Silence by Stealth: Freedom of the Press and Polarization in Latin America

Jairo Lugo-Ocando

University of Sheffield

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/whemsac

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/whemsac/38

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts, Sciences & Education at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Western Hemisphere Security Analysis Center by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.
Silence by Stealth: 
Freedom of the Press and Polarization in Latin America

Jairo Lugo-Ocando
University of Sheffield

September 2011
THE WESTERN HEMISPHERIC SECURITY ANALYSIS CENTER

**WHEMSAC** brings together a versatile and important Latin American network of traditional and non-traditional security experts from academia, business sectors, government ministries and private organizations. Its research capabilities provide Western Hemispheric leaders with a unique, real-time research and analysis on current issues. WHEMSAC is an innovative institutional model for conducting professional qualitative and quantitative research throughout the Americas at the national, regional and international levels within an open, independent, multi-disciplinary, and collaborative academic environment. The fusion of open source political, economic, and social expertise allows WHEMSAC to provide an exceptional, qualified approach to regional security insight with traditional intra-governmental analysis.

Applied Research Center  
Florida International University  
10555 W Flagler Street  
Miami, FL 33174  
whemsac.fiu.edu
Silence by Stealth:
*Freedom of the Press and Polarization in Latin America*

Jairo Lugo-Ocando
University of Sheffield

September 2011

*The views expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, Department of Defense, US Southern Command or Florida International University.*
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The weak democratic systems that followed decades of military dictatorships in Latin America coupled with the emergence of new authoritarian regimes of the left have had a significant impact on the relationship between the governments and the media. The new populist leaders have challenged the media that have generally reflected the perspectives of the traditional elites. This ideological clash has renewed direct and indirect censorship, curtailing freedom of expression and thus, freedom of the press.

In this context, this paper discusses the mechanisms used by Latin American governments, particularly the new authoritarianism of the left, to silence dissident voices. Many of these mechanisms are legal, found in laws related to personal injury and defamation. Others have been of a constitutional nature, invoking states of emergency or national security concerns. Some governments have used institutional means to close down newspapers and other sources of information.

Current media conditions in Latin America show growing polarization. This has led to considerable levels of violence and intimidation against editors, journalists, and news crews in several countries. It is precisely this type of deterioration of fundamental rights that leads to questioning the strength and sustainability of Latin American democracies.
INTRODUCTION

Latin America is undergoing one of the most dramatic periods in recent history. After decades of dictatorship, turbulent economic crisis and the emergence of new actors in the political scene, the region’s democracies are still far from consolidated. A report from the United Nations Development Program suggests that democracy in the region has failed to live up to the expectations of millions in the region.\(^1\) To make matters worse, the military arguably continue to hold influence among democratically-elected governments across the region,\(^2\) while the legitimacy of traditional democratic institutions have eroded over the past few years, limiting their ability to deploy authority and mobilize the public towards common goals of society. This is truer in the case of traditional political parties, which have lost important ground among their constituencies; making voters far more pragmatic in their choices.\(^3\) This pragmatism and the unresolved issue of socio-economic disparities have facilitated the emergence of populist leaders who stand for wealth re-distribution while challenging traditional elites. Indeed, the end of the 1990s witnessed the rise of left-wing governments in Latin America. Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, -- Correa in Ecuador, and Evo Morales in Bolivia were prominent among those who swept into power in this scenario of anti-politics.

---

\(^1\) Dante Caputo, Contribuciones al debate de la democracia en América Latina (PNUD). Buenos Aires: Santillana.


\(^3\) Herbert Kitschelt et al., Latin American Party Systems (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 309.
It is in this context that the media has played an increasingly important role in defending the former status of power. From the start, the newly elected left-wing leaders encountered a media landscape where ownership was highly concentrated in a few hands and where the mainstream and privately-owned commercial media exerted a forceful opposition towards governments and policies aimed at promoting wealth re-distribution. Evidence of this can be seen in the active role played by the news media in the rapid overthrow of President Hugo Chavez in April 2002\(^4\) and the subsequent antagonistic relations with the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, among others.

