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## **Democracy, pluralism and the media in Latin America: from public communications to women's use of new technologies**

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### **Introduction**

The Latin American continent has been transformed significantly in the last fifty years, moving away from the historical US geopolitical influence in the region and from the dictatorship regimes of the 1960s and 1970s towards liberal democracy, electing centre to centre-left wing governments throughout the continent and inserting itself fully within globalization as a more active and important global player. Latin America's transition to democracy nonetheless failed to address many problems of governance, from the ingrained tradition of political elitism to socio-economic inequalities, bureaucratic administrations and the existence still of *clientelistic* relationships amongst social and political actors. After years of dictatorship in many countries, the shift to democracy has resulted in a revisiting of the role of the state, with various countries of the region embarking on debates on how to best implement media reform and strengthen the political democracy.

Various Latin America countries have been immersed in the last decades in a series of debates on media reform, including discussions concerning the need to revisit outdated communication laws and regulation, many of which were implemented during the dictatorship years. Pressures have been placed by sectors of civil society and citizens for the strengthening of democracy in various countries. The debate on media democratization in countries like Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Venezuela, has not occurred without accusations from sectors of the market of attempts of “censoring the media” by more radical left-wing groups (i.e. Matos, 2012; Waisbord, 2011; Lugo-Ocando, 2006). The pressures for further political and media democratization have suffered a series of setbacks in the last few years in the continent, with the rise of centre-right governments and far right groups in Argentina and Brazil, thus seeing a gradual shift in the geo-politics of the region and a return to a renewed alignment with the US. This chapter aims to examine some of these paradoxes, pointing to future avenues of research and possibilities.

Many Latin American countries have not had a tradition of use of public communications for the public interest, or developed a strong communication welfare as part of a wider democratic project, similar to the public service broadcasting tradition of European countries (Matos, 2012). What has prevailed instead has been a tradition of *politicisation* of media systems and structures, including broadcasting and media regulation policies, which have co-existed alongside an authoritarian political and social culture. Despite the criticisms, the case of media reform in Argentina has emerged as an epitome of what could be done regarding democratisation of communications in the continent, whereas the slowness of implementing wider media reform throughout many Latin American countries, such as the Brazilian case, where the resolutions of the 2009 *Confecom* did not result in any major reform, appears as both symbols of hope as well as of resistance. Calls for improvement in the democratic potential of Latin American media systems are thus articulated alongside other demands for the strengthening of democracy in the whole region,

including economic growth with social inclusion, as well as the combatting of corruption practices in governments.

At a moment when Latin American countries see the strengthening of far right populist parties amid a resistance to further expand democracy in the region, it is highly problematic to equate the pressures for media reform as being merely the result of “populists” radical left-wing governments. In many ways, this accusation has been simplistically constructed as a form of *propaganda* discourse articulated by various vested oligarchic media interests weary about boosting media pluralism, political diversity and respecting citizens’ rights to information and communications. The “populism critique” is also ideological in the sense that it has contributed to downplay or ignore the political authoritarian tradition that has characterised the social and political life of many Latin American countries, where various sectors of the oligarchic elites have used the structures of the state for their own personal gain, excluding millions of citizens. This discourse has largely functioned to normalise everyday political practices, identifying “populism” as being merely associated with “radical sectors”, thus downplaying legitimate demands of civil society and social movements, and functioning to reinforce old traditional practices of exclusion and subjugation.

The debate on media democratization throughout the continent thus needs to be pursued with more maturity, and cast in the context of both right (and left wing) populism, authoritarianism and the fragility of democratic politics and institutions. The questions that are asked here include the ways in which the media and communication structures can contribute to strengthen democracy, how can it have a wider role here and how would media reform be of assistance? This chapter assesses the policy discussions and debates regarding media reform in the last years in various Latin American countries, as well as evaluating the democratic potential of the *blogosphere* as a means of boosting political pluralism and offering a wider voice to civil society groups and social movements in Latin America amid the timidity in the advancements of media democratization in

the region. I argue here that it is necessary to recapture the lost notion of a *democratic society*, and this includes cultivating stronger commitment to a proper recognition of *difference*, and that this is one of – if not the most – important challenge for the deepening of democratization throughout many Latin American countries such as Brazil. The media can, and should have, a central role here. Currently it is online communication structures which are offering possibilities for various groups, from feminist groups to media reform advocates, to pressure for change and articulate agendas which can contribute to build a more pluralist and competitive political and media environment, paving the way for more mature democracies in the region.

