

Press Freedom and Media Reform in a Populist Regime: How Ecuadorian Journalists and Policy Actors See the Correa Era

MANEL PALOS PONS

DANIEL C. HALLIN

University of California, San Diego, USA¹

This article considers the debates about press freedom raised by an important case of populist media reform in Latin America, drawing on interviews with Ecuadorian journalists, policy makers, and commentators involved in the policy process. Whereas these cases are commonly understood, following a “libertarian” conception of press freedom, as threats to an independent press, interviewees saw a more complex picture. The majority agreed that press freedom was threatened under former president Rafael Correa’s regime in Ecuador; at the same time, most of respondents considered media regulation necessary given a history of “media capture,” and believed that journalistic professionalism had improved in Correa’s period. These results suggest that press freedom is a multidimensional reality in which the state plays a key role, proposing a further discussion about media regulation and populism in contemporary societies.

Keywords: press freedom, media policy, journalism, populism, Latin America

In 2018, an article jointly published by the *Columbia Journalism Review* and the Committee to Protect Journalists celebrated “Ecuador’s U-Turn Away From Media Repression” (Southwick & Otis, 2018). Rafael Correa, who had recently left the Andean nation’s presidency, was a left-wing populist president, part of what was known as the “pink tide” in Latin America, in which a number of leaders critical of the neoliberal consensus that had prevailed in the region since the 1980s came to power (Artz, 2017, pp. 1–2). These leaders, who included Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, Luis Inazio da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and José Mujica in Uruguay, allied with “media accountability movements” that advocated for policy reforms intended, as they saw them, to democratize oligarchical media systems (Soledad Segura & Waisbord, 2016, pp. 37–41). Lenin Moreno, who served as Correa’s vice president and succeeded him in 2017, had, to the surprise of many, abandoned his media policies, and the *Columbia Journalism Review* was celebrating the end of the “state of repression” that Correa had exercised over “independent media” (Southwick & Otis, 2018, para. 4). “There is a path back to

Manel Palos Pons: mapalos@ucsd.edu

Daniel C. Hallin: dhallin@ucsd.edu

Date submitted: 2020-04-12

¹ This research was supported by a University of California Academic Senate (San Diego Division) General Campus Research Grant.

Copyright © 2021 (Manel Palos Pons and Daniel C. Hallin). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

Press Freedom," the authors wrote, "At the same time, it is difficult to overstate the damage that a powerful executive branch determined to destroy independent media can inflict on a country" (para. 55).

The *Columbia Journalism Review* and the Committee to Protect Journalists do not offer a definition of press freedom in their discussion of the Ecuadorian case, but they clearly assume a particular view about its meaning. This is the traditional negative or libertarian conception of press freedom, centered around the idea that the primary danger to press freedom is state repression, and that press freedom is therefore understood as the absence of state intervention. This narrative is standard in many discussions of media policy under populist regimes, both in public discourse and in scholarship.

The Ecuadorean case is often identified as a prime example of a general tendency for such regimes to threaten press freedom. Levitsky and Loxton (2013) classify Correa as a "full populist" on the basis of three characteristics: an antielite popular appeal (the core of the concept of populism), outsider status, and personalism (p. 110). The media policies enacted under Correa were widely characterized as harmful to press freedom, consistent with a general pattern of decline in press freedom, as measured by the standard indices, under populist regimes. This interpretation of media policy has been controversial in Latin America, however, and both the enactment of those policies and their reversal have provoked passionate debates. Many in Ecuador see the repeal of Correa's policies not as a restoration of press freedom, but as a return to an old pattern of collusion between media and political authorities and a collapse of media pluralism. These debates are rooted in a broader clash that has been part of the dialogue about press freedom globally for many decades, between "positive" and "negative" conceptions, with their differing views about where threats to press freedom lie and what role the state might legitimately play in regulating media. The interrogation of the Ecuadorean case, representative in many ways of populist media reform in Latin America, is particularly useful for illuminating key questions about press freedom and the construction of independent media.

In this article, we analyze the case of media policy under Correa based on interviews with journalists and media policy actors, in which we explore their views on state regulation of the media, the effect of Correa's media policy on press freedom, and the evolution of journalistic professionalism in Ecuador. As we shall see, most of our interviewees supported state regulation of the media in principle. They were divided about the effect of Correa's policies on press freedom, although the majority were sharply critical of important aspects of Correa's policy. Finally, and surprisingly, most believed that journalism had become more professional during the Correa era. We argue that the negative concept of press freedom is too narrow to comprehend a case like Ecuador, where a populist regime triggered bold media reforms, and we need to move instead toward a multidimensional and historical perspective that considers the full range of influences on the difficult development of an independent, professionalized, and democratic media, considering the role of the state within that larger context.

Populism, Press Freedom, and Journalistic Professionalism

Populist regimes, which have a long history in Latin America and have become common in much of the world, frequently enter into conflict with established media institutions, and are often seen as a threat to press freedom. Recent work in comparative politics has explored this relationship empirically. Kenny

(2020) shows in a global study that populist rule is associated with declines in press freedom, particularly in the case of left-wing populism. He attributes this to the lack of institutionalization of populist parties and because left-wing populists are more inclined to intervene in the economy, including media markets. Kellam and Stein (2016) analyze historical trends in press freedom ratings in Latin America, and similarly find that press freedom declines when leftist presidents, often populist, come to power. In these situations, there are normally weak levels of political competition because of the collapse of an existing party system; populist presidents see the media—historically aligned with traditional elites—as their most viable opposition, attack them “to sustain their base,” and hence become a “threat to press freedom” (Kellam & Stein, 2016, p. 66).