In return, governments have responded by enacting and modifying legislation regarding news media ownership. In some cases, these governments have gone as far as nationalizing existing media outlets while creating new ones in order to challenge prevalent accounts of events while counter-mobilizing public opinion. Still in others, there have been direct intimidation and attacks against the media. In Honduras, for example, there are reports of more than 300 documented attacks against the media in 2009. It is within these scenarios of confrontational and polarized politics that censorship, self-censorship, pressures and threats against journalists have become once again rife across Latin America.

This article examines the current threats and challenges polarization poses for the democratic stability of the

continent. As these governments face up limitations of power in their ability to satisfy the demands for a better allocation of resources; confrontation and polarization between these governments and the commercially owned media are expected to grow stronger. The reaction from these governments to the threats posed by the media has in some cases already undertaken semi-authoritarian positions; which are unique to left-wing governments in the region.

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Thirty years ago only a handful of countries in Latin America had democratic regimes in which different political parties alternated into power. Today, all countries —with the exception of Cuba— have some sort of a multi-party electoral system. Official censors from the past military regimes have been formally removed from the newsrooms across the region and most of the new constitutions in these countries explicitly guarantee freedom of speech. However, democracy has brought different degrees of tolerance towards the role of the media and the work of journalists. In many cases the newly found freedom of the media has come with strings attached; meaning formal and informal mechanisms of control.

Formal constrains on the media have included not only laws and regulations that date back to the fall of the military regimes, but also recent legislation on media ownership, access to broadcast airwaves, and proposed discretionary powers to regulate what people may or may not see from satellite channels and the Internet. Mechanisms of informal

---

control include indirect censorship and self-censorship, which became more explicit and widely used by left-wing leaders in the late 1990’s, especially after realizing that the privately owned commercial media was being used to mobilize the public against the re-distributive agendas of these governments. However, it is not these mechanisms of control that hinders the ability of the news media and journalists to express their views freely, but instead the profound polarization of political and ideological views derived from the confrontation for the control of resources. In doing so, pro-government and anti-government media outlets have become a praetorian guard of the main interests they represent and have effectively blocked not only opposite views, but those that represent alternatives to both sides. The result is a false dichotomy in which neither side admits criticism, nor values the democratic debate and political plurality.

THE MEDIA IN TRANSITION

In most cases, the media outlets in Latin America went from being a subordinate appendix of the military dictatorships, constrained by direct censorship, to become quasi-autonomous agents of political control during democracy, in its way serving the interest of the new ruling elites. Since then, they have participated “in the transaction of power while structuring the political positions of the different agents.”6 It was a scheme in which media outlets were allowed to act as watchdogs but within a set of boundaries, which included institutional support for liberal democracy.

6 Jairo Lugo & Juan Romero, “From friends to foes.”
and informal arrangements with the political and economic elites.\(^7\)

If indeed the constitutional framework did guarantee freedom of expression, it did so under specific limits established by law. These limits included harsh anti-defamation laws and severe restrictions to what could be covered by news crews. Among them, the case of the temporary suspension of constitutional guarantees by the executive branch, when declaring states of emergency or invoking national security concerns as a way of imposing a de facto injunction over what could be published or broadcast. Overall, democratic governments are not exempt of committing these sins. Most of them, with a few exceptions, have exercised, in one way or another, censorship. Furthermore, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Peru have a terrible track record of human rights abuses against editors and journalists, as well as impunity of the perpetrators. Forcible disappearance and assassination of news casts is still common in the region.

Other indirect means of censorship include: libel actions against media outlets and journalists; direct violence against them; and, practices of self-censorship among editors and news media owners due to intimidation or financial pressure. More recently, editors and journalists have been persecuted and imprisoned using a string of supposedly unrelated accusations that go from alleged embezzlement —as in the case of Eladio Muchacho from Diario de Los Andes in Venezuela— to accusations of illegal adoption of children from those forcibly disappeared during the military juntas —as in the case of Marcela and Felipe Noble Herrera —co-owners of El Clarin in Argentina.

\(^7\) Leonardo Ferreira, *Centuries of Silence: The Story of Latin American Journalism* (New (York: Praeger, 2006)
Other types of constraints derive from economic pressures. On the one hand, media ownership in the region is not only highly concentrated but closely linked to traditional political and economic elites with renewed corporative interests. Journalists in places such as Uruguay and Costa Rica have often bowed to pressures from media owners who usually indicate what can or cannot be reported. On the other hand, the State is still a key element with regards to media reform and funding, as it provides a substantial amount of advertising revenue. Within these boundaries for media freedom, journalists and news media in general could criticize governments and politicians and carry out investigative reporting, while producing media campaigns in favor or against topical issues. These boundaries, however, rarely allow for the coverage of inequality as a news topic; at least not in a systematic manner.

