

The curious absence of cybernationalism in Latin America: Lessons for the study of digital sovereignty and governance

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Abstract

In this article, we are interested in examining the factors that drive cybernationalism and digital governance in media policies. As scholars with a long-standing interest in media industries and policies in Latin America, we start with a simple empirical observation: the curious absence of debates and strong efforts to regulate digital media in the region grounded on nationalistic arguments. It is not exaggerated to affirm that for the past two decades, the region has largely adopted a laissez-faire, deregulatory approach on fundamental issues about the structure and functioning of the Internet, including the performance of global digital platforms, content traffic, data ownership and access, and speech. We believe that understanding the decades-long transition from nationalistic media regulations to pragmatism in digital policies in Latin America yields valuable insights for theorizing the conditions that foster (and discourage) nationalism and sovereignty in digital policies.

Keywords

Cybernationalism, digital policy, Latin America

In this article, we are interested in examining the factors that drive cybernationalism and digital governance in media policies. As scholars with a long-standing interest in media industries and policies in Latin America, we start with a simple empirical observation: the curious absence of debates and strong efforts to regulate digital media in the region grounded on nationalistic arguments. It is not exaggerated to affirm that for the past two decades, the region has largely adopted a laissez-faire, deregulatory approach on fundamental issues about the

structure and functioning of the Internet, including the performance of global digital platforms, content traffic, data ownership and access, and speech. Latin America has largely stayed away from the kind of cybernationalism identified with China, Iran, and Russia, as well as the European Union's (EU)

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position of sovereignty as competing alternatives to the market-centered, hegemonic power of the US model. This strikes us as a notable reversal in the tradition of media policies in the region (Fox & Waisbord, 2002) and contrasts with the position on sovereignty and digital ecosystems in other regions of the world (Van Dijck, 2020).

Historically, Latin America has been a laboratory of vibrant debates, as well as regulatory policies about print and broadcasting media driven by nationalist positions. By “media nationalism,” here we understand positions that justify protectionist regulatory policies by appealing to political, economic, and cultural matters associated with the nation-state. “Media nationalism” refers to arguments and policies that reflect the interests of governments, corporations, and civil society in favor of protecting domestic industries and actors, and promoting local content by curbing foreign influence in media ownership, production, distribution, and other issues. Oftentimes, nationalism has been used exchangeably with “national sovereignty,” another term used by governments and allies to implement policies to protect national interests from international forces. National sovereignty refers to the intention to control media and information flows and infrastructures within the political-geographical boundaries of the state in ways that nations determine fundamental aspects of media infrastructure and performance (Grimm, 2015).

Remarkably, these concerns have been generally absent in the region in recent years. Unlike previous decades, there have not been ambitious attempts to bolster state and private companies that could become dominant nationally and regionally. With a few exceptions, states have largely espoused hands-off positions regarding a range of issues, including content regulation and taxation. “Digital protectionism” (Aaronson, 2018) has not been the preferred policy option. Nor has “digital nationalism” (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021) had a prominent presence in contemporary debates and policies. Whereas calls for bolstering national sovereignty on media matters dominated policy debates half a century ago, similar calls about the digital ecosystem have been absent.

Here, we offer an explanation for why nationalist discourses and digital sovereignty are not central to

digital policies in Latin America. We believe that understanding the decades-long transition from nationalistic media regulations to pragmatism in digital policies in Latin America yields valuable insights for theorizing the conditions that foster (and discourage) nationalism and sovereignty in digital policies.

Nationalism, sovereignty, and digital policies

The analysis of nationalism and sovereignty in digital policies has been focused on two sets of cases.

Cybernationalism commonly refers to the cases of China (Schneider, 2018) and Russia (Treisman, 2018). During the past decades, both countries have appealed to national sovereignty to justify and expand their grip on the Internet. They have appealed to traditional nationalist tropes to justify certain regulatory and industrial development decisions intended to bolster the presence of domestic interests against what are presented as pending dangers by US expansionism. This includes the government’s continuous support for digital “national champions” in public–private partnerships, including China’s Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent and Russia’s Yandex. These partnerships are presented as strategically necessary to achieve common, national objectives around the world. In both cases, authoritarian regimes have deliberately opposed the Silicon Valley–dominated and US hegemony in the global digital order (Budnitsky & Jia, 2018).

