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To cite this article: Carlos Gutiérrez-González & Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed (27 Apr 2024): Colombian Television in the 1980s, Media History, DOI: [10.1080/13688804.2024.2329056](https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2024.2329056)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2024.2329056>



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Published online: 27 Apr 2024.



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# COLOMBIAN TELEVISION IN THE 1980S

## Decentralized nation-building through a unique public-private hybrid TV system

Carlos Gutiérrez-González  and Enrique Uribe-Jongbloed 

*This article examines the claims that the unique public-private television system of the 1980s provided space for the development of a national sense of community-based on common narratives and decentralization. The sources for the analysis included a revision of its contemporary discussion in printed media coupled with an analysis of TV shows currently available on streaming services and interviews with relevant figures of the time. The television content shot on location was praised for representing the nation, while simultaneously giving rise to debates about decentralization, which was finally addressed by the creation of regional broadcasters. The hybrid system fostered diversity, production quality, and a national representation that was strongly contested from the regions. At the same time, the system unintendedly hampered the creation of an audiovisual archive, and complaints about its tender systems resonate with the plight of contemporary public service broadcasting in Colombia.*

**KEYWORDS** Colombian television; nation building; TV systems; imagined community; audiovisual archive

### Introduction

The 1980s were regarded as the Golden Decade of Colombian television. It has been praised for its audiovisual and cultural achievements.<sup>1</sup> The TV system was a hybrid public-private endeavor, with the State owning the TV channels but tendering the programming slots to private companies, known then as programadoras [*programmers*]. It was unlike the public service broadcasting model common in Europe or the private commercial system found in the United States and in Colombia's neighboring countries of Perú and Venezuela. The decade ended with the incursion of cable television, massive expansion of satellite dishes, and privatization of television channels by the late 1990s. However, the problem is that 'there has not been a comprehensive history of the television phenomenon in the country,'<sup>2</sup> especially during this golden era.

The studies of authors such as Benedict Anderson, through his concept of imagined community, Jesús Martín Barbero, with his contributions to the representations of the Colombian media, especially through the soap opera, and Germán Rey, with his criticisms of the decentralization of the same through regional public television, will guide this work. With the aim of better understanding the shortcomings of the television system in aspects



Routledge

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such as 'national programming that had inflexible schedules, jealously guarded screen allocations, own styles of production and genres that attracted large audiences and established soap operas as the national television staple'.<sup>3</sup>

Many television studies in the 1980s focused on interpretive and legislative analyses that exemplify the Colombian media system, and very few focused on regional television.<sup>4</sup> From the conclusions of these studies, two contemporary issues emerge. This shows that clientelism and political favoritism in the allocation of television programming have never been addressed and remain a problem for Colombian public television. On the other hand, he explains the current lack of a comprehensive audiovisual archive and why, when an archive exists, it is incomplete or lacks key information.

At the same time that the golden age of national television was being presented, the country was immersed in a context of institutional crisis originating mainly in the failed peace dialogue, decentralized in geographical terms, between the government of the former President Belisario Betancur and the groups outside the law, to which was added the negative role of the media due to the lack of preparation and political maturity of national journalism,<sup>5</sup> this article only focuses on the first topic mentioned. Thus, it is aimed at national and international academics interested in television studies and in comparing the Colombian case with other countries, people who want to know the turning point of Colombian television, or investigating the history of this medium in a leading Latin American country.

Therefore, the research question of this article is how did the Colombian hybrid television model reach the entire nation with a focus on decentralization, the narrative construction of television fiction, and contemporary debates around its mission under the imagined community concept? Thus, the purpose is to examine the claims that the unique public-private television system of the 1980s provided space for the development of a national sense of community-based on common narratives and decentralization. This study was motivated by the recent accessibility of Colombian television material from the 1980s through streaming platforms, the death of key figures from that era, and the need for a more systematic review of programming for archival purposes. Additionally, the study addresses contemporary issues, such as clientelism and political favoritism in programming allocation, which persist in Colombian public television, and the challenges associated with the lack of a comprehensive audiovisual archive, which leads to incomplete or insufficiently detailed records.

### **Nation Building through Television**

Benedict Anderson mentions that a nation can be understood as an imagined community 'because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion'.<sup>6</sup> Although he sets the origin of the concept of nation as a bound territorial entity that encompasses a given collective identity in the early print media and independence movements of the Creole born in the Americas, it is hard to fathom that those who lived away from the centers of cultural and economic power would align with that notion of nation, especially at a time when language differences, ethnic and racial segregation, and low literacy were commonplace. In Colombia, it was

only through Television that most, if not all, of the Colombian geography was able to share a common set of stories without the need for high levels of literacy. The scarcity of cinema and the narrow local reach of radio did not encompass the territory like television did, making televisual dramas a reference point for the entire population.

Regarding televisual dramas, Rey has argued that Colombian melodrama moved away from the traditional Mexican and Venezuelan telenovelas because it included

the emergence of the region as an experience in the expression of cultural diversity, a heterogeneous country made up of numerous cultures, and different ways of living, feeling, and imagining. ... Thus, telenovela allows for an immense number of Colombians to recognize the value of the other, of difference, at once full of surprises and possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

Martín Barbero stated that 'the best thing that Telenovela has done for [Colombia] was a television that knew how to put in stories the most diverse of countries and make of these stories a tale for the common folk<sup>8</sup>, effectively creating a televisual nation.

