Media Coups and Disinformation in the Digital Era. Irregular War in Latin America

Golpes mediáticos y desinformación en la era digital. La guerra irregular en América Latina

Francisco Sierra Caballero[1]

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7398-7588

Salomé Sola-Morales[2]

http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7085-4595

This article reflects on the role of the media and social networks in the phenomenon of "media coups" in Latin America. To this end, the propaganda model is explored through the analysis of four relevant cases of manipulation and disinformation in the region: those of Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador. The main conclusion reached is that it is necessary to regulate the traditional and digital media system for democracy and peace to prevent disinformation and media coups.

KEYWORDS: Media Coups, disinformation, media, social networks, Latin America.

Este artículo reflexiona acerca del papel que tienen los medios de comunicación y las redes sociales en el fenómeno de los "golpes mediáticos" en América Latina. Para ello, se explora el modelo de propaganda a través del análisis de cuatro casos relevantes de manipulación y desinformación en la región: los casos de Venezuela, México, Brasil y Ecuador. La principal conclusión a la que se llegó es que es necesario regular el sistema de medios tradicional y digital en pro de la democracia y la paz para impedir la desinformación y los golpes mediáticos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Golpes mediáticos, desinformación, medios de comunicación, redes sociales, América Latina.

[1] Universidad de Sevilla, Spain.
fcompoliticas@gmail.com
[2] Universidad de Sevilla, Spain.
ssolamorales@us.es

INTRODUCTION

"Post-truth" policies (Keyes, 2004; Roberts, 2010) have transcended borders and seem to have reached Latin America. On the continent, a systematic policy of disinformation and propaganda typical of low-intensity conflicts is proliferating (Thompson, 1989). It has the appearance of an irregular war (Franco, 2001) or a hybrid conflict (Fleming, 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Korybko, 2015, 2016), the development of which is not only military but also economic, psychological and propagandistic.

Beyond the press and television, information manipulation has reached the Internet and social media, and cyberattacks –among other strategies– are part of the confrontational logic. The Internet and digital platforms such as Facebook or Twitter have become a scene for ideological dispute and struggle where rumors, hoaxes, lies and falsehood are becoming an essential ingredient.

Fake news has always been a central element of political communication (McNair, 2017). Now, in digital societies, where there is an overabundance of information and an increase in speed and immediacy, these lies are also proliferating (McNair, 2018). Often, fake news is legitimized by citizen authorship (Alves & Oliveira, 2016) and a fresh and direct rhetoric. At the same time, today, the value of information is more in question than ever (Marcos Recio et al., 2017). The algorithms and *filter bubbles* (Pariser, 2011) created by Facebook offer users what they want, and, consequently, end up generating more confidence in these digital platforms than in the cotent published in conventional media (Viner, 2016). All this points to the fact that the traditional media system is changing.

In many countries, social media are the first source of information among young people. Such is the case in Spain, for example, as indicated by the *Informe anual de la profesión periodística* (*Annual report of the journalistic profession*) (Palacio, 2018). The same is true for some Latin American countries like Brazil (Hootsuite, 2019). Social media are becoming the preferred space for digital or computer propaganda, and therefore for disinformation and fake news.

The 2016 United States presidential election (Kollanyi et al., 2016) and the United Kingdom referendum on Brexit (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016) are two paradigmatic examples of these new forms of algorithmic manipulation in which automated accounts (*bots*) proliferate and fake news –among other practices– are spread on the Internet by corporations and governments (Woolley & Howard, 2017). But also Latin America has been peppered by these phenomena. Thus, the 2016 plebiscite for peace in Colombia (Pauner Chulvi, 2018) or the 2018 presidential election in Mexico (Magallón Rosa, 2019; Parra Valero & Oliveira, 2018) have been marked by online disinformation campaigns. Hacking techniques, interception of phone calls or the attempt to symbolically annihilate the adversary are some of the strategies deployed by the dominant political actors in the virtual space. These techniques aim at eliminating opponents, bringing down any form of resistance or criminalizing all kinds of protest. A process that is accompanied with an increasing commodification of the newspaper industry, which depends on international financial capital.

Furthermore, in the system of imperial rule that governs Latin America, the informative discourse is often spectacular and "terroristic" (Sierra Caballero, 2019b). For this reason, in a context of global communication, it is necessary to reflect on the work of traditional and social media to question whether they are supporting the peaceful resolution of local conflicts or whether, on the contrary, they are legitimizing and amplifying –through propaganda strategies– coup processes and regional or local interventions.