Kenny (2020) and Kellam and Stein (2016) use the same libertarian or “negative” conception of press freedom that the *Columbia Journalism Review* assumes implicitly. Kellam and Stein define press freedom as “an environment in which journalists can report independently of government and with minimal regulation or state intervention” (p. 43). Kenny defines it as “autonomy of the media from political interference or censorship,” and goes on to talk about “a variety of actions taken by a government” (p. 3). Both employ standard measures of press freedom, which, as many analysts have noted, skew toward the libertarian definition (Becker, Vlad, & Nusser, 2007; Burgess, 2010; Bush, 2017; Martin, Abbas, & Martins, 2016), a fact that has led some critics to complain of a pro-Western bias in these measures.

This conception of press freedom has always been contested, however, both within the scholarly literature and in public discourse. It competes with alternative conceptions, which see a wider range of potential threats to the independence and openness of the media, place greater emphasis on equality of access to the public sphere, take a more collective approach, and often see a positive role for state regulation in promoting a communication system conducive to democracy (Glasser & Gunther, 2005; Hansen, 2015; Koltay, 2015). Dewey (1927) articulates the distinction between “negative” and “positive” conceptions of press freedom in *The Public and Its Problems*, writing that “removal of formal limitations is but a negative condition; positive freedom is not a state but an act which involves methods and instrumentalities for control of conditions” (p. 168). As Lebovic (2016) recounts, Dewey writes in the context of a debate in the United States about press freedom and democracy that has many parallels with the discussions common in contemporary Latin America, with those on the left arguing that increasingly concentrated privately owned media tilted the political playing field, and advocated for media reform, while conservatives, during the Roosevelt presidency, decried the expansion of state power in the communication system.

In the United States, the negative conception of press freedom was largely consolidated after World War II (Pickard, 2011). In Europe, positive conceptions of press freedom were more widespread, and state intervention in media markets to preserve conditions of pluralism, quality of information, and other values was widely accepted as a postwar “paradigm” (van Cuilenburg & McQuail, 2003). Despite the tendency for standardized press freedom ratings to emphasize the negative conception of press freedom, countries with relatively strong state involvement score at the top of press freedom rankings and research have shown that more regulated Western media systems provide better information to their citizens than loosely regulated environments, such as the United States (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010).

The negative conception of press freedom has for the most part predominated in Latin America since the end of World War II, although not without some contestation. Starting in the 1970s, Latin American

media reformers articulated a concept of a "right of information" (Rodríguez Arechavaleta, 2011, p. 1), which is recognized in many constitutions along with rights of speech and press freedom and implies a positive state responsibility for protecting rights of citizens. Nevertheless, the dominance of libertarian media policy was reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s with the so-called "neoliberal turn," which involved increasing deregulation, privatization, and liberalization of media markets, not only in Latin America, but in most of the world, including the West (Dawes, 2017; Feintuck & Varney, 2006; McChesney, 2008). At the same time, following the shift toward democracy in Latin America at the end of the 1980s, there was an important growth of "media accountability movements" (Porto, 2012; Soledad Segura & Waisbord, 2016) related to a general political reaction against neoliberal policies, which advocated for reforms including expansion of public service broadcasting, state support for community media, and regulation of concentration in media markets. The rise of the "pink tide" produced widespread discussion in the region that replicated many of the global debates about "positive" and "negative" conceptions of press freedom against the background of significant political mobilization and discussion of inclusion of marginalized groups across many social institutions (Artz, 2017, pp. 39–44).

These debates have to do with the proper role of the state in a media system, and also with the role of privately owned media in the democratic process. They are not exclusively normative debates, but have to do with empirical assumptions about the sociology and political economy of media and the kinds of factors that affect their independence and democratic performance. The libertarian understanding of press freedom assumes that in the absence of government intervention, media and journalists are, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* expresses it, "independent" (Southwick & Otis, 2018, para. 4). The abstract of Kellam and Stein (2016) begins by stating this view, which it treats as common sense: "The media hold democratically elected leaders accountable by exposing corruption and policy failures" (p. 36). Packed into this statement is a set of assumptions, based on the history of post-World War II, particularly in Anglo-American public discourse, about the nature of media institutions, which take it as a default state that journalists and the news organizations they work for have a high degree of autonomy from particular economic and political interests and can be seen as following norms of public service (Craft, 2010).

As Dewey (1927) observed in the 1930s, however, and as much scholarship on media systems in recent decades has confirmed (Aalberg & Curran, 2012; Hallin & Mancini, 2004), these assumptions have never been self-evident and the state has played a crucial role in the development of many of the most democratic media systems, especially in northern Europe. On the other hand, there is much research on media systems in Latin America that makes clear that media in the region do not consistently play that independent role. State restrictions on press freedom are one reason, but not the only one. In Latin America, media are generally privately owned, highly concentrated, often "captured" by elites, and frequently collusive with or dependent on political actors (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; see also Hughes & Lawson, 2005). As Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) note, it is often difficult to separate the power of state and nonstate actors, given close ties and weak boundaries between them. Levels of professionalism are low, consensus on standards of journalistic practice is uneven, and journalists are poorly paid and have little job security. High levels of inequality also mean that large parts of the population feel unrepresented by the media, as they do by other social institutions. The media landscape in the region is characterized, as Soledad Segura and Waisbord (2016) put it, not by independence but by "pervasive patrimonialism" (p. 33).