Speaking about television in the 1980s, Rey claimed that

no other creative industry burst with such strength into the daily lives of Colombians, nor did any other one grow in every possible way at such a breakneck speed. The presence in the day-to-day lives was evident in the programming rating figures, in the increase in [the number of] television sets in homes, in the social behavior attitudes regarding the new medium, and in the transmutations that were produced from the screens into the language, narratives, and even attitudes of the audience.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Martín Barbero mentioned television as the medium that brought the nation to the eyes of all Colombians, claiming that 'in Colombia, the one who managed to bring us to the screen –both folk and scholar– was Pepe Sánchez, and it was through television'.<sup>10</sup> He also stated, following audience research undertaken between 1995 and 1997 that through television 'it has been possible for Colombians to see themselves from one corner of the country to the other, not only in its diversified geography but in its different social classes and political points of view'<sup>11</sup>, and recognizing that the value for television has been this overarching national identity. Television diversity, he claimed, was even able to precede the Colombian constitution of 1991 in recognizing the multicultural and multiethnic reality of the country.<sup>12</sup> Television has thus been presented by academics in Colombia as the creator of Anderson's imagined community.

### **The Golden Decade of Colombian Television**

The Golden Decade can be said to have begun with the introduction of the NTSC color television standard in December 1979<sup>13</sup> and with the incorporation of mobile units and the use of magnetic recording in 1" and ¾" tapes, which enabled the production of television outside TV studios.<sup>14</sup> In 1979, television became a central subject of debate, with the major national newspapers *El Tiempo* and *El Espectador* publishing weekly columns on television and printing magazines on the subject *Elenco* and *TeleRevista*, respectively, where renowned academics and practitioners discussed the importance of the medium. Among the academics were Azriel Bibliowicz, who had a page-long section in *TeleRevista*, and Germán Rey, who contributed to the *El Tiempo* newspaper. Alongside them were the

renowned screenwriters, Martha Bossio, with a page-long section in *TeleRevista*, and Carlos Gustavo Álvarez, head editor of *Elenco*, for most of the 1980s. Interest in television prompted the creation of the *India Catalina* television awards in 1984 –which continue to this day– and the short-lived Simon Bolivar Television awards in 1987 –ending in 1998– as the two main industry standards for quality production.

The decade has been hailed as the heyday of Colombian television production and of the hybrid system, because during the 1980s, Colombia had a comparatively high percentage of national content, close to 70 percent of programming, a proportion exceeded only by the larger countries, Brazil and Mexico<sup>15</sup>, and sported a terrestrial network of antennas considered to be the largest in the continent.<sup>16</sup>

During this period, slots for broadcasts in the two open-air channels were auctioned by *Inravisión*<sup>17</sup> for periods of two (1979-1981, 1981-1983), three (1984-1986), and four years (1987-1991) for programming in the two open-air channels. Bidding programmers had to commit to a specific type of content for the allocated period, with all changes to their output requiring permission from *Inravisión*. Although most programmers were simultaneously production companies, a few others acquired only canned content for broadcasting. A couple of national independent production companies sold content to programming companies that held slots, effectively changing programmers during their broadcast history.<sup>18</sup>

The 1981 tender had the highest participation with 66 programmers bidding for slots.<sup>19</sup> Although fewer companies were allocated slots in the programming grid, there was always a measure of control to prevent any company from encroaching on too many allotted spaces.<sup>20</sup> In the 1983 tender, out of the 44 programmers, 24 were assigned slots. Only four programmers were assigned more than 10 h each out of the 143 h distributed. The 1984–1986 programming grid was made of 64.2 percent of national production and only 35.8 percent of foreign programs<sup>21</sup>, which is slightly higher than the 34 percent of foreign programming recorded for 1973.<sup>22</sup>

This spread exemplifies the quantity of national television production in Colombia through its two public channels with commercial programming (Cadena Uno and Cadena Dos). Programming for the third cultural and educational channel, Cadena Tres, was either made by the public production companies *Colcultura* or *Audiovisuales for Inravisión*, or foreign production of cultural or educational value received through agencies or consulates.<sup>23</sup> The programming schedule during the weekdays was different from weekends or holidays (see Table 1), and programmers bid for a set schedule for a specific time and day of the week, not counting holidays. Holiday programming was separately tendered.

**TABLE 1**  
Television Broadcast Schedule in Colombia (1983–1991)

Channel	Weekday	Saturday	Sunday*
Cadena Uno	11:30 am–1:30 pm	8:30 am–1:00 am	8:00 am-Midnight
and Cadena Dos	4:30 pm-Midnight		
Cadena Tres	6:00 pm-Midnight	6:00 pm-Midnight	6:00 pm-Midnight

\*When holidays fell on a weekday, the broadcasting schedule was similar to a Sunday schedule.

Diversity was expected to be achieved by both the spread of production companies and the number of hours available, mostly earmarked for national production. The State's interest in providing culturally relevant news and cultural production would eventually lead to the establishment of regional television channels, which began in the mid-1980s, as addressed below.

## Methodology

Previous studies have focused on historical archives, memoranda, and analyses of legislation related to the creation, development, and demise of hybrid TV system.<sup>24</sup> Much work has been done on news broadcasts<sup>25</sup> and telenovelas, mostly based on textual analysis of Colombian products and their narratives<sup>26</sup>, although less attention has been given to other productions in the past decade, including comedy or game shows. An interpretivist approach<sup>27</sup> was chosen to complement previous studies on telenovelas of the Golden Decade, including an analysis of other fictional series and revising media debates around the hybrid system, the decentralization of television, and the national representation offered by these products.