#### *Democratic politics, markets and the media in Latin America*

The current challenges faced by media systems throughout the continent are rooted within particular historical, social and political contexts. It is difficult to make generalisations about media systems in Latin America, given the diversity of the countries in the region, however it is possible to see some similarities that many of them share. As Canizelez and Lugo-Ocando (2006) have argued, Latin American media systems have traditionally been characterised by limited reach because the ruling elites throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were careful to create communication structures which prevented access, so as to control these better. State intervention in South America has further had the main aim of reinforcing governmental powers rather than promoting democratic forms of communication (Waisbord, 2000; Matos, 2008). The state was frequently assigned more a political role of control and censorship, which has resulted in suspicion towards the use of governmental powers to update legislation and media policies during the democratization years.

In many Latin American countries, the state has traditionally performed both an arbitrary authoritarian role as well as serving as an investor in the construction of the telecommunication infrastructure, having been a supporter of the private media. The broadcasting model that developed in

many Latin American nations consisted of mainly privately owned television and radio stations, and in the case of the printed press, of private newspapers financed by both private and public (state) advertising. However, there are important variations between countries, with nations like Brazil having had a tradition of heavy media concentration, in contrast to the case of Venezuela for instance.

Various academics have affirmed (i.e. Raboy, 1995; Voltmer, 2006) that the problems facing many media systems in the transition to democracy are often the problems of *democratization* more generally. More than the case of advanced democracies, citizens in new or transitional democracies need to make sense of information which comes from various sources which are not only closely tied with political orientations, but which are also subject to an authoritarian cultural and historical legacy. As Norris (2004, 1) highlights, media systems *can* strengthen good governance and promote positive development, especially if there is a free and independent press which is capable of performing the watchdog role, holding powerful people to account and acting as a civic forum of debate between competing interests.

Democracy can be understood as a complex term, and which would require a separate chapter to assess the key theoretical perspectives (i.e. Mouffe, 2000; Voltmer, 2013). However, one of its key defining aspects, which distinguishes democracies from non-democratic regimes, is the toleration of *difference* – in lifestyles, political views or cultural identities (Voltmer, 2013). This lies at the core of many of the democratization problems of many countries in Latin America, such as Brazil, with their difficulties in boosting media pluralism and diversity in order to reflect in the public sphere the wider interests and needs of multiple groups, and not just a tiny privileged minority. In the context of the conservative backlashes of the last years and the resistance to deepen the democratization project, it seems more appropriate to situate countries in Latin America as either being very fragile democracies or semi-authoritarian ones, as the Brazilian case.

Media democratization thus involves more than the transformation of media institutions, a freer press and the rise of journalistic professionalism, or even the good intentions of journalists (Matos, 2008). In Unesco's 2016 *Finlandia Declaration*, launched in May in Finland after the conference which celebrated *World Press Freedom Day*, the organisation called on all member states to among others, "enhance the information environment by putting in place positive measures to promote media diversity,.....to encourage a political culture that can isolate and eliminate all forms of incitement to hostility, ..... as well as dialogue between media professionals and civil society players in order to raise awareness of the role of....pluralist journalism in building respect for human rights and democracy."

Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002; 3) have underlined the similarities that exist between Latin American media systems with those in Southern European countries, having contrasted countries like Brazil, Colombia and Mexico to Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal. Some of the common characteristics which they identified included the low circulation of newspapers, addressed to a small elite and not developed within the democratic tradition of Northern Europe, where a mass circulation press began to grow from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards in parallel with the emergence of the public sphere and the modern democratic state. Other common elements have included a tradition of advocacy reporting and a limited development of journalism autonomy; *instrumentalization* (or political use) of privately-owned media and the politicization of broadcasting and regulation. Historically also Latin American countries have neglected public communication structures, with a tradition of misuse of radio and television "public" (state) channels by oligarchic politicians for their own personal and political interests.