A SECOND TRANSITION

The arrival of new left-wing leaders to power marked the beginning of a profound transformation of the relationship between the media and the government. The mainstream media rapidly became not only a confrontational actor, but a major antagonist player able to organize, agglutinate and mobilize the opposition. In many ways the 2002 brief overthrow of Chávez was “a mediated coup,” which brought extraordinary consequences to the future of the private media-government relations, not only in Venezuela but also across the continent. As some have suggested, “The

9 Jairo Lugo & Juan Romero, “From friends to foes.”
private mainstream media still owes the Venezuelan society a good explanation about their reprehensible behavior during those years.”

Since then, the Venezuelan government has been far more aggressive in pushing its own media agenda, promoting community broadcast media to resist the growing criticism of private media sectors, while accelerating the introduction of a new legislation on broadcast that gives the government more discretionary power and control over it. As a result, the Ley de Responsabilidad Social en Radio y Televisión—approved on December 2004—has been fundamental to dissuade most of the broadcast media of taking a critical stance. This was achieved through the enforcement of a hard set of sanctions—from heavy fines to revocation of licenses—that have been applied over 200 radio and television stations. Since then, experts and non-governmental organizations have agreed that this legislation has been effective in bringing out self-censorship.

Another important measure taken by the Venezuelan administration was the decision to take off the air the terrestrial signal of Radio Caracas Televisión (RCTV)—one of the two main Venezuelan television networks. To some, this responded to a premeditated strategy by the government

---

12 J. Urbina Serjant, Nuevos rasgos del derecho a la información en Venezuela (Maracaibo, Venezuela: Universidad del Zulia, 2006) 102. IPYS, Noticias confiscadas: cómo la censura y la autocensura en Venezuela impiden que el público conozca lo que tiene derecho a saber (Caracas: Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, 2007).
of President Hugo Chávez to replace the hegemony of private broadcasters with a state-dominated and a state-influenced media. A study performed by Bernardino Herrera —from the Instituto de Investigaciones de la Comunicación of the Universidad Central de Venezuela (ININCO-UCV) — suggests that 70 percent of the programs aired by the main state-owned television network (VTV) and TEVES (which took over the airwaves from RCTV) contained pro-government propaganda, biased information, and repetitions of President Chávez’s addresses in television and radio.

The steps taken by the Venezuelan government were quickly followed by Argentina, Bolivia and Ecuador, where there were clear ideological links to Venezuela. However, soon after, similar types of legislation appeared in Mexico and Honduras. Right after the coup, tensions between the government of Honduras and the media outlets were also very high. A draconian anti-terrorist law—which severely undermined freedom of speech—was passed by Congress behind closed doors in a session to which news media were denied access. Indeed, the use of legislative powers to undermine the ability of the media to provide critical reporting has become a widespread governmental practice in many countries.

When Ecuador declared a state of emergency on September 2010, as protests by police and some members of the military

---

led to nationwide unrest, the accusations of a coup d'état came from the government. Critics of President Rafael Correa, however, said he had exaggerated by calling it a coup attempt. Rubén Darío Buitrón, news editor of *El Comercio*, the leading Quito newspaper, said that no coup was under way and that the government was spinning the protests in order to gain political support.

*It is a media show and things have been exaggerated by the government in order to make it look like a victim,*" he said, adding that the problems had originated from low-ranking officers, not from any group of military generals wishing to take control.\(^{15}\)

According to a study from the NGO *Fundamedios* in Ecuador, between 2007 and 2011, the government filed more than 18 lawsuits against media editors and journalists. This could potentially pose a liability of millions of US dollars and lead to the bankruptcy of many of the mainstream media outlets. There is a well-documented case of journalists Juan Carlos Calderón and Christian Zurita, who were sued by President Correa for over US$10 million dollars for their book “*El Gran Hermano,*” (The Great Brother) which alleged links of President Correa’s brother with private corporations that were undertaking government contracts. Other cases include those of journalists Emilio Palacio, Francisco Vivanco and José Acacho, all of whom have been threatened with prison sentences and large civil suits.

