

# Counterhegemony in the Media under Rafael Correa's Citizens' Revolution

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*The Citizens' Revolution, the political process initiated in Ecuador with the presidential inauguration of Rafael Correa in 2007, initiated a radical transformation in the media comparable to other progressive governmental experiments in the region. The political process led by Correa has pursued a change in power relations and ownership, the introduction of regulation, the demystification of the established media discourse, and an abandonment of the market as a guiding principle in the media. From the perspective of the equitable redistribution of media power, however, it is still an open process whose outcome is uncertain.*

*La Revolución Ciudadana, el proceso político iniciado en el Ecuador con la investidura presidencial de Rafael Correa en 2007, inició una transformación radical en los medios de comunicación comparables a otros experimentos gubernamentales progresistas de la región. El proceso político liderado por Correa ha buscado un cambio en las relaciones de poder y la propiedad, la introducción de la regulación, la desmistificación del discurso de los medios establecidos, y un abandono del mercado como principio rector en los medios de comunicación. Desde la perspectiva de la redistribución equitativa de poder de los medios, sin embargo, sigue siendo un proceso abierto cuyo resultado es incierto.*

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One of the legacies of the period of neoliberalism in Latin America is anxiety about the transformation of the media as instruments of power (PNUD, 2004). Many of the governments of the region's new left have linked their counterhegemonic orientations with post-neoliberal agendas and demands for democratization of the power of the media. Where progressive governments emerged after a severe crisis of representation or the collapse of the political system, as in Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, there was a radical politicization of the question of the media, including regular counter-discourse deconstructing the interests and practices of the dominant media, discussion of constitutional reforms and new legal and regulatory frameworks,

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attempts to alter the relationships of media ownership, and the promotion of public media as an alternative to the market. In contrast, where the left rose to government, as in Brazil, through a path of political-institutional compromises, the emergence of a politicized counterhegemonic strategy was prevented even though important governmental sectors might have preferred it. Apart from these common characteristics, the inflections, radicalism, and reach of these counterhegemonic attempts in the field of communication are linked to the political dynamics, actors, alliances, and political organizational resources available in particular contexts.

This article will describe the transformative offensive on the media launched by the Citizens' Revolution, the political process initiated by Rafael Correa in Ecuador. It will examine the convergence of reformist agendas in the media sector and *corredista* discourse, the government's relations with civil society actors engaged in the democratization of the public sphere, the constitutional and legal changes in the field of communication, the realpolitik of Correa's media policy, and the shift in the balance of media power. This trajectory will allow some observations about the factors conditioning the Citizens' Revolution's counterhegemonic experiment at the level of political elites, the bureaucracy and institutions, and the society. In this context, the idea of counterhegemonic media refers to a specific political orientation rather than to an effective and lasting democratization of access and power. The latter is still an open process, and it is far from clear how the media will be restructured, how power will be distributed within the sphere, and who will be the protagonists.

Some brief references to the political economy of Ecuador's media when the Citizens' Revolution came to power will provide a standard for evaluating the experiment. Ecuador is a relatively small media market and lacks a well-developed cultural industry. Decades of deregulation have created a number of concentrated media groups, and during the crisis of the political institutions their political and economic influence increased. After the 1990s, the weak and flexible regulatory framework inherited from the military government of Guillermo Rodríguez Lara<sup>1</sup> facilitated the incorporation of the business community into the regulatory and watchdog agencies, giving rise to self-reproducing practices, frequently illegal, and to new dominant actors. Therefore, the media environment inherited by the Citizens' Revolution was characterized by the dominance of the commercial sector (approximately 95 percent of the radio and television licenses), the virtual absence of public media (Ecuadorian National Radio, created in 1961 by José María Velasco Ibarra, was dismantled in the 1990s), and a community media sector that (at least until 2002) was extremely limited by legal and operational obstacles. The structure of media ownership demonstrated horizontal concentration and overlapping of family networks and business conglomerates. Two newspapers represented approximately 65 percent of national circulation: the Pérez Group's *El Universo*, representing the political and economic elites of Guayaquil, and the traditional *El Comercio de Quito*, belonging to the Mantilla family. The family proprietors of these newspapers and other print media tended to expand their interests into the electronic media, but none of them presided over multimedia groups with monopolistic tendencies such as *Globo* in Brazil or *Clarín* in Argentina. By 2007, 19 families controlled 287 of the 348 television licenses. There was less concentration in

radio, where 45 families controlled 60 percent of the concessions. In contrast to large markets with groups concentrated exclusively in media, there was a predominance of multimedia groups controlled by industrial, commercial, and, especially, financial interests.<sup>2</sup> Six of the eight television networks with a national reach were directly or indirectly linked to banking interests. These networks dominated audiences and the advertising market (Becerra and Mastrini, 2009; CAF, 2009; CORAPE, 2008; Navas, 2011).

