the most radicalized cases, it is the presidents themselves who seem to *go public* with confrontational appeals. Nevertheless, as discussed further on, governments' public questioning of the media does not necessarily take place only through presidential discourse. It can also occur at lower levels of government; in aligned media; and through allied parties, unions, web communities, or other grassroots organizations. In brief, governmental practices of contesting big media can be performed either in a vertical and centralized manner, or, simultaneously or alternatively, in a more decentralized and capillary fashion. The discussion of the second analytical dimension takes up both types of practices.

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<sup>4</sup> In a random sample of 103 of Chávez's *Aló Presidente* transcripts, the topic appeared in 45 (44 percent). In Kirchner's case, as a case study shows, out of 862 presidential discourses, allusions to the media, mostly negative, were registered in 220 (25 percent) (Vincent 2009). This rate may have increased during Cristina Fernández's term.

### *Direct-Communication Devices and Journalistic Conventions*

The second dimension that characterizes leftist governments concerns their public communication strategies and their relationships with the media and journalism as mediating institutions. Leftist governments tend to deploy particular media practices intended for direct communication with large publics. These range from centralized modalities such as regular or sporadic presidential broadcasts, traveling cabinets, and the communicative instrumentalization of public occasions or ceremonies, to more decentralized practices using diverse communication platforms. The purpose of these practices is to bypass and contest mainstream media journalism, which is deemed to be dominated by media owners and therefore biased and distorting. In fact, these innovations are usually accompanied by a rejection of journalistic conventions such as press conferences, regular contact between official sources and journalists, interviews, etc.

The most noteworthy of these strategies has been the hosting by presidents of television or radio programs on a regular basis. Chávez's *Aló Presidente* is the most reputed example, and variations on this format have been introduced by Correa, Lula and, on occasion, Morales. Additionally, most of the presidencies—with the exception of Chile—have made extensive use of “permanent campaign” tactics as regular forms of direct communication. “Itinerant cabinets,” presidential tours, and other controlled institutional events have developed into a way of placing prepackaged or relatively “unfiltered” messages in noncontrolled media.

These practices upset press corps since they neglect the journalists' professional routines. Other less visible conventions have been broken as well. Most governments have introduced vertical source control, which means that their officials are not allowed to have press contact on politically relevant matters without authorization from above. The resulting lack of declarations collides with the journalistic need to get news on a daily basis. Journalists thus feel threatened as professionals, and even in spite of their ideological sympathy, they turn away from governments. This distancing in turn strengthens governmental perceptions of journalists as being controlled by media owners and further reinforces the above-mentioned direct-communication impulses.

At this point, some important questions arise: Do these practices belong exclusively to the repertoire of leftist governments in the region? Aren't the disciplining of sources, “keeping on message,” and other related techniques part of the “war-room” style of modern political communication popularized by the British New Labour? Is regular presidential broadcasting an ideological trend? Do Chávez's direct-communication practices not more closely resemble those of Colombian right-wing populist Álvaro Uribe than those of the other leftist governments? The latter's regularly broadcasted *Concejos Comunes* are frequently compared to *Aló Presidente*. To some observers, Uribe seems closer to Chávez in this respect than the moderate left wingers in the region. Such visions (those of the observers mentioned in the sentence above) argue that it is populism and its inherent rejection of political mediation that explains communication style, not ideology (Waisbord 2003, Rincón 2008).

All of the above contentions hold some truth. Nevertheless, closer observation shows that ideology does matter. First, the meaning attributed by government agents to their own actions and the framework within which such action is publicly explained rest upon ideological understandings of the media's role. Second, populism—rather than a commitment to a particular cause—may be the form of politics (and political communication) acquired by governments born in the wake of a crisis in representative institutions (party system, legislatures, and also media). Third, ideological views make governmental courses of action intelligible, they are not *a posteriori* instrumental rationalizations of essentially authoritarian impulses against press freedom. Beyond discourse, ideology impacts the aggregate repertoire of government practices, defining government in a more inclusive way so that it comprises various formal and informal allied or co-opted groups. Focusing on government practices at a more decentralized level then highlights those features that nonleftist governments (populist or not) do not possess. The decentralized or capillary levels are not separate from government; rather, they constitute an integral part of a distinctive media activism carried out by leftist governments which is intended to denaturalize and criticize the dominant media discourse.

One example of these decentralized practices is the state media's politically aligned airtime. Pro-government use of state media is a common practice. What is innovative is the existence of certain broadcasts specifically intended to unveil and contest the political and ideological biases of private media. Despite some differences between them, Argentina and Venezuela provide examples that have achieved public resonance and have significantly contributed to government's questioning of private media.

At the grassroots level and on the Internet a myriad of discussion forums, blogs, websites, community media, and publishing enterprises, all carrying discourses critical of mainstream media, emerged establishing a sort of counter-information trench war. These base-level initiatives aimed at questioning media credibility are linked to governments in different ways. In some cases, the link is limited to informal alliances with preexisting autonomous groups. Where governments are based on strong party organizations, as in Brazil and Uruguay, the grassroots activities tend to be embedded in the latter. In other cases, most notably Venezuela, the state plays a major role in shaping such decentralized initiatives.

In sum, if we focus solely on presidential activity, Uribe and Chávez may share the key goal of centralizing their personal authority through their direct-communication strategies, as explanations based on populism stress. But the Bolivarian leader's communications aims do not stop there. He is also building a revolutionary counterhegemony.<sup>5</sup> What further differentiates Venezuela's experiences from those of Colombia is not only the ideological orientation of its discourse, but also its consequent fostering of market-alternative communications networks as part of governmental media policy. Except Chile, which displays none of the features discussed in this section, all the cases considered share—with varying inten-

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<sup>5</sup> For some left-wing critics, both aims are contradictory as Chávez's personalism undermines a new hegemonic construction in the long run (Cannon 2009).

sity—a politics of circumventing and/or subverting the dominant media/journalistic discourse. This politics is informed by critical leftist ideas such as hegemony, voice inequality, class or race biases in the media, popular empowerment, and democratization.

### *Media Policy and Regulation*

The third dimension that characterizes leftist governments concerns media regulation. In contrast to the deregulation and market-oriented policies that during the neoliberal 1990s increased the commercial media presence, leftist policies foster re-regulation in the communications domain, state protagonism, and market-alternative forms of media. These policies aim to rebalance the presence of market, state, and civil society in the media landscape. They can be divided into the following categories: state media—creation policies, measures oriented to private media—sector regulation, and community media—fostering policies. The ultimate goal of revitalizing market-alternative media logics is to democratize the public sphere.

Most of the countries under discussion here have seen the creation of new state media or the reinforcement of existing ones. State television and radio stations have been launched in Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina, while in Ecuador, Bolivia and Venezuela state ownership has also extended to print media. Oppositional voices have generally objected to state media expansion as outright propaganda politics. In the region, any such policy attempt is rapidly stigmatized as “Venezolanization.” However, aligned programming has also been defended outside Venezuela, where it is usually justified with claims regarding the illusory neutrality of oppositional private media. Elsewhere, governments have noticed that the public perception of state media as partisan entails a political cost. Inside these institutions, media professionals often clash with political cadres who follow the government line.

With respect to the re-regulation of private commercial media, various types of restrictions have been set up (or at least announced) at the constitutional, legislative, and administrative levels. The first kind of restriction concerns media ownership and market concentration. The second type of restriction concerns media content, such as national production quotas; multicultural programming; and lastly, in some cases, content qualifications such as truthfulness of information clauses. Such content quotas are inspired by protectionism, cultural nationalism, and worries about US cultural imperialism. In this sense, Lula or Chávez can be equally heard criticizing cheap imported stuff. A third kind of regulation indirectly affects private media profits. These concern the establishment of mandatory airtime or press space for public interest or educational purposes, right-of-reply clauses, and the provision of access for market-weak voices.

Regulatory policy agendas have, nevertheless, often remained rhetorical and have not always been consistently pursued. This gap between rhetoric and policy can be explained by factors such as institutional weakness; colonized bureaucracies; or, as is more relevant to the cases under discussion here, tactical settlements with powerful media actors.

