

**Radosław Sajna**

## **Public television in Latin America: dilemmas and perspectives**

### **KEY WORDS**

Latin America, public media, public television

### **ABSTRACT**

In Latin America, despite common historical and cultural background, the meaning and the role of public media are understood differently. Such diversity is also observed in practical solutions in different republics, where on the television markets (with the exception of the communist Cuba) commercial broadcasters dominate evidently, though also many TV stations, qualified as public, exist (and are funded) in accordance to different rules: sometimes they are typically propaganda (governmental) and in other cases cultural or educational broadcasters. Although there is a problem of determination of a Latin model of public media, some agreement to treat this kind of media as alternative – in front of dominating commercial media – exists. Latin scientists, managers of public broadcasters or some politicians underline often a need to strengthen the public media (to promote democracy and pluralism), including international cooperation.

Latin America is a region that grew upon a common historical and cultural basis but at the same time it is characterized by a great diversity, ranging from the sizes and ethnic structures of its nations, through environmental and ecological conditions, socio-political and economic issues, to the manifestations of a common, and yet diverse, Latin culture. While analyzing the problem of public service media in this region of the world, it is possible to notice some common issues ensuing from the abovementioned foundations as well as dilemmas connected with the Latin American civilizational identity. And also – relating to the title of this paper – with the definition of the nature and role of public media (especially television) and the variety of implemented solutions, which most certainly does not facilitate the explanation what the public media in Latin America are.

### **Latin American dilemmas: the nature and role of public media**

In his well-known work *The clash of civilizations...*, Samuel Huntington noticed that there is no certainty regarding the civilizational or cultural affiliation of Latin America: “Latin Americans themselves are divided in their self-identifications. Some say, >>Yes, we are part of the West.<< Others claim, >>No, we have our own unique culture.<< (...) Latin America

could be considered either a subcivilization within Western civilization or a separate civilization closely affiliated with the West and divided as to whether it belongs in the West”<sup>1</sup>.

A similar dilemma arises when discussing the nature and role of public service media in Latin America, where exist private media groups, organized according to the Western free-market rules, which dominate the media markets there, interconnected by the export and import of media productions and capital as well. In this regard, Latin America most certainly does not differ from Europe or North America, even though one has to take into account the abovementioned Latin American diversity when analyzing the media systems of individual countries in this part of the world<sup>2</sup>. In the communist Cuba, obviously, it is not possible that media should be controlled by media corporations, especially foreign ones. Still, in the remaining countries of the region, the media business is the greatest determinant of the structure of media markets and whole media systems. Even though there are many media which could be considered as alternative (to the predominating commercial broadcasters), the largest range and communicating potential belongs to the strongest private media belonging to greater and smaller corporations, such as TV Globo in Brazil, Televisa and TV Azteca in Mexico, and the largest dailies, like “Clarín” in Argentina, “El Mercurio” in Chile, “El Tiempo” in Columbia, etc<sup>3</sup>.

What role can be played by public service media in countries, whose media systems, often shaped under the influence of local barons, dictators, or juntas, are dominated by private, commercial broadcasters, controlled by businessmen, often closely connected with the local political world or even with international business? Implementing modes similar to the PBS in the United States did not succeed even in a single Latin American country, nor did establishing strong public broadcasters of the European kind, like, for instance, the BBC in the United Kingdom, ARD and ZDF in Germany, RTVE in Spain, or TVP and PR (Polskie Radio) in Poland. While the public service media are criticized in the European countries as well, they still constitute an important part of broadcasting systems, though obviously

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<sup>1</sup> S. Huntington, *Zderzenie cywilizacji i nowy kształt ładu światowego*, Warszawa 2005, p. 57. Idem, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order*, New York 2003, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> See: R. Sajna, *Specyfika systemów medialnych krajów Ameryki Łacińskiej (cechy wspólne, powiązania i czynniki różnicujące)* [Specificity of media systems in Latin American countries (common features, connections, and differentiating factors)], in: J.W. Adamowski, A. Jaskiernia (eds), *Systemy medialne w XXI wieku. Wspólne czy różne drogi rozwoju?* [Media systems in the 21st century: Common or separate paths of development?], Warszawa 2012, p. 39–53.

