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CYBERTARIANISM FURTHER EXPOSED: CHILE, COLOMBIA, MEXICO, AND THE COVID CONJUNCTURE

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(Routledge 2018). *Violence* is in press with Routledge.
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ABSTRACT

Chile, Colombia, and Mexico have long been at the heart of neoliberal experimentation and cybertarian fantasy. The former has denuded their ability to meet the needs of the citizenry in general, the latter to provide a democratic media. The contemporary pandemic has put these deregulated, privatized economies under particular strain—market solutions to social problems have proven dramatically, drastically, predictably inefficient. In the sphere of education, the isolation of school pupils and workers, mandated in the interest of public health, has driven a return to public broadcasting. Combined with mass public agitation and media-reform movements, that provides hope for a new landscape.

KEYWORDS

Neoliberalism, cybertarianism, schooling, Covid, Chile, Colombia, Mexico

This essay addresses the impact of Covid-19 on three cultural and economic powerhouses of South and North America—Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. Each has adopted neoliberal economic strategies and media policies over the last thirty to forty years, via an unprecedented deregulation of industry and subsequent consolidation of oligarchic and oligopolistic power.

The history of the future is always written in its past, AKA our present, just as the history of the past is written in its future. Our present is often inscribed in ways that neglect those lessons. As a consequence, some political-economic context is needed in order to understand their experiences of the Covid conjuncture, lest presentism overwhelm our analysis. In addition, those who know only media policy are fated to understand neither policy nor media, let alone their overlap. And three issues in particular are often sidestepped in the dominant discourse of media policy. Sometimes loudly, sometimes softly, they stalk any discussion of Latin American media: inequality, neoliberalism, and cybertarianism.

CONTEXT

Latin America's pattern of imperialism and freedom differs from the rest of the world. It is both the most and the least postcolonial part of the globe. Iberian invasion devastated the region for centuries until it was overthrown in the early 1800s. As a consequence, all three countries analysed here won their freedom before Western European and US colonialism were fully established elsewhere. But they were also occupied for longer than most of those regions, and had different patterns of conquest, immigration, slavery, intermarriage, and rape (Bulmer-Thomas, 2014). The violence of the *conquista* amplified following independence, as new *criollo* rulers sought to take over, govern, and exploit territory, confirming their political-economic future.

Chile, Colombia, and Mexico show the lineaments of their tumultuous invasion and independence, and elites forged from that unique history (Allier-Montaño and Crenzel, 2015). Each is dogged by powerful, longstanding political, economic, and cultural oligarchies and

oligopolies; manifest, manifold corruption; intense and unremitting racism operating within the ideology of *mestizaje*; profound religiosity, be it Catholic or evangelical; and the forever looming, forbidding, inciting, prescribing, and above all, intervening presence of the United States (Sieder, 2002; Wade *et al.*, 2014; Paschel, 2016; Ramos de Balcarce and Malnis de Bestani, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2014; McPherson, 2016).

In the contemporary era, all three have been convulsed by political conflict: a lengthy oppressive dictatorship in Chile; six decades of conflict that saw hundreds of thousand killed and millions displaced in Colombia; and a century of authoritarian democracy in Mexico followed by intensifying *narco*-violence, linked to Colombian supply, Chinese chemistry, and Euro-Gringo demand/prohibition.

Latin America pursued nationalist projects of import-substitution industrialization from the 1930s through the 1970s (Cárdenas *et al.*, 2000). But these three nations came to share with their noisy northern neighbors and Western European governing classes a taste for two interrelated fantasies—ironic, iconic tools of governments and corporations alike—neoliberalism and cybertarianism. They obediently liberalized, deregulated, and privatized, satisfying domestic oligarchs and Northern masters (Rodrik 2007: 20). Each stands ready and able to help meet the world’s economic needs, to focus on export-oriented industries and labor-market restructuring rather than guaranteed income, agrarian reform, or job creation (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019).

How was this intellectual/policy transformation achieved, and how is it reproduced? As a consequence of punishments dished out by financial institutions and international organizations, deregulatory logic has prevailed for fifty years. Elites have sent their “brightest” sons and daughters to US graduate school for indoctrination in factor endowments, monetarism, de-democratization, and anti-Marxism—and continue to do so (Offner, 2019). The most notorious group was the ‘Chicago Boys,’ neoclassical Chilean economists who did obeisant doctorates at the University of Chicago in the service of

Friedmanite and Beckerian brutality before returning home to preside over the decimation of a fleeting socialism's legacy (Délano and Traslaviña, 1989). Similar trajectories apply in Colombia and Mexico. From Washington to Yale and back again, self-serving, self-dealing technocrats purr along with the pride of neoliberal lions (North and Clark, 2018; for an exemplification as per the passingly fashionable notion of the "Orange Economy," see Buitrago Restrepo and Duque Márquez, 2013, co-authored by Colombia's President during his days as a dutiful DC chorine; Morales, 2020). On return, these children of the oligarchy assume positions of enormous influence, forwarding 'policy-based evidence' while claiming to be animated by 'evidence-based policy' (Marmot, 2004).