In the case of China, these policies follow the so-called “dual circulation development” model. The model takes advantage of the gigantic scale of its domestic market and trade networks developed and consolidated in recent decades. Another feature is the expansionist objectives to assert the power of private companies abroad, particularly in Southeast Asia (Keane & Fung, 2018). Chinese cybernationalism as well as its global expansion has been the outcome of the strong presence of the state. The state has been crucial for many key aspects of the Internet in China, including building the digital infrastructure, cultivating and steering capital investments, designing speech controls, and fostering a nationalist discourse on digital matters (Schneider, 2018).

The Communist party has frequently justified such decisions on the basis of “internet sovereignty” which claims that countries have the prerogative to exercise full control over their digital infrastructure according to domestic concerns and priorities (Creemers, 2020).

In China and Russia, national assertiveness includes tight control of Internet access domestically. In fact, it has been argued that these cases are examples of information authoritarianism to control speech and nationalism to protect domestic economics and culture as well as to fend off global interests. Both regimes have appealed to narratives about national security and foreign threats to justify restrictive informational governance systems. Information and geopolitical strategies are unified behind common goals. They frequently dismissed liberal arguments about free flow of information as thinly veiled attacks on national sovereignty that champion US commercial, military, and geopolitical objectives. In a more sophisticated version, they also criticized the US ambiguous position on free flow of information and National Security Agency’s (NSA) digital surveillance and protectionist strategies.

Similar policies have been enacted by governments in other countries. In Iran, for example, national protectionism has been aimed at supporting domestic companies vis-a-vis US social media corporations while maintaining a tight control over speech (Yalcintas & Alizadeh, 2020). India is another case where nationalism has been a solid component of communication and information policies. However, the Indian state lacked the resources to achieve the goal on its own so far. With deregulation and decentralization of the economy, the Indian state began to collaborate with private sectors to lay down the basic infrastructure technologies to manage Generation Y’s Internet usage (Thomas, 2019).

Recently, the concept of sovereignty has also gained renewed interest, primarily in relation to European positions in favor of exerting control over a host of digital matters. European leaders have made thundering declarations in favor of digital sovereignty. *Science Business* reporter Eana Kelly (2020) writes, As political memes go, “tech sovereignty” has become a viral phenomenon among European leaders in the past 6 months. Since the

COVID-19 crisis started, politicians across the left-right spectrum have started pushing to reduce Europe’s dependence on US or Chinese-origin technologies. From vaccine development to artificial intelligence, billions of euros are now being mobilized across the EU, and the rhetoric has gone nuclear. “If we don’t build our own champions in all areas—digital, artificial intelligence,” French President Emmanuel Macron recently said, “our choices will be dictated by others.”

Here it is important to underscore distinctions between digital “nationalism” and digital “sovereignty.” Both concepts refer to the need to exercise power in ways that the digital infrastructure in a given territory is organized primarily according to domestic interests, principles, and legislation. While “nationalism” has been used to describe the cases under authoritarian regimes (which is obviously problematic, as some historical nationalistic claims in Scotland, Catalunya, or Ireland show), sovereignty has been used to describe experiences and policies more broadly, especially in relation to the positions of the EU.

Digital sovereignty refers to the right of a state to govern its network according to national interest regarding matters such as commerce, security, and privacy. It also refers to multi-stakeholder institutions and citizens at the center of Internet governance. Such arguments have clashed with libertarian arguments about how the Internet rendered obsolete the modern notion of state and territory, as well as more recent critiques (Mueller, 2020) about the problems of invoking sovereignty to claim control over communication and information policy. As a policy narrative to justify certain positions and decisions, sovereignty has been used differently by global powers, namely, the United States, the EU, China, and Russia, in their fights over Internet primacy and power. Sovereignty appears as the justification for national and regional control over data gathering and analysis, surveillance and manipulation, industrial policies, and other matters (Couture & Toupin, 2019). Sovereignty claims are always about who has the right to wield power in political, economic, cultural, legal, and geographical jurisdictions.