The media debate has been addressed through a review of two television magazines, *TeleRevista* and *Elenco*, whose articles, editorials, covers, and printed letters to the editor provide an approach to the discussions around television in Colombia. In the case of *TeleRevista*, 525 issues were reviewed (1979–1989); for *Elenco*, 104 issues were included (1986–1987). In each issue of both magazines, an equal number of editorials, articles, and letters to the editor were considered, providing a proxy for discussions around television in Colombia.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, textual analysis was carried out on 18 selected television programs (see [Table 2](#)), distributed as follows: ten from national television and eight from regional channels. This is to provide an example of the breadth of production and understand the decentralization of Colombian television through fictional content. This information was corroborated by six in-depth interviews with people who participated in these productions. The sample of selected analysis units covers the 1980s.

## Results

The bidding system for TV programming slots was deemed to be in the hands of politicians.<sup>29</sup> particularly regarding slots for news broadcasts,<sup>28</sup> and because there had been a historic relationship between programmers and political parties.<sup>30</sup> There were discussions about how the system was restrictive, non-democratic, and stifled creativity.<sup>31</sup> It was also reported that despite a given commitment to a type of production during the bid, a couple of years down the line, there was no remnant of the promises made, with TV shows often shifting schedules and national production being replaced by foreign canned content.<sup>32</sup> For instance, national production for the 1984–1986 period was assigned 108 h and foreign shows 52 h, and by February 1986, the former had gone down to 92 h, and the latter had gone up to 68.<sup>33</sup>

Although Law 42 of 1985 was considered an improvement to the previous structure of *Inravisión* and the tender processes, debates on its implementation of a meritocratic

**TABLE 2**  
Selected fiction content from the 1980s

Genre	Title	Broadcast Year(s)	Director(s)	Script	Production company
Telenovela	<i>Gallito Ramírez</i>	1986–1987	Julio Cesar Luna	Martha Bossio	Caracol
	<i>San Tropez</i>	1987–1988	Bernardo Romero Pereiro Stella Londoño	Ketty Cuello	Caracol
	<i>LP Loca Pasión</i>	1989	Aurelio Valcarcel	Juana Uribe	RTI
Series	<i>Los Cuervos</i>	1984–1986	Alí Humar	Julio Jiménez	RTI
	<i>Azúcar</i>	1989–1990	Carlos Mayolo	Mauricio Navas Fernando Gaitán	RCN
Comedy	<i>Don Chinche</i>	1982–1989	Pepe Sánchez Hector Ulloa	Pepe Sánchez Juana Uribe Dunav Kusmanich Héctor Ulloa	RTI
	<i>Dejémonos de Vainas</i>	1984–1998	Bernardo Romero Pereiro Claudia Bernal	Daniel Samper Pizano Bernardo Romero Pereiro	Coestrellas
	<i>Décimo Grado</i>	1985–1989	Jorge Emilio Salazar Alfredo Tappan	Juan Camilo Jaramillo Juan Guillermo Isaza	Cenpro
	<i>Romeo y Buseta</i>	1987–1991	Pepe Sánchez William González Herminio Barrera	Juan Manuel Cáceres Edgar Posada Campo	Tevecine
	<i>Don Camilo</i>	1987–1989	Bernardo Romero Pereiro Kepa Amuchástegui Moisés Rivillas	Daniel Samper Pizano Bernardo Romero Pereiro	Coestrellas

process were constant. Law 42 created the National Television Council –a body of government officials and society representatives, in charge of formulating a general policy, regulating public service, and delivering tenders to private operators–.<sup>34</sup> Its inclusion of community agents was taken as ‘an expression of democratization in the direction of the media’.<sup>35</sup> However, in a dedicated feature in 1987 about the tender process as seen by the programmers<sup>36</sup>, many complained that the assignment of slots was politically motivated. Even those who mentioned being satisfied with their assigned slots were critical of the length and red tape of the process. Most other debates in the magazines confirmed that the expected

participation of societal representatives and community agents was never truly realized, leaving the government free to meddle in the tender process.

Law 42 of 1985 also opened the gates to cable operators and satellite dishes. The threat to national television viewership due to satellite downloads was a topic of ample discussion.<sup>37</sup> In December 1986, Bibliowicz commented that

in Cartagena [de Indias], Barranquilla, Medellín, Cali, and Bogotá, these [satellite] dishes are already a part of the urban landscape. ... If we consider that in Colombia, we have only two and a half television channels, and through a parabolic antenna, we can get at least four more channels, then the options for the audience triple.<sup>38</sup>

Neighbors' groups all over the country were acquiring parabolic dishes that could download open –and encrypted– TV broadcasts of channels from Peru, Brazil, the US, and Spain, displacing the audience of national television.<sup>39</sup> Their increase throughout the decade went uncontested, and it was quoted as the strongest negative impact on national television, providing unfair competition. Private cable television began in 1987<sup>40</sup>, offering four channels but with too high an entry cost to become a strong competitor to open-air television for the rest of the decade.