Since democratization and despite the dislocations that started with the fall of President Abdalá Bucaram, the media elites were supported by strong direct links and reciprocal accommodations with political actors, especially from the conservative camp. Similar links were observed between the local media, especially radio and print, and the regional political leadership. This regional cleavage appears to have gained importance in the structuring of the relationship between the media and political power. Many of the largest groups (the Pérez group, the Isaías group, the Alvarado Roca family) and the most influential national media (*El Universo*, *Extra*, TC Television, Ecuavisa), which are important opinion makers and major cultural producers, have their bases in Guayaquil. This Guayaquil media elite has played a role in the ideological legitimation of the local Social Christian Party, led by Mayor Jaime Nebot (Franklin Ramírez Gallegos, interview, Quito, April 4, 2011). The retreat of the ideological defense of the market-based developmental model as it applied to the environment around Guayaquil, Ecuador's most important economic region, corresponded to its loss of political influence on a national level in a political climate dominated by the Citizens' Revolution and the emergence of a contrasting model of development based on the central role of the state (Eaton, 2011). These conflicting dynamics were further complicated by the fact that Correa is from Guayaquil and is disputing the legitimacy of those elites.

## CONVERGENCE

Correa has politicized the question of the mass media in Ecuador's democracy. Referring to them as "de facto powers," he has called attention to their illegitimacy from a democratic point of view. Therefore, the Citizens' Revolution's refoundational discourse, which meant a confrontation with the elites and the "partidocracy" during the electoral campaign, included the media thereafter, making media system change an indispensable part of a transformed political order. Correa's leadership has revived the traditional reformist debates concerning the desirable role of the state, the market, and the society in the sphere of the media (Waisbord, 2011: 99). Debating these questions became an attempt to reopen the discussion of the relationship of material and symbolic power in the area of the media, which constituted a direct challenge to the dominant actors.

Thus the Citizens' Revolution appealed to and converged with the agendas and discourses of civil society and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), human rights organizations, communication professionals, the communitarian or alternative media, unions, university intellectuals, faith-based groups, and other activist groups engaged with questions of democracy and reform and

linked with various components of the Ecuadorean left. A legacy of the discussions on the New World Information and Communications Order and the McBride report, the concepts of communication rights and media democratization point to a radical resignification of the traditional rights of freedom of expression and of the press, whose central tenet is noninterference by the state and the reforming of the institutional framework that sustains them (Jurado, 2010: 240). Retreating at the end of the cold war, this epistemic community achieved a certain rearticulation in such forums as the World Summit on the Information Society and the World Social Forum (Jurado, 2010; Navas, 2011).

International networks had a transformative role in the sphere of communication as elsewhere in Ecuadorean civil society. During the past few decades, a series of international organizations focusing on communication were established in Quito, among them the Centro Internacional de Estudios Superiores de Comunicación para América Latina (International Center for Advanced Studies in Communication for Latin America—CIESPAL), the Asociación Mundial de Radios Comunitarias (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters), the Asociación Latinoamericana de Educación Radiofónica (Latin American Association for Radio Education), and the Organización Católica Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Comunicación (Latin American and Caribbean Catholic Organization for Communication). This situation gave rise to Quito's being labeled the communication capital of Latin America, and it contributed to the development of a critical mass of professionals and activists closely connected to the debates circulating in the organizations established in Quito. This epistemic community had a certain influence on the critical sensibility concerning media behavior in Quito's (micro) cultural climate (Fernando Checa, interview, Quito, April 26, 2011).

With the rise of an increasing anti-neoliberal critique in the region at the beginning of the new century, these counterhegemonic discourses gained resonance in the conflictive circumstances resulting from the crisis in the Washington Consensus. In the particular case of Ecuador, a series of exceptional experiences deepened the general discontent with the media and increased the potential bases for a reformist consensus. A consequence of the 1999–2000 crisis of the financial system, the so-called War of the Channels of 2004 and 2005 involved media controlled by the owners of the nation's two major banking institutions. The Isaías Group media, whose owners were fugitives from justice as a result of the fraudulent bankruptcy of Filanbanco, and Teleamazonas, controlled by Fidel Egas, owner of the Bank of Pinchincha, converted their screens into a battlefield in a war of corporate interests. Open disinformation campaigns, leaks, and denunciations demonstrated the alignment between the owners' interests and the editorial lines of these media (Reyes, 2010). The public perception of this instrumental use of the media influenced Correa's various discourses concerning them and the content of his government's decisions and policies.

The mobilizations of 2005, which led to the overthrow of the government of Lucio Gutiérrez, crystallized another experience concerning the media as part of the power questioned by the urban masses mobilized in Quito. Barely visible in the mainstream media coverage, the novel collective action repertoire of the "outlaw" (*forajido*) protests depended for its coordination on an alternative

radio station (Radio La Luna) and the use of new technologies (Navas, 2011). According to Ramírez (2005: 55),

The cognitive limits and political-economic interests of the television channels were quite clearly shown by a coverage that never sought, or knew how, to show the magnitude, extension, and conviction of the citizens' protest. . . . The citizenry, which played the leading role in the insurrection, realized that on television only the standpoints of the political barons were aired. . . . The reality shown on television was not the one that the people were living every night. The rejection of the stations expressed in threats to reporters and cameramen of the various media and the call for a boycott of them were among the unprecedented actions of the nights of April.

In 2007 the Citizens' Revolution embraced the demand "Out with all of them!" of the 2005 mobilizations. Electoral necessity doubtless explains why the major media had no place alongside the "partidocracy" and "the long neoliberal night" in its campaign rhetoric. On taking office, having declared that what was won was an election, not power, and consistent with the strategy of not competing for legislative office, Correa called for a constituent assembly. This is when the real confrontation with the political parties in the National Assembly, the business elite, and the media began.

