

**United and fragmented: Communication and media studies in Latin America**

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**Abstract**

Scholars have lamented the state of fragmentation in communication scholarship for it undermines its consolidation as a distinct and coherent field of study. My interest in this article is to assess whether this diagnosis applies to communication and media studies in Latin America. My argument is that the field remains united yet fragmented in the region. Unlike communication scholarship in the United States and some European countries, it is grounded in common theoretical and analytical roots laid down in the 1960s and 1970s. Foundational studies produced made original and important contributions to the field at large, most notably, the study of media/cultural imperialism, innovations in communication/media policies, and the intersection between media and cultural dynamics. Since then, the field has become consolidated and expanded with the proliferation of research and universities and the development of various lines of research. The result is the empirical fragmentation of the field in multiple, parallel lines of research. Although fragmentation has produced rich empirical studies on myriad issues, it has yet to produce path-breaking, ambitious arguments that once were distinctive of the “Latin American” tradition of communication and media scholarship. What is needed, I argue, is to adopt an analytical position that places theoretical questions at the center, engages with arguments produced in different settings, and participates in broad debates in the global community of communication and media scholars.

The current state of the field of communication studies has been described as “fragmented” in the United States (Beniger, 1993; Cooren, 2012; Stanfill, 2012; Wiemann, Pingree & Hawkins, 1988) and Europe (Donsbach, 2006; Nordenstreng, 2007). Situated at the convergence of the social sciences and the humanities, the field comprises parallel theories, empirical interests, and disciplinary traditions. Attempts to cross divisions and forge connections have been rare. The remarkable expansion of the field in the past decades has exacerbated this trend by adding research directions and theories. Lacking a common disciplinary trunk, the field has become consolidated into a series of parallel offshoots and niche studies.

Scholars have lamented the state of fragmentation because it undermines the consolidation of communication as a distinct and coherent field of study (Craig, 2007; Rosengren, 1993). They are concerned about communication studies remaining a thematic prolongation of established

disciplines rather than a field with unique questions and theories. To address the scattering of communication research in different disciplinary directions, they recommend fostering a dialogue across traditions in order to search for common theoretical frameworks and empirical questions.

My interest in this article is to assess whether this diagnosis applies to the evolution and current state of communication and media studies in Latin America. By focusing on this case, I hope to contribute to understanding the globalization of communication/media scholarship and the (dis)connections in the trajectories of the field across the world. I do not intend to offer a detailed comparison of academic cultures. Instead, I want to examine distinctive aspects of the field in Latin America by drawing comparisons with the field in the West. Claude Levi-Strauss' observation about understanding other cultures as a way to comprehend our own culture is useful for the analysis of academic cultures: specific characteristics of scholarly fields in particular geographical settings become salient in comparison to others.

My argument is that the field of communication/media studies remains united yet fragmented in Latin America. Unlike communication scholarship in the United States and some European countries, it is grounded in common theoretical and analytical roots laid down in the 1960s and 1970s. Foundational studies produced made original and important contributions to the field at large, most notably, the study of media/cultural imperialism, innovations in communication/media policies, and the intersection between media and cultural dynamics. Since then, the field has become consolidated and expanded with the proliferation of research and universities and the development of various lines of research. The result is, similarly to what has been observed in the West, the empirical fragmentation of the field in multiple, parallel lines of research (Fuentes Navarro, 2009; Sodr , 2012b). Although fragmentation has produced rich empirical studies on myriad issues, it has not necessarily contributed to producing path-breaking, ambitious, and influential arguments that once were distinctive of the "Latin American" tradition of communication and media scholarship. What is needed, I argue, is to adopt an analytical position that resembles the one that generated novel theoretical insights in the past: a cosmopolitan view that places theoretical questions at the center of the analysis, cautiously and critically approaches theories produced in different settings, and is engaged with debates in the global community of communication and media scholars.

### **A short and incomplete genealogy**

The story of the field of communication and media studies in Latin America has been told numerous times (Atwood & McAnany, 1986; Beltr n Salm n, 2000; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1997; Otero, 2011; Rodr guez and Murphy, 1997; Schmucler, 1997). No need to repeat the whole story again here. Some aspects, however, need to be brought up for the purpose of my analysis.

First, communication *and* media studies have been used interexchangeably in the region. The distinction between communication and media studies has remained definitely more clear on both margins of the North Atlantic than in Latin America. In the latter, this distinction has been blurred as communication was subsumed under “mass communication/the media.” Rhetoric, information studies, and interpersonal communication in everyday places, families, and organizations had a minor presence. Communication and media have often been used as synonymous (de Moragas, 1981), as if mediated processes completely dominate human communication. The limitation of this confusion is that they are two distinctive yet related fields of study, with different histories, epistemologies, and theoretical grounding (Martino, 2007). Communication as approached from psychology, rhetoric, conversation and language analysis, and ethnomethodology cannot be confused with “mediated” communication that place media industries, organizations, processes, and policies at the center of the analysis.

The “media-centrism” of communication studies in the region was the result of the fact that the field was born from cross-disciplinary interest in the mass media rather than human communication writ large. Sociologists, philosophers, historians, literary critics, and economists converged in a common, emerging intellectual space in the 1960s. Disciplines that shaped the evolution of communication studies in the West Rhetoric, such as cybernetics, biology and psychology (Rogers, 1994), had negligible influence. Lacking the wide-ranging diversity of disciplinary approaches and theories found in the West (Carbaugh & Buzzanell, 2010; Bryant & Miron 2004), particularly in the United States, communication/media studies in Latin America remains focused on media and cultural processes.