The last but still significant media policy feature affects the realm of community or grass-roots media. The politics of giving civil society public standing as a legitimate actor, and fostering community broadcasting beneath the level of state- and market-driven media, has been defended as access equalization, enfranchisement, voice pluralism, and the leveling of the playing field. Public recognition of community media as legitimate actors; tripartite radio electric spectrum reserves for public, private commercial and private noncommercial operators; and other measures have been included in constitutions and legislation.

In most cases, new legislation picks up on reform proposals developed by civil society groups engaged in media democratization. This has provided governments with some sectoral support. Nevertheless, these groups have not been unconditional allies. A frequent complaint on the part of community operators is that formal barriers (antenna power limits, confinement to rural areas, administrative costs) and informal thresholds (centralized administration inaccessible to remote groups) still persist, thereby favoring big interests. Official alternative media policies also awaken fears of co-optation, instrumentalization, and loss of autonomy in community broadcasters.

The three analytical dimensions discussed above generalize a sort of ideal-typical model of leftist governments' media activism, against which empirical cases can be contrasted. Table 1 summarizes the main features of leftist media activism in the cases explored. As can be seen from the table, the governments under consideration perform differently for each dimension. What factors best account for the differences? Can these differences be explained by maintaining the existence of a common leftist core? Does Chile fall within the boundaries of leftist media activism?

The current polarization in regional political debates has made the politically laden claims regarding the existence of "two lefts" dominant.<sup>6</sup> This understanding has widely permeated the current debate in media politics as well. Differences have been reduced to dichotomies such as "populist" versus "nonpopulist," "authoritarian" versus "democratic," and "archaic" versus "modern" lefts. According to such depictions, media confrontation and media reform policies are a function of personalistic or autocratic impulses intended to reduce freedom of expression and suppress dissent. Leftism, according to this view, is merely an instrumental facade used to gain support; at best it is an expression of political immaturity and irresponsibility. In opposition to this "immature" left is the "mature" left, which has learned the lessons of history and accepts press freedom as part of democratic politics (Petkoff 2005, Castañeda 2006).

I argue that these binary distinctions obscure important commonalities and continuities. The nuanced differences summarized in the table may be more consistently explained, following Kenneth Roberts (2008, with Levitsky 2008, 1995), by looking at the variable historical, structural, and institutional constraints that have shaped and conditioned the agendas pushed forward by these various governments.

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<sup>6</sup> For an overview of these distinctions and critical discussions see Ramírez Gallegos (2006).

**Table 1: Key Features of Leftist Media Activism in Latin America**

		Venezuela H. Chávez	Ecuador R. Correa	Bolivia E. Morales	Argentina N. Kirchner/ C. F. Kirchner	Brazil Lula	Uruguay T. Vázquez	Chile R. Lagos/ M. Bachelet
Governmental public media discourse		+	+	+	+	+/-	+/-	-
Direct-communication devices and journalistic circumvention in public communication tactics	<i>Centralized</i>							
	Presidential broadcasting	yes	yes	yes (but irregular)	no	yes	no	no
	Permanent campaign and disciplining tactics	+	+	+	+	+	+/-	-
	Defiance of journalistic conventions	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no
	<i>Decentralized</i>							
	"Counterhegemonic" questioning of media	+	n.d.	n.d.	+	+	+/-	-
Media policy and regulation	State media expansion	+	+	+	+	+	-	-
	Restrictive regulation of commercial media	+	+	+/-	+	-	-	-
	Policies fostering community media	+	+	+	+	-	+	+/-

Source: Author's compilation.

A focus on institutional stability, for example, may illuminate differences in the form of media activism. The governments in those countries that have experienced a party system collapse at some point and that have, therefore, emerged from new movements or as outsiders have been more radical in all media activism dimensions than those that stemmed from institutionalized politics.

It is precisely the context of institutional collapse that has led to the emergence of political outsiders who have evolved into personalist (or populist) leaders. For instance, the absence of preexisting, credible organizational vehicles has made the use of direct public appeals through the media a key means of mobilizing support for Rafael Correa (Conaghan and De la Torre 2008). On the other hand, given the weakness of existing party organizations after such a collapse, oppositional voices also tend to converge in the media in their attempts to gain access to the public sphere (Ramírez Gallegos 2008). In sum, in contexts where party organizations have lost ground, the media become—in the eyes of all political actors—the key arena for mobilizing public support.

These factors are important in explaining public communication practices, but they do not exhaustively account for the radical media policies of some governments. The collapse of representative institutions went hand in hand with a popular backlash against neoliberalism; this backlash in turn fueled radical projects that involved the transformation of a media landscape perceived as being a constitutive part of the old order. Weakly institutionalized oppositions, intense popular mobilization by governments, and windfall hydrocarbon rents, as seen in Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador, encouraged ambitious transformative projects and new

forms of popular sovereignty; these were in contrast to the more constrained ambitions of the leftist governments in Brazil, Uruguay, or Chile, with Argentina's ambitions lying somewhere in the middle (Roberts 2008). As for other policy areas, the real or perceived structural and institutional constraints determined how far leftist governments could go in public confrontation with the media and in direct-communication practices, as well as how radical their media reform policies could be.

The collapse of political institutions can usually not be separated from a crisis in media and journalistic institutions. The discredited political parties and elites are usually intimately linked to the large media conglomerates. Not only do the two share a similar social background, and sometimes even close family ties, but their links also rest mostly on reciprocal arrangements that have secured their respective interests. In this way, the new political scenarios represent a break in traditional settlements and understandings between political and media elites. In such contexts, the already weak culture of newsroom autonomy in the region tends to disappear given the owners' impulse to defend their endangered positions through their media. By displacing political elites, political newcomers also block big media interests from access to key governmental levers they formerly controlled. This loss of control explains the latter's aggressive, and sometimes cartelized, responses (Botía 2007).

In Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia it is clearly evident that the crisis of the previous regimes' representative institutions was paralleled by a crisis in media credibility. This explains why Chávez, Correa, and Morales have been able to successfully present the old political class and the media as agents of the powerful minorities they themselves oppose. In contrast, where media credibility is higher, as in Argentina, Brazil, or Uruguay, open confrontation may be a riskier move politically.

Correa's success in connecting media elites to the discredited banking institutions and political actors is a key example. In Bolivia, big media's collusion with the increasingly unpopular political elite, which governed until 2005, became evident during the mobilization process that drove Evo Morales to the presidency (Gómez Vela 2006). In both these cases, big media's credibility crisis occurred prior to the left turn and, as will be seen, determined the perceptions and strategic stances of the nascent leadership. These crises not only shaped the new elites' views on the media—since they undermined the image of media institutions as a credible, representative and fair mirror of society—but also provided the new governments with political room to maneuver and encouraged them to push forward a radical media politics.

The same process occurred in Venezuela, although the episodes that brought about the media's credibility crisis occurred subsequent to governmental change. As Ellner (2008: 109) argues, the prevailing discussions, which focus on Chávez's populist style and personality, neglect the consistency and steady radicalization of his policies. Further radicalization has occurred each time the opposition has experienced a political setback. Its obsession with removing Chavez led the opposition to disdain political organization and to resort to putschist and anti-institutional strategies. These failed attempts had the consequence of further radi-

calizing the government's policy agendas. The evidence of this disdain for institutional politics was manifested in the media's cartelized oppositional behavior during the 2002/03 crises and the resulting collapse in media credibility (Díaz Rangel 2002, Botía 2007). Instead of the authoritarian personality ascribed to Chávez, it is actually Venezuela's institutional weakness that accounts more for the radicalization of Bolivarian communication politics. Radicalism in media activism is not caused by populism. Rather, both phenomena are possible under the same structural conditions. The views and ends that inform and shape media activism in the countries under consideration can be better understood by focusing on ideology

Although Argentina suffered a partial collapse of its party system, its institutional crisis was not as extreme as those in the Andean countries. Despite their hegemony in the legislative arena, the Kirchners initially faced some constraints from civic and interest-based organizations, the media, and governors (Levitsky and Murillo 2008). These existing political and societal constraints notwithstanding, the Kirchners radicalized their confrontation with the media. This radicalization took place after a long agrarian strike that was backed by some of the big news media. As a result, the Kirchners' popularity levels fell spectacularly by 2008 and they lost the midterm elections. Nevertheless, the radicalized media activism they pursued after 2008 seems to have significantly affected the credibility of the media confronted: the government exposed the dominance of extra-journalistic values in news coverage with some success.