In the Constituent Assembly, the Alianza PAIS (Fatherland and Sovereignty Alliance—AP) obtained 80 of the 130 seats. The alliance included members of popular movements, social organizations, the old and new left, ordinary citizens, and professional politicians committed to the goal of transcending the neoliberal order and partisan domination (Larrea, 2009; Ramírez, 2010a). Because of their association with leftist members of the AP leadership, many writers, filmmakers, and celebrities with a leftist or reformist agenda—among them Pilar Nuñez (a journalists' union leader), Paco Velasco (from Radio La Luna), and the journalist María Augusta Calle—obtained seats (Larrea, 2009; Checa, interview). They functioned as liaisons with organizations associated with the alternative media and, with various levels of participation, took the lead in drafting the constitution's section on communication.

During the Constituent Assembly, the civil society organizations gathered around the Communication Forum, a network of professionals and trained activists that constituted a forum for proposals to the assembly, and one of several policy issue networks aimed at influencing the constitutional process (Ramírez, 2010a). The sympathy of Alberto Acosta, the president of the Constituent Assembly, with these agendas and the presence of assembly members from the field of communications eased the advocacy work.<sup>3</sup> Although certain sectors of the AP's leadership perceived the importance of uniting and incorporating the communication sector, no clear directive emerged from it. The impetus appears to have come from a dynamic, sometimes dependent on personal relationships, internal to the assembly (Pilar Nuñez, interview, Quito, April 8, 2011). The discussion was not free of tensions and arguments that eventually led to fissures in the civil society sector.

But apart from these emerging disagreements, the opening up of the majority bloc and the advocacy work of the civil society organizations were reflected

in the content about communication included in the constitution in October 2008. With its post-neoliberal understanding, the new constitution established rights of communication and information (Article 16) and made the state an active agent in guaranteeing these rights. It explicitly prohibited any monopoly of communication and guaranteed the assignment, under conditions of equality, of parts of the broadcast spectrum to public, private, and community actors (Article 17). The public recognition of these sectors as actors is intertwined with its rationalization in terms of a social communication system (Article 384) oriented toward equality of communication rights in harmony with the idea of “good living” (*buen vivir*). At the same time, the constitution prohibited the participation of financial institutions in the media (Article 312), reflecting the impact of recent experience. It defined the spectrum as a strategic sector and gave the state the authority to administer it (Article 313). Finally, it established directives for the transition to the new constitutional order, one of which required the executive branch to create a commission that would audit radio and television frequency licensees within a period of six months and another calling for the passage of an Organic Law on Communication within a year.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL TRANSITION

In the implementation of the constitutional directives, conflicts, tensions, and political constraints combined to render the institutional transition inconclusive.

### THE COMMISSION FOR AUDITING CONCESSIONS OF RADIO AND TELEVISION FREQUENCIES

The Commission for Auditing Concessions of Radio and Television Frequencies, created in November 2008, was composed primarily of activists and professionals (some of them foreign) who were close to the Communication Forum along with telecommunications technicians.<sup>4</sup> Its mission was to determine the constitutionality, legitimacy, and transparency of the frequency concessions granted between 1995 and 2008, along with the existing monopolies and the involvement of financial groups in the media. Its report, which was to be presented within 180 days, was intended to be a fundamental contribution to the development of policy on modifying the media environment in accordance with the new constitutional restrictions.

The commission’s investigation detected an enormous number of illegalities and procedural irregularities on the part of the license holders and the regulatory and control agencies (the Consejo Nacional de Radio y Televisión [National Radio and Television Council—CONARTEL] and the Superintendencia de Telecomunicaciones). Among them were violations surrounding the prohibition of the buying and selling of licenses through return and immediate reconcession, irregular extensions, disregard for the order of preference and discrimination among submissions, overlooking of requirements, and the assignment of licenses to members of the regulatory agency. The report established that 40 percent of the concessions contained violations of the law or, at

the very least, questionable features and the presence of actors largely from or linked with the financial sector (CAF, 2009). These findings were evidence that concessions were routinely granted in exchange for political or private favors and that there was deep penetration of the regulatory agencies by the interests being regulated.

In May 2009 the full commission submitted its report to the president in a private meeting. As many of the individuals present testified, the report made Correa aware of the extent of the problem and the radical measures that would be needed to reverse the situation. With the aim of developing a legal and political strategy for this task, he set up an ad hoc group made up of some commission members, legal advisers, and CONARTEL officers who were present at the meeting. These latter individuals, however, had already shown reluctance about accepting the report and questioned the viability of a massive revoking of licenses (João Brant, interview, São Paulo, June 10, 2011; José Ignacio López Vígil, interview, Quito, April 25, 2011; Guillermo Navarro, interview, Quito, April 18, 2011). As a result, the report was never released.<sup>5</sup> Legal and administrative subterfuge led to its replacement by a previous one from the comptroller general's office that did not require such drastic steps.

Besides frustrating the expectations created by the report as a tool for restructuring the media, this episode made evident that actors linked to the interests under investigation or supporters of ideological positions incompatible with media democratization were present in the government and other vital state positions. These conflicting views became apparent within the president's own circle,<sup>6</sup> among CONARTEL officials, and in government bodies like the comptroller general's office and the district attorney's office, revealing the presence within the government of a right wing as well as old and new media interests. The episode called attention to Correa's pragmatism and to the constraints of civil society organizations as the basis for structural transformation. As one of the members of the commission observed, the normative critiques, cadres, and strategies provided by civil society organizations were of little help in counteracting the bureaucratic expertise and penetration that the established actors in the media sector enjoyed.