In Latin America, the field is historically anchored in debates about mass society and capitalism that dominated the social sciences and humanities in Europe and some academic quarters in the US in the 1960s. Various strands of critical theory, from Marxism to structuralism to semiotics, defined the subject of study as well as the analytical agenda. Communication studies became an extension of intellectual interest in other social questions such as capitalism, socialism, class relations, ideology, identity, and consciousness. The study of media and communication was linked to understanding specific dimensions of large-scale dynamics related to power and social/cultural change in late capitalism. This was reflected in landmark studies that defined the field such as the capitalist structure of media markets, the domination of US cultural industries in the region, the alliances between transnational capital and domestic media powers, semiotic analysis of media messages, media, development, and social change, and so on (de Moragas 1981).

Second, arguments were formulated against the positivist tradition and modernization approaches in communication studies dominant in the U.S (Gilman, 2003). Researchers in Latin America criticized the informational, individualistic and functionalist premises underpinning the “dominant paradigm” in communication associated with the works of Daniel Lerner, Wilbur Schramm, Paul Lazarfeld, and Everett Rogers. Studies rejected the theoretical and epistemological apparatus of, what was called, “functionalist” communication studies. Against

the idea of communication as information transmission grounded in cybernetic studies, they embraced the idea of communication as critical consciousness grounded in Marxism, psychoanalysis, and Paulo Freire's work. They adopted a structuralist approach focused on the linkages between communication and social forces that was critical of the psychological, individualistic premises of communication studies. They embraced qualitative and critical approaches against what they saw as the prevalence of quantitative, number-crunching methodologies. They criticized US scholars for putting communication research in the service of capitalist and imperialist interests represented by the US government and foundations. Instead, the notion that intellectual production should be intrinsic to anti-capitalist struggles in the global South was prevalent.

The field was not particularly interested in building neat disciplinary boundaries. Scholars were not concerned about, to paraphrase Andrew Abbott's idea, the "chaos of interdisciplinarity." Nor were they keen in cultivating an "epistemic culture" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999) that established intellectual differences vis-à-vis adjacent sciences and disciplines. Corraling communication and media studies seemed contrary to the essence of the subject of study. Instead, scholars plundered theoretical ideas from art criticism and history, economics and sociology, semiotics and political activism that shaped critical thinking and progressive politics. They didn't conceive communication as discipline situated in splendid isolation from other intellectual pursuits and academic traditions. They liberally blended insights from theories developed by John Berger and Louis Althusser, Walter Benjamin and Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes and Antonio Gramsci, Raul Prebisch and Darcy Ribeiro, Herbert Marcuse and Régis Debray, Julia Kristeva and Theodore Adorno, and Paulo Freire and Jose Carlos Mariategui. These were "travelling theories," in Edward Said's (1993) perceptive observation: theories adapted and translated to make sense of local experiences. The field brought together a hodgepodge of theoretical insights grounded in vastly different experiences, disciplinary backgrounds, and geo-political realities to interpret communication and culture in Latin America in contemporary capitalism.

I am not convinced by the argument that the field in the region grew out a double theoretical influence, as Martin-Barbero and Rey (2000) have argued. In their view, both the "informational/instrumental" paradigm anchored in the US tradition and the "critical/ideological" paradigm of Latin American social sciences influenced the early days of the field (see Kaplun, 2013). However, the former didn't become institutionalized in schools of communication or the academic community. Its presence was limited to translated articles and books and specific development programs funded by US government agencies, but it never evolved into an indigenous tradition with strong roots in Latin America. There was hardly a regionalized version of "the dominant paradigm" that followed the path charted by US scholars.

If anything, this paradigm served as a constant point of reference to justify the need for critical arguments. This is reflected in the perennial critique of functionalism, used as shorthand for "modernization," "administrative," "positivist" research commonly identified with "mainstream"

communication studies in the United States. The problem is that “functionalism,” if we identify it with the ideas developed by Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, lost currency in communication studies (and arguably in the social sciences) a while back. It hardly has the prominence it had in a more layered and theoretically scattered field. Regular indictments of “functionalism” bring zombie theories back to life, and build a convenient and unnecessary straw-man to sing the praises of critical theories. At this point in time, criticizing “functionalism” is to beat a dead theoretical horse. It would be as if Latin Americans still object to the Catholic Church for celebrating Mass only in Latin or protest the Spanish Crown for monopolizing foreign trade.

The critique of functionalism is linked to another feature of the field in the region: From the beginning, communication/media studies evolved into a regional, “Latin American” field of scholarship. This was the result of extensive collaboration and cross-reading/citation across the continent. What defined “Latin American” communication/media studies was a collective awareness about common processes in the region coupled with shared empirical questions and theoretical influences. Its identity was also grounded in a deliberate position against theoretical approaches identified with “Yankee/gringo” scholarship, government, and media industries, as illustrated by classic works by Luis Ramiro Beltrán, Juan Diaz Bordenave, and Antonio Pasquali (Martin-Barbero 2002; Vassallo de Lópes & Fuentes Navarro 2005).