If we think of the sociology of journalism in terms of Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchy of influences model, we could say that the libertarian concept of press freedom focuses narrowly, primarily considering one aspect of one level—the repressive role of government as an extramedia actor—and disregards the individual, routines, organizational, social institutions, and social systems levels. And if the traditional libertarian approach is very limited in terms of media sociology, it is also generally ahistorical in the sense that it treats media independence as a kind of natural condition, to which media return once outside disruption is removed. Cane (2012) develops this argument in a study of the conflict between Juan Perón, whose 1946–1955 government is often seen as the classic case of Latin American populism, and the Argentine press. Cane rejects the narrative of “a sudden authoritarian intromission into the otherwise progressive development of an internally coherent, autonomous press” (p. 4) as inadequate, and instead situates the conflicts between Perón and the press in a wider history of Argentinian politics—which took place in a context of class conflict and mass participation in 1930s to 1940s—the role of press in politics, and the relation of these to the internal politics of the press and the relations among different actors, including owners, journalists, and production workers. We approach the Ecuadorian case from a similar perspective, looking at the debates over press freedom and media policy during the Correa government within the concrete historical context of a society where an independent, democratic, professionalized press has never been something that could be taken for granted and the question of how Ecuador could construct such a press is central.

Finally, one specific issue generally bracketed in the standard approach to press freedom, but which we bring into the foreground here, is journalistic professionalism, which cuts across Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) five levels. Journalistic professionalism is generally not considered part of the traditional concept of press freedom, nor is it reflected centrally in coding schemes for the standard measures. But if we consider press freedom to be important because we value an independent press serving the need of a democratic public for information and a forum for debate, then the state of journalistic professionalism is certainly a key variable. It is important to understand that journalists' professionalism does not arise spontaneously from civil society or the market, as a negative conception would claim, but through complex interplays among several dimensions, among which state intervention through media policy is one fundamental aspect to explore. We examine in this article both how journalists and policy actors in Ecuador see the effects of Correa-era interventionist policies on press freedom, and how they see their effect on professionalism.

The Ecuadorian Case

Rafael Correa was sworn in as president of Ecuador in 2007, following a period of economic and political crisis. The Ecuadorean case is unique in many ways (Oller & Chavero, 2014), but has close parallels with a number of other Latin American countries in which populist regimes initiated what they characterized as media reforms and came into sharp conflict with much of the existing commercial media, generating intense debates about whether their policies should be seen as authoritarian assaults on press freedom, efforts to democratize oligarchical media systems, or something else. It is particularly close to three cases: Argentina during the presidencies of Néstor and Cristina Fernández de Kircher, Bolivia under Evo Morales, and Venezuela under Hugo Chávez.

As in other Latin American countries, the return of democracy in 1980 was followed by a long phase of media deregulation and liberalization and was characterized by a “weak and flexible regulatory framework” that “facilitated the incorporation of the business community into the regulatory and watchdog agencies” (Kitzberger, 2016, p. 54) and resulted in extensive opacity in the awarding of broadcast concessions. The small media market in Ecuador was overwhelmingly under commercial control and highly concentrated, with, for example, two newspapers accounting for 65% of the market and four broadcasters accounting for a similar percentage of the television market. Ecuador had no state broadcasting system.

At the time Correa was elected, a network of civil society organizations calling for reform of the media system already existed. These organizations took an active role in a constituent assembly convened under Correa, and the new constitution incorporated a significant shift toward a “positive” view of press freedom, including Article 16, which established a citizen right of information, and Article 17, which specified that the broadcast spectrum should be divided equally among three sectors—commercial, state, and community media—a common provision of contemporary media reforms in Latin America. The 2008 Constitution also banned banks from media ownership, a ban that was subsequently extended to all nonmedia enterprises.

Correa moved across many fronts to transform the media system. Months after his victory, the new government announced the launch of a public broadcaster for the first time in Ecuador’s history. Next, Correa’s administration seized the media conglomerate Grupo Isaiás, formerly owned by a bank involved in the financial crisis, for payment for the owners’ financial debt. It also nationalized *El Telégrafo*, an old Guayaquil newspaper confiscated from banking interests before Correa’s election. Government advertising funds were shifted toward the confiscated and public media. In 2013, the national parliament led by Correa’s political party (Alianza País) passed the Ley Orgánica de Comunicación (Organic Law of Communication) that set up a new regulatory framework. The law defined media as a public service, establishing a principle common to “positive” conceptions of press freedom that the state had a responsibility to regulate and support the media, and institutionalized the principle of the three-part division of the broadcast spectrum; however, this goal was never achieved, and the division was centered mostly between private and public media. This law was broad in scope, including significant regulation not only of market structure, but also of media content. It introduced rights of reply and rectification, a requirement that 5% of content be devoted to multicultural coverage (of indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities, for example), provisions related to sex and violence in television content, and a particularly controversial provision against “media lynching,” which was widely seen as intended to prevent negative reporting on political actors (Kitzberger, 2017, p. 99). Two important regulatory bodies were created: Consejo Ecuatoriano de Regulación y Desarrollo de la Información y Comunicación (Cordicom), which monitored allocation of frequencies and general content norms (e.g., time slot rules to protect children), and Superintendencia de Comunicación (Supercom), which enforced those policies and had the power to sanction media for violations.