Debates over digital sovereignty demonstrate the persistent significance of the state (Morris &

Waisbord, 2001) amid media globalization, as illustrated by policies intended to shape domestic markets and harness the Internet according to nationalistic, political, and military considerations. As Pohle and Thiel (2020) write,

at first glance, the digital transformation and the global technical infrastructure of the internet seem to challenge sovereignty. The principles of territoriality and state hierarchy appear opposed to the diffuse, flexible, forever shifting constellations of global digital networks. What is more, digital applications and communication practices have created a momentum that seems to defy legal governance and control. (p. 2)

In addition, they have successfully convinced their publics that sovereignty and state authority are necessary to protect “vital goods” ranging from security to prosperity, cultural rules, and media control. As a result, in many countries, citizens today expect their governments to protect their privacy online or to combat online disinformation and cybercrime. But the various calls for digital sovereignty in the last few years, in both centralized/authoritarian countries and liberal democracies, do more than reaffirm state authority and intervention in the digital sphere. The concept of digital sovereignty has become a powerful term in political discourse that seeks to reinstate the nation-state, including the national economy and the nation’s citizens, as a relevant category in the global governance of digital infrastructures and the development of digital technologies.

Whereas the Chinese and Russian positions are nationalistic and non-liberal attempts to reassert sovereignty, the EU position on digital sovereignty appeals to a different set of principles, namely, notions of security, individual rights, economic competition, and the rule of law (Bendiek & Neyer, 2020). Cybernationalism rings of illiberal regimes hellbent on clamping down dissent and democratic rights in the name of national security and geopolitical interests. In contrast, “digital sovereignty” lacks similar normative and political connotations. As the case of the EU suggests, even for a post-state, post-national political community, the notion of sovereignty builds off modern notions of the right of citizens in a political-geographical territory to exercise autonomous control over information infrastructure and resources.

Sovereignty is not necessarily associated with specific political regimes, geopolitical competition, or political-cultural communities. Instead, it is used to appeal to the need for influencing and controlling decisions about the digital society. Renewed interest in digital sovereignty reflects the reaction to recent developments, especially the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the role of US platforms in fostering political polarization, disinformation and hate speech, monopolistic practices, and the intervention of foreign intelligence in the electoral process.

Digital sovereignty brings together ideas of geopolitical autonomy, control of technological infrastructure, economic strength, and respect for democracy and human rights in matters such as data protection and information. Various reports and declarations illustrated this position. For example, the report *Sovereignty, Resilience and Trust* by the Global System Mobile Association (2020), which represents the leading global telecommunication providers, states,

now, as the (European) Commission envisions a Digital Decade, implementation of Europe’s digital strategy is more pressing than ever. Acknowledging connectivity as “the most fundamental building block of the digital transformation,” the strategy identifies a range of measures to strengthen Europe’s digital economy, generate value in alignment with European values and establish greater sovereignty in the era of Big Tech. Digital sovereignty is a central tenet; Europe must ensure that digital infrastructure and services are not defined exclusively by overseas companies whose interests are not its own and over which it has limited authority. (p. 3)

From nationalist media reforms to market pragmatism

The contemporary discourse of cybernationalism and digital sovereignty echoes the “media nationalism” and “technological/media sovereignty” arguments of the 1970s and 1980s that were common in Latin America (and other regions), insofar as they appeal to arguments to counter the untrammled power of the US government and companies. “National sovereignty” is the rhetorical umbrella to promote both state-centric perspectives and state-private

partnerships in support of the development of national industries and local capacity for innovation (Mattelart & Schmucler, 1983). Contemporary arguments about Internet sovereignty and Internet freedom (Powers & Jablonski, 2015) are basically a new edition of long-standing debates and simmering tensions that existed during the Cold War. Back then, alternatives to US-dominated global media policy similarly posited that governments and “national champions” had to collaborate to curb the power of US interests.

The Latin American tradition of media policy-making attests to the usage of “nationalism” and “sovereignty” to justify and legitimize media policies to reform the international media order. In the late 1960s and 1970s, several governments in the region adopted “National Communication Policies” that proposed and implemented policies that intended to control international flows of news and media content through a series of regulations and actions. Examples include the policies implemented during the presidency of General Juan Velazco Alvarado in Perú (1968–1975) and the proposal of Radio y Televisión de Venezuela (RATELVE) in 1974 and 1975. Due to several reasons, only specific aspects of the proposals and policies were effectively implemented, and they largely failed to spearhead large and sustainable transformations (Quirós & Segovia, 1996).