Firstly, this paper reflects on the concept of *media coup* in the context of the media system in Latin America, in relation to the United States propaganda model and attending to the logic of the so-called "information war" and disinformation. For this purpose, it analyzes the role of the media and, particularly, that of the social networks in the phenomenon of "media coups" (Sierra Caballero, 2016) in Latin America.

Second, the dialectic between global communication and local interventions is explored through the analysis of four relevant cases of manipulation, disinformation and propaganda on digital networks in the region: those of Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador.

The main objectives of this research are: to explore the propaganda, disinformation and information manipulation strategies of the four selected cases; to analyze how media coups operate in the digital environment through the analysis of a sample of cases. In addition, a theoretical objective, stated in the following terms, is set forth: to propose lines of action aimed at avoiding media coups and their rapid spread on social media.

In keeping with these objectives, the questions that have guided this research are the following: Can propaganda, disinformation and manipulation strategies be observed in the cases studied? How did the four media coups studied operate in the digital environment? What measures could be taken to avoid media coups and their rapid spread through social media?

METHODOLOGY

When dealing with manipulation, propaganda and disinformation strategies in the media and the digital environment, it is necessary to perform a prior contextual analysis of the cultural and political frameworks in which these phenomena emerge. The structure of the information system in question; the motivations and ideological interests of large information corporations and lobbies; the functioning of political systems and the interaction between the different actors (political parties, organizations and social movements); the citizens' relationship with the institutional, political and economic powers; the forms of organization and citizen participation, and other issues, such as the corruption of transparency of the political system, are all elements that could play a fundamental role in the analysis of media coups.

Given the great complexity of these phenomena, it is necessary to question why they arise, how they work and which effects they have on society. In this sense, it is necessary to keep in mind and not lose sight of the place and the historical-political moment in which the media coup occurs. This is especially pertinent if the purpose is to delve into both the causes of its appearance and its modus operandi and consequences for democracy.

Since the main objectives of this research are to explore propaganda, manipulation and disinformation strategies and to analyze the operation

of media coups in the digital environment, a small-number case study design has been chosen. This type of design allows delving into every unit in its entirety. In contrast with a variable-oriented approach that takes into account statistical logic, this method enables, first, to thoroughly understand the details and characteristics of each selected case, and, second, to qualitatively examine how they developed in the digital era.

The design of this research is result-focused to the extent that the objective is to obtain potential and thorough explanations that will subsequently allow predicting results. In other words, the first and the second objective of this research are combined to explore how media coups operate on the Internet and social media.

To this end, four relevant cases of manipulation, disinformation and propaganda on digital networks in the region have been selected: a) the hounding of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela; b) the misrepresentation of information in Mexico; c) the 2016 coup in Brazil; and d) the opposition against Rafael Correa in Ecuador.

In order to address these questions, a qualitative comparative methodology (QCA) was developed, which has allowed delving into the characteristics of the four selected media coups and describing the role of social networks in them.

Thus, a qualitative empirical analysis of the use of social networks in the four cases has been carried out. It is worth mentioning that retrospectively investigating propaganda uses on the Internet in each particular case is a complex task. This is mainly because there is no detailed record of the manipulation and disinformation actions carried out on the Internet because many of the websites have been removed. In addition, it is worth indicating that the media coups are ideologically or geographically fragmented. There are thousands of Facebook fanpages, Instagram pages, websites, blogs and Twitter accounts spreading fake news, rumors or hoaxes, in addition to thousands of videos on YouTube edited by collectives, participants or supporters of media coups.

However, thanks to the scientific literature and the records found on the Internet (traditional news, newspaper news, or more rudimentary pieces, such as blog posts), it has been possible to carry out an analysis of the main uses of social networks in each studied case. The qualitative empirical analysis of propaganda practices and manipulation and

disinformation strategies has made it possible to understand the operation of media coups on the Internet through the study of twenty rhetorical-discursive strategies. These have been defined, questioned and analyzed in relation to the selected cases. The strategies are specified in Table 1:

TABLE 1
DIGITAL STRATEGIES

1. Fake news
2. Hate speech
3. Emotionality
4. Assumption of opinions as facts
5. Presence of bots
6. Presence of trolls
7. Viralization
8. Demonization
9. Radicalization
10. Confrontation between "us" and "them"
11. Caricaturization
12. Spectacularization
13. Accusation and persecution of members of the government
14. Absence of sources
15. Anonymity or absence of authorship
16. Polarization of ideological positions
17. Use of ideologically oriented language
18. Skipping topics
19. Omission of human rights violations
20. Persecution of journalists

Source: The authors.