### Television Narratives of a Nation

Telenovelas and melodramatic series<sup>41</sup> were prominent in media debates (see Table 2). *Los Cuervos* was praised for its location shooting<sup>42</sup> and deemed worthy of exportation.<sup>43</sup> Julio Cesar Luna, director of *Gallito Ramírez*, claimed that 'the most valuable thing was to record it [on location] in exteriors, which allowed for good shots and enrichment of the characters'.<sup>44</sup> *Gallito Ramírez* was a great success<sup>45</sup>, earning equal amounts of praise and criticism from the audience for its portrayal of the people of Cartagena in northern Colombia.<sup>46</sup> *San Tropez* also earned high recognition as a telenovela<sup>47</sup>, with Rey highlighting the quality of the characters and setting.<sup>48</sup>

Speaking about the screenwriters for *Gallito Ramírez* and *San Tropez*, Juan Camilo Jaramillo claimed that 'Martha [Bossio] and Bernardo [Romero Pereiro] made stories that tried to reflect who we are, as a culture, as an identity, [telling them] from the region'.<sup>49</sup> *Azúcar* was set in the 1940s and 1950s and dealt with Afro-Colombian oppression in the sugar cane haciendas of the southwest Pacific region with criticism of its representation of Black Colombians and following the national discourse of *mestizaje*<sup>50</sup>, enjoying the highest viewing figures in 1989 with 36.8 percent of the rating.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the rise in rock music in Spanish in the Bogotá of the 1980s was portrayed in *Loca Pasión*<sup>52</sup>, piggybacking on the success of the 1988 '*Concierto de Conciertos*' and aiming at a younger demographic. These telenovelas and series managed to bring together a collective sense of a nation, representing different regions with their location shooting. A similar phenomenon occurred through comedy.

Comedy series<sup>53</sup> (see Table 2) in the 1980s also highlighted humor based on regional idiosyncrasies as essential to understanding the nation. *Don Chinche* revolved around a working-class mechanic in the center of Bogotá, with neighbors and friends from diverse regions of the country, representing their migration stories and cultural traits. The show and its main cast feature often in TV magazines.<sup>54</sup> It enjoyed high ratings and widespread recognition during its run.<sup>55</sup> Speaking in 1987, Hector Ulloa, who played the

eponymous *Don Chinche*, claimed that 'the longstanding presence of 'Don Chinche' on TV is due mostly to the comedy being a mirror of Colombian reality'.<sup>56</sup> The show was praised for its exterior shots that resembled film aesthetics and for its popular comedic value. In an interview with its director Pepe Sánchez, Bibliowicz mentioned that 'it is the first humor show that being from Bogotá, showing a character from the capital, is thoroughly enjoyed in the [northern] coast'.<sup>57</sup> However, letters to the editor stated otherwise, describing it as centralistic. A *TeleRevista* editorial<sup>58</sup> mentioned that centralist complaints against *Don Chinche* were the main reason mentioned in the mail from audiences requesting a channel for the northern coast. Despite this seeming contradiction, Martín Barbero stated that '*Don Chinche* was a television that had dignity and plot, local cheekiness and a language in which a whole country could fit in, which did not seem to have existed [in television]'.<sup>59</sup> The feature announcing the end of *Don Chinche* in 1989<sup>60</sup> highlighted the show's representation of the working classes and the characters from all corners of the country. *Romeo y Buseta* came as a spin-off of *Don Chinche* based on the life of a bus driver and included a similar set of characters from various regions living in Bogotá. A two-page feature<sup>61</sup> mentioned how it maintains the same working-class humor but in a different part of the city.

On the other hand, *Dejémonos de Vainas* portrayed an upper-middle-class family from Bogotá. According to Claudia Bernal, director of the series, 'There has not been, nor will there be, I believe, a program that reflects the Colombian family, as *Dejémonos de vainas* did'.<sup>62</sup> It was also among the most-watched shows of the decade.<sup>63</sup> Either the show or one of its characters appeared frequently in magazine covers and features.<sup>64</sup> Criticism was also levied on the centralism portrayed through the plot. Martha Bossio was comparing it with *Don Chinche* in her weekly column when she said:

I heard criticism about centralism in [*Dejémonos de Vainas*] ... but I believe it is due to the expectation that has developed around comedy shows by which the audience demands, almost as a mandatory requirement, a character from each region of the country. As if someone speaking like a *costeño* [northerner], another like an *antioqueño* [from the northwestern region of Antioquia], another like a *santandereano* [from the northeastern region of Santander] ... would imply decentralization.<sup>65</sup>

Due to the long run of *Dejémonos de Vainas*, spending over 14 years (from 1984 to 1998) on air, it eventually included travels of the main characters to various destinations in Colombia. Daniel Samper Pizano traveled to each of those places to ensure the plots were linked to each locale<sup>66</sup> since these travels were also shot on location. Just like *Don Chinche*, *Dejémonos de Vainas* was shot on location, but this time in a middle-class neighborhood in northern Bogotá.<sup>67</sup> Because all interior shots were made in a rented house, rather than a studio, camera angles and shot sizes are limited, unlike US and Mexican sitcoms of the time, providing increased realism.