#### THE ORGANIC LAW ON COMMUNICATION

The drafting of an Organic Law on Communication to replace the 1975 law was a tortuous process and, despite the one-year term set by the constitution, was finally sanctioned only in mid-2013. During this period the fissures and weaknesses of the sectors of civil society that had acted with relative unity during the constituent process became evident. The legislative debate again exhibited heterogeneity of ideas and interests, lack of cohesion, political constraints, and weakness in the conduct of the AP bloc. A month after the constitutional deadline for the approval of the law, an ad hoc committee composed of 11 members and chaired by a legislator of the AP majority was created. The officialist bloc confused the civil society organizations of the Communication Forum with the presentation of a bill far from their agenda and drafted behind closed doors. Confronted with this *fait accompli*, a group keeping the name of the "forum" presented a radical and corporatist-flavored bill introduced by the

opposition indigenous assemblywoman Lourdes Tiban. Disagreeing with this tactic and with some of the bill's content, a sector associated with CIESPAL that brought together organizations focused on rights and democratization established the Citizens' Collective for Communication Rights. Lacking legislative allies, the collective had no option but to present its draft in the form of input to a formal hearing of the committee.<sup>7</sup>

Behind these differences concerning tactics and policies of activism and alliances, there were personality conflicts, organizational agendas, trade union interests in favor of professionalization, and different interpretations of the nature and reach of communication rights (Jurado, interview; Checa, interview; Nuñez, interview). Furthermore, visible contradictions in the officialist bloc between the sectors that were most attached to the democratization of communication, on one side, and those linked to media interests or oriented toward satisfying the desires attributed to the executive, on the other, appeared on the ad hoc committee.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, various high-profile opposition figures stood out for their denunciation of the government's desire to control the media, which they saw as an issue that would provide them political gains. Among the divisive issues in the legislative debate, which extended to the AP bloc, were freedom of speech (and its limits), the creation of a communication council to regulate media content (its integration, its "autonomy," and its reach and penalizing powers), the redistribution (and eventual revoking) of radio frequencies, the institutional structure of the public media, and the compulsory licensing of journalists.

Meanwhile, courting public opinion, the major media launched an aggressive campaign aimed at creating the perception of an "assault on freedom of speech." This concerted action, which reduced the regulatory objective to a "gag rule," was emphatically countered in media interventions by the president calling for an end to the excesses, abuses, and privileges of the press. This polarization of the public sphere made for a difficult debate, removing from center stage the demand for the democratization of the communication media and preventing a larger mobilization of social sectors to support the law (Betancourt, 2010; Ramos, 2010).<sup>9</sup>

Both the government-sponsored bill and the draft for the floor debate approved by the committee raised criticism not only for their technical inconsistencies but, fundamentally, for their controversial content. Concerns emerged from certain sectors of civil society about excessive zeal in the control of media content, and these voices mobilized critical declarations from some international organizations. The legislative draft received critical accounts and reports from institutions like the OAS, the UN, and UNESCO, primarily questioning the aspects relating to freedom of speech.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the civil society organizations issued important warnings about inadequacies, omissions, and ambiguities with regard to media concentration, the regulation of the radio band, and the equitable redistribution of licenses, subject to—in the definitions—the available space in the broadcast spectrum (López, interview).<sup>11</sup>

After a first stage of uneven work in the committee, the numerous doubts and disagreements within AP suggested that the project would be shelved. This led to the National Assembly president's intervening to try to achieve an agreement that would set the guidelines for the discussion. This Ethical-Political



Agreement, subscribed to by all of the blocs by the end of 2009, obligated them to adhere to inter-American standards regarding freedom of speech and the creation of a communication council. However, the disqualification of the agreement by the president contributed to the continuation of the impasse throughout 2010.

In the subsequent context of the September 30, 2010, crisis (known as 30-S), the government initiated a referendum for May 2011 in which 2 of the 10 questions referred to the communication issue, seeking to reopen the discussion of the law. Question 9, which sought approval for the creation of a council to regulate media content, won by a slim majority (44.98 percent for and 42.02 percent against). This opened a new round of legislative debate. Question 3 amended the constitution (44 percent yes, 42 percent no) by extending the ban on media ownership established by the 2008 Constitution from banks to all nonmedia enterprises. Consequently, a new legislative process was open for the submission by the government of a bill that would provide guidelines for disinvestment and limit the proportion of shareholder participation in the national media by owners of other businesses to 6 percent.<sup>12</sup>

## THE REALPOLITIK OF THE CITIZENS' REVOLUTION

Parallel to the tortuous advance of the legal transition, the Citizens' Revolution launched a series of counterhegemonic processes and decisions in the media sphere. In the nuances of these policies one can observe simultaneously the radicalism and the constraints of the political process initiated by Correa.

This realpolitik had two aspects. One aspect was the development of policies that affect the distribution of power in the media. The Citizens' Revolution touched upon property relations, revamped the state's role, and fostered market alternative logics in the media sector. The other aspect was the creation of governmental direct communication devices, centered on the figure of the president, oriented toward the dispute of the public agenda and the struggle to interpret the meaning of events.

### REDISTRIBUTION OF MEDIA POWER

The alteration of the political economy of the media sector and the balance of symbolic power is a consequence of various initiatives. On the one hand, the Citizens' Revolution launched offensives that affected ownership, especially of the media that were linked to the banks, and the business structure in the commercial media sector. On the other hand, it placed the state in a primary role with the creation of public media and offered incentives—despite mutual distrust and misunderstandings—to other social forces to engage in media activities.