What has been the upshot of that history? Waves of fixed capital formation investment and contraction cycle with international demand for commodities. Public works have generally been undertaken to enable capital or manage environmental catastrophe. Neoliberal policies have slowed growth, developed the informal sector, and generated ever-greater inequality. Underemployment, unemployment, and disinvestment in social-security systems have been exacerbated.

The effect on Chile was a so-called economic miracle that was nothing of the kind. Under the democratically-elected socialist Salvador Allende, unemployment had been 4.3%. Under the neoliberal dictator/Chicago Boys patron Augusto Pinochet, it reached 22%. Real wages decreased by 40% and poverty doubled (Palast, 2003: 201; Maira, 2002: 83-84). Despite lengthy economic growth, and virtually zero inflation, Colombia has half its people living below the poverty line, compared to a third in 1980. The nation's elite received a fifth of all national income between 1990 and 2010 (Piketty, 2014: 327). During the Duque Presidency, corporate taxes and surcharges have plunged from 40% to 33% and regressive indirect taxation soared to 19% (Hellinger, 2015: 326; International Monetary Fund, 2019; Economist Intelligence Unit, 2019). In Mexico, ten percent of families hold 70% of the nation's wealth, with

just one percent controlling 40% of the money.¹ Inevitably and inexorably, neoliberal dogma has aided the wealthy at the expense of the poor.

Needless to say, the local and visiting elites who benefit from those policy shibboleths via, shall we say, “discretionary” commitments to legality. Corruption is endemic.² In Chile and Colombia, a nexus of cocaine, violence, and neoliberalism forges ‘a model and a mythology of development whilst waging a phony war on drugs and drug dealers who have been incorporated into, and/or deployed by, elites in their genuine wars to dispossess rural citizens’ (Fine and Durán Ortiz, 2016: 14). New fractions of capital have exploited the financial sector’s invention of monetary instruments to launder plunder (Giraldo Durán and Álvarez de Castillo, 2018).

Bloody socio-environmental conflicts have catalyzed across deregulated mining, agribusiness, and tourism. Over the last decade and a half, more environmental defenders have been killed than British and Australian soldiers have died in US wars (Butt *et al.*, 2019). Many more were tossed into jail or threatened. All had dared to question rapacious land use by the extractive industries. They became victims of a vicious amalgam of the state, contract assassins, and private security forces (Global Witness, 2019; Puello Sarabia and Ardila Palacio, 2019). The lack of truly independent judiciaries and the separation of powers has provided cover for these human-rights violations (Whitten-Woodring, 2009).

In the area of healthcare, most of Latin America has embarked on neoliberal marketization over the last three decades. The originary fantasy was that capital would operate more efficiently and effectively than the state, maximizing coverage and minimizing inequality of access and utilization of health services. Colombia has been the “model.” Hospitals compete to sell their wares and become

¹ <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2017/05/distribucion-riqueza-desigualdad-cepal/>

² <https://aristeguinoicias.com/2803/mexico/el-fracaso-del-neoliberalismo-en-mexico-articulo-de-carlos-herrera-de-la-fuente/>

freestanding businesses. They receive supply subsidies from the state in place of the demand subsidies that once assisted patients directly. The system has dual insurance plans: a contributory one, which is funded mandatorily by public and private employees in the formal sector, and a subsidized one, which draws on those contributions and general revenue to cover the unwaged and those in the informal sector. The result? Long delays, denial of service, high out-of-pocket costs, and ‘raging inequities’ (Webster, 2012). Forty percent of the country’s public hospitals were close to financial collapse in 2012, putting ten million patients at risk. Progressives blame this on the profit-centered nature of healthcare (Guzmán Urrea, 2016); neoliberals on labor (Giménez *et al.*, 2019). Those pesky workers...