SELECTION OF CASES

The four cases used for this comparative study have been selected on the basis of four criteria. The first of these is geographic: the four are Latin American cases. The second criterion is that the four countries

have democratic systems that are internationally questioned or that are not considered full democracies;[3] there is also a high level of ideological polarization in them, and a great number of geostrategic interests outside their borders. In addition, it is worth indicating that these four Latin American cases are paradigmatic insofar as they have had worldwide coverage. The third of the selection criteria is related to the media system of each country: all four have important information monopolies with a high level of business concentration. The fourth criterion concerns the strategic use of the Internet and social networks in favor of the media coup in all four cases.

Corpus

The main items analyzed in each case, which make up the corpus of analysis of this study, are now presented.[4] The strategy has been adapted to each case using criteria of significance, which allows us to illustrate the main trends of media coups on the Internet.

Regarding the Venezuelan case, the Facebook and Twitter profiles of individuals or opposition groups against Hugo Chávez have been analyzed. Given that the universe was very wide, accounts with more than 50 000 followers have been taken as a reference, as for instance @LaDivinaDiva (56 700 followers) or @DonCorneliano2 (72 100 followers).

In the case of Mexico, the focus has been set on the Facebook accounts of newspapers such as *El Diario de Oaxaca* and *Nación Unida*, and on websites like www.elmexicanodigital.com and www.todoinforme.com. At the same time, an analysis of the Mexican politician Alfredo del Mazo's activity on social networks during the 2017 election period has been carried out. Likewise, a study of

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[3]   Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador are classified as imperfect democracies, and Venezuela as an authoritarian system. Regardless of the criteria adopted in this study, this can certainly be used as a reference for future analyses on the existence or not of media coups in full democracies. See: The Economist Intelligence Unit (2018).

[4]   For more details, see the reference work: Sierra Caballero (2016).

the counter-hegemonic activity by the social movement #YoSoy132 has been incorporated (Sola-Morales, 2016, 2019).

As concerns Brazil, the network activity related to the accusation and trial of Dilma Rousseff, the covers of several newspapers, as well as their Facebook and Twitter accounts, and the activity of the Brasil Livre movement, have been analyzed.

In the case of Ecuador, the activity in social networks of groups and profiles contrary to Rafael Correa and connected to the opposition movement in June, 2015, and during the so-called "judicial plot" of 2018 –in response to the proposal of the *Ley Orgánica para la Justicia Tributaria para la Redistribución de la Riqueza* (Organic Law for Tax Justice for the Redistribution of Wealth)– has been studied.

Media Coups

The concept of media coup has been widely used in recent decades to refer to conflicts such as the "dirty war" against Nicaragua; the repression against popular movements in Colombia; the parliamentary coup against Fernando Lugo in Paraguay; the judicial persecution of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner in Argentina, or the spurious judicial process against Rafael Correa in Ecuador; the impeachment against Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, or the manipulation of information against the elected governments of Bolivia and Venezuela (Britto García, 2008; Casado Gutiérrez, 2016). The term alludes to the use of warfare by the media as part of an irregular intervention strategy carried out by the economic or political elites in order to regain hegemony in the region (González Cadalso et al., 2019).

This strategy includes the ideological training of the army, the dominance and control of the judiciary, and, what is most relevant in the context of this work, the hegemony and control of the public media and digital networks. More specifically, this battle for information in the current virtual space is waged in the form of cyberwarfare, using hacking techniques and leaks, creating fake news, promoting disinformation and manipulation on digital networks. The media coup, or the "soft coup" as Sharp called it (2011), is a phenomenon that uses political, economic, psychological and military power, in addition to resorting to the police and internal security forces, to prevent or reverse

any process of social transformation contrary to the local hegemonic or elite geopolitical interests.

In general, these coups –orchestrated by right-wing political forces– seek to "domesticate governments and recolonize Latin America", as Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (2016, p. 99) has indicated. If right-wing politics are not imposed through the ballot box, with the support of the United States, they will be forced through the illegal removal of presidents, the privatization of State companies, or the handing over of natural resources (Pérez Esquivel, 2016).

Media globalization –achieved and maintained through the control exercised by transnational media lobbies– allows and encourages this type of interference and interventionism because it provides a political coverage that fits in with the strategic guidelines followed by or favoring the elites holding power. This is partly due to the concentration of ownership and the monopoly of the media industry in the region, coupled with the United States dominance over communications and mass culture, which, together with its technological leadership in telecommunications and the military industry, keeps the global power concentrated in the hands of a few. This dynamic can, therefore, block or reverse processes such as the new Latin American regionalism, the rise of the left, or that of the indigenous movements, which are unfavorable to interests of the United States.