National communication policies called to protect and defend “national sovereignty” from US media imperialism (Beltrán & Fox, 1980). US media companies have had a long-standing dominant position in the region (Fox & Waisbord, 2002) as they played critical roles in the early development of media industries (news, cinema, radio, and television) through capital investments, technology, advertising, and content production and distribution. In the aftermath of the 1959 Cuban revolution, anti-imperialist ideas and movements ascended in the region. These ideas influenced both democratic and authoritarian governments, which were also linked to nationalist development projects in various areas of society, including media systems. Nationalist media policies also reflected prevalent academic debates and positions concerned with deep disparities in the global informational order that required interventionist policies. Similarly, the demands of

media unions also dovetailed with nationalist policies that promised job growth and security. The positions converged around regulatory policies based on the need to claim communication sovereignty by wresting power away from US companies and strengthening domestic and regional control.

Far from being authoritarian, claims to “national sovereignty” fundamentally proposed to ensure pluralism, democracy, and participation; an active role for the state; and regional policies. These principles were crystallized in “national communication policies” promoted by several governments in the region (Quirós & Segovia, 1996). These policies were grounded in critical diagnosis of patterns of ownership and funding of media systems. Notions of media dependency and media imperialism were central to assess the problems of media representation and bias, ideological domination, concentrated ownership, and the absence of participation of social and civic actors.

These movements for “national sovereignty” in media systems took place simultaneously with debates in the United Nations and the non-aligned movement about the need for a new economic order as well as a new information and communication order in the 1970s. The latter crystallized in the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates and proposals. Just like the nationalist media policies in Latin America, the NWICO offered a similar diagnosis about the problems of unbalanced flows of media and information that undermined opportunities for expression that reflected local cultures and demands (UNESCO, 1980). It also offered a similar set of regulatory interventions for bolstering national production and distribution and curbing the presence of foreign content. It is important to underscore that the NWICO was not a single program, but rather a process that challenged the global communication order in terms of flows of news and content. The main argument was that the order primarily served the economic and political interests of the West and that explained the perpetuation of underdevelopment and inequalities. This position called for understanding information and communication sovereignty as intrinsic to human development. Development demands upending information and communication hierarchies and

inequalities. These ideas were the basis for the MacBride report “One world, multiple voices” that gathered and summarized debates and proposals.

After “National Communication Policies” failed to take root and spearhead consequential and democratic transformations in media industries, neoliberal policies were in the ascent in the 1980s and 1990s. These policies favored the expansion of foreign investments in various aspects of media industries—from ownership to production, and the reduction in state participation (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009). Media policies primarily favored domestic and international capital in print and broadcasting, and largely ignored inclusion in access to digital technologies.

In this context, a wave of governments came to power in several countries in the early 2000 that called for “national-popular” and “progressive” media policies to roll back deregulation and market policies. Dubbed the “pink tide” amid the shifting politics of the region, these governments include the presidencies of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva in Brazil, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and the Frente Amplio in Uruguay. In general terms, they shared a similar approach to media matters in terms of opposing fundamental aspects of the neoliberal order and proposed policies to diversify media ownership (Becerra & Wagner, 2018). They shared the belief that media ownership was aligned with powerful, industrial corporations and that it had detrimental effects on public debates and policies. Concentrated ownership across legacy media and digital technologies was made possible by past deregulation and laissez-faire policies that reinforced the position of dominant companies. Ownership patterns shaped narrow news agendas and entertainment content in ways that prioritized dominant political-economic interests and excluded large sectors of the population and critical perspectives. Unlike the “National Communication Policies” of the late 1960s and early 1970s, policies and proposals were not primarily focused on the role of the state to mitigate global inequalities in information flows or appealing to national sovereignty to justify a raft of reformist policies. Rather, they established assigning a third of audiovisual licenses to nonprofit organizations including neighborhoods/

communities, indigenous peoples, foundations, and cooperatives and the other thirds to the state and the private sector.

Policy reforms sparked direct confrontations between governments and dominant media corporations. While Venezuela and Argentina reformed their audiovisual media laws in 2004 and 2009, respectively, Uruguay introduced new regulations governing community media in 2007. Ecuador passed its Communication Act in 2013, and Mexico promoted an ambitious constitutional reform in the same year (Waisbord, 2014). Bolivia made constitutional amendments that affect media industries. In Brazil and Chile, civil society had developed and put forth several initiatives for media reform that met lukewarm support from the dominant political parties. Argentina passed a telecommunications law in 2014, which was separate from the 2009 audiovisual law. Conservative governments that came to power in the mid to late 2010s steeled the momentum of media reform movements and repealed policy innovations in Argentina, Brazil, and Ecuador.