Sharp polarization between most private media and the government developed as Correa’s presidency continued, and Ecuador’s media were largely divided into two camps: pro- and anti-Correa. This phenomenon, referred to in the region as a *guerra mediática*, is typical of the pattern with left-wing populist regimes in Latin America (Kitzberger, 2017, p. 87). Private media and international press freedom organizations condemned the new law and its implementation as assaults on press freedom. Freedom House

press freedom ratings for Ecuador went from 41 in 2007 when Correa was elected to 66 in 2017, the last year of his presidency, shifting Ecuador from a status of “partly free” to “not free.” Correa and his supporters, meanwhile, claimed that the new framework served to redistribute freedom of speech toward a broader public. Correa’s weekly televised *Enlace Ciudadano* included a regular segment entitled “Free Speech for All.” The purpose of this article is to illuminate these debates about the effects of populist media policy by considering the views of those most directly involved: Ecuadorean journalists and media policy actors.

Method

Given widespread criticism that discussions of press freedom impose a libertarian framework, we started from the premise that the first step in understanding press freedom issues in a case like Ecuador should be to consider how the actors within that system themselves constructed issues of press freedom and democracy. The primary focus of research was on journalists, but the role of the media is a central political issue in Ecuador, and we therefore decided to include a sample of other actors involved in debates about media policy. As Hallin (2020) argues, one important difference among conceptions of press freedom has to do with our understanding of who its subject is, and we cannot assume that it is something that “belongs” only to journalists or the media.

Fieldwork for this research was developed during two summers (2017, 2018), amounting to a total of 16 weeks in Quito and Guayaquil. The Department of Communication and International Relations in the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (Flacso) at Quito provided an office for the researchers and contacts for local informants. Interviewees were identified through “snowball” sampling; they are not a systematic sample of Ecuadorian journalists or the policy community. A strong effort was made, however, to recruit subjects in different types of media and across Ecuador’s policy divide. The sample reflects diverse camps and media market sectors, although strong supporters of the Correa administration were more reluctant to be interviewed. We made the decision to focus on “mainstream” media belonging to the commercial and state sectors rather than community media. A distinct set of issues is involved in debates about how to interpret the role of community media in populist regimes, and we considered it too broad to address these issues in the present study. Thirty interviews lasting 40–90 minutes were conducted, in person and in Spanish, recorded and transcribed. Twenty were journalists; five were analysts and commentators involved in the discussion of media policy; and five were policy makers, politicians, or political advisors. The research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, San Diego, and respondents were offered confidentiality. As people in these positions are used to engaging in public debate, most were comfortable speaking for attribution, although we do not name them here except in select cases. Interviews were semistructured, based on a questionnaire that was adapted depending on the context of each situation, always with a purpose of “building trust and rapport with the informant” (Boellstroff, Nardi, Pierce, & Taylor, 2012, p. 95).

In analyzing the interviews, we used open coding in the preliminary phase, identifying about 20 emergent issues in the transcribed interviews using both manual coding and text research tools. For our secondary coding, we moved into a more analytical approach, using a constant comparative method (Tracy, 2013, pp. 190–191), assessing the participants’ ideological and sectorial positions around five key questions:

press freedom, regulation, quality of journalism or professionalism, public broadcasting, and media and democracy. We organize the discussion of the results around the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Ecuadorean journalists and policy actors see the proper role of the state in media regulation?

RQ2: How do Ecuadorean journalists and policy actors understand the impact of Correa-era media policies on press freedom?

RQ3: How do Ecuadorean journalists and policy actors understand the impact of Correa-era media policies on the development of the journalistic profession?

In the final section, we move into a broader discussion of the implication of these results for the understanding of media policy, press freedom, and independent media in populist regimes.

Results

The State and the Demand for Regulation

The libertarian view expressed in the *Columbia Journalism Review* is often regarded as hegemonic in much of the world, especially in regions such as Latin America where news media have historically been privately owned and media policy has been very limited, so we might expect to find that point of view dominant among our respondents, at least among those not closely associated with Correa's administration. On the other hand, we might expect the polarization over media policy of the Correa years to be reflected among our interviewees.

We did find some degree of polarization on this issue. However, only nine of our 30 interviewees rejected state regulation of media in general. Those respondents preferred some sort of self-regulation, although four of them hesitated about the role of the state. These four acknowledged the need of regulation in principle, but opted for self-regulation because of distrust of the government's behavior. All respondents endorsing the libertarian conception worked in private media and one of them was employed in Fundamedios, a nongovernmental association created during Correa's administration to defend freedom of the press, which clashed sharply with the government; three of them are foreigners (two Spaniards and one Venezuelan); and all of them held managerial positions within their respective organizations as editors-in-chief or publishers. Several of them did, however, acknowledge a failure of self-regulation in the years before Correa's presidency. For instance, a journalist, working for private media, stated that "before [Correa] . . . there was a press with excesses . . . as with all the world's press. I believe that it was a press whose major sin was not to have created self-regulation processes." Others showed doubts about whether regulation was desirable:

You know what? I don't know. It is a dilemma that I have, but I believe very much in self-regulation. There are things I don't like, and I do see. . . . There are some journalists who are very . . . they have, also, converted themselves into political actors, but at the same time it is a path you choose. (Journalist, private media)

I don't know what to tell you. . . . There are media that need regulation, that are weakly professionalized, that play games a little bit: I think [regulation] could be convenient . . . but . . . I think there's a line I don't know if I would cross. (Journalist, private media)

As these last excerpts suggest, despite some elements of polarization, there was actually a fairly high degree of consensus among our respondents on a number of points related to media regulation. There was wide consensus on an implicit and explicit critical assessment of media themselves. And a majority acknowledged the necessity of some sort of regulation, a view that cut across the political spectrum, from fiercely pro-Correa individuals to many anti-Correa respondents. For instance, according to one reporter working for *El Universo*, one of the newspapers most often punished by Supercom and attacked by Rafael Correa,