When the constitutional deadline ended after two years in October 2010, Fidel Egas, the owner of the Bank of Pichincha had to transfer his shares in Teleamazonas, one of the two free-to-air channels with the largest audiences and coverage. Forty-eight percent of the shares were distributed among

employees through credits from the bank itself, 30 percent went to Peruvian (the La República Group) and Spanish entrepreneurs, and the rest was put into a trust. The involvement of Egas's direct family members in the trust led the National Assembly to question the changes in regulations made by the Superintendencia de Bancos, which relaxed the degrees of kinship (from four to two) admitted in the control of a business, thereby violating the constitutional intent of not leaving bankers in control of the media. In opposition to this lack of administrative transparency and suspected corporate pressure, in October 2010 the assembly president called for a return to the constitutional road and achieved the annulment of the controversial modifications. Nevertheless, doubts concerning the real ownership of the channel persisted. Teleamazonas had previously been responsible for a series of incidents linked to oppositional coverages that were at odds with journalistic ethics (the most important being the cases of the "clandestine polling headquarters" and the island of Puná), exposing it to both administrative proceedings and sanctions that the channel decried as political persecution. Its radically oppositional tone did not appear to have substantially changed with the change in ownership. Nevertheless, the pressure to sell forced the company to rid itself of the most notorious and recalcitrant anti-*correista* individuals for reducing its value.<sup>13</sup>

More important in terms of the shift in power was the confiscation of the media outlets belonging to the Isaías Group. This company, one of Ecuador's major economic groups, with a base in Guayaquil, owned Filanbanco, which was fraudulently declared bankrupt during the financial crisis of 1999. In the interest of the defrauded shareholders, in July 2008 the Deposit Guarantee Agency seized 195 businesses of the group, among them 2 of the 5 most important open national television stations (TC Televisión of Guayaquil and Gamavisión of Quito). Transmitted live by the confiscated channels themselves, this daring move against one of the members of the economic establishment had the character of a state action—the announcement of it brought together the principal institutional authorities—and, while it received widespread popular support (Arosemena, 2010; Ramírez, interview), led to the resignation of the minister for economic affairs, indicating a certain anxiety among the "center-right" sectors of the governmental coalition (Ramírez, 2010b).

The confiscated stations retained their audience and their ratings by maintaining the bulk of their programming and their communication agenda. As a matter of fact, there was a deliberate decision not to alter the cultural content. Instead there was a shift in information focus and in editorial line (Ayala and Calvache, 2009; Fundamedios, 2010). Some journalists left, and two public affairs programs aligned ideologically with the "Guayaquil" model of free enterprise and autonomy vis-à-vis Quito were withdrawn (Reyes, 2010).

The confiscation was part of a broader transformation of the social power matrix in a process of realignment of institutional, political, and communication resources that allowed for the wholesale reconfiguration of power relationships. Through the confiscation Correa diminished the power resources of the private channels, not only reducing their communication space in the public sphere but also reducing the government's detractors' influence on the public. Displaying political realism, the government did not get rid of those channels despite initial promises (Ramírez, 2010b).

Beyond the cases related to the delegitimized media power of the banks, the government adopted other initiatives that affected the private sector. In 2009 it prohibited public contracts with companies that had established residence in tax havens, obligating some of the principal media holdings to provide lists of their owners and shareholders in order to retain the right to obtain government advertising. At the same time, being the primary advertiser, the government slowly reoriented the official advertising expenditures to favor the confiscated media. The media companies appear to have registered important reductions in income from state and private advertising during this period (Fundamedios, 2010). These initiatives surprised the internally divided business groups, especially in the television sector, a fact that eased the government's early offensive. Only with the discussion of the communication law did the business groups react in a more or less coordinated manner although with a defensive and radicalized position (Fundamedios, 2010).

Outside of these advances that profited from the fissured legitimacy and the circumstantial organizational weakness of the media establishment, the policy in relation to broadcast frequencies demonstrated the constraints indicated by the report of the auditing commission. The expectation of an equitable distribution (in the three equal parts, state, nonprofit, and for-profit, demanded by the civil society organizations) of the spectrum, which until then had been under the hegemony of the private commercial sector, was not fulfilled. At the end of 2010 the government awarded a concession of 14 radio frequencies to indigenous organizations and developed measures to provide equipment, consultants, and training (in a joint program with CIESPAL) to those communities (UNESCO, 2011). Besides this allocation (viewed with suspicion by the beneficiaries) and a number of permits for new public media, there appear to have been a few license reversions in connection with irregularities.

These constraints appear to have originated in bureaucratic inertia and the continued colonization of the regulatory agencies by private interests that perpetuated the intense politicization of the media order by the Citizens' Revolution. Until mid-2009 the head of CONARTEL was Jorge Yunda, a leading business representative of the practices denounced by the auditing commission. Once this conflict of interest was made public, he finally handed in his resignation. The government then attempted a bureaucratic reorganization by abolishing CONARTEL and incorporating some of its duties into new agencies that were under the jurisdiction of the new Ministry of Telecommunications. These changes do not appear to have contributed to a significant change in personnel, however, since they affected technicians, especially engineers, on whom the radio and television operations depended.