Except for Venezuela, where the ruling Chavismo refashioned the media system by creating a new hegemonic order (Korin & Pain, 2021) after two decades in power, the raft of media reforms failed to usher significant, long-lasting changes in media systems. In fact, one of the most striking aspects is that, as those governments primarily focused on reforming broadcasting ownership and content, the digital revolution radically changed the media landscape in the region. The other striking aspect is that both leftist and conservative governments largely eschewed cybernationalism and national sovereignty and instead followed a pragmatic approach that basically conformed to the dominant presence of US companies.

Digital economies, personal data, and speech

This approach is reflected in the current situation regarding three fundamental aspects of digital policies: economics, personal data, and content moderation. These three issues are central to contemporary debates in Internet governance as well as bilateral and multilateral negotiations, as recently stated by

the French Secretary for the Digital Economy Cédric O (2021). Economics include issues such as taxation, the lack of competition in the digital economy due to the dominant position of a few platforms, and market distortions due to network effects. It also covers business projection in infrastructures and connectivity networks. Personal data include protection, storage, and use, as well as the “right to be forgotten.” Content involves moderation and platform liability, the rights of freedom of expression, privacy, non-discrimination, and other topics such as hate speech and disinformation.

Generally, Latin America has not implemented policies grounded in principles of national sovereignty on economic regulations, the protection of personal data, and digital speech that would upend the interests of dominant US companies. In fact, there has been limited policy innovations on these issues, let alone comprehensive and shared approaches to deal with multiple aspects of digital governance. The current digital order basically follows the market-centered order, with strong dominance of Silicon Valley companies coupled with a pragmatic approach interested in pursuing agreements with European and Chinese companies. Latin American countries have basically accepted digital corporate sovereignty as the bedrock principle of digital policies, as they have endorsed corporate self-regulation as the default principle of the digital network ecosystem and the concept of network neutrality (Villanueva-Mansilla, 2020).

Digital economies

The region has not addressed the complexity of challenges of the digital environment regarding content, network economy, infrastructure projection, antitrust rules, or data protection in ways that could have strengthened the power of domestic actors—the state, corporations, and civil society. Instead, governments have generally taken a market-friendly approach. Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Colombia, and Chile, the largest economies in the region, have offered competition incentives to promote investments in the informational industries. Most countries have a slew of policies and initiatives to address the digital divide. Also, some Latin American states participate in the Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development (OECD) meetings to achieve articulated and global rules for taxation in the digital economy (CEPAL, 2018).

US companies dominate key aspects of digital economies (Katz, 2015). Google has a quasi-monopolistic position in the Internet search market. US giants Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter dominate social networks. A similar situation exists in the online video market with a limited but growing participation of local actors (Peña Miranda, 2020). The only regional corporation that has gained a significant position is Mercado Libre, which is the main e-commerce platform in the largest economies (Katz, 2015).

Brazil, Chile, and Argentina have signed agreements to develop their infrastructures and attract investments from US and Chinese companies. Amid China’s growing economic influence in the region, the following agreements should be mentioned. Tencent, the parent company of multipurpose app WeChat, has invested \$180 million in Brazil’s NuBank. Bytedance, owner of the social networking service TikTok and the most valuable start-up worldwide with a market valuation of over 100 billion, has opened operations in São Paulo. Chinese Didi Chuxing, a virtual ride-hailing platform, acquired the Brazilian firm 99 Taxi Ofo, and Mobike, China’s bicycle-sharing app, has expressed interest in the Mexican market.

An example of the dominant market pragmatism is Chile’s Humboldt submarine cable project that will open a straight line with Asia.¹ It will connect Valparaíso with New Zealand and Australia and then with other cables connected to South Korea, China, and Japan. In turn, this cable will be connected to Argentina, which will provide interoceanic connection without passing through the United States. What drives this project is essentially the goal of strengthening economic ties between the region and Asian economic superpowers rather than a broad, ambitious plan embedded in notions of national sovereignty or that addresses other aspects of the digital economy.

