Between Macondo and McWorld:

Communication and culture studies in Latin America

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Over the years the question of hegemony has been central to Latin American mass communication and culture scholarship (access to power, control, participation, and resistance). This emphasis has shaped various waves of theoretical development, such as a critique of modernization theory (Beltran, 1976; Mohr, 1975), the dependency model and cultural imperialism (Dorfman, 1973; Dorfman and Mattelart, 1984; Mattelart, 1972, 1974a, 1974b, 1977; Uribe, 1973), alternative communication scholarship (Gonzaga Motta, 1982; Reyes Matta, 1982; Rodríguez, 2001), and popular culture studies (García Canclini, 1982; Martín-Barbero, 1987; Nethol, 1982; Roncagliolo, 1986). However, as new hybrid cultural configurations reflective of recent 'globalizing' processes such as liberalization, privatization, and democratization have surfaced (García Canclini, 1989), theorists have been forced to reconsider the relationship(s) between culture and power. For mass communication scholars, this has meant rethinking how the cultural industries serve to enable certain kinds of social control while also stimulating the expression of cultural self-definition and political participation. As a result, the fractures in contemporary Latin American cultures, where neo-liberalism and consumer desire collide with popular memory and political agency, become crucial areas of analysis.

To meet this investigative challenge, Latin American media scholars have begun to focus more deliberately on post-colonial sensibilities (the politics of race and ethnicity) and the vestiges of independence politics (nationhood, citizenship), in concert with established areas of inquiry such as the influence of external forces (e.g. international economic and political agendas and corporate expansionism), the role of the nation state, and social movements. This new, multilayered emphasis has demanded that scholars engage new terrains of research such as mediated memory, identity politics, and 'otherness' as areas central to understanding how people experience and negotiate globalizing forces.

This special issue of *Global Media and Communication* focuses on communication and the question of culture in Latin America, and is an attempt to register and examine this shift in theory and research. Through invited essays from established writers from Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Puerto Rico, the special issue analyzes a cultural landscape increasingly defined by the conspicuous markers of technology and global capitalism (e.g. cybercafes, cell phones, cineplexes, etc.) embedded in social struggles (e.g. democratization, armed conflict, racism, poverty, resource control, immigration) and framed by the thick residues of indigenous, colonial, revolutionary, and pre-capitalist pasts.

The significance of this special issue lies in part in its extension of the region's own rich critical scholarship tradition – a tradition defined by its commitment to progressive politics and the foundational principle of praxis as intrinsic to academic work. The four articles presented in this issue serve to reveal an investigative trajectory that resonates with the complexity and ambivalence of the sites where cultural production and consumption, political agency, and memory intersect. While the writers here focus less overtly on ideology than those associated with the Latin American theoretical traditions of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Armand Mattelart, Antonio Pasquali, Eliseo Verón), emphasizing instead problems associated with consumer capitalism and struggles over political agency and cultural representation, the commitment to questions of social power remains paramount in all four contributions.

Commercialization and lukewarm democracy

The economic and political conditions that mark the shift in theorizing, and that provide the historical context for the essays in this issue, began to take shape in the 1980s, when many Latin American countries moved from military regimes to democratically elected governments (e.g. Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay), while others initiated neo-liberal reforms designed to stimulate economic growth and encourage foreign investment (such as Mexico and Chile). Through this transition, the cultural role of the state in most of Latin America became more oblique, while cultural industries became visible players in social, cultural, and political arenas.

This is not surprising as reciprocal ties between the state and commercial media were forged early on in most Latin American countries via implicit laissez-faire policies, clientelism, and the selective implementation of government intervention and administrative control (Fox, 1988, 1997; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Elites needed

political stability and economic growth to stay in power, so 'given the often undemocratic nature of governments, political control of the media was of far greater concern to elites than was the regulation of commercial growth or the establishment of public service goals' (Fox and Waisbord, 2002: 1). Thus the adoption of a privately owned, commercially operated model for broadcasting was established that was mutually beneficial to state and media interests alike. Exemplified by Brazil's TV Globo and Mexico's Televisa, but also consistent with the smaller media systems in Central America, the overriding media model in Latin America has been generally supportive of the political parties in power and decidedly pro-business. Indeed, even during the rise of military dictatorships in many Latin American countries in the 1970s, free market economics were endorsed and supported by the cultural industries (Fox and Waisbord, 2002).

Later, as the state in most Latin American countries eventually sought ways to liberalize their economies and privatize public services, the commercial media began to take an even greater role in articulating the contours of the public sphere. Throughout Latin America, these efforts often coincided with democratization. Together, this confluence of political and economic forces has fostered some rather contradictory developments – responses, paradoxically, both detrimental to, and offering openings for, the promises of democracy. In terms of developments that could be argued to have occurred at the expense of democracy in the region, by design liberalization created opportunities for big business, not democratic participation. For instance, cultural industry leaders like Brazil's Organizações Globo, Mexico's Grupo Televisa, and Venezula's Cisneros were able to gain a greater degree of influence over national and regional cultures, and even internationalize their operations (Amaral, 2002; Mayobre, 2002; Sinclair, 1999). Coupled with other lingering factors, such as the still-present authoritarian state policies, oligarchic media regimes provided a fairly narrow ideological range of ideas, limiting opposing voices and constricting debate while drowning out more civic approaches for information production and circulation.