The Citizens' Revolution's public media creation policy signified a radical change. Until then, the Ecuadorean experience with public broadcasting had been limited to the weak experiment with Ecuadorean National Radio. In 2007 the inaugural broadcast of public television, Ecuador TV, transmitted the opening of the Constituent Assembly. In 2008 Ecuador Public Radio was resurrected and *El Telégrafo*, based on a traditional Guayaquil newspaper that had been confiscated in 2002 from another banker, was relaunched as a public newspaper. The presence of these new media and others such as the digital newspaper *El Ciudadano*, the tabloid PP, and the Andes news agency introduced voices and

content that had been excluded by the commercial, political, and cultural logics of the private media. This expansion was recognized even by those critical of the government (Ayala and Calvache, 2009; Fundamedios, 2010; UNESCO, 2011). At the same time, many civil society organizations sympathetic to the Citizens' Revolution agenda remained critical of the governmental slant of the news programs (Jurado, interview; Checa, interview).

This unprecedented experiment was confronted with cultural, technical, professional, and political constraints and challenges. Historically, it was the private media that provided media content in Ecuador. An indicator of the naturalization of this order is the large percentage of the population that still confuses the new public media with the private commercial stations (Ayala and Calvache, 2009). In contrast with the confiscated media, the new public media have a very limited audience. Furthermore, the infrastructure of the state media is incipient; Ecuador TV, for example, received a wide-ranging VHF channel only in 2011. Another problem concerns the professional culture. The majority of the journalists, technicians, operators, and managers that compose the public media staffs come from the private media and have been socialized in their perspectives and biases (Raquel Escobar, interview, Quito, April 6, 2011; Carol Murillo, interview, Quito, April 24, 2011; Orlando Pérez, interview, Quito, April 25, 2011; Giovanna Tassi, interview, Quito, April 12, 2011). Institutional heterogeneity and weakness can also be seen in the use in public radio and television (RTVPEcuador) of an ISO 9001 certified management system, an established standard oriented toward optimization of productivity and other market goals. Many of those responsible for the journalistic content and the construction of the public media are experiencing the tension between civic imperatives and the immediacy of the conflict between the government and the private media (Tassi, interview; Murillo, interview; Pérez, interview; Escobar, interview). At the same time, certain key roles, for example, the management of the confiscated and public media, have been granted to boards that were not linked to the Citizens' Revolution ideologically—that stemmed from the president's coastal connections and were deeply immersed in the business culture.

Taken together, the sum of all of these policy initiatives and orientations appears to have resulted in a weakening of the dominant voices and in an opening for viewpoints and discourses that had previously been absent in the public sphere. It appears to have provoked a displacement in the form of a novel legitimacy of alternative logics to the commercial and private media logics that had previously been hegemonic.

#### THE CREATION OF COUNTERHEGEMONIC GOVERNMENTAL DEVICES

Given the weakness of the other institutional spheres, "during the period of the Citizens' Revolution the mass media has become the principal arena of political struggle" (Ramírez, 2010b). Consequently, the government has gradually constructed a series of direct communication devices centered on the figure of Correa as the leading spokesman and leader.<sup>14</sup> From the beginning radio and television broadcasts were established from which the president was able to consolidate a "space of personal visibility" and unmediated discourse. The signals for these transmissions, offered free, are voluntarily

retransmitted by a significant important number of community radio stations and by commercial stations given the audience they provide (Reyes, interview). At the same time, as stipulated by the 1975 law, there was regular use of broadcast chains to interrupt radio and television programming in order to refute the assertions of journalists and anchors on the air (Reyes, 2010). Within this wide-ranging presidential communicative space, counterdiscourse and systematic critical questioning of mass media institutions occupied a primary focus. On Saturdays there was a regular segment called "Freedom of Speech Now Belongs to Everyone" that was dedicated to questioning and deconstructing discourses, refuting assertions, and calling attention to inaccuracies and biases in the press.

Correa's discourse on the media merits systematic study. Two critical perspectives can be distinguished in his denunciation of the media as "de facto powers." The one connected to the demands of civil society and the left, as we have seen, is the assertion of the antidemocratic nature of the media's power and the promise to redistribute that power. The other, disturbing to these same allies for both normative and prudential reasons, tends to identify the confrontation between the media and the government as the fundamental antagonism.

The "war" with the media began in March 2007 in the context of the coverage of the conflict between the executive and legislative branch regarding the constitutional reform. The major newspapers, *La Hora* and *El Universo*, branded the governmental initiatives taken to overcome the impasse illegitimate and criminal. Correa responded by suing them for slander, condemning journalists on camera, and characterizing the press as dishonest, miserable, and corrupt. For their part, the major national media, en bloc, under the influence of institutions like the Inter-American Press Association, presented the media conflict simply as a function of the government's desire to silence the press (Reyes, 2010). This mode of confrontation was present, with some fluctuations, from that moment on, but with the 30-S police insurrection it reached new heights. The same day the government decreed that an uninterrupted chain be made available because of the fear of destabilizing coverage. In the subsequent polemic on the nature of the insurrection, a column in *El Universo* that branded Correa a dictator and charged him with ordering the authorities to fire at will on a hospital full of innocent people and civilians led to civil and criminal prosecutions of the columnist and the newspaper.<sup>15</sup> These reactions are intelligible in the framework of the president's perception of the media as pursuing their interests outside of any institutional boundaries. For Correa, the media powers were using their symbolic capabilities in a praetorian manner, without any limits, as is suggested by the frequent expression "hired assassins with a pen" (*sicarios de tinta*). This position represents a historical pattern in the president's view (Correa, 2011, my emphasis):

This is the history of Latin America, not only that of Ecuador. Examine the history of Alfaro, the editorials of the newspapers *El Comercio* and *La Prensa*. Concerning him (Alfaro) they said: "Crush the serpent." The daily *El Comercio* treated him in this manner, with this detestable name, *inciting the population to massacre and the barbaric bonfire*. Are the people of Quito assassins? The people of Quito were encouraged and manipulated by the corrupt conservative press.