All the constraints referred to above impose limits upon governmental action. But the perception of those limits varies according to the prior experiences and contingent prudential judgments of governmental actors. Governments do not always act in a coherent fashion across different sectors of government and across time. In terms of the attitude towards the media and public communications, different views generally coexist inside government entourage and broader governing coalitions, as the Brazilian case makes visible. Inside the *petista* government, ideological hardliners compete with advisors more inclined to compromise in the face of media interests or journalistic demands. As insider narratives reveal, Lula, who is himself divided between historical convictions and pragmatism, picks up one or the other's agenda depending on the circumstances (Kotscho 2006). The moderation of media policy results from the political need to achieve compromises with the parliamentary opposition and established power agents, whose interests are intertwined with those of the media elites. In Brazil, the dashing of grassroots groups' media policy expectations and the accommodation of political and market interests have been linked to the political realignments the Lula government has experienced.

In contrast to the case in Brazil or Uruguay, in Chile the governing Socialist Party elites do not appear to be torn between their views and what is politically feasible when in government. Their public (and private) conformity with the status quo in the media sphere makes it legitimate to ask whether Chile is still a case of leftist media activism. This paper's focus on constraints allows us to include them—at least analytically. As Roberts (1995) shows from a historical perspective, after Allende's fall the formerly radical socialists underwent a



process of self-reflection that led to their moderation; due to the strategic logic and institutional confines of the democratic transition, they later became the hegemonic party of the Chilean left. Aware of the limited political room left by the new institutional scenario, this already ideologically changed left entered into redemocratization seeking moderation—that is, looking after allies in the center of the electoral arena, not risking grassroots mobilization, remaining cautiously pragmatic, and relying on elite-level bargaining with the rightist opposition and business. Leftist media critics remained circumscribed to the so-called “extra-parliamentary left”; they remained outside of government.

In the next section a detailed descriptive narrative account of the country cases shows how the various constraints discussed above have been reflected in the leftist governments' media activism.

### 3. The Country Experiences

Chávez's rise to power as a result of the total collapse of the former political order and the crisis of its political and media institutions explains Venezuela's position as the most radicalized in all the media activism dimensions. Through the successive phases of his government's radicalization, Chávez's antagonism in reference to the media escalated. From the outset in 1999, the president frequently criticized the media's coverage of government as distorted. He attributed this distortion to the fact that both the printed press and commercial television were controlled by an “oligarchy” used to a past of privilege, stating that this oligarchy was resisting the ending of its privilege by a newly empowered “people.” After the episodes of 2002 and 2003,<sup>7</sup> in which the media played an eminently political role, as exhibited in their cartelized and conspiratorial behavior, Chávez began to call them—somewhat justifiably—“putschists” (*golpistas*). He has since regularly denounced their “terror campaigns” as intended to destabilize government.

Given the US administration's and US media organizations' overt support of the Venezuelan opposition, Chávez's revolutionary narrative increasingly played the anti-imperialist chord (Ellner 2008: 196-202). As of 2002 no distinction was made between the behavior of na-

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<sup>7</sup> In April 2002 the president fired the national oil company's board of directors, thereby setting off a series of protests and massive strikes. The protesters, encouraged by the business elite and some unions, received privileged attention from the private media. On April 11, army officials detained Chávez and announced that he had resigned. This statement was not questioned by the private media. In the following days the media silenced loyal army officials and ignored the massive pro-Chávez rallies. Ultimately, this popular mobilization, the divided military, and key defections among the putschists drove Chávez back to the presidency. Later, from December 2002 to January 2003, a new “civic strike” demonstrated the polarization between media and government. During these new protests, the broadcast media suspended regular programming and the printed press reduced its editions to coverage of the opposition's collective action (Tanner Hawkins 2003, Cannon 2009). Many of the initiatives and strategies behind this oppositional mobilization were born out of regular media owners' and editors' meetings (Botía 2007: 271-295).

tional private media and the international networks (especially CNN). The “imperialist,” “hegemonic,” “capitalist,” and “neoliberal” character of their uniform voice is, according to this perspective, a natural product of the alliance between local oligarchs and the US government<sup>8</sup> (Zúquete 2008). This conglomerate occupies the role of the “counterrevolutionary” force. Additionally, with the rise of the idea of “twenty-first-century socialism,” Chávez began to criticize the media for promoting individualistic and egoistic values, as opposed to the new revolutionary consciousness required.

In addition to anti-imperialism, there is a second way in which the Bolivarian discourse transcends national boundaries. This is through the idea that real independence from imperialism can only be achieved through joint Latin American strategies and “international solidarity” against US hegemony (Ellner 2008: 189). This regional perspective on the part of the Bolivarian revolution has practical consequences in the media realm since it is the ideological pillar of initiatives such as Telesur and those supporting regional alternative-media policies.

All these views, embedded in a narrative of popular redemption, coexist and are intertwined with the secular topic of voice democratization. At a rally in April 2007 Chávez defended the nonrenewal of Radio Caracas Televisión's (RCTV) license as the returning to the people of something they owned—the radio electric spectrum—and that they had been stripped off 50 years previously by a family from the rich oligarchy. Back in popular hands, frequencies were to be redistributed to transmit the voices of the previously excluded.

Hugo Chávez popularized regular presidential broadcasting with his *Aló Presidente*. This paradigmatic example of direct communication started in 1999 as a radio broadcast; since 2000 it has also aired on television on Sundays and has an average length of five hours. In the beginning, a talk show format prevailed. The president answered calls from common people, listened to their problems, advised and provided solutions, thereby displaying a strong identification with popular sectors previously excluded from public life. The program's granting of visibility to the poor explains its immediate popularity (Cañizález 2003: 33). Since then the broadcast has also entailed other performative functions. Touring locations around the country, the president has often required government officials to attend, questioning them about the topics of the day. He has also used the program to issue orders, threaten domestic adversaries or criticize international rivals. It has been observed that Chávez has invented a way to stage government through television (Anderson 2008). *Aló Presidente* plays a central role in setting the public agenda. The president's televised deeds are usually Monday's Venezuelan news headlines. Simultaneously, the Bolivarian leader has devised his broadcast as a pedagogical vehicle for the popular indoctrination in the ideas of twenty-first-century socialism.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to *Aló Presidente*, the mandatory broadcasting of presidential speeches (*cadena*s) has become a frequent resource for direct communication. Especially during times of political crisis, Chávez has justified the mechanism as a way to fight the “lies” and “disinforma-

<sup>8</sup> Chávez often derides media owners as *pitiyanqui* (Yankee-lover) bourgeoisie.

<sup>9</sup> Online: <[www.alopresidente.gob.ve/historia/28/1633](http://www.alopresidente.gob.ve/historia/28/1633)> (15 March 2010).

tion" of the private media.<sup>10</sup> In 2007, Chávez's critics had counted 1513 *cadenas* totaling 890 transmission hours (Cañizalez 2007).

