



**New Media: The Press Freedom Dimension  
Challenges and Opportunities of New Media for Press Freedom  
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**New Media in Latin America:**

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I have never seen a coup d'état manual in Latin America. But if there was one it would say that after or while seizing or attacking the presidential palace and other strategic points in the capital city, the military should also send troops to the broadcast towers and studios, and to the newsrooms. That was routine in Latin American coups. Censorship must be established right away for the coup to succeed. And usually it was so effective that the dictator would not relinquish it even when he was so powerful that it became useless. Censorship was only replaced by self-censorship, which is the worst form of censorship.

Covering coups and dictatorships in Latin America for years, I have always been amazed by the effectiveness of censorship. Yes, there was the word of mouth, there were some international radio stations that helped to spread other what was really going on, but censorship and propaganda were very effective. People really did not know what was going on in their own countries, even when those facts had been in the headlines abroad.

When we examine the impact of new media on Freedom of the Press in Latin America, we should remember how traditional media in the region have been affected throughout history by those coups, which brought dictatorship, censorship, self-censorship, press controls, corruption, manipulation, propaganda, monopolies and an incredible concentration of ownership in a few hands. In addition to all of that, journalists who dared to dissent would often suffer personally, by way of prison, torture, kidnapping and even assassination. We must also remember how often the media fought for democracy, but also

how often the media did not fight because they were part of or in collusion with the antidemocratic forces.

The emergence of the Internet, as part of the Digital Revolution that is changing the world, coincided with an unprecedented wave of democracy in Latin America. When I was covering those coups, in the 70s and 80s, most of the region was suffering the consequences of dictatorships and direct or indirect censorship that contributed to prevent economic and social development. Democracy has not changed significantly the economic and social problems of the region, but the flow of information and ideas has improved a lot, despite all the problems.

The growth of Internet in the region has been slower than in the developed world, and it is usually shown as a classic example of the digital divide. The statistics indicate that only 16 per cent of the Latin Americans are Internet users. That percentage is exactly the same as the average penetration of Internet among the world population. It pales however, in comparison with the 70% Internet penetration of the United States and Canada, for example.

This reduced Internet penetration can mislead the evaluation of the importance of the medium and the outreach of online journalism in the region. The 26 million users in Brazil or the 20 million users in Mexico represent only 13 per cent or 19 per cent respectively in each of those countries. The percentage could be low, but the absolute number is high and offers enough critical mass for a significant audience that is growing fast and benefiting from the new ways of disseminating and receiving news and information. In the poorest countries of the region, such as Honduras, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Paraguay, for instance, percentage of the population with access and the absolute numbers of users are very low and the infrastructure very bad.

Despite all limitations, Latin America counts on a dynamic, creative and increasingly powerful online journalism that has already extended the audience of the traditional media that ventured in the digital world. All the newspapers in the region that I know have more unique visitors per month in their Web sites than the daily circulation of the print edition. And some of them have or are close to having more unique users per day than daily circulation.

In the countries with smaller Internet penetration, the real number of users is much bigger than what is revealed by the statistics because of the widespread use of public places that charge very little money to offer access to the Internet. Although those cybercafes or public booths by and large are not used for news consumption, the fact is that millions of people who do not have their own access to the Internet are becoming citizens of the virtual world and potential news consumers, by paying usually less than half a dollar per hour of access.

As in other parts of the world, new media in Latin America mean more freedom of expression and more freedom of the press. As in the rest of the world, Latin

Americans have been experimenting with new ways to communicate, to form communities and to break with the privileges of the traditional media. There is no spectacular example that I am aware of, there is no OhMyNews.com like the South Korean phenomenon, but there are many examples that it has become much more difficult to stop information to flow freely.

In 1999, when a judge banned the book a young journalist had published on corruption in the courts of Chile and ordered her arrest, the only thing he achieved was to get many more readers for the book. The text rapidly found its way to the Internet, and was posted abroad, out of the reach of the Chilean courts, but easily available for Chileans with access. The example was followed in other cases of gag order or when the media was not interested in publishing certain issues.

Recently, when the press in Peru was reluctant and did not publish a story about a son the president had out of his matrimony, Peruvian bloggers spread the word so effectively that the press had no remedy but to cover the case. The President eventually came out and recognized his son's rights. The blogs may not be as important in the region as it is in other latitudes, but in some countries they are proliferating rapidly and having an impact on journalism and on public life.

In Brazil, for example, Ricardo Noblat, a former newspaper editor and political columnist, was unemployed in 2005 when he started to dedicate his time to cover politics to his blog. A few months later, during a political crisis, his audience was equivalent to the circulation of the big newspapers and the Internet provider offered to pay him a salary, since he was driving so much audience to their portal. Noblat's blog moved eventually to the Web site of one of largest newspapers of Brazil and then moved again to another paper.