In Bolivia, political events have led to the promotion of new legislation that limits the ability of journalists and the media to cover certain issues. Indeed, fears of separatist movements have led to greater control of the media, while a new and wide supported anti-racist legislation has included articles that grant discretionary powers to the government while posing a potential threat against the freedom of the media.

Opposition leaders and some of the mainstream media outlets of Santa Cruz and Cochabamba —regions rich in natural resources— have been accused of promoting national separatism with the intention of weakening President Evo Morales’ government. Indeed, separatism in Bolivia has often been associated with white and rich land ownership, as in the case of the US-born rancher Ronald Larsen, who has openly opposed the Morales' administration. Followers of President Morales have accused the media of supporting these movements and of putting in jeopardy the national unity.

Equally critical has been the proposal for a new law on racism. The Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church in Bolivia (CEB) warned that if changes were not made to the draft law against racism, led by President Morales, there could be a serious danger of undermining freedom of expression. The Secretary General of the CEB, Oscar Aparicio, pointed out that if some of the passages in this project remain in the final bill, democratic exercise of freedom of expression could disappear altogether. These parts of the bill have also been rejected by several institutions such as the media associations, federations, and unions of journalists in that country. The law provides economic sanctions and authorizes the Executive branch to close any media that publishes or broadcasts any content considered racist or discriminatory. Needless to say that the wording is
in some cases is vague and left to discretionary interpretation by the authorities.

It is possible to suggest that some of these governments are using perfectly legitimate causes to push for media laws that limit—or could potentially limit—the freedom of expression as they provide wider discretionary powers to the Executive—making it more difficult for journalists and media owners to challenge the former. In Nicaragua, for instance, the Congress passed a bill that criminalized violence against women and established sanctions against media that satirized female politicians. This has effectively kept some cartoonists from drawing and criticizing the first lady.

**DECONSTRUCTING POLARIZED VIOLENCE**

Another key exercise of indirect censorship is the orchestrated violence against media in general, particularly journalists and news workers. According to the Venezuelan NGO *Espacio Público*, in 2008 there were 186 cases of violations affecting journalists and media outlets, mostly assaults, intimidation, and threats; one journalist was killed. In 2009, another NGO, the *Instituto Prensa y Sociedad*, reported two journalists killed, about 20 harmed, and more than 200 cases of aggressions against reporters, between print and broadcast media outlets in Venezuela alone. In other places such as Colombia and Mexico, journalism has become indeed one of the most dangerous and deadly professions. However, violence also extends to the media outlet itself. In 2002 the main offices of *El Nacional* were surrounded by pro-government sympathizers, minutes after
President Chávez had made harsh critics on national television against the newspaper.\textsuperscript{16}

Also, there have been several violent acts against television networks such as \textit{Globovision}. Explosive devices have been thrown at the station in daylight and many reporters and photographers have been attacked by pro-government supporters as well as by both the police and the armed forces. Indeed, it is the State’s responsibility to control violence and guarantee the safety of journalists, even if the attacks come from third parties.

Violence, however, has not been an exclusive issue of pro-government sectors. Many in the opposition in Venezuela have orchestrated violence against pro-government media and media workers, while trying to cover news from the opposition. This situation has been replicated in places such as Bolivia and Ecuador, but to a much lesser extent. Some authors believe that there are structural reasons as to why violence against journalists and news crews is becoming endemic. They point out that this is a reflection upon the fragility of democracy in some Latin American countries, which translates into increasing violence against press workers.\textsuperscript{17} Colombia alone has the macabre Latin America’s record of more journalists killed in the continent,\textsuperscript{18} while

\begin{flushleft}


\end{flushleft}
places such as Mexico follow dead close. Because of this, the phenomenon of orchestrated and spontaneous violence against reporters and news teams needs to be analyzed in a wider setting that focuses not only on how the news are controlled and censored, but also on how impunity affects media freedom.

Previous research carried out in other societies suggests that when journalists’ safety is seriously compromised, news crews either stop or limit their coverage.\textsuperscript{19} If the need of coverage relates to political or economic interests of the media organizations, and if these interests are greater than the risk of getting journalists killed or harmed, journalists and news crews have to become ‘embedded’ with one of the parts; despite the detriment of their ability to be critical and independent.