As a last example, *Don Camilo* was an adaptation of the Italian series of stories by the same name but set in the 1950s Colombian countryside instead of post-war Italy. Like the other shows mentioned, it was filmed on location in the town of Tenza, 131 km north of Bogotá. Moises Rivillas, who was assistant director to Bernardo Romero Pereiro in *Don Camilo*, before directing it himself, remembers that 'Bernardo Romero was directing San Tropel, and other shows at the same time, and he would fly in from the coast, drive to Tenza, Boyacá, and shoot, and I had to have everything ready for him'.<sup>68</sup>

Similarly, Carlos Benjumea, who played the leading role, had to be driven three hours from Bogotá to Tenza and back every day.<sup>69</sup> Amuchastegui added that 'Tenza was then a pristine town that fit very well to recreate the 1950s'.<sup>70</sup> An *Elenco* article praised the location shooting and claimed that 'most of the national television shows seek exterior [shots] to improve production quality, while at the same time, bringing attention to beautiful regions of the country'.<sup>71</sup> A total of 320 episodes were expected to be made in the four years assigned to *Don Camilo*.<sup>72</sup> However, only one year of programs were ever made and because of damage to the tapes, episodes had to be reshot.<sup>73</sup> The show's schedule was changed a total of three times until it was taken off the air in 1989, and the foreign comedy *M.A.S.H.* replaced it the first time around, whereas the animation *Bugs Bunny* replaced it the second time.<sup>74</sup>

Bibliowicz mentioned how TV was an ephemeral experience, but video-recording technologies enabled the creation of an archive that could be accessed by researchers, and that *Inravisión* was giving a thought to create a research department.<sup>75</sup> But archiving fiction programs was left to the programmers. Problems with recordings and archiving were commonplace. Interviewees mentioned that tapes for the shows were often erased and reused, making archiving difficult. Rivillas had to reshoot one scene of *Gallito Ramírez* because he had inadvertently erased the tape that contained it<sup>76</sup>, and Daniel Samper Pizano mentioned that one of the actors of *Dejémonos de Vainas* kept the only copies of the show and ended up selling them for personal profit.<sup>77</sup>

During the Golden Decade, 14 programmers produced fiction content that was debated in TV magazines. Exterior and location shooting were the staples of the fiction programs of the 1980s, along with the inclusion of characters representing different regions, providing a visual and personal narrative of the country. As supported by discussions in TV magazines, these products were not completely successful in providing a single national narrative.

## Decentralization of Television

Colombian television has been regulated and broadcast from Bogotá since its origins in 1954. Decentralization of television broadcasting came from the Minister of Communications, Antonio Abello Roca, who in 1981 mentioned the need to have channels in regions that showcased the multifaceted talent of the inhabitants of the provinces.<sup>78</sup> Programming companies experienced difficulties developing shows outside of Bogotá. Talent outside of Bogotá was rarely licensed by *Inravisión*, and this constrained the production of a telenovela in Medellín<sup>79</sup>, and the work of Proyectar TV in Cali.<sup>80</sup>

Actors, producers, and directors from provinces were often quoted as demanding regional channels. The debate sparked by *Don Chinche* regarding representation moved *TeleRevista*<sup>81</sup> to publish some of the letters to the editor, who requested a channel for the northern coast. Bibliowicz stated that it was economically feasible and culturally relevant to increase the number of TV channels.<sup>82</sup> *TeleRevista* pointed out that regional television emerged to 'end the centralism of Bogotá and having a channel for the expression characteristic of the different regions'<sup>83</sup>, but at high operating costs<sup>84</sup> and with political control that did not guarantee stability to the television system<sup>85</sup>, at a time of low-quality content on the country's television<sup>86</sup> and despite 'the resistance of Bogota

programmers, who saw a competition on regional channels that would steal part of their advertising slice.<sup>87</sup>

Regional public television began on December 20, 1984, after Decree 3100 enabled the creation of regional broadcasters or channels. Its Article 3 states that these channels must fulfill a cultural function since

the incorporation of mass media into the educational, cultural, informative, and recreational development and training processes is necessary, to the socio-cultural conditions of the Colombian regions; the social development, harmonious and organized according to the geographical conditions and the population volume of the departments and areas of the country, can be promoted, using television as the most efficient communication tool; it is the policy of the national government to make all the necessary efforts to encourage the strengthening of the values and customs of the various social and cultural groups of the national territory.<sup>88</sup>

Furthermore, Decree 3101 authorized *Inravisión* to start the first regional channel in the country, Teleantioquia.<sup>89</sup> The above is presented after having a television 'centralized and restricted to a cultural policy' for 30 years.<sup>90</sup>

Regional public television in Colombia begins as a public television service that covers a specific geographical area smaller than the national territory, but larger than a municipal area.<sup>91</sup> Sunday, August 11, 1985, provides the first broadcast of Teleantioquia.<sup>49</sup> This was recorded by the newspaper *El Tiempo*: 'Today they inaugurate Teleantioquia, the first regional TV channel ... The television signal will go on air at noon on channel five and be seen by about 2 million 800 thousand people residing in the Valley of Aburrá', while in *TeleRevista*, an article is titled '*Antioquia ve lo que quiere ver*' [Antioquia watches what it wants to watch].<sup>92</sup> However, the original plan of having regional channels be supported exclusively by governmental monies failed, with the bankruptcy of Teleantioquia in early 1986<sup>93</sup>, forcing the government to allow for advertisement revenue to be collected and program slots to be assigned similarly to national broadcasting.