I think the Communication Law was needed; it is a necessity to regulate media in Ecuador due to the background information I told you. But Correa manipulated the law. . . . He created a custom-made law with sanctioning and regulatory bodies. (Journalist, private media)

A reporter for *Ecuavisa*, a television network highly critical of Correa, expressed a similar view:

I want to think it was necessary. I agree with a Cordicom. . . . Cordicom's job was a work mostly related to generating supply to improve information. To apply the Communication Law to improve, such as to not to put specific shows on children's time slots, etc. . . . And if suddenly a reporter makes a mistake, because he didn't . . . handle the best way, you were a little bit discriminatory regarding this social group, that Ecuadorian nationality. . . . Perfect! That's ok! But then the Superintendencia starts sanctioning us. Here there is this struggle between private media and the state. (Journalist, private media)

All the journalists we interviewed working in public media strongly supported regulation, stressing the bad shape of media before Correa took power.

However, if there was general consensus on the necessity for regulation, there was also consensus among the journalists in our sample, whether they worked at public or private media, *oficialista* or opposition newspapers, that there were negative outcomes of regulation under Correa, especially the Supercom, the sanctioning institution. A former editor-in-chief of *El Telégrafo*, the newspaper nationalized by Correa's administration, working at the time of the interview at Telesur, a transnational cable network based in Venezuela and aligned with the left, said,

What I don't like is that thing of the process of sanctioning. It is not clear, is confusing. I don't know about law, and since there's no experience in the world on sanctioning media. . . . So, it is a business that is not entirely clear to me. (Journalist, public media)

This critical view of the Supercom was shared by our respondents, across political lines, only omitted by three pro-Correa policy makers.

There was also strong consensus among our interviewees about the value of public broadcasting, introduced during Correa's first government. At the same time, few of them backed the actual operation of public media under Correa. Only three policy makers and one journalist supported public media's management without major criticism, although they tended to add apologetic remarks about something that "was completely new in the country." Most of the interviewees, however, confirmed a blatant partisan use of public media. Statements by journalists from public and private media corresponded in critiques of biased public media, although they sometimes differed on the tone and the logic of the bias. The BBC was frequently invoked as a contrasting example. "In an ideal situation public media shouldn't have any connection with the current government, but they have. . . . I think the BBC is funded by a tax," explained a journalist employed by public media. Others thought alike:

What they must do, if they have a public broadcaster, is to reform the law and shield that medium. Remove the political weight from those programs. . . . If what they want is a medium for the governing party, let's put that broadcaster to compete in the market.
(Journalist, private media)

Most of the participants pointed out funding as a major problem for the independence of public media, and many—journalists working in public media, policy makers and analysts, but also reporters in private media—suggested a different logic for public broadcasting, beyond private broadcasters' commercial goals. "Without public media, whose aim is not commercial advertising but to serve to citizenship, who is going to do it?" said a public media journalist. Other informants confirmed that reasoning:

From my point of view, public media are that: They must offer a public service much wider than our services [in private broadcasting]. They must go further and quickly to investigate, I don't know, how that government's nutrition program has benefited the population.
(Journalist, private media)

In sum, despite some elements of polarization, there was a fair degree of consensus among our respondents across political lines and media sectors. Two thirds supported media regulation in principle, and all agreed that public media have a significant role to play; the libertarian view was thus present but not predominant. At the same time, the vast majority agreed in presenting a critical view both of the state of private media in Ecuador and of the implementation of media regulation and the management of public media under Correa.

Freedom of the Press Under Correa

Asked directly whether freedom of the press was threatened during the Correa presidency, our respondents were about evenly divided. Sixteen replied that it was at risk or simply did not exist under Correa. Fourteen either rejected the idea that freedom of the press was threatened or sought to put the issue in a different historical perspective, arguing that the Ecuadorian press had never really enjoyed freedom. This division fit fairly closely the lines of conflict between media sectors and partisan camps. Only one reporter working at a private newspaper rejected the idea that there was an "explicit" risk to freedom of the press, seeing mostly an "implicit" danger, although that reporter denied any self-censorship in his own work. Those

rejecting the idea that press freedom was under special threat during Correa's presidency were concentrated in public media and in the political field, although journalists at public media were not unanimous in that view.

Respondents who did see a threat to freedom of the press focused primarily on the phenomenon of self-censorship stimulated by the government's stance toward the press. "I think the law has generated a great deal of fear among private media owners because, hailed by the government, many citizens have initiated legal proceedings against media," expressed a journalist working in private media. They also described a general sensation of fear: "With any colleague you talk to, or with managers, or shareholders, they would have conflicting interests, but they agree . . . that they were really coerced by political power and colleagues practiced a brutal self-censorship," explained an informant who worked as a political advisor. Others compared the situation with the past:

I think that it was at risk, but not to the extent as it was under Febres Cordero's [1984–1988] government. It was an exercise of symbolic violence by which many of us remained silent because of fear. . . . Not only fear of sanctions, but also fear of trials, fear of a justice system that wasn't going to offer a fair sentence, fear of retaliation, fear of losing one's job. (Journalist, public media)

Fear and self-censorship thus were a common denominator among many respondents, whether they agreed or disagreed on the need for regulation, and to some extent also across different views on journalism and politics. Arturo Torres, then editor-in-chief of *El Comercio*, had a very different background compared with political advisor José Alonso, a Spaniard who worked as a journalist in Spain before helping Correa win the 2006 elections and at the moment of the interview was close to Moreno's government; Raquel Escobar, in turn, had a position at the public radio broadcaster and defined herself as a leftist who had worked for community media. Many of them had management positions, but there was also a reporter within the group; and they worked both in private and public media. On this point, we again see a broad consensus among many of our respondents. An important distinction, however, had to do with the extent to which respondents stressed problems concerning press freedom before Correa's presidency. Four of those respondents pointed out that press freedom had been at risk often, and that Correa was not so different from other presidents of Ecuador.