One of the paradoxes and challenges to media democratization in Latin America is precisely the fact that communication structures are heavily intersected with state dynamics, as well as being skewed towards the market and their processes. The recognition of the historical arbitrary role that the state has had in many Latin American countries nonetheless should not serve to dismiss or undermine the



possibility that the state can still have a role in media policy supported on a non-ideological basis, and on commitments to the public interest. The process of fortification of the democratic project demands the reversal of precisely these regressive elements that undermine the existence of a more democratic and complex media system, which can be composed of state, public, market and alternative and civic communication systems that serve the diversity of the needs of complex populations (Curran, 2002).

As Waisbord (2009) states, the ideal of civil society as the site of progressive media politics clashes with the messy dynamics of “real existing” civil societies. Waisbord (2011) has emphasised the importance of boosting the influence of civil society in Latin America as a means of impeding the reduction of communications to either market dynamics or state authoritarianism. He also underlines that Latin America has had a long tradition of both political populism *and* civic mobilization aimed at democratising media systems. Civil society players are thus composed of multiple groups with different interests, some of which can be self-serving whilst others are more genuinely committed to a stronger democratic media.

As Fox and Waisbord (2002, xxii) have underlined, the whole Latin American region has had a weak anti-trust tradition of legislation and a culture of promiscuous relationships established between governmental officials and the media. These have made aspirations for democratic media change highly problematic. The first legislations on the media in the continent were implemented during the period known as the *national development and industrialisation phase*, between 1930 and 1960, with principles defining the radio-electric spectrum as a public space and one which needed to function as a concession regime to the private interest (Lugo-Ocando, 2006).

The media environment in most Latin American countries would start to change significantly from the 1990s through the competition from foreign companies, the expansion of cable and satellite services and the introduction of new technologies. Political liberalisation and the growth of multiple public spheres was followed by the ascent of the market forces, the implementation of neo-liberal state reform programmes and the reinforcement of deregulation policies. These served to shake up

significantly the previous more static, nationalistic and family-owned media industries, paving the way for media globalization in the region.

Moreover, the governments that have come to power since the 2000s throughout Latin America, were situated mostly on the centre-left, with a few exceptions and changes in the last years. These have included Nestor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina (2003-7 and 2007 onwards), followed afterwards by the centre-right politician Mauricio Macri in 2015; Luis Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2002 and Dilma Rousseff in 2010 and 2014 (being impeached in 2016, taken over by the vice-president Michel Temer, of the centre-right); Evo Morales (2006 onwards) in Bolivia; Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007 onwards); Daniel Ortega (2007 onwards) in Nicaragua; Hugo Chavez (1999-2013) and Nicholas Maduro (2013 onwards) in Venezuela; Michelle Bachelet in Chile (2014, 2006-2010); the liberal conservative Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia (2014, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2016) and Jose Mujica and Tabare Vazquez in Uruguay, respectively (2010 and 2015). Most if not all initiated discussions, on media policy, seeing communications as having a role in social and economic development.

Liberalisation policies also facilitated the creation of giant media conglomerates in the region, including duopolies in Argentina, the *Grupo Clarin* and *Telefonica*, and the *Grupo Santo Domingo* and *Grupo Ardilla* in Colombia, as well as *Grupo Phillips* and *Cisneros* in Venezuela. Latin American media systems have become linked to global networks of telecommunications, media and advertising (Rose and Waisbord, 2002 in Lugo-Ocando and Canizelez, 2006, 10). Notably, the key major players include *Televisa* (Mexico); *Globo Organisations* (Brazil); *Venevision* (Venezuela); *Ceracol* (Colombia); *Chilevision* (Chile); *TV Azteca* (Mexico) and *RCN* (Radio Cadena Nacional, Colombia).