As for decentralized direct-communication tactics, Venezuela has pioneered the use of politically aligned airtime on state television with *La Hojilla*, a show hosted by a Bolivarian cadre dressed in a red shirt who disputes what is said daily in the private media. Via alternative communication platforms, counterhegemonic communication practices have also multiplied. Nevertheless, the key trait of this civil society mobilization is that "the state has played a central role in giving form" to it, despite the grassroots movement's anti-statist slant (Ellner 2008: 180). Indeed, the Ministry of Communications and Information plays a central role in organizing decentralized counterinformation strategies. Its activities range from financing the publication of dozens of media-critical books to deploying *comandos juveniles de guerrilla comunicacional* trained to respond private media lies in the streets and on the Web.<sup>11</sup>

Venezuela has also been a leader in the creation of state media. In addition to revamping the preexisting national television and radio stations (VTV and RNV), the administration has created two further nationwide television stations (Vive TV and TVes).<sup>12</sup> The state-controlled radio network has also been expanded. And, consistent with its geopolitical views, the Bolivarian government is now the main stakeholder in Telesur, the regional news network conceived of as both a vehicle for Latin American integration and a weapon against US-based information dominance (Lugo Ocando 2008).<sup>13</sup>

Despite a wider content diversity than presumed by their critics,<sup>14</sup> much of these media outlets' programming is overtly aligned with the defense of the Bolivarian revolution. This alignment is deemed legitimate due to the ongoing ideological warfare. Andrés Izarra—the ex-RCTV news producer who has held key communications roles in government since 2002—has justified this expansion of media outlets as part of a Gramscian war, not incompatible with pluralism, to win the minds and hearts of the people and against the capitalist hegemony reproduced by private media.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In the wake of the 2002 crisis, oppositional protests received privileged coverage from the private media as part of a "communications strategy" intended to demonstrate their massiveness (Cañizález 2003: 35). On April 11 the government sought to thwart the opposition's dominance of the screens by compelling the broadcasters to transmit the presidential message with *cadenas*. Broadcasters evaded this measure by "splitting" the screen. That same day, Chávez was ousted. The developments that drove Chávez back to government were in part a dispute for control over what the Venezuelan public could see, hear, and read.

<sup>11</sup> Online: <www.minci.gob.ve>.

<sup>12</sup> TVes operates on the band and with the equipment of the ousted RCTV.

<sup>13</sup> The interstate station initiated broadcasts in mid-2005. The initial stakeholders were Venezuela (51 percent), Argentina (20 percent), Cuba (19 percent), and Uruguay (10 percent). Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua joined later as minor participants.

<sup>14</sup> Vive TV, for instance, has been recognized by independent observers for its innovative participatory productions.

<sup>15</sup> *El Nacional*, November 8, 2007.

The restrictions on private commercial media in Venezuela are not that explicit at the legislative and constitutional levels. Given the gaps in legislation, policy formation has instead proceeded through discretionary administrative decisions taken by regulatory authorities. To most observers, the underlying rationale of those decisions has been a response to the polarization between Chávez and the private media. Over time, the number of commercial media licenses has stagnated. In some cases expired licenses have not been renewed, on the basis of alleged violations of regulatory laws. The most controversial case involved RCTV, the most confrontational television broadcaster since 2002. The nonrenewal of its license in 2007 was attributed to its “putschist” behavior during the crisis of April 2002 (Cañizález 2007, AMARC 2009). Other restrictions to private media profits have resulted from the 2004 “Ley de Responsabilidad de Radio y Televisión” content regulations on violence, discrimination, schedules for children’s programming, and, last but not least, the frequency of presidential *cadena*s.

In addition, the 2000 Venezuelan Telecommunications Act transformed the informal illegal broadcasters into recognized “public service community media,” while also committing the state to their development through financial aid. In fact, as of 2000 the number of community radio and television operators grew exponentially. Official backing further accelerated after 2003, when Chávez realized the decisive role that community media had played in the street mobilizations after the coup (Ellner 2008: 179-180; Sel 2009: 29). Despite these improvements in community media policy, some community operators perceive the regulations discussed above to “compromise, indirectly, the independence of these media.”<sup>16</sup>

Ecuador’s leftist government also emerged in the context of a crisis of representative institutions and a plebiscitarian confrontation with the “old order.” Correa’s rise to power began with nothing more than his direct appeals to the public.

Rafael Correa’s discourse about the media was decisively shaped by his path to the presidency as a political outsider. His campaign discourse combined the rejection of neoliberalism and disdain for the political class (the “*partidocracia*”). He presented himself as a newcomer without links to the ruling elites, close to the people, and determined to reverse the historical domination of the country by the establishment (Conaghan 2008). Similarly to Chávez, although not in such a radical manner, Correa succeeded in constructing himself as a strong political authority opposed to an old and discredited order identified with traditional political, social, and, notably, media elites.

Significantly, in his 2009 inaugural speech as president under the new constitution, Correa placed the media at the heart of the historical juncture: “We have defeated those who held power in order to exert it on behalf of the privileged, but not power itself. There are still ‘*poderes fácticos*,’ especially that terrible power which is the informative power.”<sup>17</sup> In his view,

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the cost of the technical reports required for licenses is an economic barrier that government itself lowers, providing subventions and credits for broadcasting equipment (AMARC 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Author’s translation.

the Ecuadorian press had historically presented itself as a “moral” and “infallible” guardian of the public interest, thus hiding its true self. The problem in his eyes was the contradiction inherent in a “private business providing a public good” to the point of endangering democracy. It was government’s task, he concluded, to unmask this political player lacking democratic legitimacy.<sup>18</sup> In his view, the Ecuadorian press, like the press in the rest of the region, had played a political role as a defender of the status quo and had “always been against progressive governments in Latin America.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Correa repeatedly reminded his listeners that most private media were owned by banking institutions, something which gave them unjustified power: “You talk about regulating the interest tax or diminishing the costs of banking services [...] and you will see the campaign that mounts against you.” Correa has frequently downplayed journalists as bank clerks, thereby indicating their lack of autonomy.

During his first presidential campaign in 2006 Correa had already made successful use of the media. After he won the presidency, a constitutional assembly election, a constitutional referendum, and a general election (under the new constitution) all took place in less than two years. Through this plebiscitary path the government naturalized a “permanent campaign” style: “The ‘war room’ of the 2006 election campaign was recreated in the presidential palace” (Conaghan and De la Torre 2008: 274).

At the beginning of his term, Correa instituted *Diálogo con el Presidente*, a public radio broadcast aired on Saturdays. Often smartly combined with “traveling cabinets,” this format has successfully enhanced governmental contact with local communities while reaching nationwide audiences (Conaghan and De la Torre 2008). Similarly to the case in Venezuela, *cadena*s have also played an important role as a direct-communication device. In the various electoral contests, Correa has resorted heavily to existing legal provisions that oblige private broadcasters to transmit public-interest content to gain screen presence.<sup>20</sup> As president, Correa has increasingly rejected direct interviews, press conferences, and other journalistic formats.

In the realm of media policies, Correa’s first move was the creation of a public newspaper through the seizure of a bankrupt Guayaquil paper called *El Telégrafo*. Public television did not exist in Ecuador when he took office, while public radio was almost nonexistent. In 2007 the government created Ecuador TV, and in 2008 it relaunched Radio Pública de Ecuador. At the latter’s opening ceremony Correa defended these media outlets, responding to critiques that suspected parallels with Venezuela:

<sup>18</sup> Online: <[www.presidencia.gov.ec/pdf/Discurso-Posesion%2010%20de%20agosto\\_pdf\\_2009.pdf](http://www.presidencia.gov.ec/pdf/Discurso-Posesion%2010%20de%20agosto_pdf_2009.pdf)> (5 May 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Reporteros Sin Fronteras, reporte 2008.

<sup>20</sup> During the constitutional referendum, for example, the government imposed—albeit after some negotiation—the mandatory broadcasting of a program called *Conociendo la Constitución* by invoking an existing media law that envisioned the public use of private television slots for educational purposes. Some media owners argued that content was partisan and resisted the mandate.

These are not the government's media, they belong to the Ecuadorians. Many Latin American countries have them, as do practically all the developed countries [...] Well-managed public media are tremendously positive for a society because they do not have that deep dilemma between the pocketbook and social compromise in communicating objectively.<sup>21</sup>

In taking advantage of his initial popularity and the relative lack of credibility of private media,<sup>22</sup> Correa has shown a radical determination to alter ownership relations in the media sphere. Regulatory authorities have already reversed some radio licenses and seized television stations linked to fraudulently bailed-out banks. Meanwhile, provisional clauses in the new constitution have mandated the sanctioning of a new Communications Act and the formation of a committee to audit all previous license-conferring procedures. The new act not only stipulates ownership bans for bank owners and politicians, but also foresees—due to the collusions and prevarications the committee has reported—the “redistribution of illegally obtained frequencies” in the interest of the public and community sectors. In sum, while the new constitution itself contains explicit bans on media monopolies and other restrictions, the bill currently being discussed in Ecuador seeks to severely restrict the number of licenses, cross-ownership, foreign capital participation, and audience share, and to stipulate spectrum reserves.