MEDIA

South America’s mythic liberator Simón Bolívar famously called for ‘freedom of the press.’ He regarded independent journalism as part of ‘all that is sublime in politics’; a cornerstone of autonomy from Spain (2003: 21, 42, 73). But whereas countries that experienced later forms of Euro-imperialism developed statist radio and television propaganda, public-service broadcasting, or a blend of both before and after independence, Latin American media have been weighted in favor of private interests. In part this was because they were free of colonialism long before the advent of radio, in part because newspaper owners quickly and easily moved into the audiovisual realm.

In the case of regional dictatorships curated by Washington, for example Brazil or Chile, or nominally democratic authoritarian oligarchies, as per Colombia and Mexico, this heritage did not make for the open debate putatively associated with capitalism. Rather, it consolidated power elites, imbricating political regimes with media proprietorship. For example, Colombia’s dynastic history finds many presidents directly linked to the media, as reporters, owners, or family legatees (Rathbone, 2013). And ideological *idées fixes* are indexically sticky: for instance, longitudinal content analyses of Colombian news and current-affairs television disclose that what began in the 1960s as programming dedicated to transcendental reactionary ideas—love of

country, democracy, republicanism, morality, progress, and development—was gradually displaced by material stories of violence, insurrection, insecurity, and a failed state (Narvez Montoya and Romero Pena, 2017). Hope-filled fantasy was eroded by a torrent of hopeless resignation mixed with shock.

In keeping with their heady embrace of neoliberal dogma, all three countries discussed here have deregulated radio and television over the last thirty years, crushing whatever public initiative existed. They have also enthusiastically embraced cybertarianism, the quaint but pervasive libertarian faith that the newer media will return us to Eden, an imaginary world of innocence and pure communication (Miller, 2000, 2009, 2016). True believers invest with unparalleled gusto in Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, evolutionary economics, and industry policy, producing a ‘literature of the eighth day, the day after Genesis’ (Carey, 2005). *Bourgeois* economists see these benefits spreading worldwide, energizing markets in the Global South, guaranteeing ‘the complete elimination of waste,’ and massively reducing poverty and corruption (Jensen, 2007). A utopian alchemy of truth and beauty endows the internet with magical powers that allow users to transcend geography, sovereignty, and poverty (Ogan *et al.*, 2009). This magic is said to make consumers into producers, free the disabled from confinement, encourage new subjectivities, reward intellect and competitiveness, link people across cultures, and allow billions of flowers to bloom in a veritable post-political cornucopia.

The International Telecommunications Union notes (and promotes) the growing importance of mobile communication for economic growth in Latin America (2018: 4). But by its own reckoning, there is immense variation in smartphone ownership, access to networks, and affordable, fast, reliable connections (2018: 104-06 and 125-30; also see lvarez, 2014; Bianchi, 2015). Television is assumed to be a medium in transition that is soon to disappear. But in Latin America, as elsewhere, there is precious little evidence to support such a contention. TV, a grand warehouse of culture, is in transition, demonstrating its adaptability for the umpteenth time. Latin Americans are watching more television than ever, and in a way that is about phenomenological collectivity as opposed to the physically,

psychically individuated model of new technologies that pervades the Global North (Orozco and Miller, 2017).

Embracing the internet as the salvation of all things bright and beautiful in an otherwise cruel world is especially odd in large, relatively poor countries with sizeable rural populations for whom high-quality digital services are as far-distant as serious civil-society *entrée* to politics. The slow dismantling of governmental media capacities has a clear *connection* to the prevailing cybertarian discourse of government and corporate elites and academic chorines in urban centers; and just as clear a *disconnection* from the realities of impoverished rural life.

THE CONJUNCTURE

Neoliberalism left most of Latin America in a poor state to manage the pandemic, the exceptions being Cuba (a socialist state) and Uruguay (until recently a social-democratic one). At the time of writing (September 2020), the region provides five of the world's top ten countries in numbers of infections, with 8.8 million confirmed cases and over 325,000 deaths (Horton, 2020).³

In Chile, 450,000 people have been infected and more than 12,000 have perished out of a population of 18 million.⁴ Colombia's fifty million resident have suffered close to 800,000 infections and 25,000 deaths.⁵ At least 75,000 Mexicans have died, though many estimates postulate a much larger figure. It has the world's fourth highest number of deaths after India and ranks second per hundred thousand inhabitants. This in a country with a population of 130 million. It is estimated that about 70% of those deaths are related to comorbidities, such as hypertension, obesity, and diabetes.⁶ Those conditions have radically increased with neoliberalism's industrialization of food and

³ Of course, testing regimes vary wildly in their thoroughness.