Academic research was closely linked to real-world politics and remained conscious about the need to place communication studies within historical and political contexts. Latin American communication/media scholars were critical of “Ivory tower” intellectual work. Many were personally active in the politics of the 1960s and 1970s in the region, and in some cases, occupied prominent positions in government. As universities became epicenters for political effervescence in the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban revolution, scholars deliberately opposed defining themselves and their work as “academic” (Walsh, 2005). The Sartrean model of intellectuals *engagé* committed to radical politics was particularly appealing amid the anti-imperialist, nationalistic, revolutionary politics that characterized the leftist intelligentsia at that time. Prominent communication/media scholars were publicly identified with leftist political parties and organizations, served in governments with progressive agendas, and participated in regional and global debates about the New World Information and Communication Order sponsored by UNESCO.

This evolution suffered an important setback with the coming of right-wing military dictatorships to power in the Southern Cone during the 1970s. Scholars based in Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay went into exile after suffering persecution and threats, and magazines, journals, and universities were shut down. Given these political conditions, intellectual production somewhat shifted to universities in other countries, namely Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela where conditions were significantly better for academic work.

It was in the late 1970s and early 1980s when Latin American cultural studies branched off as a field of study from within communication/media studies. About the time communication/cultural

studies was emerging in the United Kingdom, it also surfaced in Latin America (Szurmuk and Waisbord, 2011; Waisbord, 1998). The foundations were laid out by the works of Nestor García Canclini (1995) and Jesus Martin-Barbero (1993) which were critical of dominant arguments and developed original ideas that defined cultural studies in the region. It is not exaggerated to say that they shifted the course of communication/media research and were largely responsible for the “cultural turn” in the field. Both authors questioned then-popular theories of media imperialism and cultural imposition to understand cultural formations and processes.

García Canclini (1995) produced ground-breaking anthropological studies of popular cultures that challenged then-prevalent arguments about the power of “mass cultures” and media industries on cultural formation. His notion of “hybrid cultures” illustrated his argument about the complex dynamics of cultural traditions and expressions in the region. His conclusion helped to reposition the study of culture within communication studies and raised warnings about making ambitious deductions about cultural processes from the analysis of media texts and systems. Simultaneously, Martin-Barbero (1993) invited the field to move the analysis from “the media to mediations,” as his landmark book is entitled. Equipped with a sophisticated theoretical scaffolding anchored in continental philosophy, he prodded the field to rethink the relation between communication, media and culture – to shift the focus of the research from “objects” to processes (Martin-Barbero, 2013). Not only was he critical of the dominant media-centrism and long-held suppositions about the numbing effects of media flows from Hollywood as argued by the “media imperialism” thesis. He was also fascinated by how people engaged in sense-making processes in everyday places – from popular markets to telenovela watching – to (re)create individual and collective identities. In his view, the analysis of media texts should not be the focus of communication studies, but rather, it needs to be placed in contexts where people develop a sense of self and nurture common bonds with others.

Largely thanks to García Canclini and Martin-Barbero, communication and cultural studies have been tied at the waist in Latin America. This was not a complete innovation as previous studies had also been concerned with both communication and culture. After all, both issues were central to pioneering journals in the field such as *LENGUAJES* and *Comunicación y Cultura* (Grimson, & Varela, 2002; Schmucler, 1997). Yet their most significant innovation was that different sets of questions needed to be asked about “the media” by placing texts/industries within the study of cultural dynamics. Research on “media audiences”, “cultural consumption” and “youth culture”, which have exploded since their landmark books, are indebted to their ideas. These works capped the early intellectual development of the field in Latin America in the 1980s.

What should we conclude from this abbreviated history?

One conclusion is that communication studies grew out a common intellectual trajectory in Latin America in contrast to the West, where the field lacks a unified history and a clear identity (Eadie, 2011; Simonson, García-Jiménez, Siebers, & Craig, 2012). In the region, the field is

grounded in cross-disciplinary interest in mass communication and critical social theory, and has paid close attention to the political and cultural uses of the media. The canon of communication studies is more intellectually homogeneous than in the West. It features classic texts of the media/cultural imperialism tradition, structural semiotics and discourse analysis, continental philosophy, cultural studies, and political economy. These theories and approaches have been the *lingua franca* of the field, included in must-read reading lists of graduate programs and bibliographical references. Compared to the West, notoriously missing in the Latin American field are specific theoretical approaches (pragmatism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology), disciplinary traditions (social psychology, cognitive psychology) and research subjects (media effects, conversation analysis).

Because it embraced a more narrow view of communication, the field developed a common theoretical and epistemological core in Latin America. It became organized around a common set of research subjects, such as media industries, cultural dynamics, and media policies. Critical political economy and cultural studies have stood high even as new thematic questions (such as political communication, health communication, and journalism studies) have gained ground in recent decades. Critical approaches embedded in post-Marxist, post-structuralist debates maintained an influential position. Interpretative and ethnographic studies remain preeminent; positivist approaches have a minor presence. Canonical texts cover significant less ground than in the West. The linkages between academia and politics are still strong. In recent years, scholars have actively participated in contemporary processes of media reform in many countries and are visible voices in governments and the media.