Fourteen interviewees did not agree that press freedom was at risk during the Correa presidency. Some basically rejected any claim of threats to press freedom; on the contrary, they argued that there had been an increase in pluralism in media during Correa's years. "We reached the point in this country where left parties weren't allowed to advertise their propaganda even if they were paying for it. . . . There were two types of censorship: personal and economic," said a pro-Correa policy maker. Others acknowledged some risks, but argued that freedom was always problematic in Ecuador:

There was censorship within private media; one had to agree with specific agendas. When I was working at *Hoy* newspaper . . . [Ecuador] was negotiating a bilateral treaty with the United States in 1996–1997. Inside that treaty, in the small print, there was this issue about patented bio-organisms. . . . This is a topic I deal with very often . . . and I published a list of articles questioning. . . . One day, the editor-in-chief told me, "This is not going out"—that simple—because we had to sign that treaty with the U.S. (Journalist, public media)

I don't know if there was any press freedom before. There . . . was always that limitation to show everything 100%. With Correa . . . private media had access to political opposition and public media to government's sources. And there was more room for denunciation with Correa. (Journalist, public media)

The issue of press freedom was central to the conflict between Correa's government and its opposition, and it is not surprising that we find more polarization on this question than on more general questions about media regulation. Even here, however, some elements of a broader consensus can be seen. This includes a view that fear and self-censorship were widespread among media personnel; recall here also the widespread view among our respondents that the role of the Supercom as a sanctioning body was problematic and that public media were overly politicized. There was also fairly wide agreement that the state of the media in Ecuador was problematic long before Correa. This point comes into focus in another way in the next section of our discussion.

The Impact on Journalistic Professionalism

Besides press freedom, another value frequently invoked globally in discussion of media systems and their regulation is that of journalistic professionalism. As we have seen, many of our respondents, across political lines, saw the state of professionalism in Ecuadorean journalism as historically low. Recall the respondent, one of those who favored self-regulation, who spoke about "things I don't like, and I do see" and "journalists who . . . have converted themselves into political actors." One of the stated goals of Correa's media reform, consistent with the views of many media accountability movements in Latin America, was to promote journalistic professionalism. Article 10 of the Communication Law elaborates on the ethical norms of the profession. And Article 29 guarantees journalists freedom to publish news even against the will of media owners or editors, a principle that is sometimes referred to in European media regulation as "internal press freedom." Other articles have to do with fair payment and labor conditions for journalists, and the implementation of the law requires those producing news to have degrees in journalism or communication.

With this in mind, we asked the participants about the evolution of journalism and whether the quality of the press had gotten better or worse during the Correa presidency. Nineteen respondents of 30 replied that it had gotten better. Those who saw increased professionalism in Ecuadorean journalism, however, had differing interpretations of why this had happened. For some, the transformation has been part of a positive, and progressive, enforcement of rights reflected in the Communication Law. For them, the law changed journalism by forcing reporters and editors to be professionals, do a good job, and take care of positive rights, that is, the right of the citizen to quality information. In contrast, for other respondents, the change was seen as a defensive process in which journalists had to do their job better to survive in a hostile, negative environment. For those respondents—seven of the 19 who described an improvement in journalism—journalists had to comply with the rules enforced by governmental agencies to avoid consequences that could be disastrous, and this made them more rigorous and smarter:

I think [that journalism improved]. . . . Economic instability makes you more timorous . . . there were coworkers with 20 years of experience that were making the same money that I was making in my beginnings . . . you asked them how much they made, and they responded, "150 dollars and it depends if I get advertising for my show." . . . Furthermore, university degrees were not required [before the law]. . . . And it also demands you to contrast your sources. (Journalist, public media)

I would think that [the law] made us more cautious. Now we are, all of us, used to providing more documents to support something. . . . Before [the law], I was working on courts and we used to write the name of the accused. . . . So, that did make us take care of individuals. (Journalist, private media)

[The law] pushed us to pay attention on all sides; it forced us to take care in a way you have no idea; to read and reread everything in a way you have no idea. It made us so brainy that it made us good journalists. Yet, in order to have the opening to say things that were being managed badly or just corruption . . . it didn't. (Journalist, private media)

Other participants supporting the law also praised the new rights of reply and rectification, which they saw as increasing citizen access to media. Finally, most of the respondents backed measures to boost national media production also introduced by the law alongside other cultural policies, even though arbitrariness in implementing the spirit of the law was a common accusation from most of the actors.

Discussion

Controversies over media policy under populist regimes are commonly understood according to the libertarian model of press freedom. Our Ecuadorean respondents coincided in part with that interpretation. The majority did see threats to press freedom in Correa's policies, with particularly strong and broad consensus that the conduct of the Supercom and the lack of independence of public media were problematic. On other issues, our respondents did not coincide with the libertarian conception. The majority, across lines of political division, endorsed the idea that state intervention, both through regulation and through public media, could play a positive role. This was true, in part, because there was also widespread belief among our respondents that the professionalism and independence of journalism in pre-Correa's Ecuador were poorly developed. And in a finding that may seem surprising, a majority said that journalism had improved during the Correa period, although they narrated that change in different ways, raising interesting questions about the conditions under which journalistic professionalism develops.