Personal data

Data sovereignty alludes to a nuanced mixture of normative concepts such as inclusive deliberation

and recognition of the fundamental rights of data subjects (Hummel et al., 2021). It has become a central legal and political issue as a response to corporate accumulation and monetization of personal data as well as surveillance (Zuboff, 2019). It aims to delineate forms of ownership and control of data articulated by individuals, companies, and countries.

Although this issue has become central to global debates about the dominant role of private companies and state surveillance, and the need for legal frameworks that protect personal data and privacy, it has not emerged as a priority in Latin America. Certainly, some global developments have sparked interest and action in the region. For example, the 2013 Snowden revelations had a powerful impact in Brazil. They prompted the administration of President Dilma Rousseff to promote resolutions on Internet privacy at the United Nations, as well as to convene multi-stakeholder debates on privacy. The revelations also offered a political opportunity for Rousseff to push forward the passing of the bill *Marco Civil da Internet* (Santoro & Borges, 2017), a truly innovative attempt to ground digital legislation on the basis of human rights. Also, European debates about data protection attracted attention and inspired similar proposals in the region (Califano, 2021). However, although there has been growing interest in data protection, the situation is highly uneven in the region. There is no common regional legislation. Data protection laws exist in half of the countries in the region, such as Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and México (CEPAL, 2020). However, there are still plenty of legal gaps on a range of issues affecting data protection.

Content moderation

On content moderation, most Latin American countries have not implemented strong regulations for monitoring and censoring digital speech. The exceptions are Cuba and Venezuela, where the governments have enacted laws prohibiting data and information that are contrary to “social interest, moral and good customs” in the former and establishing that service providers are responsible for information that fosters “distress” among citizens,

ignores legitimate authorities, incites changes to public order, and promotes lawlessness. Various governments, however, have tried to demand service providers to monitor, filter, or eliminate certain content. These demands generally cover issues such as copyright and intellectual property, discrimination, and violation of privacy (Vargas Agosta, 2020). Yet these are not cases of governments systematically pushing to control content through new legislation.

On hate speech and the right to be forgotten, Latin America does not have strong regulations either. Except, again for the cases of Cuba and Venezuela, where their legislation could be applied to classify certain speech as hate speech, this matter remains unregulated. Also, there are no legal norms about the right to be forgotten. This absence partially reflects the standards of freedom of expression of the Inter-American Systems of Human Rights, which provide expansive protection to speech (Zamora Saenz et al., 2020), as well as the lack of interest in making this a priority issue.

In summary, except for Cuba and Venezuela, Latin America lacks draconian legislation on content embedded in principles of nationalism and sovereignty. There are no regulations stipulating that Internet companies bear responsibility for content. Although the EU and member countries have served as a frequent source of inspiration for policy debates and various media laws in the region in recent decades, there has not been a similar process aimed at tightening controls on global digital corporations in the region. Furthermore, the free trade agreements that Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico signed with the United States endorse Section 230 of the 1996 Communication Decency Act that gives legal immunity to companies for content uploaded by third parties.

Why cybernationalism and digital sovereignty are absent

The preceding sections show that cybernationalism is largely absent in Latin America. Cybernationalism demands that state actors and private companies come to fundamental agreements to promote policies aimed at strengthening the position of domestic interests (Schneider, 2018). These agreements may

cover a range of issues, such as digital trade, infrastructure and networks building, intellectual property, and national security. Instead, most Latin American countries have fundamentally embraced political pragmatism in a market system dominated by US companies (Aguerre et al., 2018). With the exceptions of governments that have imposed limitations on digital speech, states have largely taken hands-off positions, especially on matters such as e-commerce, infrastructure, hardware, and data control. Nowhere in the region there have been momentous showdowns between global corporations and governments and national media behemoths over matters of content, access, and taxation. Governments have basically accepted the rules of engagement with US corporations, while, in some cases, they have pursued business deals with Chinese companies (Rincón, 2021).

How do we explain the absence of cybernationalism and digital sovereignty in Latin America? Why did the region deviate from the path of nationalistic policies that it charted half a century ago? In the context of profound transformations in communication and media policies driven by the global scale of the digital revolution (Van Cuilenburg & McQuail, 2003), our answer is threefold: the comparatively small size of national digital economies, the lack of ambitious geopolitical projects, and the weakness of developmentalist projects that could have bolstered state-capital alliances as well as domestic markets and actors.