This is exactly what is happening in Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, where journalists and their news crews remain behind friendly lines in order to guarantee their own safety. By doing so, journalists and reporters become embedded in each side of the political spectrum, therefore reinforcing prevalent views within their core audiences. This only increases polarization, while making normal mechanisms of self criticism and dialogue dysfunctional.

It is true that media polarization in Latin America is not a new phenomenon. Historically newspapers and broadcasters were divided between pro-government and pro-opposition media, with little or no space whatsoever for alternative views. Even during the 1930s and the 1940s, the newspapers of the time did not publish the names of the candidates that

did not represent their interests.\textsuperscript{20} Indeed, as some argue, polarization has been a sustained trend and feature of modern Latin America.\textsuperscript{21}

However, what it is relatively new is the degree of violent confrontation and exclusion within this process of polarization. In 2007, a report from the Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Venezuela identified 47 aggressions against journalists. In the year 2008, the number of aggressions had gone to over 60 according to the same report.\textsuperscript{22} Similar tendencies can now be found in places such as Bolivia and Ecuador, where violence against media presents itself in verbal and physical forms. In places such as Colombia, Mexico and Peru, violence against journalists and subsequent impunity of the perpetrators is widespread. Nowadays, journalists find themselves under the same threats that judges, prosecutors, union leaders and human rights activists, but in most cases without the legal or police protection that some of the former enjoy when carrying out their functions.

Under these circumstances, journalists are compelled to report only from safe intellectual and physical zones, in order to reassure their status as gatekeepers of their constituencies. They know that the fundamental nature of polarization is violence; which is not only a manifestation of a pre-existing

\textsuperscript{20} E. Díaz Rangel, \textit{El 14 de febrero y otros reportajes} (Caracas: Monte Ávila Editores, 1998), 110.


antagonism, but a mean to keep that same antagonism in place—crucial to reinforce political identity and ideology. In doing so, subjective violence in face of polarization is pivotal to manage indirect censorship. A few journalists are able to reach objectivity despite the heavy baggage and pressures that sometimes make it almost impossible to provide a fair account of events.

Journalists from both sides acknowledge the problems they face when bringing back accounts that do not represent the mainstream views within their own newsrooms. They say that it is even more problematic to bring back political stories that do not fit either views of “goodies and baddies.” According to Gabriela Pedrozo an investigative reporter for Globovision, for more than a decade,

>To work in that network has become a life experience; now we have to wear a bulletproof vest to go on the streets. We receive training on how to use gas masks. Globovision has been accused by the government of promoting “media terrorism” and of “poisoning the minds of the public.”

Pedrozo instead blames the government for the increasing violence against journalists and underlines the limited access journalists have to government sources. This complaint is

---


also shared by others such as Luis Pérez from *La Verdad Daily* in Venezuela:

*Not only we do not get invited to press conferences or events, but moreover if we manage to get there, we are denied access by the authorities and security services.*

Pérez’s views are shared by other journalists working in what the government supporters describe as “opposition media outlets.”

The situation seems to have deteriorated in the past ten years. Traditionally, political leadership had accepted, with reticence, the democratic and critical role of journalists and media outlets; viewing news editors and journalists as political adversaries, who would, nevertheless, play along the wider ground rules of the system. However, this is no longer the case in some of the new regimes. The new left-wing political elites see journalists instead as ideological enemies who are willing to bring them down from power in what is perceived to be a class struggle.

Even though certain degree of polarization is healthy for public debate and confrontation of political ideas, the polarization of the media in many Latin American countries has become an end in itself for censorship, which often spills


25 Phone interview with Luis Pérez on August 27, 2011.


into violence or threats of violence. Madeline García, who works for the State-owned international broadcaster TeleSur and who formally worked with the privately owned Televen during the events of 2002 in Venezuela, argues that violence comes from both sides. This position is also supported by pro-government journalists across the continent. However, it is the government the ultimate responsible for the security and well-being of journalists and reporters from all sides. Peruvian and journalists Carlos Ganoza, argues,

*One might even suggest that the current antagonism between the media and the left-wing governments is a radical manifestation of a greater framework of polarized politics in which these countries have been crudely divided between those who are in favor and against the new left-wing paradigm.*

However, audiences are crude social constructions and as such, they do not entirely reflect the more complex and interlinked set of realities that define how certain issues will be covered. Therefore, as news is directed towards these audiences, they resent the issues as simplistic caricatures that serve well the ability to hold on to specific audiences by reinforcing their pre-conceptions and world-views.