Our study is limited in what it can show about the impact of Correa's policies. We have looked here at the assessments of certain kinds of actors, including top policy makers and journalists for principal national media. We do not include the views of community media producers or ordinary Ecuadorians. We also do not report data on the content of Ecuadorean media. Viveros and Mellado (2018) do report some such data from a content analysis of two principal newspapers, gathered in 2012 and 2014 before and after the passage of the Ley Orgánica de Comunicación. Their data show a decline in the watchdog role in news content, an increase in the use of government sources, and a decrease in oppositional sources, supporting

the idea that the law led to self-censorship; they also show an increase in the civic role, which involves reporting on citizen activism, possibly in part an effect on the provision requiring multicultural content. Their study was not designed, however, to test for media openness more generally, and does not permit comparison with the pre-Correa period. We will report content analysis data in subsequent publications on changes over a longer period.

Nevertheless, our conversations with Ecuadorean journalists and media policy actors suggest several conclusions and directions for research.

First, the libertarian framework commonly used to conceptualize concerns related to press freedom in populist regimes gives us limited insight into the issues that face journalists and policy makers in a context where democratic media institutions have never been consolidated. That framework involves an implicit assumption that independence and professionalism can be taken as given, in the absence of outside intervention by the state. But as our interviewees mostly agreed, the problem they face in Ecuador is not simply to restore independent media that were disrupted by a particular political actor, but to build democratic media institutions that never fully existed. Theory and research on press freedom and media regulation need to give more attention to the question of how independent media institutions can be constructed in different contexts. That, in turn, requires thinking more broadly about the sociology and political economy of the media, evaluating the role of government policy within that broader context.

Second, there is a need for greater attention, both conceptual and empirical, to the relationships among press freedom and other values by which we might evaluate a media system, including democracy, pluralism, and truth. Kellam and Stein (2016) note that in Latin America between 1993 and 2013, media freedom ratings moved in the opposite direction from “polity” ratings for the strength of democratic institutions. Why this would be true is a complicated question. But it does suggest there may not be a natural harmony between democratization and press freedom, at least in the libertarian formulation, where state intervention and regulation do not play a major role in setting up the public sphere. Polarized views about the role of the media have continued following the end of the Correa government and the dismantling of media policies implemented under it. Some have seen these reforms as a restoration of press freedom, whereas others have seen a return to an old pattern of collusion between media and elites, resulting in a decline in pluralism. Clearly, there is a need for research on how traditional measures of press freedom may be related—or not—to measures of such factors as pluralism, openness, professionalism, and the performance of watchdog functions.

Finally, the Ecuadorean case raises important questions about what makes media reforms succeed or fail. Despite the high level of polarization in Ecuador, we found in our interviews a fairly high level of consensus both that the *Ley Orgánica de Comunicación*, or some version of such a law, was necessary, and that the implementation of that law in Ecuador was deeply problematic. By most accounts (Hernan Reyes, personal communication, November 3, 2015; Kitzberger, 2016), although media accountability movements played important roles in media policy at the beginning of the Correa administration, they were largely marginalized when the law was written and implemented. This may in part have to do with the nature of populist leadership and the personal centralization of power that is often associated with it, including the phenomenon of “delegative democracy” in which the populist leader is seen as embodying the people (Conaghan, 2016, p.

110). It may also suggest, more broadly, that it is easier to make changes in who has control of structures of power than it is to change the social and cultural bases of that control, to create forms of rational legal authority where they have not existed, or to democratize participation in policy making.

Populist leaders like Correa or Hugo Chávez in Venezuela appear very radical in their challenge to the existing media establishment. And in certain ways they do set in motion important processes of change. But in some sense, as Waisbord (2011, 2018) argues, they are not so radical. Unlike the media accountability movements with which they are allied, they accept media capture as inevitable and simply seek to shift it to their own advantage. As a result, they do not bring about a lasting shift from “pervasive patrimonialism” toward independent media serving a democratic public (Soledad Segura & Waisbord, 2016, p. 33).

Our analysis focuses on the context of a populist regime in a developing country where democratic institutions and the media that serve them have always been shaky. This is, in general terms, a common context around the globe. But it would probably be naïve to imagine that the issues it raises are confined to such conditions, without relevance to “advanced” Western democracies. Shifts in the structure of media, in media policy in the context of neoliberal deregulation, and in party systems have produced increased media polarization, rising partisanship, and a worrisome spread of new types of propaganda in many advanced democracies as well, and they too may need to confront a debate about negative and positive conceptions of press freedom and the discussion about how independent, democratic media can be reconstructed.