On April 28, 1986, another regional channel, Telecaribe, began broadcasting one of the region's most representative cultural events, *the Festival de la Leyenda Vallenata*. The editorial of *Elenco* in November 1986 praised *Telecaribe* for its programming and recognized that it was a region where the national channels had poor reception and the population was underserved. It states that:

There was a human issue, one about a culture that was so different from the rest of the country. The *costeños* [from the northern coast] watched programming that was like speaking to them in Chinese. ... [it included] no elements from their daily lives, idiosyncrasies, talent, or mood.<sup>94</sup>

*Elenco* even added a section called 'Aquí el Caribe' dedicated to issues related to television on the northern coast and later included a separate schedule for the programming of Telecaribe on its pages.<sup>95</sup> Originally, Telecaribe headquarters were established in Valledupar, but 'within a few years, they moved to Barranquilla, the most developed city in the region'<sup>96</sup>, after political disputes over its control.

On July 3, 1988, Telepacífico, the third regional television channel, began operating. This channel also broadcast cultural activities in its geographical context. The channel's

headquarters were in Cali, the third largest city in the country. Live and pre-recorded content began to be broadcast to other cities in the Pacific Region.

Regional public television played an important role in the representation of regional cultures through its fictional products.<sup>97</sup> With smaller budgets, regional operators used medium-length films to entertain their audiences, such as *República Independiente de Palmas de Caribania* and *La Patillalera*, both shown on Telecaribe. This channel was the first regional operator to broadcast fictional content representing the identity and culture of the Caribbean region. Towards the end of the decade, regional channels had made a few fiction productions commissioned to independent production companies in their region (see Table 3).

One of the critical purposes of public operators with this type of content was to ensure the preservation of the cultural identity of their regional contexts. In addition, public television had other functions to fulfill, for example.

The circulation of regional production, support for different production proposals, breakdown of the usual circuits of distribution of audiovisual materials, approach of audiences to experimentation, and articulation of television to other social processes.<sup>98</sup>

According to Pacho Bottia, *Corralejas* was a series filmed in towns around Barranquilla and dealt with themes of daily life in the region around the *corralejas* festivals and their context, whose characters were a displaced peasant and a pageant queen of the festival.<sup>99</sup> This kind of social representations of regional operators presented situations involving racism, machismo, classism, abuse of church power, and acts of violence. These representations were characterized by their regional focus, meaning that they were approached from the unique perspective of each coverage area. This regional perspective allowed audiences to connect more deeply with narratives and understand how social issues affect their specific communities.

**Table 3**  
Fiction content for regional channels in the 1980s

Channel	Title	Broadcast Year	Director	Production Company
Telecaribe	<i>Qué Sainete</i>	1987	Myriam de Flóres	Televista
	<i>Corralejas</i>	1988	Pacho Botía	Palman Television
	<i>La Patillalera</i>	1988	Hugo González	Club Video 76 y Grupo Taller Cine
	<i>República Independiente de Palmas de Caribania</i>	1989	Hugo González	Grupo Taller Cine
	<i>Cheverísimo</i>	1989	Álvaro Ariza	Olimpica TV
	<i>Dámaso</i>	1989	Hugo González	Universidad Autónoma del Caribe
	<i>Maten al León</i>	1989	Jorge Alí Triana	RTI and Telecaribe
Telepacífico	<i>Viva el barrio</i>	1989	Iván Aguayo	Tele Asociados

## Discussion

This study has shown that in the Colombian case, the idea of a nation as one single imagined community, as presented by Anderson<sup>100</sup>, is difficult to ascertain. Although there is a national common narrative presented through television, as argued by Rey and Martín Barbero<sup>101</sup>, at the same time the hybrid television system and fictional content of the 1980s in Colombia exhibit the relevance of regional imagined communities. The demands for decentralization highlight, at least in the case of the northern coast, that national television has been unable to provide an overarching discourse to encompass the whole country. This situation is not unlike the contemporary debates about regional broadcast in countries such as Spain and the United Kingdom which have been reignited recently.<sup>102</sup>

Fiction production in the form of drama series, telenovelas, and comedies in the 1980s shaped a collective narrative. Although Telenovelas have received most of the attention in research, comedy series spent more time on screen than even the most successful drama series, and they were constantly among the most-watched shows of their time and constantly debated in TV magazines. The unique hybrid TV system allowed for diverse production, despite the limited number of outlets. The Golden Decade was a period of collective consumption of television, before the erosion and fragmentation that would be caused by the advent of cable, satellite dishes, and the reforms to broadcasting regulation that prompted the consolidation of two private television channels from the late 1990s onward.<sup>103</sup> The move towards a private system based on a deeper commercial interest was the culprit of a dearth of audiovisual diversity.<sup>104</sup>

Television fiction also sparked debates about representation, which supported the need for decentralization of the broadcasting system, as exemplified by the discussion prompted by *Don Chinche* and *Dejémonos de Vainas*. Despite the initial successes and recognition of Telecaribe in its production of fiction, the decentralization of television only moved the centers for production from the country's capital to the main cities of the regions, creating a regional re-centralization.<sup>105</sup> This re-centralization in turn copied the woes of national broadcasting in turning regional television into bounties to be distributed among political supporters. Thus, the arrival of public operators in the regions sparked power and control disputes in local governments, as happened in Telecaribe.

One main criticism of the hybrid model in the media debate was its use as a strategy to appease political leaders by handing over jobs through its tenders, highlighting that television regulation was never truly independent from government intervention. This practice of clientelism has continued to this day in public television and has been replicated locally in the case of regional channels.<sup>106</sup> Further criticism of the hybrid system was levied against a lack of control upon programmers fulfilling their original commitments in the tender process. Schedule shifts and changes in the type of programming were commonplace, often leading to either less national production, being replaced by foreign shows as exemplified by *Don Camilo*, or a decrease in the variety of genres of programming in favor of telenovelas.