It is an interesting case to illustrate the impact of new media on the Freedom of the Press. First, it showed that journalism is not a monopoly of media companies anymore, since a solitary can use his talent to launch his own media outlet and garner an audience. It also showed that the traditional media were not sleeping or ignoring their surroundings. After an initial bout of skepticism, they were able to adopt the blog style (some of the best print columnists became bloggers) and to open their doors to absorb successful bloggers, as in the case of Noblat.

Online journalism is still incipient in most of Latin America, but it is growing fast both in the news production and in building up audience, in spite of the limitations imposed by the digital divide and the 16 per cent Internet penetration. We can just lament that the glass is 84 per cent empty and be pessimistic about the importance of new media in the hemisphere. Or you can celebrate that we already have 16 per cent of the glass full, which offers great opportunities for the dissemination of news and information, and also for new forms of civic participation.

Latin American journalists start to recognize that journalism is not a one way route anymore and that people nowadays want to read but also want to be read. The openness of the media to let their audience participate more and more by way of forums, commentaries and blogs enrich the Freedom of the Press as a civic value. It now encompasses not only the right to freely print what journalists want to say and inform, but also to open channels for the citizens in general to do the same. And of course, it is not only text. Photos and videos from the audience are finding their way to the Web sites of traditional media, creating a new dynamic that may debilitate the power the press had before. But it certainly gives journalism a chance to survive by becoming more inclusive, more connected with the communities it serves and more open to let transform its work into a conversation – as preached by the civic journalism movement.

This empowerment of the citizenry through its participation in the journalistic process extends to another phenomenon that is growing especially in South America: the proliferation of media watchers, such as the Observatorio da Imprensa (Press Observatory) in Brazil and other “media observatories” in other countries. Traditionally, the press has talked about everything, but has been reluctant to talk about herself, about her role and especially about her mistakes. The new media have made it possible for the watchdogs in the press to come more and more under the scrutiny of other watchdogs, from the citizenry in general, who found new channels to communicate with the media.

There are many other new media dimensions in Latin America’s Press Freedom, including opportunities for a better coordination among Press Freedom advocates and one that I would like to emphasize as my last point: the Internet has created opportunities for continuous education of journalists interested in improving their knowledge and the quality of their work and their contribution to the society at large.

At the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas at the University of Texas at Austin, the Internet is in the center of our activities to work with journalists from Latin America and the Caribbean. We combine professional training with organizational capacity building to help journalists who are interested in improving the standards of journalism in their countries to create their own organizations dedicated to that end. Our work has resulted in the creation or strengthening of a new generation of journalists’ organizations committed to democracy, Freedom of Expression, Freedom of the Press, and the ethical principles of independent and professional journalism.

More than 2,500 journalists from Latin America participate in email discussions in several listservs that we host at the University of Texas at Austin. It was in one of these lists that hundreds of journalists from Mexico articulated a couple of years ago the first national protest against violence on journalists that had happened in Mexico. Another of those listservs has been used by provincial journalists from Peru, from the Amazon region to the highlands of the Andean mountains to

organize workshops and seminars that gave them unprecedented opportunities to improve their professional skills and understand complex issues. In Brazil, the discussion led to training in how to cover issues like organized crime and money laundering, but also to teach how to use Computer-Assisted Reporting Techniques. And recently in Argentina, the email discussions we sponsor and stimulate resulted in a fascinating debate on the elaboration of a code of ethics that eventually was signed by hundreds of journalist.

We also use the Internet to distribute to more than 10,000 journalists a trilingual newsletter with the headlines of news on journalism in the Americas to raise the awareness of issues related to Press Freedom and professional development of journalists.

But maybe the most important project for the Knight Center right now is a Distance Learning project that has already reached hundreds of journalists from virtually all Latin American and Caribbean countries with online courses of four to six weeks. The multimedia platform we use was built on open source software and we are now transferring the know how to the local organizations. At this very moment, we are conducting a course on Investigative Journalism, taught by a journalist in Southern Argentina and taken by 108 journalists from almost all countries of Latin America.

Journalists must take advantage of the opportunities created by new media, but it is very important that they are able keep the values and principles of traditional journalism and live up to their responsibilities in democratic societies. At the Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, we are trying to help journalists to improve their work and to keep alive those values and principles of independent journalism. We hope that the new media offer antidotes for the eradication of the kinds of information blackouts, censorship and self-censorships that we had in Latin America during those years when I was covering coups and military dictatorships in the region. The new media pose new challenges for journalists and new problems, but I believe they expand the Freedom of Expression and give a new dimension to the Freedom of the Press.