⁴ <https://www.gob.cl/coronavirus/cifrasoficiales/>.

⁵ <https://www.eltiempo.com/salud/coronavirus-en-colombia-muertes-y-contagios-23-de-septiembre-del-2020-539474>

⁶ <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2020/07/obesidad-y-muertes-por-covid-salud-llama-a-un-cambio-radical-de-alimentacion/>

subsequent changes in the labour market, 51% of which is informal. The current health crisis could see 60% of people fall into poverty.⁷ In addition, since the pandemic hit, new records are being set in Mexico for assassinations, driven by *narco* rivalry, misogyny, and desperation (Ferri, 2020). For example, on June 17 2020, 117 murders were recorded. The victims varied from wives to political targets, from children to cartel servants (Grant, 2020). The corollary daily homicide averages are 38 in the US and less than two in Britain.⁸ About which one reads, shall we say, a wee bit more.

Just as the Covid crisis is exacerbated by complex historical relations that foster inequality, discrimination, and violence, media responses to the conjuncture have been hamstrung across the Global South by the absence of significant national public broadcasters and pervasive digital access (Mueller and Taj, 2020). This has been especially notable in education, where the fantasy of interactive distance learning is impractical for the popular classes.

August econometricians estimate that the average cost of the pandemic to school pupils globally is already a third of a year, with ongoing effects on global domestic product for the remainder of the century. The longer that face-to-face instruction remains interrupted, the greater the subsequent economic impact; more immediately, the loss of childcare afforded by public education hinders the capacity of households to keep or retain paid work, with a disproportionate impact on women—95% of Latin America’s 150 million school pupils are sequestered at home. Wealthy families support private education, hire tutors, and show little interest in public schooling, which suffers as municipal, provincial, and national governmental revenues fall. Meanwhile, college enrolment, which has doubled across the region this century in the world’s fastest expansion, is

⁷ <https://www.sinembargo.mx/01-09-2020/3852531>

⁸ <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2019/crime-in-the-u.s.-2019/topic-pages/expanded-homicide>;
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020#homicide>.

seeing a massive drop in matriculation (Schleicher, 2020; *Economist*, 2020; Hershberg *et al.*, 2020).

CHILE

Chile confronted the pandemic as a nation already in turmoil, following huge protests in 2019 against neoliberalism. Covid-19 further stimulated demands of the state by the popular classes and elites alike for services it has not been used to undertaking since the 1973 *coup* and the Chicago Boys' hegemony. 'Public service' institutions had largely been deemed untenable, and 'social security' lowered to a minimum (Somma *et al.*, 2020). The new demands included strengthening public health, protecting employment, and allowing people to withdraw their savings from a hitherto-private pension system. The response was brutal, with the repressive state apparatus murdering, wounding, and incarcerating protestors at will (Franklin, 2019). But the 2020 plebiscite on a new constitution marked the ultimate popular rebuttal of fascism and its hangover.

When the pandemic arrived, additional popular demands emerged: public educational-cultural television, to make up for pupils being unable to attend school; higher-quality media content for children and adolescents; and improved television more generally (*Colegio de Profesores*, 2020). The ensuing protests have been met by further, extreme police brutality on the streets (McGowan and Larsson, 2020).

These expressions of citizen dissidence posed problems not only in the context of neoliberalism's natural ally—authoritarianism—but more specifically, given the privatized media, a lack of public-service broadcasting, and disagreement over how communications and cultural policies should cater for the common good. Put another way, there were no basic democratic controls of media actors. Only one TV channel, Televisión Nacional de Chile (TVN) lay in the hands of the state, and it was effectively run as a corporate station: TVN has public duties, but its enabling legislation requires that it be funded by advertising (Fuenzalida, 2019). A fiscal crisis has led to major redundancies at the channel, with its headquarters put up for sale at the very peak of the pandemic (*El Mostrador*, 2020).

TVN's former manager, Juan Carlos Altamirano, claimed that from the advent of television in Chile, 'an educational and cultural channel for schools had been called for' (Altamirano, 2006) but without success, due to strict neoliberal guidelines and the idea that state intervention in such matters would be harmful. In 2007, an *Encuesta Nacional de Consumo Cultural (National Survey on Cultural Consumption and Use of Free Time)* showed that radio and TV were the only universal media (Consejo Nacional de la Cultura y las Artes, 2007). The idea of 'a new form of public service to the family and children' connecting education and television via a dedicated channel on the national network linked to primary and secondary schools was deemed unacceptable (Fuenzalida, 2019: 328); the government cavalierly ignored such innovative forms of education. Meanwhile, the commercial media have struggled since the rise of the internet. The country lacks a representative, informative, diverse, participatory, and entertaining media system. TV in particular has increasingly opted for low production values, gossip and scandal programs, cheap imports, and reality shows—a perfect formula to minimize pluralism (Santander, 2007; Andrada and Cabalín, 2021).