In this sense, when exploring the so-called media coups, it is necessary to take into account the hegemonic control of the media and culture, which is precisely what prevents "another communication" (Alfaro, 1993; Maldonado Rivera et al., 2015) in the region. Namely, a democratic, citizen, popular, participatory communication in favor of peace, development, social change and "good living" or "living well" (Contreras Baspineiro, 2014), which should be the objectives of any communication policy.

MEDIA SYSTEM IN LATIN AMERICA

The region is characterized by the corporatist and underdeveloped structure of the public media system, as indicated by UNESCO's media development indicators (2019) in matters of diversity, equality and

pluralism. Given the concentration of ownership and the existence of an information oligarchy, most countries are found to have democratic deficits.

To analyze the media coups, it is therefore essential to keep in mind the Latin American context and the main characteristics of the media system in the region, which is characterized by: a) lack of plurality, due to high media concentration, which promotes the dominance of a monodiscourse and nullifies diversity and all alternative voices; b) job insecurity among journalists and reporters, who depend on oligarchies and media owners, and who, in addition, are mostly lacking in qualifications; c) censorship, imposed by the government and induced by the elites, lobbies and economic magnates; d) Anglo-Saxon colonialism of the journalistic profession models, imposed through media companies and press agencies; e) hyper-concentration of advertising and dominance of large national and transnational capitals; and f) absolute control in the hands of the elites (media power, governments, economic lobbies or transnational groups), united in a common goal. All these elements feed off one another and impede the development of a democratic system: plural, diverse and transparent.

In turn, it is important to note the growing importance of social media in the region. Up to 66% of the Latin American population is a regular user of social networks (Hootsuite, 2019). Therefore, it is essential to consider these media when exploring the propaganda mechanisms used in media coups. The direct and immediate scope of these media –available through the personal cell phone of each individual– is what explains the large impact of media coups and what makes the propaganda model fit so well with the interests of the powers that be.

THE PROPAGANDA MODEL AND THE OMNIPRESENCE OF THE UNITED STATES MEDIA

It is necessary to question the role of the media in coup processes, such as those that have been taking place in recent decades in the Latin American region. For decades, the United States has held a hegemonic control of the media. From Hollywood to Netflix, this "invasion"

reaches, as indicated by Lima Rocha and Klein (2018), both the Internet –where there are links between cartoons, series, polemicists and humorists, to name a few examples– and subscription TV, where Latin Americans are exposed to a universal, hegemonic and monolithic symbolic universe: the North American one.

Back in 1988, Herman and Chomsky discussed how the United States media industry promoted patterns of behavior and values that aimed at maintaining and reproducing the status quo within and outside the United States borders. The propaganda model proposed by these researchers allows explaining how the mass media worked in Latin America as vehicles for the transmission of messages, values and symbols that matched information manipulation strategies.

To illustrate the pertinence of such theoretical-methodological contribution when dealing with media coups, the strategies carried out by the United States for the development of the propaganda model are presented below.

a) *Hegemony and control of communications in the region*. Direct or indirect surveillance proposed as a media logic of intervention in Latin America, aiming at guaranteeing the defense and security of the United States values as defined in the *Santa Fe document* (Roitmann, 1989), which was the doctrinal framework of the Reagan administration. This surveillance is implemented through the control of media companies and lobbies, as well as through the use of bots, trolls, content farms, spyware and other hacking techniques.

b) *New media culture in the field of political communication and propaganda*. This is fundamental to the development of war conflicts in several of the above-mentioned countries and in the third world in general, as well as to the internal consolidation of a neoliberal communication model and policy.

c) *Warmongering colonization of the United States public opinion* (Selser, 1988). It was imposed through persuasion and the alleged communist threat for the purpose of guaranteeing the public opinion's support to the subsequent low intensity wars in regions such as Central America. Thus, for example, the wars fought on

the social media against Rafael Correa or the 2016 referendum in Bolivia, both of them marked by disinformation, illustrate how media coups determine the public agenda and preserve the neoliberal order.

THE INFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION WAR

The dynamic of this war is based on the confrontation between opponents and its weapon is information. Information can ideologically support a government attacked by insurgent forces, or support an insurgent force seeking to break free from an antagonistic government.

The war can also be based on disinformation, i.e. manipulation or, as Serrano (2009) described it, speculation and spectacle. Thus, the omission, silencing and absence of coverage of any fact or action, however dramatic, can neutralize the opponent and, by not acknowledging their presence, annihilate them.