Hughes and Lawson (2005) identified several barriers to the creation of assertive, pluralistic, and independent media in the region. These include violence against journalists encouraged by a precarious state and a generalized weakness of the rule of law (e.g. 60 per cent of all murders of journalists occur in Colombia (González Uribe, 2003)); authoritarian laws and policies that chill assertive reporting; oligarchic ownership of television – the region's dominant medium; the continuing unevenness

of professional journalism norms; and the limited reach of print media, community-based broadcasters, and new communication technologies (Hughes and Lawson, 2005: 9–10). These barriers have severely hobbled the ability of democracy to reach its full potential despite its spread through much of Latin America. In fact some indicators suggest that the role of the press in serving democracy in the region has taken several steps backwards in the last few years. 'According to Freedom House's Survey of Press Freedom, the number of fully free press systems in the region fell from 11 to 19 systems in 1992 to just four in 2002; three fewer than when the survey started in 1981–1982' (Hughes and Lawson, 2005: 10).

The barriers against responsible information media with deep commitments to democracy, added to the trend of welcoming free market models during the last two decades, meant that cultural industries gained the power to naturalize and thus to privilege the free market logic of capitalist modernity as if consistent with and indivisible from national health and well-being. In Mexico, for example, the shift from a state-shaped to a corporate-controlled public sphere was accompanied by a new articulation of freedom and progress. Here the proponents of neo-liberalism replaced 'nationalism' with 'productivity' and 'revolution' with 'modernization' (Monsiváis, 1996). Indeed, even media texts were used to positively frame neo-liberal principles for media audiences. Most noteworthy were the 'tequila novelas' of the 1990s produced by Televisa and TV Azteca, which were reliant on the highly romanticized, folkloric iconography of haciendas – sites of primary accumulation and extremely exploitative labour relations established before and after Mexican independence. These telenovelas were unfettered by the more egalitarian and public-nationalist principles of the Revolution (nationalized public resources and 'land and liberty' even for the poor) while ideologically compatible with today's free trade political climate (Chávez, n.d.).

Such discursive adjustments were nothing new and are in fact part of a long line of attempts in Mexico aimed at building political consensus and inscribing diverse segments of the population into a nationalist project – even if that project has most recently turned to 'modernizing' the nation through liberalization and privatization. This role has traditionally been reserved for the state. But in Mexico, as with other Latin American countries, within the present socioeconomic environment, such ideological adjustments have been articulated by corporate interests as concomitant with the promises of social justice and participation, and are used to cast pluralism as if in the service of the market system as well as the state (Yúdice et al., 1992). In practice,

however, public debate and action have often been either ignored, or appropriated and reinscribed as natural, extensions of the 'free' market (Chávez, 1998; García Canclini, 1995; Harvey, 2005; Murphy, 1995; Wilpert, 2004).

Mobilization from the margins

These trends are not to suggest that commercial media in Latin America have never challenged political elites. Indeed, the media in Venezuela have been anything but friendly to politicians (Mayobre, 2002), and 1990s upstart Televisión Azteca in Mexico was able to attract a sizable audience in large part because of its daring telenovelas (which used political corruption as part of their storylines) and its news coverage, which broke radically from Televisa's tradition of merely parroting the ruling party PRI's political agenda (Hernández and McAnany, 2001). However, to assert that these examples are indicative of a broader trend in Latin America would be to miss the point that when the commercial media do intervene, this intervention has overwhelmingly been as a means to preserve the status quo and mobilize 'civil society' toward supporting the market. Indeed, Televisa owner Emilio Azcarraga Milmo once claimed to be a 'foot soldier of PRI' – the long-entrenched party of Mexico's 'autocracy' (Fox, 1997). In Guatemala, media mogul Angel González González has followed a broadcasting strategy of political accommodation for whatever party happened to be in power (Rockwell, 2003).

Strategies to ideologically manufacture political and economic consent, however, have not always had their desired effect, sometimes actually fueling tactics that have been counter-hegemonic in nature. That is, in some cases, within the naturalizing currents of 'mainstream' commercial and political culture, underrepresented and marginalized communities within Latin American society felt that the only way their interests would be recognized was by appropriating the new social and cultural spaces recently forced ajar by the seemingly more open and democratic flow of information that new technologies like the internet and media fare from cable and satellite television provide. Indeed, the early rejection of neo-liberal economic policies by the Zapatistas and the Barzón farmers in Mexico, the election of neo-populist leaders Lula in Brazil and Chavez in Venezuela, the 'water wars' in Bolivia, the cocalero movements in Andean countries, the piquetero movements in Argentina, and the recent anti-CAFTA political theater by the Bolque Popular in Honduras, demonstrate that citizens throughout Latin

America are dissatisfied with the free market model, frustrated by some of democracy's undelivered promises, and convinced that struggles for social justice need to be played out in cultural arenas for political gain (Ballve, 2005; Chávez, 1998; Cleaver, 1998; Ellner, 2005; Knight, 2005; Trejo Delarbre, 1994; Wilpert, 2004).