Chile is routinely valorised by international economic organizations and coin-operated pundits and thinktanks for its deregulatory policies. Apart from their wider economic devastation, these purposive fantasies have proven deleterious for access to broadband, where costs are much higher than in the region more generally. About 20% of the population has no internet access (Cabello *et al.*, 2020). A trendsetter in Latin America in quickly adopting digital policies, Chile's material mixture of a complex geographical terrain and isolated populations has nevertheless rendered rural areas of minimal interest to capital. Despite programs designed to keep costs at urban levels, uptake is limited by both poverty and unfamiliarity with relevant technology. In addition, the country's largest phone networks have engaged in predatory pricing (Correa *et al.*, 2017; Agostini *et al.*, 2017).

With this background, and under increased scrutiny following the 2019 protests, President Sebastian Piñera created an educational station for the millions of children and their carers stranded at home by the pandemic. *TV Educa Chile* (TV Teaches Chile) was launched on digital and cable television and the internet in April 2020.⁹ Programming was provided by the Consejo Nacional de Televisión (National Council of Television), which drew on the archives of other channels, productions that it oversaw and owned, and imported material. The new service had an expiration date: Piñera announced the aim was to ‘broadcast educational content for the duration of the quarantine’ (*24 Horas*, 2020). Let’s not get carried away here.

But after an overwhelmingly positive reception, *TV Educa Chile*’s evisceration was postponed to December 2020, with a possible further extension (*La Tercera*, 2020). Catalina Parot, president of the Council, pointed to its high ratings among children’s networks (Consejo Nacional de Televisión, 2020). Beyond this competitive perspective, the station’s success can be located in quickly enabling children to gain access to quality material.

The channel’s future remains in question. The underlying structures that preceded Covid-19 remain hegemonic: Chile’s neoliberal structure and weak democracy embrace market-driven solutions for social problems, and disregard social involvement in policymaking and state accountability. *TV Educa Chile* relies to a considerable extent on the goodwill of private TV channels and cable and satellite operators. They have cooperated in the context of the pandemic, but the station is therefore beholden to private stakeholders.

That said, the increasingly democratic temper of the nation raises the question of whether teachers and parents have a role in media policy and management. Should the emergency educational service be driven by technocratic guidelines, public-service norms, or something in-between? So far, the “in-between” experience has seen civil-society actors participating in meetings with public and state institutions. But

⁹ <https://www.tvn.cl/envivo/tveducachile>

in general, there is ‘very little space for organized civil society in the work of the government’ (Sáez Baeza, 2020).

Ultimately, all these problems relate to the conundrum of a media system unused to public-service expectations, whereby the production and provision of content do not simply follow market logics (Becerra and Waisbord, 2015). Chile’s media fail to meet that standard. The challenge for *TV Educa Chile* is close to the struggles of 2019 that demanded radical turns in Chilean politics away from strict neoliberalism and towards new regulatory frameworks catering to the common good. This may be one of those instances where crisis encourages democracy over capital, the public interest over mammon, ordinary people over oligarchs. One can only hope.

COLOMBIA

As per Chile, in late 2019, hundreds of thousands of Colombians, from across territories, classes, ages, and races, decided they had had enough of failed neoliberal economics and authoritarian policing, of money redistributed upwards, the targeted killing of social leaders, ecological devastation, willful misconduct of the peace process, and the usual litany of oligarchic and oligopolistic self-satisfaction and parthenogenesis. They took to the streets against this persistent violence, knowing, rightly, that some of their number would suffer further brutality as a consequence. Such activism has continued in the current conjuncture.

Covid-19 and the government’s response have put a spotlight on differences between the middle and upper classes and the marginalized peasant, poor, Afro-Colombian, indigenous, and working classes (groups that may overlap). Jail overcrowding, which only pops up on occasion in the news, has become a major story, with two prisons hotspots of contagion. Violent threats and aggression against healthcare workers have also proliferated, as in the region more generally (Taylor, 2020). Although the nation has been praised for reacting quickly to the pandemic in comparison to some of its neighbors, the current rate of contagion in the Amazon basin, affecting Peru, Brazil, and Colombia, shows how sizeable the

problem is when articulated to systemic and immense inequality. And the country's sticky oligarchy is as powerful as ever: while Congress sought to buy thousands of surgical masks to protect its members, at great cost, medical personnel in the Amazon made videos with their smartphones and sent them to news outlets to request that masks be sent to them as well. And when physicians report data on infections and deaths that do not suit the national government, they are dismissed as little old rent-seekers (Alsema, 2020).