The US has also been identified by scholars as having shaped many commercial broadcasting systems in the countries in the region, influencing the adoption of the American liberal journalism format in countries like Brazil, and are considered to still exercise influence albeit more subtle and

indirect (i.e. Straubhaar, 2000; Lugo-Ocando, 2006). Media systems in the region have thus seen a transition away from family-owned to more internationalised corporations. However, the globalization of communications imposed competitive threats to media owners in the continent, with the second generation of the Marinho' s of *TV Globo* having had to adapt to the competition from international media in the cable market (Matos, 2008; Fox and Waisbord, 2002) by forging alliances with Murdoch's News Corporation for satellite television, as well as deals with AT&T for cellular phones.

Political liberalisation opened the avenue in the continent to revisit debates on media reform in a very changed atmosphere than the dictatorship years, although the changes in the governance of the countries, and the persistence of authoritarianism and populism practices in social and political life, has meant that advancements have been contradictory. A shift in thinking towards the media has definitely occurred, and is the result of increasing democratic demands made by civil society groups who have strengthened their voice in the post-dictatorship years. This is not to mention more critical positions within society towards the media and awareness of its role in development. The success of the approval of the *Marco Civil* of the Internet in Brazil is but an example, as are other initiatives which are being put forward across the continent. It is to some of the challenges confronting media reform in the region that I turn to next.

*Media reform and the case of public communications in Latin America: an assessment of advancements and challenges*

Latin American nations have thus traditionally had weak public communications platforms and it has been in the context of the process of democratization that many are seeking to fortify

existing public spaces of debate in order to expand citizens' information rights. New media policy measures aimed at stimulating diversity and the public sphere have begun to be slowly implemented throughout the region, slowly reaching centre stage of the public agenda, with some countries having pushed for reform faster than others. As Banerjee and Senevirante (2006) have stressed, it is precisely when PSBs are most vulnerable in Europe that they start to be perceived as being quite relevant for other parts of the world in their fortification of their democratic project (i.e. Curran and Iyengar, 2009; Matos, 2012). Lima (2010)<sup>i</sup> has noted how Brazil had aspired to fortify their public communications structures towards democratic concerns, in a similar manner to the tradition of public service broadcasting upheld in many European countries, from the UK with the BBC, to Spain with TVE and Portugal with RTP. In countries like the UK, public service media has performed a vital role in functioning as a unified public sphere, bringing the nation together independently of socio-economic background and income, reflecting regional and local diversity as well as working to improve the educational and cultural levels of the population (Matos, 2012; Scannell, 1989).

Many countries have encountered difficulties, and resistance from commercial and other vested interests, to strengthen public communication structures for the public interest. The debate on media regulation in Brazil has been articulated differently from the context of Argentina, and of other countries like Venezuela. In the case of the latter, Lugo-Ocando and Canizalez (2006) have underlined the highly ideological environment of political confrontation which exists between the government of the deceased president Hugo Chavez (1999-2013) with the media, culminating in the 2002 coup attempts in the country. Until recently, this was different to the political context of Brazil and Argentina. Since 2015 and 2016 however, both these countries have seen new centre-right governments rise to power, which has begun to set the clock back on previous advancements to media reform.

In Brazil the demands for a better quality media, and for a wider expansion of media outlets to attend to the diversity of the country's multiple interests, have been made by diverse groups of civil society. These culminated in the realization of a series of debates which were part of the 2009 *Confecom* (Federal Conference on Communications) conference on media policies and proposals for the democratization of communications. One of the key challenges for Brazil is the need to reverse the tradition of public communication structures skewed towards state and oligarchic political interests. Politicisation of public service broadcasting and public communications has been a reality for the public media in Brazil (Matos, 2012), which has been considered by many as being more of a "state" media than anything else, due to its dependence on the government of the day, politicians from the Northeast and other evangelical groups, than a public communication structures (Matos, 2012).

The breaking of the historical tradition of promiscuous relationships, which has existed between the public media and specific oligarchic politicians, is one of the key elements which need to be pursued with greater impetus if one aims to fortify the public media in Brazil. After years of attempts to fortify the public media sector, such efforts have been weakened by the conservative backlash against the public service broadcaster EBC, responsible for *TV Brasil* and launched by the Ministry of Culture and the Brazilian government in December 2008, one of the few advancements regarding media reform that the country has seen in the last years. Initially the launch was criticized by conservative and other market sectors for supposedly being a media organizations controlled by the former president Lula, when it was a result of years of pressure from civil society players for a diverse media system, and included already as a communication right in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. Soon after vice-president Michel Temer was sworn in as interim president in May 2016 following the first stage of Dilma's impeachment process nonetheless, the CEO of *EBC*, Ricardo Melo, was forced to resign. The public media has been recaptured by governmental groups to service as a propaganda mouth piece for their policies.