These logics are behind many conflicts in Latin America and have been used to stop popular movements, indigenous insurgencies or leftist governments. From the coup promoted in Chile in 1973 –assuming Klein's shock doctrine thesis (2007)– to the experiences in Guatemala, Colombia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru or Venezuela, many are the processes of interference in which the media have played a decisive role in defending intervention strategies or the total abandonment of victims and civilians before the public opinion.

Information and its management have been used strategically for decades to reproduce the imperialist logic and to defend the United States of the supposed "hidden enemies" on duty –first the Russians, then the Chinese, later Iraq, Libya or North Korea, currently the entire third world (Collon, 1999, p. 378)–. Dissemination through the mass media of a paranoid discourse in the form of terror stories kindles the citizens' fear of any possible threats posed by these enemies. These narrations, constantly repeated in the mass media, end up fostering a military escalation and a feeling of permanent conflict. Today, therefore, the concentration of geopolitical power, hegemonized by the United States, is the logical counterpart of economic globalization, which is doctrinally defined as decentralization on a planetary scale.

In short, this situation points to a global information and communication crisis that, in the words of Ramonet (1998), brings to light the democratic deficit that governs the expansion of global information networks according to the strategic and political-military interests of the "world-system" described and analyzed by Wallerstein (2005). In this context, the new media, social networks and digital platforms emerge as the central axis of propaganda and disinformation policies against peace and the sovereignty of the people of the South.

RESULTS

In order to illustrate the dynamics and functioning of the media coups and the propaganda and disinformation model inherent to such counter-revolutionary strategies, the results of the analysis of the four selected cases –Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil and Ecuador– are presented below.

Venezuela, the hounding to the Bolivarian Revolution
This case can be considered an illustrative example of the explored propaganda model. Since Hugo Chávez became president, the private media began to constantly and systematically harass the population with distorted narratives about the Venezuelan democratic process. In 2002, the failed coup was justified. Meanwhile, the alleged "peace operations" orchestrated by the United States have been silenced to the public and have only been denounced by independent documentaries such as *The War on Democracy* (2007), by Christopher Martin and John Pilger, to mention an example.

The mainstream media have always deliberately kept hidden the hegemonic geopolitical interests and activities of the powerful. This dynamic is, precisely, the one that destabilizes governments such as that of Venezuela. The intervention of the Pentagon against the Bolivarian Republic has been considered an "unrestricted war" (Sierra Caballero, 2018), which has transcended Venezuelan borders. It has even been assumed by supposedly independent media like the Spanish newspaper *El País*, owned by the PRISA group, which has legitimized the coup plans led by Washington. *El Clarín* in Argentina, *El Tiempo* in Colombia, *El Comercio* in Ecuador, among other relevant newspapers, have also

sustained this deliberate campaign against the Chavista government (Casado Gutiérrez, 2016).

What has happened on the social media? From the official Facebook and Twitter accounts of government opponents, ranging from political representatives to ordinary citizens who created profiles like @LaDivinaDiva, with more than 56 700 followers, or @DonCorneliano2, with more than 72 100 followers, numerous rhetorical-discursive techniques have been used to transfer the space of the contest to the virtual stage. Below are some of the strategies of the computational propaganda model, which is at the basis of the media coups herein explored.

a) *Demonization*. It is a discursive strategy that seeks to isolate the opponents by preventing them from defending themselves, declaring them morally inferior and denying their basic rights (Romero-Rodríguez, 2014; Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2015).
b) *Radicalization*. Through this strategy, elements of the opponents' speech are taken out of context in order to exaggerate and criminalize their points of view.
c) *Confrontation "we"/"they"*. This confrontation perpetuates a warmongering logic of sides, which reflects the opposition that occurs offline.
d) *Caricaturization*. Through grotesque representations distorting the image of presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, as well as of other members of the government, their qualification as "dictators", "dangerous", "madmen" or "criminals" is justified.
e) *Fake news*. The production of hoaxes, rumors and widespread disinformation meant to destabilize and isolate the Bolivarian government.
f) *Sensationalism and spectacularization*. In the same way as the mass media, social networks replicate sensationalism by turning anecdotes into, for example, hashtags that trivialize information (Casado Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 19).
g) *Absence of sources*. "News" is published on social networks unattributed, without references or the precision that could guarantee its veracity.

h) *Use of ideologically oriented language*. On a lexicological and semantic level, to reinforce the position of the United States and its allies.

i) *Polarization in favor of extreme positions* (Morales et al., 2015). It is achieved through the use of a warlike and conflictive language that accentuates fear and panic among the population and the international public opinion.