The pandemic has highlighted the digital divide in this very unequal country—and the barrenness of cybertarian wish-fulfillment. Minimal internet access, low income, and inadequate infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, meant it was untenable to imagine virtual classrooms could be comprehensive responses to the emergency. After the state's 'preventative mandatory isolation' decree of March 2020, school closures were supposed to see classes become virtual. The entire academic system, from kindergartens to universities, private and public, faced a mandatory shift to digital platforms. But just 60% of the population have internet services. More than a million people in rural areas do not have access, and 96% of municipalities lack the necessary infrastructure for virtual classes. Outside the major cities, pupils are also unlikely to own laptops or cellphones (Laboratorio de Economía de la Educación, 2020). In many "remote" areas, teachers have written educational guides which they pay to photocopy then deliver to spread-out students in person on motorbikes or through other messengers (Veiman Mejía, 2020). That illustrates the fatal flaw of cybertarianism: ignoring immense gaps in connectivity.

Radio and television have a long history as resources for rural education in Colombia, dating to 1947 and the success of Radio Sutatenza (Vaca Gutiérrez, 2011) then on to extensive educational television programming, which lasted from the 1960s to the 1990s via two national public broadcasters. That ended with neoliberalism's gift of private television channels in the late 1990s (Amaral Ceballos, 2004). Although public national and regional networks continued to provide educational content and children's programming, such

material has diminished dramatically over the last twenty years; commercial broadcast media have shunned it. Privatization proved fatal (Salamanca Rodríguez and Brandão Tavares 2019: 149).

The country needed a response that could reach all populations. That led to a return to previous educational strategies via public mass media. In order to educate many school-aged children, the government was forced to resort to television and radio schemes that had been eroded many years before; they could actually reach isolated regions. So as in Chile, the country had to start over; the miraculous market had proven itself woefully inadequate as a mechanism for ameliorating social crisis. In March 2020, the Ministry of Education allied with the vestigial national public broadcaster Radio Televisión Colombia (RTVC) to provide educational programs for children and teenagers under the project “3,2,1.. Edu-Acción” (Presidencia, 2020; Mineducación, 2020).

Different parts of the nation also developed strategies in response to the pandemic. Some reverted to radio as a preferred medium, as per *Aprende en Casa Radio* (Learn-at-Home Radio), which was launched in Bogotá (*Educación Bogotá*, 2020), rural areas of Antioquia (Escuela de Colores), the Amazon basin (Chacón, 2020), and various indigenous and multicultural communities (Izquierdo, 2020). RTVC’s manager, Álvaro García, suggests this may lead to the public national broadcaster resuming its task as a content producer for education (*El Nuevo Siglo*, 2020), but it is too early to tell whether there will be a return to the dedicated educational programming of the 1970s and ’80s.

A decade ago, Jesús Martín Barbero (2008) warned of the implications of state withdrawal from producing and supervising media texts. At a time when the internet and digital distribution were barely nascent, he understood the importance of television, not as some mere system of distribution, or a replacement for traditional education, but as part of the elaborate sensorium under which children grew up. And when Colombia has drawn on the internet for educational purposes, it has been subordinated to market logics, with

little encouragement to center the school itself as a site of pedagogic innovation to which policymakers should respond. Instead, Bogotá mandarins have offered cybertarian models organized around Tayloristic preparation for the labor market rather than social inclusion and action. This purportedly instrumental logic has been fashioned in accordance with neoliberal policies more generally that seek to insert the country into global business: a project of training rather than education (Barragán Giraldo and Amador Báquiro, 2020).

Thankfully, the return of educational radio in particular has reconnected schools to an oral-narrative tradition that is important for many rural children. And television, still derided by some as the antithesis of appropriate pedagogy, has become at once part of the curriculum and a supplement to it. The whole array of communication possibilities is returning to children across the nation. Let's hope it does not fade away, leaving the illusion of digital platforms as a privileged point of insertion into learning.