The 2008 constitution guarantees equal rights and access to frequencies for the public, private, and community sectors, while the new bill foresees privileging public and community sectors until equal spectrum shares are reached. The new regulatory proposals also foresee content qualifications, special “citizen tariffs” for advertising in order to guarantee media access for weak groups, stipulated airtime for referendum and educational campaigns, and the establishment of local and national production quotas in broadcasting.

In Bolivia, the biased coverage of the political mobilization process that drove Evo Morales to the presidency exposed the lack of journalistic professionalism and autonomy—the result of the media owners' own political interests. During the so-called “Guerra del Gas” episodes the credibility of the media was questioned by an important part of the public after the networks decided to transmit blockbuster movies at the same time as police repression left 63 protesters dead in La Paz (Gómez Vela 2006). This and other such incidents not only shaped and reinforced Morales's and the movement's views on the media but also affected the media's legitimacy, making radical confrontation a political option.

This impact of these experiences on the Morales government's media policy was visible from the outset. In his inaugural speech Morales recalled that the movement's path to power had already involved a bitter struggle with the media:

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<sup>21</sup> *El Comercio*, August 27, 2008. Author's translation.

<sup>22</sup> The 2000 financial crisis made banking institutions widely unpopular. This explains Correa's insistence on their links to the media.

Thanks, I want to acknowledge some media, some professionals who always advised us so that we learned. But some journalists, men and women, permanently demonized the social struggle; they permanently condemned us by using lies. Some journalists and media subjected us to a sort of media terrorism, as if we were animals, as if we were savages.<sup>23</sup>

As president, Morales frequently appeals to the people to judge the “disinformation” and “distortions” of the private media themselves. Similarly to his Andean counterparts, the interpretations he offers link the media’s behavior to “powerful,” “oligarchic,” “fascist,” “right-wing,” or “imperialist” interests. But what stands out in Morales’s discourse is the ethnic dimension he adds. The media’s voice is depicted as racist and as a continuation of past domination. In his speeches he often recalls the need to “fight those media that every day fight against us, every day denigrate us, every day humiliate us, every day offend us with lies.” The construction of “us” is clearly ethnic: “I want to make a very important topic clear: some media demonize us, they penalize communitarian justice; they think the death penalty is communitarian justice. Totally false.”

Although regular presidential broadcasts were considered in Bolivia, the government has privileged different formats.<sup>24</sup> Bolivia is an ethnolinguistically divided country. Large parts of the population, especially in the countryside, do not speak Spanish. On the other hand, despite his Aymara origin, Morales can only speak Spanish. Additionally, the low level of national media penetration in distant rural communities makes centralized messages inadequate. Given this context, the government’s direct-communication policy has been implemented mainly through networks of local radio stations and complemented by other aligned media outlets and presidential tours. Simultaneously, initial government efforts to sustain press workers’ sympathy have failed and some incidents between the president and reporters have damaged journalist’s sympathy for government.<sup>25</sup>

In Bolivia, state television already existed before Morales came to power. His government’s efforts in public media policy thus concentrated elsewhere: a state-owned daily paper called *Cambio* was created, while radio was privileged given the audience characteristics. The former public broadcaster Radio Illimani, renamed Radio Patria Nueva, became head of a “community radio” network of over 30 local stations called Red Nacional de Radios de los Pueblos Indígenas y Originarios (RNRPIO). This network was financed with Venezuelan development aid.

<sup>23</sup> Online: <<http://abi.bo/index.php?i=enlace&j=documentos/discursos/200601/22.01.06Transmision.html>> (5 July 2008). Translated by the author.

<sup>24</sup> A weekly broadcast called *El pueblo es noticia* began in 2007. Although critics initially suspected it would function similarly to *Aló Presidente*, Morales only sporadically attends as a guest, with other high-ranking government officials appearing on an equal basis. Its influence in setting the public agenda remains limited.

<sup>25</sup> At the beginning Morales insisted, “The capitalist system uses the media against government [...] At the journalists’ level, they like me; it is the owners who are campaigning against my government” (Lauría 2007). The later deterioration of the government relationship with reporters was exemplified in 2009 when Morales asked a reporter during a press conference to prove his newspaper’s accusations against the government.

The 2009 Bolivian constitution recognizes community media and commits the state to “supporting the creation of community media and providing them with equal conditions and opportunities.” Alternative media have in fact experienced significant improvements in their legal and material circumstances. Nevertheless, sectoral organizations have complained about the confinement of community radio to rural areas and about the government’s inaccurate definition of RNRPIO as “community radio” since the network is a top-down-controlled network (AMARC 2009).

Restrictive policies towards commercial media haven’t gotten very far to date, apart from the new constitution’s ban on media monopolies and oligopolies. During the constitutional debates some advances in press regulation were attempted. Nevertheless, following government negotiations with part of the opposition, the new constitution ultimately failed to regulate issues of journalistic ethics, leaving the matter to self-regulation by the press. However, the government did issue a mandate obliging newspapers to grant unionized journalists and press workers a daily space to express their opinions. Now, in the aftermath of Morales’s recent landslide reelection, official voices have announced that there will be a new media law in the near future.

In Argentina, Néstor Kirchner’s rise to power also followed the collapse of the old party system. But in contrast to Chávez or Correa, who came to power without the support of pre-existing party organizations, the then-unknown Patagonian governor rose to the presidency thanks to the Peronist Party, whose capacity for electoral mobilization among low-income segments of the population had survived the crisis. Nevertheless, urged to broaden the party’s support base, Kirchner announced a “renewal of politics” in an appeal to the non-Peronist urban middle class. The dispute over these “political orphans” (Torre 2003) lay at the heart of Kirchner’s conflict with the media, given the presumed exposure of these middle-class “orphans” to the media’s presentation of reality. While it remained limited during Kirchner’s term, the conflict has radicalized during his wife’s subsequent presidency.

The Kirchners’ public statements about the media have been embedded in a wider “national and popular” understanding of recent history related to the Peronist left. According to this loosely revisionist viewpoint, the last dictatorship initiated the “neoliberal” stage, which lasted through the 1990s until the 2001 crisis. After the crisis, and with Kirchner in the presidency, a remobilization of society and a phase of recovered “autonomy of politics” began. In the Kirchners’ view, the media, which they saw as organically linked to the elites in society, had played an essential ideological role through the long era of establishment dominance. The fact that politics had been colonized by “*poderes fácticos*” during these years had been reflected in the public sphere through the dominance of a “technocratic discourse” that discredited every political vision that deviated from market imperatives. The Kirchners’ saw journalism as having being intellectually subordinated to liberal technocratic common sense and as dependent on nonelected powers.



Kirchner portrayed himself as challenging this state of affairs, frequently framing the confrontation as a dispute over representation: the media claimed to represent the public by “doing journalism,” while in reality they were “doing politics” on behalf of the same old minority interests. Against the media’s deceptively neutral account (*relato mediático*) of reality, the executive saw itself as leading a popular majority already aware of the former’s deceptions: “[...] they want to write us down through their newspaper or their media. But they have to realize that we Argentines have already learned to distrust certain things” (Vincent 2009: 14). This governmental perspective began to be present in 2003 and only became radicalized after the 2008 agrarian conflict, during which big media’s coverage was seen to favor protesters. Again, the narrative of a powerful minority colonizing the public sphere was used to initiate a political dispute intended to recover this public sphere for a democratic majority.