The field evolved with one ear close to theoretical arguments particularly in Western Europe, and the other tuned to historical and contemporary developments in the region. This branded the unique contributions of the “Latin American” tradition. It cultivated a consciousness of Latin America as a common intellectual space, defined by a shared history that could be interpreted by applying insights from theories produced in the West and adapted to different conditions and processes (Barranquero, 2011). It did not champion an “indigenous” way of thinking, steeped into local intellectual currents and uncontaminated by Western influences. The field neither adopted a navel-gazing position nor did it celebrate parochialism. Dominant approaches were not chiefly interested in building an intellectual project uniquely anchored in local traditions, particularly compared to other regions of the global South where indigenous, cultural and religious cosmovisions infused the development of communication theories (Gunaratne, 2010; Miike, 2010; Sesanti 2010). Scholars didn’t denounce Western theories in the name of intellectual sovereignty, but instead, they picked selectively depending on ideological sympathies and ontological premises. While they criticized theories that failed to scrutinize capitalism or link communication to social structures, they embraced continental philosophy, semiotics, and social theory that helped to contextualize communication and media in specific social formations.

Consequently, the field has been open to global and regional development and intellectual trends. It was a globalized field of study in the sense of connected to intellectual debates elsewhere,

before globalization became a buzzword in the post-Cold War era. It sought to de-Westernize communication scholarship decades before it became a concern among academics in the West (Park & Curran, 2000). It was skeptical of universalist claims before deconstructionism and postmodernism became fashionable. It was unabashedly cosmopolitan, constantly rethinking the viability of ideas produced in Europe and the United States in the region.

### **Where we are**

This historical excursus shows the consolidation of communication/media studies into a cohesive, interdisciplinary field of study. It cannot be considered a nascent area of academic interest, a “field in construction.” It has become the outgrowth of a “scientific/intellectual movement” (Frickel & Gross, 2005) with distinctive ideas, organization structures, resources, and opportunities. It is intellectually organized around distinctive theoretical and analytical traditions. “Communication” is the umbrella term for the study of media industries, systems, policies, reception, cultures, and organizations. Critical traditions – from Barthesian semiotics to Frankfurt School cultural pessimism, from political economy to cultural studies – have had a strong influence. It is a mature field with the essential organizational infrastructure: scores of departments and schools, thousands of students and researchers, dozens of journals scattered throughout the region, professional organizations, and national and regional meetings.

Compared to the field in United States and Europe, the object of study in Latin America is less diffused as a result of the fact that fewer disciplines and theories have converged. The research tradition of media effects, social networks, message design, information processing, have a strong presence. Nor is there a visible influence from disciplines such as information studies, social psychology, cybernetics, rhetoric, conversation analysis. The field is focused on the study of fewer subjects, namely “the media” and cultural processes, and remains analytically embedded largely in various strands of critical theories.

Because intellectual traditions and thematic interests remain different, the challenges for the field in Latin America are not similar to the ones identified in the West. In the latter, the challenges are grounded in the interdisciplinary nature of the field: the lack of theoretical coherence, the persistent of parallel lines of research, and the lack of common goals (Craig, 2007). These issues are less of a problem in Latin America because the field has a more unified intellectual genealogy that still informs research agendas and analytical perspectives. Less disciplinary omnivorous than the field in the United States, for example, heteroglossia is less of a challenge in the region. Thanks to a shared past, the field speaks fewer theoretical and disciplinary languages.

The current challenge, I argue, is different. It is less about finding a common canon or language and more about reinvigorating theoretical thinking and charting out new analytical developments. It is a field with “theoretical challenges,” as Muniz Sodré (2013) rightly puts it. What has been missing during the past decades amid the proliferation of publications, academic

programs, and journals are new theoretical questions that could not only redefine the directions of the field but also make significant contributions to the global field of communication and media studies. What is necessary is, to borrow François Cooren's (2012) call, to "put theory at the center" in order to sharpen the original contributions of research about Latin America communication and media to the field at large.

What are the causes of the "theoretical challenges"? Two factors need to be mentioned. Research tends to be organized and dispersed around empirical questions instead of theoretical arguments or broad analytical and conceptual debates. The substantive literature produced in the past decades has made important contributions by documenting and offering thoughtful insights on a range of important empirical issues – from media audiences (Bonilla Velez 2011; Orozco Gómez, 2012) to media policies (Mastrini & Becerra, 2009). Yet a significant body of knowledge has yet to make important theoretical innovations that nudge communication and media studies to reconsider previous arguments in light of findings coming out of the region.

Frequently, studies have resorted to using existing theories to analyze certain empirical phenomena instead of probing them or trying to advance new theoretical arguments. This tendency produces derivative ideas rather than novel propositions that question conventional wisdom or push the field in new directions. This is particularly curious considering that Latin American communication scholarship has historically taken pride on its critical tradition – questioning rather than simply perpetuating received knowledge.