MEXICO

Over the last fifteen years, Mexico has experienced a series of crises, due to an increasingly weak state, a changing mediascape, and conflictual interactions between diverse regional power groups and organizations and their constitutive links with transnational economic and political dynamics. Neoliberalism takes “Mexican political polarization” as its chief narrative, which in turn structures how Covid-19 signifies within such concepts as “uncertainty” and “normality.” Populism and neoliberalism are cast as opposite poles of the political milieu, with concomitant effects on media policy. This is particularly notorious in regard to the frameworks being used to interpret Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador’s government performance before and during the pandemic.

Mexican television reaches 92% of the population. Under the guidance of economic and political elites (stations are owned by a very few families) it has legitimized and promoted dominant national

values, reproducing racist, classist, and hetero-patriarchal schemas.¹⁰ For many years, TV has been a primary source of misinformation—the precursor of today’s misinfodemia.¹¹ Public radio and television are weak. The Sistema Público de Radiodifusión del Estado Mexicano (SPR) is available to approximately half the country. But although that coverage continues to grow, SPR lacks a visionary strategy and the political-economic capacity to meet the public interest; to serve the nation’s vibrant social and cultural diversity. In 2019, it signed an agreement with TVN, RTVC, and the Instituto Nacional de Radio y Televisión del Perú to cooperate as part of the Alianza del Pacífico (Pacific Alliance).¹² That may advance regional integration by sharing resources.

Thirty years after the internet’s arrival, 56% of homes—mostly in urban areas—are connected. Approximately 65% of the citizenry has some access, but half the rural population (about a quarter of the national total) experiences low-speed service at best.¹³ Fixed broadband is available to 15% of people, while 74% have mobile connections. The difference between the cost of mobile versus fixed broadband is huge, and accentuated by inequality in economic and cultural capital alike. Occasional availability differs from routine high-quality access, and there is a clear correlation between people’s educational level and their internet usage (Martínez-Domínguez and

¹⁰ <http://www.ift.org.mx/sites/default/files/contenidogeneral/medios-y-contenidos-audiovisuales/estudiorolesgeneropublicidad3002200.pdf>.

¹¹ Nat Gyenes and An Xiao Mina use this term to identify viral misinformation regarding a particular disease. It has the potential to understand ideological struggle beyond public health, such as the environment.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/08/how-misinfodemics-spread-disease/568921/>.

¹² <https://alianzapacifico.net/en/what-is-the-pacific-alliance/>.

¹³

https://www.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/saladeprensa/boletines/2020/OtrTemEcon/ENDUTIH_2019.pdf

Mora-Rivera, 2020).¹⁴ The conversion of mainstream commercial media onto digital platforms has been clumsy, facilitating the dominance of Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google. Fortunately, there is a vibrant media-reform movement. Spearheaded by progressive academics and intellectuals, it strives for regulation in the public interest. Those demands achieved new visibility in 2012 thanks to #YoSoy132, a student group that took to the streets and informational highways to demand a more democratic media (Gomez and Treré, 2014).

Covid 19 arrived with the country convulsed by a reconfiguration of hegemonic forces. The 2018 presidential election was won by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) with 55% of the direct popular vote. His inauguration speech announced a “fourth transformation of public life” in Mexico, propounding the restoration of republican life after decades of neoliberalism. A *sui generis* politician¹⁵, López Obrador combines liberal traditions, conservative populist nationalism, appeals to an indigenous/rural and urban low-income base, evangelical religiosity, and a diversity of left-wing advocates. AMLO’s fourth transformation has sought to undermine state corruption and renew commitments to social justice. The incorporation of a new political economy for the division of labour within the state, called “republican austerity,” has significantly diminished the salary gap within the bureaucracy, which employs almost 1.4 million people, and restricted sumptuary spending.¹⁶ An increase in the minimum wage of 16% and the creation of “a truth commission to investigate the case of forty-three disappeared students from Ayotzinapa, [the reform of constitutional laws to incorporate] labour rights for domestic workers,[...] freedom to over a dozen political prisoners, closing loopholes that would have returned paid taxes to giant corporations”¹⁷ has generated intense reactions across the ideological spectrum. For instance, one of his flagship developmental projects, the Maya

¹⁴ <https://www.theciu.com/publicaciones-2/2020/3/11/avances-en-acceso-a-banda-ancha-en-mxico>

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/03/andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-election-mexico-leftwing-resistance>

¹⁶ <https://mondediplo.com/2020/01/06mexico>

¹⁷ <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/02/mexico-lopez-obrador-airport-pemex-strikes>

Train—which the government claims will benefit most stakeholders—is opposed by progressive environmentalists, the Zapatistas, small businesses and oligarchs. Equally, the ambiguous personal position of AMLO in regard to abortion, his equivocal gestures towards certain feminist groups, and the blatant failure to stop *feminicidios* has hindered his otherwise progressive gender policies (his cabinet is the first executive team formed of more than 50% of women, many of them feminists).