<sup>3</sup> See: R. Sajna, *Media w Hispamoameryce w perspektywie komunikowania globalnego* [Media in Hispanoamerica in the perspective of global communication], Bydgoszcz 2013, p. 185–253.

individual countries of the Old Continent implemented different solutions regarding the mission and tasks, managing, and subsidizing public broadcasters<sup>4</sup>.

In the so-called New World, it is not even entirely clear what the public media are, even though the term *medios públicos* is frequently used in both scientific and political discourse. The Mexican researcher Patricia Ortega explains that in Latin America the notion of public television is understood to comprise various state, regional, and national operators, university, educational, and cultural media, parliamentary and legal channels, and even official and government ones. It refers to the media then, Ortega explains, which do not operate for economic gain but fulfil various functions instead, while having various forms of organization and financial and legal structure<sup>5</sup>. A well-known Latin American scientist, Jesús Martín Barbero even said, in reply to the question how to define public television in Latin America today, that “public television, at this point, refers to all of the country which does not fit in a private television”<sup>6</sup>. This statement suggests, among other things, an alternative and inclusive nature of public television. In Latin American media systems, dominated by commercial broadcasters whose operation often limits the pluralism of opinion due to explicit interests of the owners and their political “sponsors”, the public television should fulfil a special role. Radio, which is of great significance to building local identities and supporting development, among others, especially in the case of socially handicapped groups, such as indigenous rural population, is less often mentioned in this context. There are already many radio stations called *comunitarios* that is “community” stations: most of them are in Mexico, but they are present in other countries of the region, too<sup>7</sup>.

Television is considered as the main mass medium in Latin America, which is why public television is often discussed in the context of democratization of this part of the world. Florence Toussaint from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) connects democracy with television to show how it impeded the establishment of a society based on equality. Obviously, it is the excessive economic and political power of certain groups which is to blame for this state of affairs, leading to economic and social inequalities. Therefore,

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<sup>4</sup> See: A. Jaskiernia, *Publiczne media elektroniczne w Europie* [Public electronic media in Europe], Warszawa 2006, p. 179–281.

<sup>5</sup> P. Ortega, *Televisión pública en América Latina: Los valores del mercado y las políticas de Estado*, “Infoamérica. Iberoamerican Communication Review” 2010, No. 3–4, p. 206, [http://www.infoamerica.org/icr/n03\\_04/ortega.pdf](http://www.infoamerica.org/icr/n03_04/ortega.pdf) [accessed: 16 Mar 2013].

<sup>6</sup> M. Díaz Estévez, J. Peña Moya, *Diálogo con Jesús Martín Barbero: “En la televisión pública debe haber más país”*, “Infoamérica. Iberoamerican Communication Review” 2010, No. 3–4, p. 121, [http://www.infoamerica.org/icr/n03\\_04/barbero.pdf](http://www.infoamerica.org/icr/n03_04/barbero.pdf) [accessed: 12 Mar 2013].

<sup>7</sup> See: U. Klinger, *Democratizing media policy: community radios in Mexico and Latin America*, “Journal of Latin American Communication Research” 2011, Vol. 1, No. 2, <http://alaic.net/journal/index.php/jlacr/article/view/4/9> [accessed: 15.03.2013].