References

- Aalberg, T., & Curran, J. (2012). *How media inform democracy: A comparative approach*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Aalberg, T., van Aelst, P., & Curran, J. (2010). Media systems and the political information environment: A cross-national comparison. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 15(3), 255–271. doi:10.1177/1940161210367422
- Artz, L. (2017). *The pink tide: Media access and political power in Latin America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Becker, B., Vlad, T., & Nusser, N. (2007). An evaluation of press freedom indicators. *International Communication Gazette*, 69(1), 5–28. doi:10.1177/1748048507072774
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pierce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Burgess, J. (2010). *Evaluating the evaluators: Media freedom indexes and what they measure*. Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/cgcs_monitoringandeval_videos/1

- Bush, S. (2017). The politics of rating freedom: Ideological affinity, private authority, and freedom in the world ratings. *Perspectives on Politics*, 15(3), 711–731. doi:10.1017/S1537592717000925
- Cane, J. (2012). *The fourth enemy: Journalism and power in the making of Peronist Argentina, 1930–1955*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Conaghan, C. M. (2016). Ecuador under Correa. *Journal of Democracy*, 27(3), 109–118. doi:10.1353/jod.2016.0040
- Craft, S. (2010). Press freedom and responsibility. In C. Meyers (Ed.), *Journalism ethics: A philosophical approach* (pp. 39–51). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Dawes, S. (2017). *British broadcasting and the public–private dichotomy: Neoliberalism, citizenship and the public sphere*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- Feintuck, M., & Varney, M. (2006). *Media regulation, public interest and the law*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Glasser, L. T., & Gunther, M. (2005). The legacy of autonomy in American journalism. In G. Overholser & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *Institutions of American democracy: The press* (pp. 384–399). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Guerrero, M. A., & Márquez-Ramírez, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Media systems and communication policies in Latin America*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hallin, D. C. (2020). Press freedom and its context. In M. J. Powers & A. Russel (Eds.), *Rethinking media research for changing societies* (pp. 53–64). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Hallin, D. C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hallin, D. C., & Papathanassopoulos, S. (2002). Political clientelism and the media: Southern Europe and Latin America in comparative perspective. *Media, Culture & Society*, 24(2), 175–195. doi:10.1177/016344370202400202
- Hansen, E. (2015). The positive freedom of the public sphere. *Journalism Studies*, 16(6), 767–781. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2014.943937
- Hughes, S. L., & Lawson, C. (2005). The barriers to media opening in Latin America. *Political Communication*, 22(1), 9–25.

- Kellam, M., & Stein, E. A. (2016). Silencing critics: Why and how presidents restrict media freedom in democracies. *Comparative Political Studies*, 49(1), 36–77. doi:10.1177/0010414015592644
- Kenny, P. D. (2020). "The enemy of the people": Populists and press freedom. *Political Research Quarterly*, 73(2), 261–275. doi:10.1177/1065912918824038
- Kitzberger, P. (2016). Counterhegemony in the media under Rafael Correa's Citizens' Revolution. *Latin American Perspectives*, 43(1), 53–70. doi:10.1177/0094582X15571276
- Kitzberger, P. (2017). The media politics of the "Citizens' Revolution": Communicative power redistribution and democratization. In L. Artz (Ed.), *The pink tide: Media access and political power in Latin America* (pp. 87–110). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Koltay, A. (2015). The concept of media freedom today: New media, new editors and the traditional approach of the law. *Journal of Media Law*, 7(1), 36–64. doi:10.1080/17577632.2015.1055143
- Lebovic, S. (2016). *Free speech and unfree news: The paradox of press freedom in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Levitsky, S., & Loxton, J. (2013). Populism and competitive authoritarianism in the Andes. *Democratization*, 20(1), 107–136. doi:10.1080/13510347.2013.738864
- Martin, J. D., Abbas, D., & Martins, R. J. (2016). The validity of global press ratings: Freedom house and reporters sans frontières, 2002–2014. *Journalism Practice*, 10(1), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1010851>
- McChesney, R. W. (2008). *The political economy of media: Enduring issues, emerging dilemmas*. New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.
- Oller, M., & Chavero, P. (2014). La profesionalización del periodismo y el profesionalismo de los periodistas en Ecuador [Professionalization of journalism and journalists' professionalism in Ecuador]. *Prisma.com*, (25), 23–49.
- Pickard, V. (2011). The battle over the FCC Blue Book: Determining the role of broadcast media in a democratic society, 1945–8. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(2), 171–191. doi:10.1177/0163443710385504
- Porto, M. (2012). *Media power and democratization in Brazil: TV Globo and the dilemmas of political accountability*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Rodríguez Arechavaleta, C. M. (2011). Apuntes sobre el derecho a la información en México en los años 70: Entre el Nuevo Orden Informativo y la crisis de legitimidad interna [Outline about the right of information in Mexico in the 1970s: Between the New Information Order and the internal legitimacy crisis]. *Nueva Época*, (6), 1–17.
- Shoemaker, P., & Reese, S. (2014). *Mediating the message in the 21st century: A media sociology perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Soledad Segura, M., & Waisbord, S. (2016). *Media movements: Civil society and media policy in Latin America*. Chicago, IL: Zed.
- Southwick, N., & Otis, J. (2018). *Ecuador's U-turn away from media repression*. Retrieved from <https://www.cjr.org/analysis/ecuador-moreno-correa-supercom-press-freedom.php>
- Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- van Cuilenburg, J. J., & McQuail, D. (2003). Media policy paradigm shifts: Towards a new communications policy paradigm. *European Journal of Communication*, 18(2), 181–208.
doi:10.1177/0267323103018002002
- Viveros, D., & Mellado, C. (2018). La ley de comunicación y su impacto en la materialización de los roles profesionales periodísticos en las noticias de la prensa de referencia en Ecuador [The communication law and its impact on the presence of journalistic professional roles in the news of the elite press in Ecuador]. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, (32), 143–169.
<https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v0i32.6587>
- Waisbord, S. (2011). Between support and confrontation: Civic society, media reform and populism in Latin America. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 4(1), 97–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1753-9137.2010.01095.x>
- Waisbord, S. (2018). Why populism is troubling for democratic communication. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 11(1), 21–34. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcx005>