This occurs in a context where there is little debate and knowledge about the importance of communication policies for the public interest, and where there is still a lot of confusion regarding the tendency to equate “censorship” with genuine concerns to develop media policies committed to the common good, and which are part of the very cornerstone of advanced democracies worldwide. Research has also shown how important segments of the elite and young Brazilian population support a wider role for the public media (Matos, 2012). Significant segments of the respondents recognized the importance of the public media for the process of democratization in Brazil, but the survey also revealed that many, despite still having the habit of largely consuming media content from private broadcasters, also envisioned a bigger role for the public media<sup>ii</sup>.

The election of Mauricio Macri in Argentina in 2015 also led to a revisiting of the *Lei dos Meios* (2009), widely endorsed by around 300 civil society groups who had formed a coalition for the democratization of broadcasting since 2004, and who contributed to the drafting of the legislation through significant public debate (Vivares and Martens, 2014). Thus the regulatory agency created through the legislation was dissolved by the new government, and a new agency controlled by the executive was implemented in its place, raising accusations that it was attending to the interests of corporate media companies. The changes to the *Lei dos Meios* law have included, among others, alterations in the mechanisms of combat to concentration and the flexibility of the limits to media ownership.

Maringoni and Glass (2012) have further underscored how new laws have been approved to regulate communication activity in countries like Venezuela, Argentina and Bolivia. Argentina has been seen as a successful case for many, but not without its controversies and accusations made against the Kirchner government. The *Law of Audio-visual Communication Services*, which was presented by President Cristina Kirchner and approved on September the 17th 2009 by the Chamber of Deputies, proposed limits on the power of media conglomerates. The law impedes that any private television has more than 35% of the media, demands official publicity to be regulated

and licenses to be renewed every ten and not 20 years. No firm alone can have more than 10 radio and television concessions. It also allocates a third of the electronic radio spectrum to non-profit organisations.

It has also prohibited horizontal and vertical concentration, establishing minimum quotas for national productions. The law is being seen by experts as ground-breaking, and as a sign that the whole region might follow this example soon afterwards. These measures however have angered the *Clarín* group, which detains around 80% of the cable TV concessions in Buenos Aires. There has been a perception by some that there has been an open confrontation with the media conglomerate *Clarín* group. Argentinian scholars like Mariana Baranchuk and Javier Use have argued that the creation of the law was only possible due to the alliance established between government and social actors. Sectors of the public nonetheless were consulted to help draft it through the installation of forums throughout the country, with democratic participation having played an important part in the debate (Mendes, 2012).

In December 2013, the Chamber of Deputies in Uruguay approved the new legislation on Audio-visual Communication Services, with 183 articles, a result of an initiative that was put forward by the government of Jose Mujica. The text recognised communications as a human right which should be granted to all citizens and further aimed to reduce media concentration by giving more transparency to the process of concession and permissions of public broadcasting licenses. It also created minimum quotas for national production, prohibiting telephone companies of exploring radio and television waves (Bianchi, 2013). Its radio broadcasting law (act 18.232) for one was considered to be among the most advanced in the world, having managed to secure at least one-third of all possible services of broadcasting and telecommunications to the third sector radio electric spectrum (Gomez, 2010 in Garcia, 2013).

As Maringoni and Glass (2012) further stressed, the legislation in Bolivia created in 2011 envisioned a new regulatory framework for the private property of radio and television and is

embedded in the idea that the radio-electronic spectrum should be seen and understood as a public good. The biggest innovation of the new Act in Telecommunications (*Ley General de Telecomunicaciones, Tecnologías de Información y Comunicación*), which involves 113 articles, has been the distribution of frequencies across sectors, with the State having the maximum of 33% of the share, the market 33%, and social communities and indigenous people being allowed up to 17% of the spectrum. Another important point is the recognition of the importance of citizen's participation in defining communication policy.