An unintended consequence of the hybrid model underpins the absence of a central audiovisual archive. Most programmers of the Golden Decade disappeared during harsh economic times at the turn of the millennium. When they filed for bankruptcy, they covered their unpaid dues by selling their production stock or handing it to *Inravisión*.

For instance, *RTVCPlay*, the public service streaming platform, now offers some episodes of *Dejémonos de Vainas*, *Don Camilo*, and *Romeo y Buseta* as part of their catalog because they were handed over by *Coestrellas* and *Tevecine* in the 2000s. Sadly, this offer is incomplete, and there is no information on broadcasting dates; some programs are bereft of end credits, which means it does not easily work as an archive. This is because the tapes have been lost, erased, or reused. *Don Chinche* is unavailable, because RTI sold it to Tele-mundo, depriving Colombians of one of the most important TV shows of the decade. *Corralejas* is not found in the archives of Telecaribe. Currently, the easiest access to these products is via pirate uploads to YouTube by people who recorded television broadcasts, leaving the Colombian audiovisual memory at the mercy of a global corporation.<sup>107</sup> The experience of this research certainly shows the importance of developing an archive that connects media debates, programming schedules, and access to the episodes, to satisfy the demand of a comprehensive historical review of Colombian television.<sup>108</sup>

Despite the shortcomings of the tender processes, the hybrid system provided an ample array of products, including drama and comedy series, especially telenovelas. The hybrid model only lasted for a few decades, but its uniqueness can certainly be considered an interesting development for television history, not only for Colombia, but also for Latin America, since it was unlike the predominant ones in the region. This shows that a different system from the PSB television model of Europe and the commercial model of the US was not only possible but also successful in addressing the cultural interests of a country.

Finally, the limitations of this study focus on the lack of diversity of sources from the regional press, since only national magazines were taken into account, and the same availability of fiction productions and personalities from that period are no longer available. For future studies, it would be important to include audiences located outside urban centers, the inclusion of other complete audiovisual content, and articulation regarding the incidence of the institutional crisis and its possible relationship and impact when decentralizing the media and content.

### **Acknowledgment**

We would like to thank the students in the *Práctica Investigativa* courses of 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 at the School of Social Communication and Journalism, Universidad Externado de Colombia for their work digitalizing TV magazines, and to César Mora Moreo, Alessandra Puccini Montoya, Danna Guerrero, Camila Tenjo, María Alejandra Pérez, Daniela Martín Sanabria, Sofía Sepúlveda and Laura Rosero for setting up and transcribing research interviews.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### **Funding**

Universidad de La Sabana, code COM-110-2023, grupo de investigación *Cultura Audiovisual*. Universidad Externado de Colombia, code FCSP-I-PR-PI-2022-01, grupo de investigación *Recasens*.

## Notes

1. See Calero Aparicio, *The Colombian Media*; Martín Barbero, *Los laberintos del gusto*; Tibble, *La TV Colombiana de los 80*.
2. Rey, *Historias sobre la economía naranja*, 156.
3. Bonilla and Narváez, *The Media in Colombia*, 92.
4. García Ramírez and Barbosa, *Historias de la televisión en Colombia*.
5. Bonilla Vélez, *Periodismo, Guerra y paz*, 56.
6. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.
7. Rey, *La television en Colombia*, 80.
8. *TeleRevista* 403, 30.
9. Rey, *Historias sobre la economía naranja*, 155.
10. Rincón, *Jesús Martín-Barbero*, 33.
11. Martín Barbero, *Cultural Change*, 92.
12. Martín Barbero, *Los laberintos del gusto*.
13. *TeleRevista* 38, 3; *TeleRevista* 558.
14. *TeleRevista* 258, 3.
15. Calero Aparicio, *The Colombian Media*, 94.
16. Vizcaíno Gutiérrez, *Estado y Medios Masivos*, 278–9.
17. Inravisión [Instituto Nacional de Radio y Televisión] was the State body in charge of regulating, overseeing and managing radio and television broadcasting from 1963 to 1995. After 1995 it was only responsible for public service broadcasting and in 2004 became RTVC [Radio Televisión Nacional de Colombia].
18. See Uribe-Jongbloed and Corredor Aristizábal, *The Adaptation of Don Camillo*; Uribe-Jongbloed, Gutiérrez-González, and Puccini-Montoya, *El entorno y la producción audiovisual en Colombia*.
19. Vizcaíno Gutiérrez, *Historia de una travesía*, 116.
20. Calero Aparicio, *The Colombian Media*, 94.
21. Vizcaíno Gutiérrez, *Historia de una travesía*, 292.
22. Varis, *The International Flow*, 146.
23. Arango-Forero et al., *The Media in Colombia*.
24. See Garzón Barreto, *Televisión y Estado*; Vizcaíno, *La legislación de Televisión*; Bernal and Dávila, *El régimen jurídico*.
25. See López de la Roche, *La historia de los noticieros de televisión*.
26. See Zapata and Ospina, *Cincuenta años de la televisión*; Rey, *Ese inmenso salón de espejos*; Rodríguez and Tellez, *La telenovela en Colombia*; Bibliowicz, *Be Happy because your father*.
27. Fickers and Johnson, *Transnational Television History*, 2.
28. *Elenco* 256; *TeleRevista*, 376.
29. Gómez, *¿Qué quiere la gente?*
30. Múnera, *La radio y la televisión*.
31. *TeleRevista* 261, 261, 264, 289; *Elenco* 372.
32. *TeleRevista* 263, 281; *Elenco* 326, 363.
33. *Elenco* 382, 4–5.
34. *TeleRevista* 332, 12–13.
35. Ramírez, *Hoy inauguran Teleantioquia*.