Toussaint argues, it is necessary that television be public, which may prove to be the key to democratization and communicational pluralism<sup>8</sup>. A similar message is sent by, among others, Javier Esteinou Madrid from UAM, another university in Mexico. He not only speaks in defence of public media but also suggests certain changes in the law (i.e. the Mexican Federal Law on Radio and Television), which would lead to the formation of “genuine public media”. According to this scholar, it is the modern state that should assume the responsibility for creating the conditions in which the pluralism of voices may exist, especially using public media. Democracy, as he claims, cannot involve information only through the few, as it would only serve the elites<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Latin American model of public television?**

In his monograph *Public television in Latin America: Reform or privatization*, another Latin American researcher and expert, Valerio Fuenzalida from Chile, sought the ways of modernization to create the “Latin American model of public television” instead of copying the solutions from Europe or other developed countries. According to him, it is not regional chauvinism but rather an attempt to find a response to the particular needs of the audience, related to the social issues faced by the population of the region. The innovative reform, however, should be based on the previous abortive experiences with public television in Latin America. The alternative to the reform, as Fuenzalida claims, is privatization, which has been one of the most visible trends in the region in the last decade of the 20th century<sup>10</sup>. In fact, in the 21st century some reform efforts were made in some Latin American countries, yet it is still difficult to call it a revolution or even a clear evolution in this field.

Valerio Fuenzalida advocated striving for a “Latin American model of public television”, which would rest on four program bases: the consensus regarding the television policy of the states (socio-political basis); the needs and expectations of the television audience (audience-related basis); the Latin American ethos (cultural basis); and the ludic and affective nature of the television language (semiotic basis)<sup>11</sup>. The program policy of such a television should, according to Fuenzalida, implement the following objectives:

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<sup>8</sup> F. Toussaint, *Claves para la democracia. Televisión pública*, in: A. Vega Montiel, M. Portillo, J. Repoll (eds.), *Las claves necesarias de una comunicación para la democracia*, Mexico D.F.–Villahermosa 2008, p. 55–66.

<sup>9</sup> J. Esteinou Madrid, *Transición democrática y defensa de los medios públicos en México*, in: *Las claves necesarias de una comunicación para la democracia*, Mexico D.F.–Villahermosa 2008, p. 67–98.

<sup>10</sup> V. Fuenzalida, *La televisión pública en América Latina. Reforma o privatización*, Mexico D.F.–Santiago de Chile 2000, p. 7–8.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41.

1. Shape the family audience, taking into consideration the educational (extra-curricular) role, which would better suit the existential needs of the Latin Americans, instead of using television for formal education.
2. Build the culture of social empowerment for development and combating poverty, instead of treating television as a tool to empower the socio-political leaders and disqualify their adversaries.
3. Strengthen the identity through the presence of the ludic and festive culture to serve as popular Latin American entertainment, in place of the privileged presence of high culture.
4. Organize the information and discussion space for resolving social problems, and by doing so influence national policies to resolve these issues, instead of treating television instrumentally as the tool of ideological, party, or government propaganda.

Valerio Fuenzalida argues that a program focused on the above goals of public and cultural utility would be a Latin American model, “relatively different” from commercial television and the solutions regarding public television adopted in Europe<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, the goals listed above seem to differ from the proposals and demands regarding public media there, such as in Poland, where the demand is for a larger dose of high culture, and the role of the media in development and fighting poverty is hardly mentioned.

Moreover, the idea of a common Latin American model of public media seems idealistic, considering not only numerous disagreements at the regional and national level in individual countries, but also the diversity of broadcasting systems themselves. Each Latin American republic has its own experiences in this area, which led to the emergence of specific media realities, in spite of obvious cultural and linguistic community.

### **The Latin American diversity: public television in selected countries of the region**

The origins of television in the largest country of Latin America resemble the North American model that is, based on private commercial initiative. The first television businessman in Brazil was Assis Chateaubriand, who came into possession of 36 radio stations, 34 periodicals, and 18 TV stations, while the history of television in this country is mostly the history of rivalry between private networks and their complex relationships with the authorities<sup>13</sup>. Public television in Brazil was also created according to the North American model, as a network of education and cultural channels. In 1967 the Televisión Educativa de

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 41–48.