*History repeats itself*, and this is one of the challenges of Latin America: creating a more decent press that works for the common good, fulfilling its responsibility of providing information rather than engaging in secret political agendas or character *assassination* of a person's reputation and integrity through print.

These naked, irresponsible, and "seditious" powers confront Correa with a problem regarding freedom of expression and its limits. Along with some of his supporters, the president defends the state's duty to sanction and regulate these behaviors. This tendency was demonstrated in the heteronomous positions of the ruling party regarding the regulation of content in the legislative debates. It was also displayed in the consensus of AP sectors concerning the political legitimacy and necessity of civil and criminal prosecution of abuses of the freedom of expression.

### THE POLITICAL-STRUCTURAL LIMITS OF THE CITIZENS' REVOLUTION

Without a doubt, the Citizens' Revolution will be remembered as a striking experiment in creating counterhegemonic media. The political process led by Correa has changed the relations of symbolic communicative power and media ownership, introduced regulation, demystified media discourse, and broken up the domination of the market as the guiding principle in the media. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the equitable redistribution of media power advocated by the Citizens' Revolution, it is still an open process whose outcome is uncertain. For ideas to be effectively transformed into policy, they must not only be present on the level of the political elite but also be embedded in institutions and—finally—exist as shared societal ideologies and beliefs (Sikkink, 1991). This distinction is useful for classifying observations concerning the limits, difficulties, and contradictions of the Citizens' Revolution as it attempts to democratize the mass media.

#### THE ELITE AND THE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

The president himself, as we have seen, carries heteronomous viewpoints and practical orientations regarding the media and communication. As has any political leader, he has been shaped by contradictory personal, social, and political experiences,<sup>16</sup> and his agendas cannot be expected to be consistent and ideologically pure. The heterogeneity of the interests and ideas regarding the media that coexist in the Citizens' Revolution coalition influences its media policy. The AP contains not only different expressions of the highland left but also sectors of the center-right and middle-class sectors marginalized from institutional power, with roots in the followers of Abdalá Bucaram, that are associated with the populist political culture of the coast. This diversity is reflected in the core of the government, in the legislative bloc, and among AP leaders in general, many of whom have strong ties with media interests in their regions. Key positions are occupied by individuals linked to established interests, whose ideas on the media are more business- than politically oriented and who are therefore indifferent to the democratizing agenda. For example, the

brothers Vinicio and Fernando Alvarado, the sons of a radio station owner from Los Ríos and associated with private business in communication and advertising, are in charge of communication and media policy in Carondelet. Enrique Arosemena Robles, a member of one of Guayaquil's powerful traditional families and nephew of the owner of Ecuavisa (a station where he attained his professional experience as engineer and manager), was in charge of the public radio and television media and those that had been confiscated (Arosemena, 2010). These individuals generally come from Correa's pre-political social circle and his coastal base.<sup>17</sup>

This divergence of interests, combined with a certain lack of expertise on the technicalities of communications and the weaknesses of the legislative work, help to explain the impossibility of a cohesive position for the AP's legislative bloc. Along these lines, one must point to the politico-organizational weakness of the Citizens' Revolution, reflecting the choice of a kind of electoral mobilization from above based on a technocratic-marketing model (Ramírez, 2010b).

## INSTITUTIONS

On the institutional level one can observe not only lack of skills and bureaucratic inertia but also the difficulties in the attempts to reverse the historical colonization of the state by business interests. The civil society organization network—a "state within a state" supported by international cooperation—linked to media change did not develop the technical-political cadres necessary for the creation of an alternative policy community to sustain structural change. Although numerous critically committed professionals have editorial responsibility in the new public media, many of the executives come from the business world, while in the newsrooms a professional culture molded in the private media dominates. As public media executives themselves acknowledge, journalistic autonomy clashes with the immediacy of polarized politics, while the development of professional training programs is only in its initial stages.

In the arena of community media, an effective redistribution of expression power beyond spectrum reserves is dependent on access to financial and organizational resources. There has been some state support for infrastructure, financing, and training, but the results and continuation of these initiatives are at the mercy of the government's tense relations with the social movements.

The most obvious constraints occur in the bureaucratic agencies that regulate the telecommunications sector. Essentially composed of engineers and technicians, they have not been amenable to the agenda of media democratization. Confronting them and separated by an epistemological rupture are the sociologists, communication theorists, and jurists with a political vision and agenda for balancing rights for this sector (Ortega, interview). At the same time, the staff of the new Ministry of Telecommunications includes many of the old managerial and technical bureaucrats of the regulatory, administrative, and controller organizations of the broadcast spectrum. It is very difficult for political power to penetrate bureaucratic control in these very specialized agencies. The engineers they employ have historical links with the business sector. Throughout its 13 years, the CONARTEL board has been primarily composed of licensees or direct

business representatives as well as numerous representatives of the armed forces, historically intertwined with certain business interests (CIESPAL, 2011).