It should also be noted that, mutually supported and fueled by the large conglomerates, the social networks in the hands of the Venezuelan opposition or of groups related to the interests of the United States promote greater disorder, instead of dialogue and conflict resolution. In fact, the smear campaign against the elected representatives, the continuous rumors and disinformation remind us of the coup against Salvador Allende in Chile, in 1973. In this instance, information manipulation strategies were also conjured, along with others of an ideological, military and economic nature.

México: Information manipulation

Manipulation in the coverage by traditional media of cases such as the disappearance of 43 normal-school students in Ayotzinapa in 2014, the lack of diversity in the treatment of the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, and the magisterial silence after the Acteal massacre or the mobilizations in Oaxaca (Gravante, 2016) prove the link between media logic and democratic quality in Mexico (Rodríguez Arechavaleta, 2012). Characterized by the presence of strong oligopolies, a high level of business concentration –Televisa and TV Azteca control 90% of the television share (Rovira, 2013, p. 39)– and the consequent absence of pluralism, transparency and diversity, Mexican traditional media hardly accept any critical or alternative voices questioning their hegemonic monodiscourse, which is in fact that of the government and the elites. Oscillating between silence and criminalization, journalistic narratives remain firm in the face of any form of insurgency or manifestation of dissent, as evidenced by their reactions to the collective mobilizations in Oaxaca, Guerrero or Veracruz, or the recent rise in gasoline prices.

Informational bias and lack of pluralism are manifested in the news agendas, which concentrate on topics concerning institutional political actors (Martínez Garza et al., 2015), as well as in the constant omission and stigmatization of minorities, social movements or social actors. Inequity is significant in terms of time of representation and treatment, leading to lack of diversity (Martínez Garza et al., 2015) and pluralism, both of which are essential to build a democratic and fair media system adapted to the needs of the citizens.

Social networks feed this dynamic by amplifying the logics of traditional media and perpetuating the power of the forces of law and order. Although digital platforms have become a space of rebellion and fight against the dominant voices for the citizenry –as the #YoSoy132 movement has revealed–, the elites have also begun to use these platforms to their advantage, and the following dynamics can be observed.

a) *Presence of bots, trolls* (Martínez, 2018) *and hacking attempts* (Nicolai, 2018). Manipulation, the creation of feelings of enthusiasm or derision, and the use of spyware have become common strategies in election campaigns from 2012 to 2018 in Mexico (Magallón Rosa, 2019). For instance, in the 2017 election in the State of Mexico, it was possible to detect that 17% of the messages supporting Alfredo del Mazo came from accounts located abroad (Fregoso, 2018).

b) *Fake news and rumors*. Among those that should be highlighted are the creation of false statements, publication of false surveys, invention of issues related to candidates or public figures, manipulation of programmatic elements, identity fraud, publication of tweets falsely attributed to reputed foreign figures in support of certain politicians and candidates, concoction of political measures supposedly proposed by those candidates, dissemination of false information on voting legislation. All these strategies can be implemented through WhatsApp networks and through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or YouTube accounts.

c) *Absence of authorship*. Generally, websites and accounts devoted to disinformation –such as www.elmexicanodigital.com and www.

todoinforme.com, or the Facebook pages of *Nación Unida* and *El Diario de Oaxaca*, to mention some examples– do not have a contact section and do not provide any information regarding the authorship of the texts published on them (López et al., 2018).

d) *Discursive polarization*. Between the reality of the militarization process and indiscriminate violence imposed by the elites and the state apparatus through the conventional media and social networks at their service, and the reality expressed by the citizens on the streets and on alternative social networks and digital platforms.

e) *Absence of sources and omission of human rights violations*. There is not a complete coverage in conventional media of the episodes of violence in Oaxaca, Guerrero or Chiapas. The military or the government are the only sources mentioned. Meanwhile, private complaints have been relegated to marginal networks, the digital platforms of social movements or independent media.

f) *Persecution against journalists*. Constant threats against professionals who report cases of corruption or organized crime (Arribas, 2016), and against anonymous citizens who freely express their opinion on virtual platforms.

g) *Concealment of relevant information*. Especially in cases of corruption in the public media where politicians are involved, to prevent public opinion from exercising any form of resistance.

Brazil, the 2016 coup

Brazil is a good example of a media system governed by the propaganda model and in the hands of "large corporations that manipulate opinion, drive preferences, mobilize feelings. Gigantic, meticulously prepared campaigns wipe out reputations and topple governments" (Sodré, 1999, pp. 388-389). It is also a good illustration of the cultural and media omnipresence of the United States in the region.