This has generated particular controversy among liberal intellectuals, technocrats and the previous government’s oligarchy, including the mainstream corporate media. Accused of bearing the worst of authoritarian populism through an archaic and naive relationship with *el pueblo* (the people), López Obrador is portrayed as an architect of polarization between rich and poor. In spite of such intense controversy around the “fourth transformation”, as of early November 2020, AMLO’s approval ratings have risen to 60% nationwide.¹⁸

There is intense public debate, mostly on social-media platforms, as to whether his policies can deal effectively with the pandemic. In that regard, the president faces both legitimate criticisms and unscrupulous attacks from the right, which also uses one of the nation’s main TV outlets to oppose health-ministry guidelines. When the pandemic struck, schools and universities were quickly shut down, and remain so. As in Chile and Colombia, they sought to move instruction online; but again, a large, sprawling country with massive inequality and the effective absence of state authority in vast swathes of its territory has meant many pupils do not have access to their teachers. The government’s tele-cybernetic approach to the educational crisis caused by COVID 19 has been criticised for not effectively incorporating the experiences that teachers, parents and students had the previous term regarding the difficulties of coping with poor technological infrastructure, unequal domestic labour, and anachronistic curricula.¹⁹

¹⁸ <https://www.forbes.com.mx/politica-amlo-con-mayor-aprobacion-en-9-de-las-ultimas-10-encuestas/>

¹⁹ <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/opinion/manuel-gil-anton/educacion-hacernos-guajes>

The conjuncture has therefore seen the reactivation of longstanding traditions of media education in Mexico that were asphyxiated by neoliberal policies. One of the nation's first public radio stations, Radio Educación, was launched in 1929 by the Ministry of Education. In 1968, the Ministry created *Telesecundaria* (tele high school). It has provided isolated communities with curricula designed for pupils living in precarious conditions and with poor terrestrial access. The system has been criticized for failing to make inroads into the social disadvantages experienced by rural pupils (Santos, 2001; Calixto Flores and Rebollar Albarrán, 2008). But as of 2017, *Telesecundaria* had carried the work of over 72,000 teachers to 1,448,281 high-school students in 18,667 locations (Abrego, 2019). It has proven useful in designing and implementing an emergency plan. *Aprende en Casa* (learn at home) responds to challenges presented by the pandemic in towns and villages where internet access is almost inexistent, but television is well-established. The scheme provides thirty million children aged four to fifteen with access to learning. This return is a stunning indictment of neoliberal/cybertarian hegemony. As in the Chilean and Colombian examples, it gives critical voices an ironic form of hope in a moment of despair and anxiety—ironic in that it reaches back into the past to rescue us from the folly of the present.

CONCLUSION

These three brief case studies indicate the need to look not only at the media policies of regions and countries, but also their political history, inequality, neoliberalism, and cybertarianism. One could say of Latin America more generally that only by confronting oligarchic power and its extension through deregulation and privatization can we begin to comprehend the Covid conjuncture as it unfurls, chaotically and frighteningly, before us.

Even as there are stirrings of civil society revolt in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, and demands for real public-interest media, oligarchies that have been in power for centuries, and whose private interests are well-served by public-policy fashions, look to consolidate and profit from the crisis. But at least the current conjuncture has propelled us, albeit kicking and screaming, to recognize that technology should be

used in accordance with actually-existing needs rather than cybertarian mythology.

Chile's late, great anti-poet, mathematician, and nuclear physicist Nicanor Parra's critique of neoliberal accounting still holds: 'Hay dos panes. Usted se come dos. Yo ninguno. Consumo promedio: un pan por persona' (There are two loaves of bread. You eat both. I am left with nothing. Average consumption: one loaf per person). That ugly paradox, so beautifully encapsulated, has been cited by everyone from Julieta Venegas to Sonar 105.3 FM.²⁰

Given these three nations' mass public agitation and media-reform movements, there is hope for a new landscape. Perhaps previously prevailing policy shibboleths and their attendant inequality and corruption may wash away as so many lackluster bottled messages never to be found. We can but hope, as we look dimly through a haze of horror and misinformation towards a different tomorrow.

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We note that this resonant phrase is universally associated with him, but does not appear in his published work.

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