These examples of grassroots mobilization mark in dramatic fashion the serious disjunctures between the promises of the market system and the exercise of democracy, revealing that the region's dual move toward neo-liberalism and democratization in the late 1980s and 1990s served to both legitimate political escapism and privilege consumerism while at the same time providing openings for resistance, dissent, and collective political action. According to 'MexArtinian' critical scholar Néstor García Canclini, this dynamic made ethnic, social, and economic disparities more evident, and a period of disenchantment with democracy developed when it became apparent that it did not necessarily address inequality and marginalization (Murphy, 1997: 82). In fact, by the dawn of the new millennium many Latin American citizens began believing that democracy was not the promised panacea – a decisive shift from the hopefulness of the mid-1990s (*Economist*, 2004). Thus, Latin American society is, ironically, increasingly being defined by the very fractures, disjunctures, and tensions between global capitalism, consumer culture, and the political potency of the marginalized that globalization leaves by the side of the road.

Latin American communication scholarship on culture

Scholars have responded to this historical moment by rethinking the negotiation of social capital, and moving away both from erudite interpretations of popular culture as vulgar, cheap, and degraded, and postmodern interpretations of popular culture as a means of resistance or merely irony. Emphasis is now increasingly focused on the production of creolized cultural forms and practices and how these forms reveal social tensions and instances of negotiation that refract political power and agency. In question is the exercise of cultural hegemony as constitutive processes in the production of collective national-popular subjects. Indeed, the broad 'blowback' reaction to the neo-liberal-democracy project by Latin America's disenfranchised has been expressed in terms that are both cultural and political and that often appear as reflective of hegemonic culture while also decidedly counter-hegemonic.

Framed by this theoretical conundrum, this special issue seizes on what some have called a moment of 'magical neo-liberalism' in Latin

American history to explore the relationship between media and culture in a region arguably undergoing one of the most complex and fractured responses to 'globalization' on the planet. In doing so, these four articles extend the commitment of Latin American critical mass communication scholarship to the radical praxis initiated in the 1970s by writers such as Luis Ramiro Beltran (Bolivia), Antonio Pasquali (Venezuela), Eliseo Veron (Argentina), Armand Mattelart (Chile), and Paulo Freire (Brazil). Anchored in a politics of liberation and emancipation of the marginalized, the authors in this collection articulate an investigative trajectory that illuminates emerging points of contention and that captures the complexity of Latin American cultural landscapes by rethinking theoretical assumptions, probing media discourses, questioning the potential and limitations of democracy, and analyzing counter-hegemonic cultural practices.

And yet, the four articles presented in this special issue break away with much of the essentializing theories of the 1970s and their attempt to reveal structures and stable systems. Today's Latin American communication and culture scholars are embarking on a theoretical quest that focuses more on points of intersection, bridges, and in-betweens. Instead of examining things in themselves, these scholars seem to shift their gaze to how cultural processes and phenomena connect, intersect, or fracture one another. If three decades ago the context took center-stage, today Latin American communication and cultural studies explore issues and processes in their connections and intersections; thus, local and global can only be understood in connection to each other. Local and global inflict meaning on each other as they interact and it is these historical instances of meaning construction that Latin American scholars intend to detect, capture, and reveal. As with the studies of the 1970s, this new generation approaches the study of communication and culture as a pretext to understanding the social spaces and processes for political agency and the potential to transform social structures and fabrics. However, if previous generations understood power in binary alignments, these new studies tend to articulate power in fragmented and scattered social spaces. Thus, social spaces for political agency are found in unexpected opportunities within the cultural industries.

However, all kind of fissures and disjunctures are found within the mediascape and here communication and culture scholars are detecting social and cultural spaces for resistance and the articulation of new utopias. These fissures are then taken over by media initiatives that range from studies of indigenous and Mapuche media (see Salazar, 2002, 2003, 2005); Rodríguez and El Gazi's study of Colombian indigenous

radio (forthcoming); studies of indigenous media in Mexico (Castells i Talens, 2005; Magallanes Blanco, 2005; Ramos, 2005); piquetero film and video in Argentina (Riposati, 2003); Indymedias (Boido, 2003; Ortellado, 2003; Ruiz, 2003); and the ever present – and still number one in terms of relevance and reach – community radio (see Rodríguez and Cadavid, in press; Geertz et al., 2004).

To enable this discussion, the guest editors have assembled a collection that presents a dialogue between theoretical concerns central to globalization (the essays by Jesús Martín-Barbero and Rosa María Alfaro Moreno) and media discourses which have shaped strategic initiatives for cultural defense and political action (articles by Yeidy Rivero and Juan Poblete). Moreover, the special issue presents work from and about nations in Latin America (Chile, Colombia, Peru, Puerto Rico) that have received marginal attention in English language communication journals (even in work that has focused on Latin America), and thus provides a unique mix of perspectives and engagements of communication on the question of culture in Latin America.

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