O Globo is the paradigm of the logic of media concentration and lack of pluralism and democratic access that plagues Latin America. Inspired by the American model (Sinclair,1999; Straubhaar, 2001), the Brazilian media system is concentrated in a few hands. In addition, the so-called "nationalizing vocation" (Straubhaar, 2001, p. 138), promoted by the military in the 1960's, has made it possible to create a culture

of consumerism (Furtado, 1996) that nullifies criticism and resistance. The Marinho family, founder of *O Globo*, actively collaborated in maintaining law and order during the dictatorship and has been the favored monopoly group for decades. The control exercised by and on this group is exemplified in the always positive coverage of the actions of certain politicians, and in the blockade and constant criticism of such candidates as Lula da Silva, who was pressured since before becoming president to not implement any regulation that would affect the information monopoly of the Marinho family.

From the coup d'état of 1964 to the soft coup of 2016 (Gentili, 2016; Nepomuceno et al., 2016; Pérez Esquivel, 2016; Secco, 2016), the mainstream media has used techniques of concealment, and supported the "dissemination of disinformation" (Secco, 2016, p. 5) and the manipulation and annihilation of adversaries –first, president Lula da Silva; then, president Dilma Rousseff (Anderson, 2016) –. As Feres has indicated (2016), *O Globo* and *Estadão* are two of the most reactionary newspapers in Brazil, which, beyond the military coup of 1964 and the subsequent authoritarian period, have persevered in their logic of domination under democracy: "Election after election, they have supported the PMDB candidates for the presidency, making a scandalously biased coverage of the election against the left-wing candidates, especially the PT" (Feres, 2016, p. 107).

The accusation and trial of Dilma Rousseff was a joint operation of the judiciary with the large communication companies (Secco, 2016, p. 15). Roberto Marinho's newspapers and televisions were strategic in creating the political climate that conditioned the crisis (Anderson, 2016; Goldstein, 2015), and, later on, promoted the dismissal. This authoritarian logic orchestrated by the oligopoly could be observed both in conventional media and social networks as follows:

a) *Manipulation of the media agenda*. With an unequal distribution of time in the news coverage. For example, Sergio Moro and the so-called *Lava Jato* (Car Wash) operation obtained significant space in the main Rede Globo newscasts during prime time, with periods of around nine minutes, which represented around one third of the total time dedicated to reporting government crimes or any political news

concerning the PT (Campos, in Sierra, 2016, p. 236).

b) *Distortion of reality*. By groups such as the *Movimento Brasil Livre* (MBL), organized by right-wing youth who supported the mobilizations in favor of the impeachment and used digital networks and platforms to impact and distort the situation in a virtual way. The group received financial aid from various political parties, including the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira (PSDB), the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB), Democratas (DEM) and Solidariedade. In addition, communication experts organized their online events (Lima Rocha & Klein, 2018, p. 109).

c) *Use of politicized arguments*. Increasingly present in everyday interactions and on social networks (Tavares et al., 2016).

d) *Affirmation of rumors, viralization of hoaxes and assumption of opinions as facts*. Social networks echoed and widely circulated, for example, the front pages of newspapers like *The Economist* where the possible fall of Dilma Rousseff (Lima Rocha & Klein, 2018) was announced months before it occurred.

e) *Omission of topics, sources or issues* that affect the privileged sectors or provoke debates or criticism against them.

f) *Absence of verification*. Null corroboration or commitment to the investigation of data or elements that are controversial or of doubtful origin (Lima Rocha, 2003) and still proclaimed as absolute truths.

g) *Viralization*. As a strategy to increase notoriety or encourage massive debate on certain topics or positions (Lima Rocha & Klein, 2018, pp. 106-107).

h) *Spectacularization*. It is constant in the informative coverage of all kinds of events and was especially significant during the broadcast of the session that resulted in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, which –as Lima Rocha and Klein have pointed out (2018, p. 112)– resembled the coverage of a World Cup and gave the impression of being a show (van Dijk, 2017).

i) *Media attacks and version wars*. Radical confrontation between the three largest conglomerates, *O Globo*, *Estadão* and *Folha*, regarding national policy issues (Lima Rocha & Klein, 2018).

Ecuador, the opposition against Rafael Correa

From the forced deposition of the president of the republic, Abdalá

Bucaram, in 1997, that of president Jamil Mahuad in 2000, the overthrow of Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005, the attempted coup of 2010, and the opposition movement against Rafael Correa in June 2015, to the sinister judicial plot against him in 2018 (Boudet Gómez, 2018), Ecuador has been characterized by having a weak State historically frustrated by coups. These have been aimed –always with international support (Operation Condor)– at "eradicating all spaces in the region that supported a socially-oriented political management of the state" (Favaro Garrossiniet al., 2016, p. 56).