In Venezuela, as Garcia (2013) has noted, community media regulation in 2002 opened the country's media system to the third sector. Lugo-Ocando and Canizelez (2006) have further stated that, compared with other countries, there are more users and subscribers for TV and radio per capita in Venezuela than in Brazil or Mexico. Most of the media in Venezuela is also owned by national entrepreneurs and international groups (Canizelez, 1990 in Lugo-Ocando, 2006), and is not concentrated in the hands of a few, having historically been divided into the pro and against Chavez camp. The government of Chavez has also been accused to have used the public media for its own political interests. Much of the community media was a cheerleader for the regime and the private media consistently complained of threats to press freedom incited by the government. A famous incident was the decision not to renew the RCTV license. Painter (2008) has correctly argued also that even the project of creating a "public media" that would be capable of integrating the region of Latin America and strengthening the public sphere, through the TV station *Telesur*, has not been entirely successful due to the persistence still of a culture of politicisation of broadcasting in Venezuela.

A key feature of the democratization process which has been taking place in the last decades throughout Latin America has been the growth of political debate on the internet, which has seen a rapid increase in access and users throughout many countries in the region. In Brazil the



*blogosphere* has emerged as a vital vehicle for strengthening political pluralism and discussion, issues to which I turn to next.

*The case of the “alternative media” in Brazil and the blogosphere: from social movements to feminist groups*

The Internet has been expanding rapidly in Latin America and is also reaching different groups across classes, although the digital divide is a persistent problem in countries like Brazil, and is the main barrier to a stronger influence that online communication networks could have in the process of democratization (Matos, 2014). According to a 2014 report from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (Cepal), around 58% of Brazilians have access to the Internet, and this stands as a significant improvement from the 30% registered in 2006. The percentage however is still lower than in other Latin American countries like Chile, Argentina and Uruguay, with the former reaching as high as 70%.

Since the decade of the 1990s, the re-democratization process in Brazil has seen a dynamic growth of critical news commentary websites and other more politically partisan blogs and websites. In the absence of further improvements to the media landscape in the country, this can be seen as a form of boosting pluralism and diversity, and a gradual step towards a further deepen of the democratization project. Despite problems with resources and the restrictions imposed due to audience fragmentation, many “alternative” online media outlets are serving as an important tool in democratization. In Brazil as in most parts of the world, blogs are being used both by the mainstream media, independent journalists as well as civil society and other social movement groups. Women for instance appear as significant users of online technologies, and are 53% of the users in the country.

Guedes Bailey and Marques (in Siapara and Veglis, 2012, 396) have examined the possibilities offered by digital media and blogs in Brazil regarding the ways in which these can offer opportunities for people to become more active agents in the communication process (and I would add in the *political* polis as well). Despite the fact that newspaper and media blogs are still the ones most accessed, such as the *Blog do Noblat* of *O Globo* newspaper, non-mainstream blogs financed by local, regional or federal governments, or private individuals, have had a significant level of connection with various sectors of the Brazilian population, stimulating debate across the political spectrum.

The Brazilian mainstream media for one is controlled by less than 10 families, including the Frias of *Folha de Sao Paulo*, Marinho's of *Globo Organisations* and the Civita's of the publisher *Editora Abril*, and is responsible for nearly 80% of the total audio-visual and media content in the country. Many have argued that, due to the lack of commitment to media reform and the persistence of partisanship practices in newsrooms, the mainstream media has seen a decline in professional standards and commitments to objectivity in the last years, following from its attempt of strengthening professionalism in the 1990s during the re-democratization years and in the context of the changes implemented by the governments of Cardoso, Lula and Dilma (Matos, 2008). The *2016 Reporters Without Borders* report put the country in the 104<sup>th</sup> position, a fall from the 58<sup>th</sup> position given in 2010, due to the risk posed on the lives of journalists in the country, from policy brutality during protests to the lack of professionalism of the mainstream media in its efforts to overthrow the president Dilma Rousseff in 2016.