The digital economies in the region are remarkably small by global standards. None of the digital markets in the region compares to the global behemoths in the West or in Asia. Latin America's digital economy still lags behind that of the rest of the world. The region accounts for less than 1% of the market capitalization value of the world's 70 largest digital platforms. In terms of harnessing digital data, Latin America together with Africa hosts less than 5% of the world's colocation data centers.

Numerous reports document the weakness of Latin America's digital markets compared to other regions. The Network Readiness Index (NRI) is a global benchmark frequently used to assess digital environments. Excluding the United States and Canada, the rest of the continent perform

significantly below developed economies. While Chile earns the region's top rank of 42nd out of 121 economies, Latin America's three largest economies, Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, rank 59th, 57th, and 58th, respectively. The region noticeably ranks low in terms of readiness for the future of digital technologies (Huntzinger et al., 2020). Latin America's digital weakness is also reflected in the Global Cybersecurity Index (GCI). This index is based on the legal framework for cybersecurity and efforts to strengthen domestic capacity to defend against cybercrime. The region has a lower median position than any other world region except Africa.

Unsurprisingly, digital trade is a fraction of the volume in developed economies. Despite growing interest in recent years, it remains a marginal issue in the Internet policy and governance debate, as well as in the trade regime (Aguerre, 2019). Consequently, several obstacles, such as the lack of regulatory coherence, persist. The region's digital economy remains largely unprepared to support the expansion of digital trade (Suominen, 2017). Certainly, as long as the digital gap persists, it is hard to envision that national markets in the region would expand (Patiño et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2020).

Second, the absence of cybernationalism and sovereignty in Latin America reflects the geopolitical position of the region in the world. Cybernationalism and sovereignty are tied to the geopolitics of world superpowers. It has been part of geopolitical realities, rivalries, and the aspirations of governments to reassert power and influence regionally and globally, as the cases of China and Russia demonstrate (Budnitsky & Jia, 2018). Cybernationalism and sovereignty reflect ongoing shifts in global geopolitics and the reshaping of the postwar order.

No Latin American country has harbored similar hopes to become a dominant global power. No government attempted to lead and control a major restructuring of the national digital economy, in ways that it would be linked to foreign interests or harness digital development to strengthen particular geopolitical goals. In the region, the Internet has evolved between US domination and the recent incursion of Chinese companies in selected countries and areas. More than pushing geopolitical ambitions and pursuing technological autonomy,

states and corporations have sought to accommodate amid the technological competition between the United States and China.

Third, the absence of cybernationalism and sovereignty reflects the absence of developmentalist projects that could have brought together the state and capital around a common project of national development, expansion, and protection. In the cases of the leading global powers, the state has played a fundamental role through asserting national sovereignty policies and/or steering the development of digital markets and corporations. The state is essential as both the engine of digital development and the regulator over speech, economic, and data matters (Haggart et al., 2021). Digital nationalism demands governments actively managing digital markets through various tools—legislation, laws, and economic policies.

There has not been “digital developmentalism” in Latin America—that is, no systematic, uniform efforts to build an Internet–industrial complex grounded in state-centric or multi-stakeholders model that could have shaped digital infrastructure and governance. Such policies would have been necessary to offer alternatives to the dominant presence of Silicon Valley. There have been no “national developmentalist” projects, as they existed (certainly in various forms) half a century ago in the region, especially in the largest economies (Brazil, Mexico, Argentina). Back then, several governments espoused “national development” as the central goal of economic and social policies, including media technologies. Instead, there are no examples of that tradition in the region today. Furthermore, it could be argued that the persistent digital gap in the region, as well as the underdevelopment of digital markets and trade, reflects the absence of digital developmentalism that could have promoted policies to ensure broader, quality access and market expansion.

Even governments that attempted media reform policies in the past two decades have not pursued a developmentalist path in digital sovereignty. In the past two decades, left-center governments in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Uruguay pushed ambitious policy agendas to regulate media markets to foster ownership pluralism. With

different success, they aimed to curb the power of dominant media corporations and bolster the position of other commercial actors and civil society organizations through policy and legal innovations.