<sup>13</sup> S. Capparelli, S. dos Santos, *La televisión en Brasil*, in: G. Orozco (ed.), *Historias de la televisión en América Latina*, Barcelona 2002, p. 65–116

Rio de Janeiro was founded, and the TV – Cultural de São Paulo in 1969. As stated by Patricia Ortega, there are 170 stations in Brazil dependent on public or private institutions, operating not for economic gain, and in 2007 President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva created a state television, TF Brasil Canal Integración, broadcasting internationally<sup>14</sup>. Currently, the Brazilian television market is dominated by TV Globo (owned by the greatest media corporation in Latin America, i.e., Globo Comunicação e Participações SA), followed by four other commercial networks (Record, SBT, Bandeirantes, and Rede TV), which is reflected not only by the lucrative market of Brazilian *telenovelas*. Meanwhile, the public network TV Brasil is only marginally successful in fighting for audience, at least from the market perspective<sup>15</sup>.

In the neighbour Argentina, television began broadcasting in 1951 as part of – as Nora Mazziotti calls it – the “expansion of media during Peronism” (from the name of Juan D. Peron ruling the country), and the first national channel was called Canal 7. After a while, private channels started to appear, although Mazziotti points out that television in Argentina went through different stages: from consolidation, etatization, reprivatization, to atomization<sup>16</sup>. Today, it is also dominated by private channels, and Canal 7 remains the chief public broadcaster. In 2001, the Sistema Nacional de Medios Públicos was created, an institution responsible among others for the funding of public television, and in 2009 a law was passed, which reserved 33 % of broadcasting space for non-profit organizations and set new requirements for state media. The same law also created a new institution called Radio Televisión Argentina Sociedad del Estado<sup>17</sup>.

On the other side of the Andes – in Chile – television was introduced by universities, although it took place quite late, from 1959 on, when the new medium was already operating in the majority of other Latin American republics. The soccer World Cup in Chile in 1962 contributed to the development of television, its popularization and consolidation. In 1968, the state television TVN (Televisión Nacional de Chile) was established. In this country, unlike in Brazil or Mexico, private stations did not combine into a broadcasting system but were only secondary in relation to the initiatives which are regarded as public in Latin America<sup>18</sup>. Nowadays, the main players on the fairly competitive television market in Chile are the public

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<sup>14</sup> P. Ortega, *Televisión pública...*, op. cit., p. 207.

<sup>15</sup> See: M.I. Vassallo de Lopes et al., *Brasil – nuevos modos de hacer y de ver ficción televisiva*, in: G. Orozco Gómez, M.I. Vassallo de Lopes (eds.), *Convergencias y transmediación de la ficción televisiva (OBITEL 2010)*, Rio de Janeiro 2010, p. 128–178.

<sup>16</sup> N. Mazziotti, *La televisión en Argentina*, in: *Historias de la televisión...*, p. 25–26.

<sup>17</sup> P. Ortega, *Televisión pública...*, op. cit., p. 206.

<sup>18</sup> See: V. Fuenzalida, *La televisión en Chile...*, in: *Historias de la televisión...*, p. 163–201.

(state) TVN, private (Catholic) university channels UC TV Canal 13 (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile) and UCV TV (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso), and four private commercial channels: Chilevisión, Mega, Red, and Telecanal<sup>19</sup>. In spite of the strong positions of the stations seen as public, that is the state-owned TVN and university channels, the staple of their funding are advertising revenues, which means that they function in a way no different from the operation of private commercial stations, and the main difference between them is the ownership. Therefore, it is difficult to discuss public television in the case of Chile, when one assumes the definition based on European solutions.

The leaders numbered among the new left in Latin America make bold moves in the area of rebuilding the broadcasting systems in their countries. The recently deceased President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez, as well as Evo Morales in Bolivia or Rafael Correa in Ecuador, decided to significantly strengthen the state media sector, which is often referred to as public as well. Thus, in 2007 the state/public station Ecuador TV started broadcasting in Ecuador, and in Bolivia, following previous quite unsuccessful attempts, Bolivia TV was launched in 2009. Morales and Correa, however, have to fight serious political and ideological battles with private media controlled by hostile owners. Hugo Chávez used to be quite successful in this type of struggle, as he was not only the star of the weekly several hours-long program “Aló, Presidente” in the state-controlled Venezolana de Televisión (VTV), but also created new media initiatives, including the international station TeleSUR, funded by a group of Latin American governments, which remains the main mouthpiece of the Bolivarian Revolution. Even so, however, the television market in Venezuela is dominated by several commercial broadcasters<sup>20</sup>.