In Ecuador in contrast to some of its neighbors, advances regarding network regulation and the transition to digital technology in television have been timid and tentative (Valeria Betancourt, interview, Quito, April 19, 2011). The pending decisions in these convergent camps will have important consequences for the future of the political economy of communication and information. Agencies like the Ministry of Telecommunications have become key areas for struggles that will largely shape the institutionalization of the Ecuadorean media.

## THE SOCIETY

An important social constraint of media reform agendas is that they are bound to appeal to Ecuador's rather narrow urban sectors. Outside of Quito, the functioning of the media seems not to be perceived as a major problem. A 2009 survey found that 58.01 percent of respondents in Guayaquil considered the media honest in contrast to 34.67 percent in Quito and 45.35 percent in the country as a whole (UNESCO, 2011). Increasingly, the popular sectors on the coast are a vital part of AP's base, and this constituency is sensitive to cultural themes and rituals in which the demand for the democratization of communication is not important.

For their part, circumscribed by the coincidence of the Citizens' Revolution with a decline in mobilization (Ramírez, 2010a), civil society organizations committed to the democratization of communication have been unable to mobilize broader social support. While they were successful in influencing the constituent assembly, in the subsequent phase they were placed on the defensive given their internal fragmentation and their feeling of having been stripped of their agenda by government. There was tension between the institutional criteria they promoted (autonomy from the market and the state, citizen participation, inclusion of silenced voices, and identity, among other things) and fear of instrumentalization or control from above given the top-down policy construction dominant in the Citizens' Revolution. At the same time, Correa did not question tout court the legitimacy of business activity in the media field. The confrontation with the commercial media must be viewed as part of a much wider struggle to limit the political influence of specific business, banking, and family networks, especially those from Guayaquil (Ramírez, 2010b). The Citizens' Revolution's initial advances benefited from the weakened collective action capacity of the factionalized business interests, but by the time of the legislative discussion the sector had recovered significant coordination, as evidenced by the aggressive press campaign against the law.

Judging from the results of the referendum of May 2010, the battle for hearts and minds appears to reflect these fluctuations and nuances. On the new communication law the "yes" vote was the smallest for any of the 10 questions while the "no" vote was almost on a par with the largest. Among the middle sectors of Quito—the group that was in the streets in 2005—the "yes" vote appears to have been in the minority. The struggle for the distribution of power in the media arena is not over. Given the government's actions since the referendum, it does not appear that the struggle will be relegated to the background.



## AUTHOR NOTE

The final version of this article, submitted in February 2012, is an analysis of events that took place through the middle of 2011.

## NOTES

1. The 1975 law had already naturalized the commercial understandings of this sector (Jurado, 2010; Navas, 2011), in contrast to the experience of the radical media reformism associated with Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru.

2. In contrast to other Latin American countries, except for the presence of the Prisa and González groups the participation of transnational capital in the media sector has not been significant.

3. Acosta was from Radio La Luna's advisory group, and this contributed to his sensitivity to the issue. "When we were in Montecristi he was still there, and he gave us direction during the writing of the articles" (José Ignacio López Vigil, interview, Quito, April 25, 2011).

4. Guillermo Navarro, the commission chair, is a leftist planner educated in Czechoslovakia. In 2006 he published a study on media concentration called *Los poderes fácticos* (The Factual Powers), and Correa adopted the expression to characterize the media.

5. It was Fundamedios, an NGO critical of the government, that put the report in circulation through a request for access to public information.

6. The individuals most often mentioned are Vinicio and Fernando Alvarado, in charge of communication and media policy, and Alexis Mera, legal secretary of the Presidency.

7. Various academics and specialists in communication were consulted, if only unsystematically, throughout the legislative debate. Their influence was considerably less than during the constituent process (Romel Jurado, interview, Quito, April 11, 2011; Reyes, 2010: 171).

8. Rolando Panchana, author of the government-sponsored bill and a former television host, was idiosyncratically distanced from the media democratization agenda. Betty Carrillo, the first chair of the committee, was strongly criticized for her performance and her closeness to the rightist sectors of the executive branch.

9. In Argentina, in contrast, despite a similar media campaign there was massive mobilization in support of the media law passed in 2009.

10. This is another relevant difference with Argentina, whose media law was not questioned but instead received praise on the part of those organizations.

11. There was a warning about this heteronomy later when the administration of the spectrum and licenses were later included in a bill drafted far from public scrutiny in the Ministry of Telecommunications. This legislative-regulatory distinction between telecommunication and communication was said to favor the bureaucratic domination of the spectrum rather than adopting citizens' standards in communication policy (Julia Ortega, interview, Quito, April 27, 2011; López, interview).

12. The operative definition of "national media" is full of consequences for the structure of ownership in the sector.

13. Ramírez (interview) sees here the breakdown of old alliances and structures of media power.

14. These counterdiscourse measures centered on the figure of the president are a contrast with the Argentine case. In its counterhegemonic offensive, Kirchnerism appears to have drawn on resources from a diversified cultural media field that was not available to the Citizens' Revolution.

15. Recently, the first criminal and compensatory verdicts were handed down, followed by the self-exile of the columnist in Miami.

16. The Citizens' Revolution was preceded by a period of governmental instability and by a growing antipolitical climate that was significantly reinforced by the major media (Navas, 2011).

17. Arosemena knew Correa from his participation in Christian youth circles, but he achieved the post through the efforts of the Alvarado brothers (Arosemena, 2010).

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