Not even authoritarian governments have embraced full-fledged cybernationalism. Authoritarian governance is driven by the interests of state actors, including political elites, the military, and intelligence agencies, to bolster various goals—national security, geopolitical influence, regime stability, and economics. Yet, even semi-authoritarian, illiberal regimes in Latin America have not actively pursued digital sovereignty, but instead have tried to clamp down on domestic dissidents’ digital access and politics by pulling several levers. In Venezuela, the ruling *chavismo* implemented a series of policies to consolidate a new communication hegemony dominated by the government and commercial allies. It pushed heavy-handed regulations of digital speech primarily aimed to suppress dissent (Korin & Pain, 2021; Puyosa & Chaguaceda, 2017). Similar situations are found in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Ecuador, and Chile (CIDH, 2020) and, in 2021, Colombia.² However, attempts to restrict digital expression did not embrace nationalist policies aimed at promoting digital “national champions” or other similar goals.

In summary, governments that attempted democratic or authoritarian media reforms did not resort to “digital developmentalism” to strengthen state leadership and the position of domestic capital in matters of digital infrastructure, security, R&D, inclusion, and other issues (Belli & Cavalli, 2019). Setting up the foundations of digital independence from foreign influence by expanding state-led developmentalism was not a top policy priority. Instead, pragmatic accommodation to the current US-dominated market order and the global rivalry between US and Chinese companies have been the preferred course of action.

Conclusion

Latin America has not taken the path of cybernationalism or digital sovereignty, which demand states steering the process of digital infrastructure, management, and governance through technical and legal

instruments. This “path not taken” signals a reversal of the legacy of media protectionism and national sovereignty. Blistering critiques of media colonialism and arguments in favor of a “strong state” on media policies, that were prominent half a century ago, lack a similar presence in the digital era. The region can justifiably be considered a case of the diminishing role of the state in matters of digital regulations and development. Instances of “strong state” or “the return of the state” are few and scattered (Flew & Waisbord, 2015). In some cases, democratic states have tried to regulate specific aspects of the digital society, such as data control, but those efforts have not been part of comprehensive policies embedded in the tenets of national sovereignty. Some governments have implemented strong-arm regulations to control digital speech through surveillance and security measures, yet such policies were not embedded in ambitious national development objectives. Even if they justified regulations by appealing the need to foster national cohesion against “foreign powers,” as in the case of Cuba and Venezuela, they were not aimed at shaping an enclosed, “national” internet.

In summary, the limited cases of democratic regulation and authoritarian imposition in the region do not exactly fit the cases of “digital nationalism” identified with China and Russia nor European positions on “digital sovereignty.” Neither sustainable efforts to foster a “Splinternet” nor claims to exert absolute sovereignty on specific aspects of the digital infrastructure have taken place.

The absence of projects of digital sovereignty in the region is related to the small size of their national digital economies compared to the global scale of the digital economy; the lack of ambitious geopolitical projects; and the weakness of “digital developmentalism” that could have bolstered state-capital alliances as well as domestic markets and actors. States have fundamentally opted to go along with a US-dominated commercial network and global concentration of Internet traffic and advertising while seeking Chinese investments in digital infrastructure and networks (Avendano et al., 2017), regarding new developments in mobile communications such as 5G.

What lessons can be drawn for the study of cybernationalism and digital governance? Latin

American suggests that only countries and regions that meet certain conditions, such as market size, geopolitical power, and/or strong developmentalist policies, may be able to pursue the paths of media nationalism and digital sovereignty. Whereas these policies were plausible policy options during the old broadcasting media order, as Latin American illustrates, the digital revolution has radically changed the conditions. Accelerated economic and technological globalization has upped the ante for nationalistic policies. It has made it more difficult for countries to have the power to negotiate with and set the terms of engagement with corporate behemoths.

The cases here examined also suggest caution when answering questions about the rise of cybernationalism and digital sovereignty or the “return of the state” (Haggart et al., 2021). Nuanced conclusions are warranted. Various models of digital governance (Leong & Lee, 2021) are currently being developed that cannot be simply captured by binary options of complete market domination and absolute state control. Digital governance comprises multiple aspects that cannot be easily summarized in categorical arguments about strong or weak state, sovereignty, and nationalism. It is important to explore further the different features of media governance globally to offer theoretical, parsimonious answers to why countries and regions take different paths in digital policies.

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Notes

1. <https://www.subtel.gob.cl/mtt-adjudica-elaboracion-del-estudio-de-factibilidad-del-cable-submarino-asia-sudamerica/>
2. https://datosprotegidos.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Informe_CIDH_Preliminar_DP_ODC-1.pdf

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