**POLARIZED DANGERS**

The use of indirect mechanisms of censorship is not exclusive to Latin America or even to the developing countries. The use of injunctions and threats of libel actions to keep the media at bay is now widespread in the U.S. and

---

27 Phone interview with Carlos Ganoza on August 20, 2011.
Great Britain. More recently, a group of young Muslims in the UK were detained by the police and taken to court under the Anti-Terrorist Act for showing banners against British soldiers returning from Afghanistan. Paradoxically, the slogans in the banners were very similar if not almost identical to those used in the anti-Vietnam war protests and in the 1960s’ anti-apartheid movement.

The use of violence against the media, journalists and news crews is still —sadly— a recurrent and widely spread practice in our times. Violence against journalists is deliberately used by governments to limit their independent assessment of the events and to push for “embedded journalism.” Indeed, journalists from both developing countries and industrialized nations are constantly threatened, harmed and killed while pursuing their stories with the sole intention of silencing dissident voices.

In Latin America, polarization provides a framework that legitimizes censorship and makes it not only acceptable but also arguably desirable for the public. Because of polarization, the public sphere and the elements that nurture a healthy political debate in Latin America are partitioned in opposing mirrors that reflect almost unrecognizable


caricatures of the same events and issues. Indeed, in Latin America, the media landscape is now dominated either by official media —usually used as propaganda in the context of re-distributive policies— or by corporative media owned by a few who try to hold on to their traditional privileges. This dichotomy is expressed in a deeply polarized environment in which both sides are fervently trying to establish their own hegemony in airwaves. This has become a common practice in places such as Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela, where presidents not only have weekly programs, but also almost unlimited access to the airwaves.

One of the most worrisome features is that this situation seems to be widely accepted not only by those who gather and disseminate the news, but also by the public who consumes them. Most surveys in the region suggest that with a few exceptions, those media outlets that adopt impartial views tend to suffer in terms of ratings and sales. Similar surveys and market research suggest that in some places polarization has been more accepted as 'normal'. In Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, the public has become radicalized in reading, listening and watching only the media outlets that reflect their own political preferences, since they seem to provide a legitimate version of events.

Regrettably one must conclude that the formerly held notion of an impartial and somehow balanced media, even if it is just a utopian aspiration, has ceased to be the right choice for many. If one is to believe the media sales figures and ratings from different media outlets, people in Latin America seem to want either a completely depoliticized media full of infotainment or a news media politically charged with

31 DataAnalisis, Consumo de Medios, Caracas: Tendencias Digitales, 2009.
propaganda from either side. It is a dire scenario in which audiences tend to tune only to what reinforces their own political identity, or even worse, not to tune anything at all.

Also, the radicals from both sides seem very happy to see their own political views uncritically reflected in their media coverage, even if this means omitting facts and censoring voices that challenge prevalent views. Some authors have observed how this polarized coverage tends to operate by providing or undermining legitimacy to the opposing narratives.

At the core of this system of censorship and self-censorship, as we have discussed it earlier, extreme polarization translates into violence. Paraphrasing Žižek\(^{32}\), this is a type of systemic violence that is not perceivable to many, but upon which systems of power depend. This violence against opposite views is virulent, oppressing and blinding, but equally silent and intangible. It is pure terror—hence why many are now using the term “media terrorism.”\(^{33}\) In this framework, the media is vociferous in attacking the “other”, as well as fearful of reflecting self-criticism or perspectives that do not exhibit those of their political masters.

Behind all this, there is a mechanism to award legitimacy by polarization. Indeed, by making journalists, editors, news media and sources take sides and embrace extreme positions, the framework of polarization not only limits the scope of what can and cannot be reported but also makes almost


invisible the positions, views and voices from the opposition and from those outside the polarized spectrum. In doing so, this framework erases the spaces for opposite and alternative views, thus reinforcing polarization and its violent manifestations.

The problems of an explicitly biased coverage (such as democratic deficit) are overwhelmingly eclipsed by the ability to turn segmented audiences into commodities. Hence, pro-left and anti-left media saturate their narratives with exaggerated versions of their own realities, which are impossible to corroborate in a context of polarized politics where one side of the society does not literally speak to the other. In simple words, doing propaganda instead of journalism tends to pay off in the short term for both sides.