Such tendency is also visible in double attitude about theories that originated elsewhere, particularly in the United States and some Western European countries. On the one hand, there persists a mix of skepticism and unfamiliarity with certain lines of thinking that never made into the mainstream of communication/media research such as pragmatism, media effects, cognitive psychology, and ethnomethodology. On the other hand, there continues an innate curiosity and enthusiasm for current European "social theory," without careful considering how well they travel across borders or how they can be enriched from a "Latin American" perspective. Examples include recent works by sociologists (Bourdieu, Castells, Luhmann) and philosophers (Auge, Badiou, Butler, Laclau, Ranciere), which have been widely applied to the study of communication and media. The limitation lies in the tendency to use rather than to probe theories to assess their virtues and shortcomings to analyze communication and media. Such attitude diverges from the past given that communication scholars showed a cautious approach in the reception of "foreign" theories. The foundational literature showed a healthy inclination to assess the applicability of arguments produced in the midst of American academia, Parisian politics and Italian insurrections. Such skepticism seems to have dissipated as if what is produced anywhere necessarily applies elsewhere. It would be actually remarkable if arguments made elsewhere, typically outside the field of communication and media studies and without particular consideration of the empirical richness of cases in Latin America, would translate perfectly well.

### **Putting theory at the center**

Producing theoretical innovations or steering theory in new directions, let alone producing “Theory” that may revolutionize the field, is not easy. Our intellectual times are far from the heady days of grand social theory in the West (Eagleton, 2004). It is not obvious whether the kind of sweeping, ambitious theorizing that dominated the social sciences and the humanities into the 1980s is still possible. A combination of factors has made such attempts improbable. Academic specialization drives scholars to produce modest theoretical arguments applicable to niche areas and more narrow questions. Also, embarking on producing grand theories with universalist ambitions is ideologically suspicious in the aftermath of academic multiculturalism and postmodernism. The recognition of the endless complexity of social phenomena, too, leads to aiming for modest arguments instead of master explanations about big communication questions. Although conclusions about “the death of theory” might be vastly exaggerated (Elliott & Attitridge, 2012; Lionnet & Shis, 2011), these are tough times for comprehensive, universalist theorizing.

But even if theory-building may not set its sight on a vast social horizon, it is still worth trying to produce parsimonious and rigorous explanations beyond specific cases. Producing “Theories” may set the bar too high, but it is still possible and necessary to generate original theoretical propositions that invite us to see things in a different light and keep the body of knowledge springy. Pushing new theoretical insights forward is a non-negotiable condition for academic research. Every PhD student is expected to make even a modest contribution to theoretical knowledge. There is still the belief, as Russell Neuman and colleagues (2008) have shown, that failing to push theoretical arguments forward is considered a sin in the field. Empirical research is parasitic on past theories and studies, yet it needs to set out to revisit received ideas, seek conceptual breakthroughs, and chart new analytical directions. If this missing, research quickly becomes stale and uninteresting, and fades without leaving theoretical traces.

Communication/media studies needs constantly to interrogate theoretical arguments. This is particularly so given that interest in a range of “communication” issues – from the use of information technologies in everyday sociability to the structure of media markets – clearly overflows the boundaries of the field. Scholars trained in a wide range of disciplines, from psychology to economics, study communication and media phenomena without making reference to communication theories, becoming affiliated with communication academic organizations, or publishing in “communication/media” journals. Because “communication/media” are ubiquitous in every corner of society, they have become a matter of interest across the humanities and social sciences. In all likelihood, the “mediatization of everything” (Livingstone 2009) will exacerbate central features of the field, namely being empirically untidy, organized around parallel research questions, and brought together under the same institutional infrastructure a motley collection of scholars, departments and journals interested in all-things-communication.

Given the prospects of further fragmentation, it is imperative to continue developing an interdisciplinary theoretical scaffolding. The congenital cacophony of communication/media

studies will not go away. The field is bound to live permanently in perpetual chaos, with splintered lines of research and theoretical branches. One way to (re)define the field is to pursue common theoretical questions that are relevant across empirical and disciplinary divides. What sets one academic field apart is not only its unique subject of inquiry or institutional infrastructure. It also needs a shared interest in producing new theoretical arguments. A theoretical body lays out important questions, provides a common frame of analytical reference, and signals research directions.

Another reason for fresh theorizing is the constant need to shake up intellectual dogmas and renew the analytical apparatus of the field. To reiterate what any graduate student is constantly reminded, utilizing theories is important yet insufficient. Academic scholarship should constantly probe the interpretative value of past theories rather than recite old truisms. It is a double-entry process: Theories shape our thinking while research reshapes theories. One doesn't need to embrace an absolutist Popperian vision or hold a blue-eyed conviction about scientific progress to believe that intellectual pursuits should constantly probe theories. Following theories as God-handed catechism is unexciting. It produces predictable arguments that make research almost unnecessary. It is contrary to the kind of critical, original thinking frequently celebrated in academic discourse, class syllabi, annual reports, and commencement addresses.

In the case of communication/media studies in Latin America, critical theorizing could not only reinvigorate the field. It might also provide common questions for debating across lines of research that tend to be clustered by topic – industries, audiences, arts, journalism. Theoretical challenges offer conceptual and analytical bridges that can inform thinking in specialized areas of work and break off insular thinking.

### **Scholarship without borders**

Foregrounding theory is also important to renew and strengthen the contributions of Latin American research to the field at large. Despite the limitations of English as lingua franca in the global academia (Lugo-Ocando, 2010), increased globalization has opened up new opportunities for showcasing the contributions of research about the region. To become truly globalized and de-Westernized, the study of particular developments within one community, region, or country needs to be placed in the broad context in the field by interrogating theories and arguments produced across settings. Theory-building offers a way simultaneously to break away from the analytical limitations of local empiricism, to bridge political, cultural and geographical divides, and challenge persistent Western-centrism (Hafez 2013).