The Kirchners have not experimented with regular broadcasting. Instead, they have systematically resorted to controlled events in order to have an impact in noncontrolled media. Ceremonies, inaugurations, or official visits have developed into a routine device for delivering unmediated messages that journalists have baptized “*el atril*” (“the lectern”).<sup>26</sup> The device functions—according to a newspaper account—as follows: in the morning cabinet members indicate the government “line” on radio newsmagazines; later the president uses the lectern to reinforce the topic; and finally, once authorized, the remaining *kirchnerista* leadership goes public with the same line.<sup>27</sup>

In fact, government exerts strict control over government officials acting as sources, while also denying journalistic conventions. As one veteran journalist stressed, during former governments official sources were used to fight factional disputes, “but *kirchnerismo* arrived and things changed; the closed, jealous, compartmentalized style Kirchner imposed modified this game’s rules.”<sup>28</sup> These tactics, together with Kirchner’s ironic dismissals of reporters’ questions as being mandated from the media owners above them, made for an uneasy rapport with press workers.

After the 2008 radicalization of the government–media conflict, the government’s direct-communication strategy began to integrate decentralized tactics. One innovation has been a successful television show, which is aired on the public station, called “678”; it has become a forum where the deconstruction of ideological, corporate, and journalistic biases is presented daily to a mass public. Through its resonance and mobilizing capacity, this format has significantly contributed to the government’s questioning of private media’s credibility. At the same time, a myriad of pro-government bloggers, tweeters, Facebook groups and other web

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<sup>26</sup> The 2001 crisis undoubtedly shaped Kirchner’s communication style. During the 2005 mid-term campaign he declared that governments that do not exercise a “permanent campaign [...] are taken away with the helicopter.” He was referring to the image in the collective memory of De la Rúa’s fall.

<sup>27</sup> *La Nación*, December 14, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Julio Blanck, “Cristina Kirchner renueva la batalla por la construcción de la realidad”, *Clarín* December 1, 2007. Author’s translation.

communities have emerged. Despite accusations of top-down control, the phenomenon seems to represent the relatively autonomous backing of the government by primarily young, urban, and middle-class progressive *kirchnerista* groups.<sup>29</sup>

The 2008 agrarian conflict was also a turning point in terms of media policies in Argentina. Until then no significant expansion of state media had taken place and only timid administrative measures to boost alternative media had been taken. During Kirchner's term—behind the public confrontations—the prevailing attitude towards private media was that of tactical settlements. In contrast to Correa, Kirchner initially chose not to confront the big media groups. Instead, his early rulings prevented the Clarín Group, the biggest media conglomerate, from losing control of its assets to foreign creditors after the 2001 crisis. Shortly afterwards he decreed a 10-year grace period for all television licenses that were about to expire. Later, again favoring Clarín, the government allowed a merger of cable providers that granted the conglomerate a dominant position in national cable markets. Only later, once Cristina Fernández de Kirchner had taken power and after the 2008 agrarian conflict had ended with a defeat for the government in Congress, did the government, politically weakened and with no political support from the middle class to lose, launch a legislative initiative developed by reformist civil society groups, the Law for Audiovisual Communication Services. Though the move was perceived by some as seeking vengeance for big media's backing of agro-industrial interests, it received support from the center and the left, and from legislators.

During the heated months of parliamentary debate and after the law was passed, confrontation between the government and the media further escalated. Enforcement of the law, which has still not begun, would certainly mean that the biggest media groups would be forced to get rid of much of their assets.<sup>30</sup> In fact, the new law severely restricts license numbers, cross-ownership, foreign capital participation, and audience share. It also establishes national production quotas and stipulates spectrum reserves. Furthermore, its implementation would mean the significant expansion of state media and the quantitative multiplication of community and alternative media.

In contrast to all of the above cases, the following group of leftist governments' rise to power did not result from institutional collapses but rather from the game of institutional politics and, therefore, from compromises between politicians and established media players.

What distinguishes the Brazilian government's media discourse—and that of the governments in Uruguay and Chile as well—is that, despite the president's undisputed leadership, government power is shared with a strong party organization. Therefore, governmental discourse does not overlap with presidential discourse, as can be assumed with the above

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Beatriz Sarlo, *Revista Debate*, June 18, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> At the time of writing, the law's regulatory decree is not yet ready, while the filing of judicial complaints by opposition leaders represents a further obstacle to enforcement. The controversy will likely be settled by the Supreme Court.

cases. Although diminished following the *Mensalão* scandal, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) is still a relevant actor in Brasília. Rooted in Brazilian leftist culture and with long-term experience in union struggles, political campaigning, and local government, the party carries a set of shared beliefs about the nature of media institutions and their role in the struggle for power. Within the party's ranks, big media are mainly perceived as class actors. The *paolista* elite newspapers are often termed the "bourgeois press" (Kotscho 2006), a view that reinforces perceptions of biased political coverage.

As part of the political moderation process that led Lula to the presidency in his fourth electoral attempt, harsh internal debates about how to cope with the media took place within the party. In opposition to party hardliners unwilling to satisfy the media's rules of the game, Lula ultimately headed the 2002 campaign with a party-autonomous pragmatic and technocratic approach towards media imperatives<sup>31</sup> (Porto 2003, Miguel 2006). This path conditioned the party's attitude towards the media once in government. Lula and high-ranking *petistas* have been divided between confrontation and appeasement, especially during political crises (Kotscho 2006). Although frequently preceded by verbal escalations, the appeasement strategy has tended to prevail. Lula has maintained his *petista* views about media, but prudential judgment has led him to avoid confrontational tactics in most circumstances.

Nevertheless, Lula himself is a source of inherent tension between government and the press. He has come to represent the man of the *povo* (common people) who has reached the top political position, a position which was previously the exclusive domain of social elites. His arrival symbolized the democratization of politics. Despite policy moderation, Lula's emergence as a national leader reignited a strong sense of "us" and "them" in Brazilian society. His discursive relationship with the media is strongly influenced by the fact that he is highly resented and mistrusted from above and unusually connected and identified with the masses below. Since the beginning of his presidency the elite press has seen "populism" in his direct-communication style; derided his lack of education; and felt persistently irritated by his catchphrase "never before in the history of this country," with which he depicts his presidency as a historical turning point.

Yet after some explosive episodes in his first years, Lula has mostly avoided open confrontation.<sup>32</sup> His relatively sporadic criticism of the press's class bias nevertheless applies the logic of "them" against "us." When he publicly criticizes the media, he usually brings up cases of *distorted* press coverage of social policies. In one such case he pointed out that "an important Brazilian newspaper" had headlined a story covering a government program subsidizing construction materials for poorer people as follows: "*Lula faveliza o Brasil.*" From this

<sup>31</sup> In 2002 Lula appointed the renowned political marketing guru Duda Mendonça.

<sup>32</sup> The confrontation peaked after a *New York Times* correspondent wrote that Brazilians were concerned about Lula's proclivity to alcohol abuse. In addition to an impulsive deportation decision, the government reacted by announcing a bill aiming to institute a journalistic board to regulate the profession. This "declaration of war" ended in appeasement after the entire news media reacted en masse against this "attack on press freedom."

headline he inferred that it was written from the perspective of someone “who has not the slightest notion of what it means for the poorer people [...] to be able to build their own houses.” Another case he frequently cites concerns the elite press’s references to the Bolsa Família Program as “assistentialism” or “clientelism.” This example comes from a resonant and insightful 2008 magazine interview dedicated exclusively to the president’s views on the media and the press.<sup>33</sup> In the interview, which took place at the peak of his popularity, Lula declared his indifference to this media’s ideological character, which he deemed to be part of the “historical behavior” of the Brazilian press. This character, he reasoned, remained unproblematic at the time given that these biased narratives were ineffective in terms of their impact on audiences and readers, since the latter were “intelligent” and able to discern what went beyond factuality. He related this idea of a nonpassive public to present-day media differentiation, which multiplies interpretive capacities. Lula presented himself as having learned about the media’s nature after long, *bitter* experience, seeing it as something a government had to live with. As discussed below, this pretended indifference at the top and confidence in the reception of media messages at the base level is related to active critical communication on the part of the government.