A relatively strong sector of media recognized as public exists in the neighbour Colombia, the third most populous country in Latin America. The inauguration of television broadcasting in that country took place exactly on 13 June 1954, under the dictatorship of Gen. Gustavo Rojas Pinilla. The regime authorities launched the television to serve the propaganda goals, while simultaneously fulfilling an educational and cultural role. Soon, however, the state-controlled Televisora Nacional was partially commercialized by leasing transmission time to private broadcasters, which made the advertising income flow. It was so that the mixed, state and private broadcasting system was born, which survived in Colombia

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<sup>19</sup> See: Zob. V. Fuenzalida et al., *Chile – la audiencia escoge la información*, in: *Convergencias y transmediación de la ficción...*, p. 179–213.

<sup>20</sup> See: M. Alvarado Miquilena, L. Torrealba Mesa, V. González Barrios, *Venezuela – entre lo público y lo privado. De una o otra hegemonía*, in: *Convergencias y transmediación de la ficción...*, p. 421–472.

until the 1990s<sup>21</sup>. However, the modification of the Constitution in 1991 and the subsequent amendments to various statutes concerning the operation of television led to changes in the media system of Colombia. The National Television Commission (CNTV) was created as a regulatory board, and in 2007 the first concessions were issued to private broadcasters. In consequence, the state-owned stations changed their form: while Canal Uno still operated as mixed, Canal A was turned into Canal Institucional, mostly broadcasting cultural and education programs, and cover the sessions of the parliament; meanwhile, the Señal Colombia was to become a public channel offering mostly cultural, education, and sport programs. Besides these, there are regional, local, and university channels operating in Colombia, which are also included in the number of public channels. In order to ensure funding of public and state media, the Fund for the Development of Television was established, to be managed by the CNTV and funded mostly with the money of the private broadcasters who pay the treasury for the use of television signal or for the lease of broadcasting space in state-owned channels<sup>22</sup>.

The landscape of media considered as public in Mexico, the second largest country of Latin America population-wise, also seems to be fairly diverse. Television began broadcasting in Mexico already in 1950, during the rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Sp. *Partido Revolucionario Institucional – PRI*), which was more precisely a coalition, that remained in power in Mexico until 2000, when Vicente Fox from the National Action Party (Sp. *Partido Acción Nacional – PAN*) became the President of the Republic. Stressing the collaboration between the authorities and the owners of the television, Guillermo Orozco said: “In Mexico, the party and the television were like two sides of the same coin for more than 50 years”<sup>23</sup>. He meant, obviously, the cooperation (to maintain the status quo which was favourable to both parties) between the PRI and the largest television network in the country, Televisa, which could not have been launched by Emilio Azcárraga without certain actions on the part of the authorities. The present-day television market in Mexico is dominated by this powerful private network (being the core of a great media corporation of similar name, the second greatest such corporation in Latin America, preceded only by the abovementioned Globo Comunicação e Participações SA) along with a smaller one, TV Azteca. The state has its own channels, but already in 1993 the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari sold two state-owned channels (Canal 13 and Canal 7), simultaneously dissolving the Instituto

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<sup>21</sup> G. Rey, *La televisión en Colombia*, in: *Historias de la televisión...*, p. 117–162.

<sup>22</sup> P. Ortega, *Televisión pública...*, op. cit., p. 207–208.

<sup>23</sup> G. Orozco, *La televisión en México*, in: *Historias de la televisión...*, p. 203.