In this context, polarization is not only the amalgamation of complex views and voices in clear-cut but unrealistic political blocks, but also a way to keep audiences captive of elite interests. If indeed these interests do represent distinctive understandings of society (social rights against liberal rights), these are far from comprehensive and by no means represent the realities and issues that news media and journalists should be covering and disseminating. As each side only speaks to those of their own kind, the consequence is obvious; democratic debate and self-criticism ceases to exist as such, and explicit violence inevitably follows.
WORKS CITED


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jairo Lugo-Ocando** holds a BA in Social Communication from the Universidad del Zulia (Venezuela), a MA from Lancaster University (UK) and a PhD from the University of Sussex (UK). His research interests include media and democratization in South America and Digital Technologies in the developing world. He has worked as a reporter, staff-writer and chief sub-editor for several newspapers in Venezuela. He has also been correspondent for newspapers, magazines and radio stations in Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and the United States. He was a member of the advisory board of the Asylum Positive Image Project run by OXFAM-GB. He has been invited to lecture at the Universidad Católica Andres Bello (Venezuela), IQRA University (Pakistan) and the University of Columbia (USA) among other institutions.
PHASE II


David Scott Palmer and Alberto Bolívar, “Peru’s Shining Path: Recent Dynamics and Future Prospects.” May 2011.


Juan Pablo Sarmiento & Gabriela Hoberman, “Disaster Risk Management Disparity in the Caribbean: Evidence from
Barbados, Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago.” May 2011.


Thomas Bruneau, “An Analysis of the Implications of Joint Military Structures in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia.” April 2011.


Erich de la Fuente, “Cuba’s Role in Venezuela’s Control of the Internet and Online Social Networks.” October 2010.


**STUDENT PAPERS SERIES**


PHASE I


WESTERN HEMISPHERIC SECURITY ANALYSIS CENTER SPONSORS

The Applied Research Center advances the research and academic mission of Florida International University. ARC’s focus is to solve real-world problems through multi-disciplinary research collaborations within the University's increasingly talented applied and basic research units. It is uniquely structured and staffed to allow for free-flowing exchange of ideas between the University's applied researchers, academia, government, private sector and industry partners. The ARC’s vision is to be the leading international university-based applied research institution providing value-driven, real-world solutions, which will enable FIU to acquire, manage, and execute educationally relevant and economically sound research programs. That vision is based on the Center's core values of respect for the environment, health and safety of all individuals, creativity and innovation, service excellence, and leadership and accountability. The Applied Research Center is organized into three core research units: Environment; Energy, and Security and Development. Under the leadership of its Executive Director, the Center reports to FIU’s Office of Sponsored Research Administration. An External Advisory Board, encompassing leaders from the private and public sectors, participates actively in the Center's growth and development. The Florida International University Applied Research Council, a team of University deans, executives and faculty guide the development of the Center's programs.

Florida International University is Miami’s first and only four-year public research university with a student body of more than 40,000. It is one of the 25 largest universities in the nation. FIU’s colleges and schools offer nearly 200 bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral programs in fields such as international relations, law and engineering. As one of South Florida’s anchor institutions, FIU has been locally and globally engaged for more than four decades finding solutions to the most challenging problems of our time. FIU emphasizes research as a major component of its mission. The opening of the Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine in August 2009 has enhanced the university’s ability to create lasting change through its research initiatives. Overall, sponsored research funding for the university (grants and contracts) from external sources for the year 2008-2009 totaled approximately $101 million.

The United States Southern Command (USOUTHCOM) is one of ten unified Combatant Commands (COCOMs) in the Department of Defense. It is responsible for providing contingency planning, operations, and security cooperation for Central and South America, the Caribbean, and their territorial waters; as well as for the force protection of U.S. military resources at these locations.

The National Defense Center for Energy and the Environment (NDCEE) provides reliable and sustainable solutions to the US Department of Defense in areas ranging from contingency operations to global climate change and greenhouse gas reduction to safety and occupational health. These solutions increase mission readiness and improve the health and safety of our Armed Forces both at home and abroad. The NDCEE provides project management and technical support to the WHEMSAC Program.