Among the core main Brazilian mainstream journalistic blogs are *Miriam Leitao's*, *Blog do Juca*, *Josias de Souza*, *Balaio do Kotscho*, among others, many which belong to key media groups, including five from the 16 key news blogs, which belong to the Abril group. Some of these mainstream blogs are quite opinionated and differ from the practices of objectivity and professionalism of traditional journalism, such as *O Globo's Blog do Noblat* and *Cora Ronai's*.

An important independent media group is undoubtedly *Midia Ninja*, a movement formed by amateur journalists and *bloggers* which has been extremely influential due to its reporting of grassroots political activism as well as acts of police violence in protests ( Matos, 2012, 2014).<sup>iii</sup>

Feminism has also found in new communication technologies an important ally in their struggle for gender equality. Authors like Harcourt (in Bhavnani et al, 2016, 180) have argued over the importance of ICTs as political tools for women, although at the same time acknowledging the fact that online networks can also be spaces for negative portrayals of women, including cyber-stalking. Contemporary feminism in Brazil has seen a significant boost due to the possibilities offered by new technologies.

Various feminist movements have started to make significant inroads into the mainstream of Brazilian society through their political activism, mobilization and combatting of stereotypes on online platforms and social media. This has been the case of feminist groups such as *Blogueiras Feministas* and the NGO *Think Olga* for instance, who managed to occupy a significant space of debate in the blogosphere in 2015, the year seen as the “Brazilian Arab Spring”, through its discussion of sexual harassment and the articulation of personal experiences of young Brazilian women, which I examine more elsewhere (Matos, 2017). Although fragmented, dispersed and highly divided, civil society and feminist movements such as the ones mentioned here are slowly contributing to re-shape debate in mainstream Brazilian society on issues from the perseverance of the public media to the need to advance women’s rights.

### *Conclusion*

Media reform is thus one among many of the challenges that Latin American countries face, and which range from the pressing necessity of reducing inequality levels to the granting of wider

opportunities and quality public services to the vast majority of the population, in areas like education and health. The skewing of weak public communication structures for the common good, the updating of outdated media reforms, the improvement of quality debate in newsrooms and in the political public sphere, as well as the strengthening of journalistic professionalism and press freedom norms, are among some of the major debates on media democratization that have been taking place throughout Latin America in the last decade.

In the last three decades, many countries in the region have seen the rise of centre to centre left wing governments who have both paved the way for wider political liberalism as well as having implemented a series of market reforms. Brazil, represented by the presidencies of Cardoso, Lula and Rousseff, has largely attempted to uphold the norms and values of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, pushing through change in Brazilian's social and political institutions and attempting to create a "democratic consensus" around economic growth and social inclusion and which, similarly to other countries in the region, has suffered a significant blow. Many countries in the region have seen a significant shift to the right and rise of conservative thinking and attempts of restoring old traditional elitism norms and hierarchies, posing significant threats on the little reform and advancements that have been made in the last decades.

Semi-authoritarian or semi-democratic governments have remained the norm throughout most of the countries in the region, with traditional oligarchic practices and elitism remaining the norm, despite decades of pressures for wider social change. The *blogosphere* in countries like Brazil are emerging as small, but significant and loud, spaces of resistance and articulation of contra-narratives to the strong conservative backlash. Many of these websites, from across the political spectrum, are assisting in offering more diverse and grassroots narratives which are largely absent from the mainstream media, which has, albeit exceptions, strongly resisted change and justified its self-righteous stance by accusing perceived enemies as "populists", thus undermining democratic demands for wider social inclusion and democratization. In the current

uncertain future for media reform throughout the continent, future research into the growing importance of the Latin American *blogosphere* for shaping public opinion and increasing political debate in the public sphere is much needed (Matos, 2017).

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<sup>i</sup> “TV Brasil internacional – Na disputa por espaços de expressão” (*TV Brasil* internacional – in the dispute for spaces of expression, *Observatorio da Imprensa*, 01/06/2010).

<sup>ii</sup> The current law in Brazil on the funding of public communications obliges telecommunication companies to destine a small amount of their profit in resources to the country’s public media.

<sup>iii</sup> See the website <https://ninja.oximity.com/>.