Formulating theoretical propositions also help to address a pesky question that recurrently appears in the field: the scientific nature of communication and media studies. Sentiments have been divided around this question. Some believe that the “scientific” model identified with the use of certain methodology and epistemology provides the mirror in which the field should see itself; instead, others believe it is the wrong model given its narrow ontological and ideological

assumptions about knowledge about society. Different positions on this question continue to split the field in separate quarters, the “qualitative/quantitative” rift being one of the most notorious (and least productive) divisions.

No need to revisit this long and complex debate here. Part of the problem, I believe, is that the concept of “science” doesn’t allow finding common ground. It generates strong and opposite reactions across the many divides that stops the discussion before it starts. To some, science evokes the grand project of Western philosophy; to others, it is marooned in the model of natural sciences. To paraphrase Ludwig Wittgenstein, sometimes words stand in the way of understanding each other. What we need is to reformulate the question of “scientificity” and the “scientific” aspirations of the field. What is at stake is the need to permanently (re)articulate theoretical propositions that provide rigorous and generalizable explanations beyond purely empirical and descriptive analysis. In the spirit of Max Weber’s classic formulation of science, we need to enrich coherent and reasoned arguments to organize and interpret evidence. The point is producing research that renovates ambitious, rigorous, evidence-based, sophisticated interpretative frameworks.

In the case of Latin America, the challenge is to produce innovative theoretical arguments that capitalize on the wealth of empirical lines of research and the unique intellectual tradition in the region. What to study is not the problem. Endless number of topics merit study given the reach and constant revolution of communication and social connectivity. Instead, the problem is insufficient attention to theoretical questions that could bring together communication and media scholarship around a common research agenda and foster conceptual and analytical breakthroughs. Although I am aware that this is a difficult task in the context of the compartmentalization of research in specific divisions of professional associations and niche journals, it is worth exploring ways to do it.

Theorizing should be motivated by asking how and why Latin American cases rise new theoretical questions, take propositions further, and/or provide findings that question existing arguments. The broad question needs to be “What does research about communication/media processes in the region add to theoretical debates?” The value of empirical research is not only to analyze certain developments for better comprehending them, but also to serve as the foundation for developing new theoretical insights.

The position here proposed – interrogating the local relevance of arguments developed elsewhere and producing original theories in dialogue with debates in the West – is not entirely original. It actually taps into the tradition of communication and media studies in the region. Pioneering studies adopted such perspective almost half a century ago: they engaged critically with paradigms produced elsewhere instead of simply applying or rejecting them. By probing the relevance of “foreign” theories in light of different conditions, they unmasked their universal pretensions (Mignolo & Escobar, 2010). By doing so, they laid out the foundations of the field in the region born at the crossroads of reading Western arguments “against the grain” of local

communication, media/cultural industries, political histories, social mobilization and indigenous intellectual traditions.

Thinking theoretically is a way to engage in Latin American scholarship in debates in the field at large. It is way to reorient the focus from empirical studies about local and regional issues to conceptual conversations across geographical borders. This is necessary at a time of increased academic globalization and “de-westernization” (Park & Curran, 2000) of communication and media studies. Besides widening the empirical pool of cases, studies about specific countries or regions should advance new theoretical insights, just as one expects from any study, no matter its geographical focus. So-called “regional/area studies” should not reinforce geographical divides. They unintentionally reify, however, conventional topographical notions of social studies, divided across geo-political constructions and “area” specializations. Inward-looking studies may provide valuable insights about local and regional developments and provide a shared space for scholars interested in a certain geographical region. Instead, “regional” scholarship needs to participate in common, global debates by testing arguments grounded in different realities and raising new theoretical and empirical questions.

Latin American communication and media studies needs to reengage with broad theoretical debates beyond geographical borders. Such shift is needed to cultivate a truly cosmopolitan scholarship, “a field of the world” to paraphrase Kant’s classic definition of cosmopolitanism (Waisbord, 2014). This means an intellectual mindset interested in refining theoretical thinking informed by myriad cases from around the world rather than accumulating empirical knowledge or compartmentalizing research in geographical areas. Our knowledge and conclusions are limited as long as they are based on limited set of cases.

### **Research directions**

With this view in mind, I want to suggest research directions for studies about Latin America that might contribute theoretical lessons about important questions in the field. My inclination is to embed communication and media studies in the analysis of power, “the fundamental concept in the social sciences,” in Bertrand Russell’s well-known assertion. This is particularly so considering abysmal economic and social disparities, and fluid and dynamic politics in contemporary Latin America. My interest is to understand whether and how the study of communication and media helps to understand how power works and the prospects for strengthening citizenship.

Here I propose four research questions about communication, media, and power: How does citizen activism contribute to changing power relations in media systems and performance as well as media policy making? Do digital media and new forms of media “prosumption” contribute to citizen empowerment? How are communicative spaces for difference and similarity connected to democratic debate and governance? How are myriad forms of communication and

media linked to processes of social and political change? In what follows I flesh out these questions.