36. Elenco, 390.
37. See *TeleRevista* 296, 416, 446, 552.
38. *TeleRevista* 403, 30.
39. The access to private channels from Peru (i.e. América Television, Frecuencia Latina, and Panamericana Televisión) led to the popular description of the phenomenon as 'Perubólica'.
40. *Elenco* 409.
41. In Colombia telenovelas were daily broadcasts of half an hour, whereas were shown once a week, which usually meant that series were shorter in number of episodes. Telenovelas seldom extended beyond one year, while series often did. Since episodes were usually recorded weekly, if there was sufficient interest, both telenovelas and series could easily extend their runs.
42. *TeleRevista* 316.
43. *Elenco* 369.
44. *Elenco* 381, 6–7.
45. Cover in *Elenco* 351; *TeleRevista* 386, 397, 414.
46. *Elenco* 353.
47. *Elenco* 421; *TeleRevista* 450.
48. *El Tiempo*, 5-C, 16 de Agosto, 1987.
49. Juan Camilo Jaramillo, online interview, 2020.
50. Vargas Álvarez, *Azúcar*.
51. *TeleRevista* 556.
52. *TeleRevista* 517.
53. Comedy series in Colombia more akin to soap operas than telenovelas. Since there were no seasons either, comedy series would usually have between 40 and 50 episodes per year. *Dejémonos de Vainas*, for instance, ran for 14 years with a total of about 450+ episodes.
54. *TeleRevista* 241, 246, 358, 401, 453, 528; *Elenco* 414.
55. Amaral Ceballos, *50 años*, 291; *TeleRevista*, 308, 528.
56. Bernal and Dávila, *El regimen jurídico*, 5.
57. *TeleRevista* 246, 17.
58. *TeleRevista* 266.
59. Rincón, *Jesús Martín Barbero*, 35.
60. *TeleRevista* 528.
61. *TeleRevista* 434.
62. Claudia Bernal, online interview, 2021.
63. *Tele Revista* 308, 332, 336, 389.
64. *TeleRevista* 276, 285, 326, 337, 347, 352, 358, 389, 456; *Elenco* 418.
65. *TeleRevista* 270, 30.
66. Daniel Samper, online interview, 2016.
67. As a curiosity, an episode of *Dejémonos de Vainas* broadcast on January 18, 1985 (Costeño tenía que ser) has the character of *Don Chinche* visiting the Vargas family, providing a cross-over of the two comedies.
68. Moisés Rivillas, online interview, 2021.
69. *Elenco* 401.

70. Kepa Amuchastegui, online interview, 2021.
71. *Elenco* 401.
72. *TeleRevista* 435.
73. *TeleRevista* 496, 498.
74. *TeleRevista* 492, 521.
75. *TeleRevista* 274.
76. Moisés Rivillas, online interview, 2021.
77. Daniel Samper, online interview, 2016
78. Gómez, *¿Qué quiere la gente?*
79. *TeleRevista* 249.
80. *TeleRevista* 275, 276.
81. *TeleRevista* 264, 266.
82. *TeleRevista* 266.
83. *TeleRevista* 332, 12–13.
84. *TeleRevista* 322, 13.
85. *TeleRevista* 336, 11.
86. *TeleRevista* 353, 3.
87. García Ángel, *Televisión en Colombia*, 28.
88. Sistema Único de Información Normativa, *Decreto 3100 de 1984*.
89. Múnera, *La radio y la televisión*.
90. Castaño, *Los canales regionales*, 139-140.
91. Arango-Forero et al., *The Media in Colombia*.
92. Ramírez, *Hoy inauguran Teleantioquia*; *TeleRevista* 333, 12–13.
93. *TeleRevista* 340.
94. *Elenco* 367, 3.
95. *Elenco* 369, 372.
96. García Ángel, *Televisión en Colombia*, 30.
97. Gutiérrez-González, *Modelo de producción de sentido*; Gutiérrez-González, *Déjala morir*.
98. Rey, *La televisión en Colombia*, 80.
99. Pacho Bottia, online interview, 2023.
100. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*,
101. Rey, *Ese inmenso salón*; Rincón, *Jesús Martín-Barbero*.
102. See Ramsey, *Broadcasting to Reflect*; Hutchinson, *Broadcasting and Devolution*; Komorowski et al., *Broadcasting Regulation in Wales*; Gutiérrez Lozano, *Regional Television in Spain*.
103. Arango-Forero et al., *The Media in Colombia*.
104. Salamanca Rodríguez and Brandão Tavares, *A TV colombiana*, 150.
105. See Rey, *La televisión en Colombia*; *TeleRevista* 334, 3 *Teleantioquia*.
106. See Castano-Echeverri, *Censorship, clientelism and bureaucracy*.
107. Uribe-Jongbloed and Roncallo-Dow, *Dejémonos de vainas, ¿sí?* YouTube como memoria y archivo.
108. Rey, *Historias sobre la economía naranja*; Zapata and Ospina, *Cincuenta años de la televisión*.

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