Mexicano de Televisión (Imevisión). The state remained in control of two cultural channels, Canal 11 and Canal 22, which do not cover the whole of the country, however, mainly broadcasting through cable networks. Even though in 2010 President Felipe Calderón took care to increase the range of Canal 11, it still only covers about half of the country. There are also more than 20 regional broadcasters in Mexico, controlled by the authorities of the various states of this federal republic. Apart from these, there are also paid thematic channels: a parliamentary one (since 2000), and one belonging to the judiciary (since 2006), which are also considered as public, even though access to them is limited<sup>24</sup>.

A noteworthy case among the countries of Central America is Costa Rica, the country which is seen as the paragon of democracy in the region and holds the first place – among all Latin American countries – in the freedom of media ratings<sup>25</sup>. The first state/public station, Canal 13, was launched in 1977, to subsequently create the Sistema Nacional de Radio y Televisión (SINART), into which three television channels were incorporated (8, 10, and 13) as well as Red Nacional de Radio, or the national radio network. After the abortive attempt to cede the SINART to the Church, the media came under the control of the foundation “Waves of Knowledge” (Sp. *Ondas del Saber*). In 2003 a law was passed, which conveyed the public status to the SINART and provided it with mixed funding: partially from the state budget and partially by the commercialization of its product. It also received 5 % of the advertising income generated by the state<sup>26</sup>.

### **Conclusions and outlooks**

The variety of solutions adopted in the individual countries of Latin America regarding the media referred to as *públicos* makes it difficult to describe the Latin American model of public television. Even more so, as it is not entirely clear there which media can be considered as public. Should we consider as such all but the commercial stations in the hands of private companies, according to the broad definition suggested by Martin Barbero? If so, we may not be able to overcome the difficulties in defining the model. However, the popular ideas of cooperation and integration between Latin American republics do emerge in the discussions about the future of television in this region of the world as well, even though developing a shared Latin American model of public media does not seem to be likely. Still, Tristán Bauer, the President of the public corporation Radio Televisión Argentina S.E., points out that

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<sup>24</sup> P. Ortega, *Televisión pública...*, op. cit., p. 209–210.

<sup>25</sup> See: R. Sajna, *Specyfika...*, op. cyt., p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 209.

due to the technological convergence and the switch from analogue to digital broadcasting, a project of integration on Latin American level should be considered, aimed at a greater and more pluralistic production by the local public stations, international coproductions, exchange of television productions, etc. He also reminds that the pioneer in Argentina was Channel 7, which is taking the pioneering role again, this time leading the digital revolution<sup>27</sup>.

Even though the digital revolution in Latin America is delayed several years in relation to North America or Europe, the so-called switch-over is scheduled to take place in phases during the following decades, and it will most certainly not end before 2020. What is stressed in this context, however, are the benefits from adopting a broadcasting norm common to all countries of the region, even though reaching a consensus in this matter is not easy, similarly to the Latin American model of public media. For it is difficult to find a direct European or North American inspiration, or even a Latin American agreement regarding the role (apart from its significance for the development of democracy and pluralism), ways of operation, or outlooks for the public media in the region. It would be easier to indicate a certain diversity belonging to the trend of seeking one's own identity, with the accompanying uncertainty already mentioned by Samuel Huntington.

Thus, to sum up the above considerations, we should expect more integration activities, aimed rather at certain forms of cooperation than to establish a regional model of public media. It will be taking place with a simultaneous acceptance for the diversity resulting from the autonomy of individual Latin American republics and their specific social, political, and economic issues, in spite of the common historical and cultural foundations laid by the conquest and then fight for independence – and now sovereignty – of Latin America as a whole and as individual republics within it. The future of public media in this part of the world will most likely depend on the actions of the politicians and other actors of social life, both in individual countries and on international stage, and especially on the local, Latin American one.

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<sup>27</sup> T. Bauer, *La televisión pública nuevamente en la vanguardia*, in: A. Miranda et al. (eds.), *Pensar los medios en la era digital. Iberoamérica frente al desafío de la convergencia*, Buenos Aires 2010, p. 13–16.