Lula has also utilized the practice of regular presidential broadcasting. *Café com o Presidente* started in 2003 as a six-minute long nationwide radio talk aired twice a month (since 2005 it has aired weekly). In his performances, the president empathizes with the common people regarding their problems, enounces government policy, and interviews popular figures (Trein 2008). Despite the relatively small direct audience, this speech platform remains central to the government’s agenda-setting efforts since news agencies and the press, given the scarcity of other sources, quote from it extensively. Extensive presidential touring is also intended to produce controlled events that have an impact on the noncontrolled media. At the same time, the government keeps all journalists, regardless of their rank and prestige, equally uncertain about who will get access to the source, instead of relying continually on certain journalists as outlets for government messages (Scolese and Nossa 2006).

During Lula’s 2006 reelection campaign, the use of capillary tactics to counteract big media coverage multiplied. Numerous NGOs linked to the PT organized viewings of *Citizen Cane* in poor suburban neighborhoods. These showings were followed by debates which aimed to draw parallels to the Brazilian media. Meanwhile, the role of deconstructing media coverage was assumed by a number of pro-Lula Internet activists who ran websites known as “watchblogs” (De Lima 2007, Malini 2007).

When he began his second term, Lula announced the creation of a federal public television station. Until then public television had only existed at the state level. He defended the project on the basis of the need to counterbalance market logic and to promote debates that commercial television was not interested in. By the end of 2007 the *Empresa Brasil de Comu-*

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with *Piauí* magazine, December 2008, online: <[www.info.planalto.gov.br/exec/inf\\_entrevistasdata.cfm](http://www.info.planalto.gov.br/exec/inf_entrevistasdata.cfm)> (20 April 2010).

nicação had been created. In order to rebut press critiques regarding the station's dependence on the Ministry of Communications, an advisory board of independent personalities was appointed and renowned journalists and anchors were hired. However, the resignation of one of the journalists and one of the board members shortly thereafter on grounds of interference led to renewed and loud criticism on the part of the press.

Private media regulation has been limited in Brazil. Although *petistas* and other leftist allies shared such an agenda, Lula's path to Brasilia was paved by tactical settlements with the media, especially with the Globo Group (Kotscho 2006, Miguel 2006). Regulatory initiatives have faced obstacles stemming from big media—highly influential in terms of public opinion—and its interests, which are intertwined in complex ways with political interests nested in parliament, an arena where government needs to forge alliances to achieve majorities.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, since 2003 Congress has discussed several proposed bills which would regulate media industries. These have been met with stiff political and business community opposition (Lins da Silva 2009). In contrast to regulatory efforts in areas such as public television and production quota policies, where the government has found allies and room to maneuver,<sup>35</sup> in private sector regulation the PT has faced an impasse. This limitation has collided with the demands of, and frustrated, the party's core constituencies. In late 2009 the government tried to contain the resulting internal pressure by organizing a Federal Conference of Communications (Confecom) intended to generate consensus on media democratization issues. The results of these debates were to be the basis for a new general legislation that the government promised to promote in Congress. However, a last minute defection by most of the big media representatives has made the initiative's success doubtful, especially given that it is an election year.

Brazil also deviates from the expectations of progressive groups regarding community media policy. Indeed, considering the previous status quo in the country, Brazil exhibits the worst performance of the leftist Latin American governments. Compared to its predecessor, Lula's government has, according to critics, caused the increased criminalization of community broadcasters while slowing down the pace of operator authorizations. The government has also been accused of conferring media licenses intended for genuine civil society groups to local political bosses (AMARC 2009: 140-1). Again, the government's compromises with established powers seem to explain the shift in its practices. Its initial alliances with the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra's (MST) landless peasants, with ecological groups, and with other social movements have shifted towards more pragmatic electoral and parliamentary alliances with traditional local political leaders as it has attempted to maintain its ability to govern.

<sup>34</sup> Not only do media industries have strong lobbies in political arenas, but politicians themselves also own approximately 25 percent of the television channels, mostly regional stations, that retransmit big-media programming.

<sup>35</sup> New legislation stipulates national production quotas. Brazilian cultural nationalism, though, is not an exclusive feature of the left. Moreover, the Globo Group, the biggest media-content industry, has backed these initiatives.

Though Tabaré Vázquez and other members of the cabinet in Uruguay's leftist government periodically confront the media, their public criticism is generally the standard nonideological repertoire of complaints: accusations of being oppositional or overemphasizing "bad news." However, as is the case with the PT, the constitutive party organizations of the governing Frente Amplio (FA) share a set of critical ideas about media and communication; these ideas are "heir to a Latin American leftist tradition" (Moreira and Vincent 2010). In its policy programs, the coalition stresses the excessive concentration and discourse dominance of the commercially oriented media, and the need for the democratization of voice through the fostering of public and community media.

Although practices such as regular broadcasting have not been used in Uruguay, presidential communication is usually limited to speeches and press releases. Indeed, Vázquez generally avoids interviews, press conferences, or other forms of regular contact with the press (Vincent and Moreira 2010). On the other hand, the coalition parties' strong base-level organizations have provided channels for decentralized criticism of big media, especially during elections.

Uruguay's leftist government has neither innovated in the realm of state media nor challenged the private media's dominance. During its first term, the FA government seems, like its Brazilian counterpart, to have felt constrained. Though it had historically denounced collusion between big broadcasters and traditional parties, once in power and after some clashes, it accommodated the media by not touching the interests of the television-owner families in exchange for not-too-aggressive coverage (Moreira and Vincent 2010). It was in the domain of alternative media that the government instead advanced its progressive agenda. In 2006 Uruguay sanctioned the Community Radio Service Law, which significantly enhanced the standing of community operators (AMARC 2009).

Overt media-critical discourse appears to have been almost absent on the part of the recent leftist Chilean governments. Only occasionally did socialist president Bachelet allude to newscasts' overemphasis on crime or their gender biases as serving rightist agendas. Chile seems to be the clearest counterpoint to Venezuela when one considers how governments have gone public with criticism of the media. A brief example depicts this well: In 2005, a front-page article in the conservative and influential *El Mercurio* denounced governmental nepotism and corruption. Socialist president Ricardo Lagos reacted by writing a letter to Agustín Edwards, the editor, in which he plainly accused the newspaper of having anti-democratic intentions. Significantly, it was a private letter and was not intended for publication. Nevertheless, and also significantly, it was the newspaper's editor who sought public confrontation by publishing the letter. Chile also contrasts with Brazil and Uruguay in that the media discourse at the governmental party or coalition level relies on standard liberal-democratic conceptions of the media. To the *Concertacionista* elites democratization has bene-

fited from the depoliticization of public opinion, which has been reinforced by the deregulated media market.<sup>36</sup>

Chile's leftist governments have not challenged the existing public-private balance in the media landscape. The inherited neoliberal regulatory scheme, which has framed the media purely in terms of market activity, has not been challenged by the Concertación (Lugo Ocando 2008). To critics on the left, the only politics in the media realm has been "no politics" (Herrera Campos 2007). This inability to challenge the media landscape has also been reflected in the realm of community media. The neglect of these institutions has only recently started to be reversed with a new law that merely softens the state's formerly repressive approach to them. For broadcaster organizations, this "improvement" just puts the worst Latin American legislation on community radio (Chile) on par with the second worst (Brazil) (AMARC 2009: 161). In sum, if Venezuela lies at one extreme of a continuum that represents the degree of institutional constraints, Chile lies at the opposite extreme. The Chilean socialists' path to government has been one of submission to post-authoritarian institutional rules and compromise with established political and social actors.

#### **4. Conclusion: The Media Activism of Latin America's Leftist Governments in Context**

The commercialization of media systems and the diffusion of US-inspired professional ideology in journalism have resulted in increased distance between politics and newsrooms around the world. As a consequence of this distance, media coverage of governments has become increasingly critical and hostile. Simultaneously, governments have come to feel increasingly dependent on positive media portrayals in order to mobilize public opinion, mainly due to the decline of party-political identities (Hallin and Mancini 2004, Helms 2008).