One theme is citizen activism around media policy reforms, a subject of growing interest in media and communication policy as well as central to many recent experiences throughout the region. Citizens' initiatives and participation in myriad ways have been central to recent public debates and legislative reforms virtually everywhere in the region, including Argentina's 2009 audiovisual services law, Ecuador's 2013 law, Uruguay's 2007 community media law, Brazil's *Marco Civil* on Internet regulation, Mexico's opening of television markets and Internet regulation, Venezuela's myriad media laws, and so on.

For the past decades, studies on media and democracy have focused on the centrality of civil society and the role of the State. An underlying premise of this line of inquiry is the idea that citizens' participation makes important contributions to effective democratic accountability and institutional performance. This idea places hopes in civic society to reinvigorate democracy and institutionalize forms of communication that foreground ordinary citizens instead of elites or experts. Civic engagement in/with the media is deemed necessary to strengthen the quality of democratic life and addresses chronic problems of media systems, specifically the disproportionate influence of markets and political elites, the weakness of civic voices and the narrow agenda of news organizations in covering social problems. Certainly, the challenges for media democracy are not identical across regions and political regimes, and the spread of digital technologies, in principle, offers opportunities for redressing old inequalities in political communication.

In Latin America, a range of obstacles for promoting opportunities for civic voices persists. Government discretionary manipulation of press economies, libel laws, the absence and weakness of freedom of information, and informational routines tilt the balance in favor of political elites. Media concentration and commercialism reduce opportunities for progressive actors to get fair and consistent access. Cozy relations between giant media business and governments negatively affect civic interests that challenge both industrial corporations and allied politicians. Also, anti-press violence amid situations of statelessness, particularly in Mexico and Central America, makes public expression extremely dangerous for citizens and journalists. These obstacles undermine the possibilities for pluralist media systems featuring institutions and platforms that scrutinize political and economic powers, promote a diversity of views, reflect heterogeneous cultures, and cover a range of public issues and demands.

In Latin America, organized publics have pushed to curb the power of both states and market through innovative proposals and legislation. They have aimed to legalize community media, curb media concentration, promote domestic production of audiovisual content, regulate official advertising, ensure public access to government information, increase media accountability and transparency, and eliminate libel laws and other forms of chilling speech. In contrast to a past tradition of citizens' opposition to the state on media matters, civil society actors have used a

range of strategies including opposition, advocacy, and coalition-building with state and market actors to promote democratic changes.

Here there are valuable lessons not only for understanding ongoing political shifts and new forms of civic participation. They are also important to further our grasp on emergent forms of citizen participation and media policy making.

A second theme for further exploration is the issue of social media and citizens' mobilization, a subject that has received a great deal of scholarly attention, both outside and inside communication and media studies in recent years. This is an appropriate subject to study in Latin America, not only given recent examples of using digital platforms for contesting power and organizing citizens - from student activism to citizens' mobilization against extractive projects along the region. It is also a relevant issue given the region's pioneering tradition of alternative uses of various media (from radio to grassroots video) for political empowerment (Rodriguez & Mirelles, 2014). With high levels of Internet penetration and the explosion of mobile platforms in the past few years, the region is incredibly rich with examples of "digitally connected" citizenship.

Various questions need to be closely inspected around new forms of mediation of collective action. Has the proliferation of digital technologies resulted in increased mobilization, in a region with persistent inequalities in digital access? Do digital platforms make it possible to bypass conventional brick-and-mortar associations? How specific social and political conflicts affect the use of digital platforms and, in turn, are affected by the wide availability of the latter? Does the political use of digital media "follow" rather than "precede" protest (Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013)? How are communicative practices "hybridized" – mixing old and new technologies, interpersonal and mediated communication - around the contestation of power? Do digital platforms challenge traditional forms of political representation and voice in a democracy?

A third area of research is interrogating the implications of the ongoing consolidation of segmented spaces of communication for democratic debate and governance. These are spaces for communicative homophily populated by citizens who share similar political views, socio-economic positions, educational backgrounds, religious affiliation, and so on. The fragmentation of both old media and digital platforms has facilitated this process. Citizens are able to tailor media exposure to content that fits existing interests, predispositions, and views, thereby reducing the chances they may encounter unintended news, information, and opinion. Personalized news, selective exposure, and communication islands become dominant. Instead, the prospects for media content attracting different populations or facilitating exposure to same information across publics become slimmer. The decline of mass media undermines the possibility of media platforms providing common spaces for the meeting of socio-economic, cultural, and political heterogeneity that characterizes contemporary democracies. This development raises concerns about the impact of the exacerbation of polarized beliefs on

democratic communication and political dynamics, namely the lack of awareness about the lives and demands of fellow citizens, and the difficulties for consensus-building actions.

Underlying this line of argument is the notion that democracies should provide spaces for discussing and encountering similar interests (based on geographical location, occupation, ethnicity and other variables) and heterogeneous ideas and beliefs. Democracies require communication for expressing and bridging differences. When only one type of communication predominates, democracy suffers. Common mediated spaces, dominant during the height of the mass media, catapulted dominant views to the center in detriment of a diversity of opinions and expectations. Mass media were not particularly good at reflecting and nurturing difference. In contrast, the primacy of communication homophily leads to a different set of problems: the perpetuation of enclosed, self-referencing views separated from the rest of society. The communication architecture of democracies should encourage citizens to come in regular contact with similar and different viewpoints and experiences. Whether citizens actually take advantage of such opportunities is a different, even more complex matter that remains the subject of much analysis.