This new context, where media appear to affect the political process with their own logic, seems to have engendered a worldwide increase in governmental media activities. Following the American example, which has long had a public relations-centered presidency, executives make efforts to counteract contemporary news media outlets' self-portrayal as the watchdogs of state affairs on behalf of society. This counteroffensive in the public sphere can be seen, for example, in the growth of new professional roles and task forces related to public communication and media relations within governments; it can also be seen in the routinization of rationalized media-relations practices that, through expertise, anticipate journalists' institutional needs so as to mesh with media outlets' news agendas and generate news coverage (Gaber 2000, Negrine et al. 2007).

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<sup>36</sup> Significantly, former left-wing intellectuals who served as media advisors to the Concertación have converted to mainstream liberalism. In their view, the modernization of the media system, triggered by Pinochet's structural reforms, was key to democratic consolidation given the prevalence of a moderating market logic over political or ideological impulses (Tironi and Sunkel 1993).

To what extent do these trends explain the media activism of Latin America's leftist governments? Though some traditional features of politics-media relationships remain, politicians are faced with an increasingly assertive and autonomous news media (Waisbord 2000, Hughes 2006). The perception of media outlets as influential and politically decisive institutions has grown dramatically among political elites in the region. According to Ruiz (2010), this (mis-) conception of media power explains the general trend of governments developing aggressive strategies against media-colonized politics. In his view, the overstated perception of media power originates in the distinctive timing of political and media change in Latin America: democratization coincided with a dramatic media revolution. During the lost decade of the 1980s and the neoliberal 1990s, the media kept expanding their influence while political actors continually lost public favor. According to this perspective, it is the particular timing of these two contrasting changes, not ideology, that explains the exaggerated governmental responses to the media. This account may explain the intensity of governmental responses, but, while not incorrect, it misses the qualitative distinctiveness of the cases described in this paper.

Government executives oriented to Western PR practices do not—though they undoubtedly might wish to (Cook 1998: 83-4)—*bypass* journalism in their public communications. Latin American leftist governments' practices of systematically bypassing journalism through direct communication and "trench wars" question the liberal assumptions (neutrality, watchdog role, etc.) that underlie journalism. This type of questioning is built into a particular ideological interpretative scheme. However, critics have generally ascribed this questioning to extra-ideological factors. Media confrontation and direct communication have been linked to populist resurgence. Defined as political interpellations where leaders present themselves as the true expression of the people, populist appeals can be framed according to leftist or rightist worldviews (Waisbord 2003). For empirical proof of this contention, observers point to the analogous direct-communication practices and televised narratives undertaken by leftist Hugo Chávez and rightist Álvaro Uribe (Rincón 2008).

Populist appeals claim to represent the people as a whole, without mediation. The populist standpoint is always dualistic. It is a narrative of the people as opposed and oppressed by an enemy: a minority of the privileged, an oligarchy. This fact leaves no room for the liberal understanding of the role of the press. A press that releases a discordant voice can't be anything but the expression of that oligarchy, or whatever rhetorical figure is used as the enemy of the people. This understanding of politics places the press in a partisan role incompatible with liberal assumptions. Moreover, when the populists question the worldview offered by the contemporary media, they deny—and thereby dispute—the latter's claim to represent society. Indeed, present-day populists clash with the media given the fact that present-day media, in their commercially oriented attempts to maximize their audience, also exert a sort of populist appeal (Waisbord 2003).

According to this view of the relationship between populism and the media, the practice of pointing at the illusory character of media "independence" and unveiling the interests behind



the media is an attribute of populism rather than leftism. But while populism may explain the anti-political and anti-establishment features of ideologically diverse discourses, focusing solely on populism fails to illuminate some of the other traits of the country cases described above. Populism may explain presidents' centralized direct-communication strategies, but it does not account for the simultaneous capillary practice of subverting big media messages at the base level. The decentralized capillary practices depend on the existence of militants, adherents, enthusiast youngsters, or bloggers who identify with a cause driven by a leftist identity, not simply by populist appeals. Neither does populism provide a plausible explanation of market-alternative media policies. These are founded on leftist ideas about the media's role in democratic societies. These last two ideas point to a particular characteristic of the new Latin American left: its discomfort with and its challenging of the new media landscapes dominated by big business.<sup>37</sup> This ideological galvanization, which has permeated government agendas where the left has come to power, may be explained by a factor already mentioned above: the media's dramatic expansion coincided with the neoliberal wave in Latin America. Consequently, it has been easy for politicians to associate big media with neoliberalism. Given the cohesive role of anti-neoliberalism and its importance in the resurgence of the left's popularity after the pro-market orthodoxy failed to meet public expectations, the antagonism between the media and leftist governments in Latin America is hardly surprising.

Anti-neoliberalism has revitalized a leftist core of critical ideas about press and media that have permeated government personnel and coalitions. These ideas constitute a blend of views with diverse origins. In part, critical portrayals of the liberal press stemming from former leftist, reformist, or populist national experiences seem to have reemerged, as in the case of Argentina's leftist Peronist culture. At the same time, a region-wide intellectual tradition of critical communication from the 1960s and 1970s—inspired by the so-called NOMIC (New World Order for Information and Communication), an agenda derived from the 1980 UNESCO-sponsored McBride report criticizing informational and access inequalities that favored developed countries—has also reemerged. These revived traditions have mixed with more recent media critiques linked to new internationalist grassroots perspectives that are circulating in region-wide alternative publications, forums, and activist networks<sup>38</sup> (Sel 2009: 24-29). Aram Aharonian, the veteran Uruguayan journalist who conceived of the Telesur project, best exemplifies the presence of this vision within the personnel and policies of the various governments. To him, the station's slogan, "Our North is the South," expresses the critical-communication tradition's message of fighting the North's informational hegemony. As

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<sup>37</sup> In contrast to Europe, where public media exist as a counterbalancing force, commercial logics have dominated Latin America's media landscapes since neoliberal deregulation. This contrast may account for the respective responses of the leftist camps on each continent.

<sup>38</sup> The Porto Alegre Forum and the Spanish editions of *Le Monde Diplomatique* are two prominent examples where the critical views of figures such as Noam Chomsky and Ignacio Ramonet, the latter's general editor and a global media activist, are disseminated.

chairman of the station he was completely devoted, sometimes even against the will of the Venezuelan administration, to creating an alternative to CNN and to the media portrayals that reflected "us through the eyes of others"<sup>39</sup> (Kozloff 2006: 125).

In addition to (or even reinforcing) ideological tradition, there is some evidence to suggest that the "Chavista experience" has also exerted some weight as a meaningful example of alternative media practices for the leftist governments that came to power after it.<sup>40</sup> The diffusion of the Venezuelan practices—which is due to new media technologies and international media coverage, both of which have made the country's experiences more visible to its neighbors—may have turned into a reciprocal feedback loop facilitating mutual learning. On the other hand, this diffusion has not functioned through imitation alone. Indeed, the Bolivarian government has had an active policy of spreading alternative media discourses and practices in Latin America, as the examples of Telesur and Venezuela's logistical and financial support for alternative media illustrate.

In sum, this paper has presented the picture of a novel governmental media activism on the part of leftist governments in Latin America—a picture emerging from a properly articulated view of both their communication practices and their media policies. This activism, as we have seen, is not independent from the revitalization of media-critical leftist perspectives in Latin American civil society. The extent to which these governments' leftist agendas are ideologically sincere or merely the opportunistic instrumentalization of such moods in society is a question that worries both the governments' foes and some of the social movements engaged in media reform. It is also a question which this article cannot answer. Yet whatever the answer, it does not affect the phenomenon of Latin American governments' leftist media activism itself.

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<sup>39</sup> In an article published on the Spanish leftist website *rebelión.org*, Aharonian explicitly roots Telesur in the critical traditions mentioned above, online: <[www.rebelion.org/noticias/2006/8/36669.pdf](http://www.rebelion.org/noticias/2006/8/36669.pdf)> (April 2010).

<sup>40</sup> A former press advisor to the Kirchners emphasized in a 2008 interview with this paper's author that both believe that lessons have to be learned from developments in the relationship between government and media in Venezuela.

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