The challenges presented by the solidification of niche, segregated communication and the weakening of common, large-scale spaces, are different and have uneven consequences across societies. Impact may not be similar in multicultural societies or highly homogeneous societies (in terms of ethnicity, religion, race, language). Nor should we assume that the effects may be similar in polarizing public opinion and democratic politics in polities with moderate differences on fundamental issues or in those with high degree of social exclusion or moderate social inequalities, and in democracies with a history of violent confrontations or a tradition of peaceful resolution of conflict and compromise.

Latin America offers a fertile ground to examine these questions and probe concerns about ongoing trends in digital communication raised by recent scholarship in the United States and Europe. The region remains an immense laboratory for myriad experiments in communication promoting sharedness and diversity. Recent initiatives to institutionalize multiculturalism in Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador through a range of media projects provide a wealth of experiences to examine the challenge of cultivating a common democratic polity on the basis of the recognition and reaffirmation of cultural pluralism (Gumucio-Dagron, 2014).

Likewise, the issue of whether digital communication promotes polarized opinion and politics is enormously important. It takes special relevance considering not only the tragic history of political polarization and violence in much of the region, but also given the exacerbation and mobilization of polarized opinion in specific countries in the past decade. Uncivil speech and ideological bubbles in digital communication that may lead to bitter and vicious politics is not just a plausible, hypothetical problem. Regrettably, it has been a familiar scenario in countries with a long record of political and social violence. The question, then, is whether social media

and other digital platforms intensify polarized opinion and, in turn, leads to hardening positions that make the politics of compromise and consensus-building difficult.

The deepening of “echo chambers” is particularly problematic in countries with marked levels of social exclusion and disparities. Certainly, this is not a new development if we consider that both communication and media have historically evolved amid such conditions and, arguably, were constitutive of social differences based on class, race, ethnicity, education, and language.

Finally, my last suggestion is to explore ways to bridge the “paradigm divide” between informational/strategic and participatory paradigms in theory and practice of communication for social change. I believe insights from both traditions are needed to comprehend the multi-dimensionality of communication to promote social justice and address power inequalities. It is hard to envision how sustainable social change is possible without addressing power relations. Wrestling with power to encourage large-scale social change inevitably demands strategic communication and participatory politics (Waisbord, 2014).

Participatory communication is more than the presence of democratic conditions of speech or the mobilization of affected publics. It implies questioning power inequalities and transforming institutions through various strategies to produce structural changes. The literature on social movements (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009) has amply demonstrated that collective mobilization is not just the result of spontaneous, random actions. Successful efforts to promote social change demand strategic thinking – planning and implementation of goals, tactics, publics, opponents, and arguments. Transformative strategic communication necessitates discussions about goals, key publics, messages, and tactics. It is linked to ways to frame problems for various publics, form alliances, leverage funding, human, and institutional resources, and identifying appropriate opportunities for promoting social justice.

Latin America is a rich setting for probing these ideas. Not only it produced pioneering studies about communication, development, and social change half a century ago, a tradition that remains strong in the field (McAnany, 2012). The region has also been the place for the recent emergence and consolidation of social movements that blend insights from strategic and participatory communication to achieve change across a range of issues – human rights, domestic violence, health, education, environment, employment, child labor, and others. Just as they foreground participatory mechanisms to foreground different voices against the monotonous public discourse dominated by political and economic elites, they resort to various persuasive strategies to raise awareness about issues and persuade various publics to support change.

Certainly, these four lines of research do not make an exhaustive list of topics to explore and refine theoretical arguments in the field of communication and media studies.

## **Conclusions**

The Latin America case suggests that the globalization of academia may not necessarily streamline research agendas, analytical perspectives, and theoretical approaches. The field of communication studies has, no doubt, become globalized if by this we mean increased connections through “international” journals, books, and conferences. Global connectivity, however, doesn’t inevitably lead to shared research directions, common perspectives or similar criteria to define what counts as quality research. If the Latin American experience is a good indicator, the academic *habitus*, even if open to ideas originated elsewhere, remains rooted in local intellectual traditions and oriented towards domestic questions.

The question, then, is how to turn attention to theoretical issues by foregrounding questions that are relevant beyond specific local and regional boundaries. By facilitating conversations and collaborations across regions, the globalization of academic work offers the opportunity to produce studies and theories based on cross-national evidence. Given these conditions, compartmentalizing research in geographical boxes is not only a waste. It has no intellectual justification. The de-westernization of the field in the spirit of cosmopolitan scholarship demands shared questions and multiple perspectives. Publishing cases from the global South in English may be an important step, but it is insufficient if there is not engagement with ideas produced elsewhere. Just adding and stirring case studies from the South to existing research in the West doesn’t necessarily result in a new kind of academic sensitivity, original approaches, or solid theorizing based on myriad cases. It might bring an international polish but it won’t shake up parochialism. It might widen the pool, but it wouldn’t necessarily shift the debate or enrich theoretical perspectives.

What is needed is to continue to stimulate a curiosity about relevant theoretical and empirical questions in the field at large in both the West and the global South. I hope I have shown that Latin American scholarship has much to offer in this regard.

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