The case of the opposition movement against the government of Rafael Correa in June 2015 is a good illustration of how the logic of the propaganda model operated in the journalism industry lobby that directly confronted the government. In this context, especially "the private media –the nature of which had already strayed long before the pure exercise of controlling the democratic institutions started– strongly embraced certain political actors, displaying openly propagandistic and corporatist discourses" (Orlando, 2012, pp. 5-6). More specifically, the traditional media supported the marches organized by the opposition against the proposal of an Organic Law for Tax Justice for the Redistribution of Wealth, which clearly benefited the people and harmed the elites. As Garrossini et al. (2016) have pointed out, the disinformation strategies implemented in the mass media and on digital networks and platforms by those who promoted a media coup were characterized by:

a) *Direct accusations against the government and the figure of Rafael Correa*. Branded as "totalitarian" in traditional media and digital platforms.

b) *Promotion of intrigues, spreading of false rumors and fake news*. In order to weaken the image of the executive, and sow panic among the population at the threat of recessions, divestments or job losses.

c) *Creation of influencers*. Development of virtual profiles that are responsible for shaping opinion among real and false users, as well as for monitoring, managing and spreading propaganda.

d) *Presence of trolls*. Who use aggressive and violent speech against public figures or block any form of dialogue. Often these are fictitious profiles that enter communities as if they were members to

later instill mistrust or create imbalance.

e) *Exponential distribution and viralization*. Facebook comments, tweets or hashtags built by certain influencers in groups or user lists and in traditional media.

In short, a whole arsenal of rhetorical strategies that have been employed by the traditional media, driven and supported by digital platforms, to conduct the media coup in favor of the hegemonic interests and against democracy.

DISCUSSION

As a result of the comparative analysis of the propaganda, information manipulation and disinformation strategies of the four selected media coups, the following trends have been identified and observed in comparative terms.

Firstly, the four coups are characterized by the use of falsehoods or lies as a fundamental strategy, either through the circulation of hoaxes, false rumors or fake news or through the use of resources that enhance emotionality versus rationality. In addition, lying as a strategy is accompanied with the absence of sources and with anonymity, as a resource to avoid liability, as well as with the omission of data or key elements that would allow understanding the entire discourse.

Secondly, the Venezuelan, Brazilian and Ecuadorian cases all present a marked belligerent tone against the presidential figures of the respective countries. The media coup is aimed at them and has the purpose of discrediting and ending their presidency, which is why intense smear campaigns can be observed in all three cases, ranging from the demonization of Hugo Chávez to the media attacks or version war of the Brazilian case.

Third, in all cases there are automated profiles and false accounts, presence of bots, exponential distribution and large-scale viralization of opinions, generating an increase in the discussion of certain topics and promoting certain perspectives within the debate or conflict.

Fourth, in the cases of Venezuela and Brazil there is, in addition, a tendency to politicize the discourse. Furthermore, the accusatory tone

that is found, for instance, in the campaign against Rafael Correa is in those countries complemented by the ideological polarization and confrontation of the different social groups on one side and the other of the political spectrum, reducing the positions to only two: either in favor of or against Dilma Rousseff, either Chavista or anti-Chavista.

Fifth, the typical sensationalism and spectacularization of traditional mass media, particularly television, are easily fed back into social networks. In fact, many of the Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts analyzed echoed the television coverage orchestrated by large groups and corporations that implicitly supported the coups. Thus, it is necessary to underline that the media coups conducted on the Internet are nothing more than an amplification of the hegemonic journalistic and television debate. Most Facebook and Twitter publications are in fact news copied from the mainstream media, retweets of journalists' comments or televised videos, as well as opinions supported by the conglomerates holding power. This is especially significant in the Brazilian and Ecuadorian cases.

Sixth, in the case of Mexico, some different trends are observed, despite the fact that the country's media system is characterized by great business concentration and a tremendous absence of pluralism and diversity of information. The persecution of journalists, the omission of human rights violations or the concealment of relevant information are the fundamental axes of the disinformation strategy developed in the country. However, this strategy has obtained an important response from the citizens who created the #YoSoy132 movement in favor of truth and a democratic, transparent and plural information system, a fact that clearly makes the Mexican case distinct.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting on communication in Latin America at a time marked by asymmetric conflicts and irregular wars, such as those illustrated here, is, without a doubt, a challenge for research in information and communication.

Studies on propaganda and conflict news coverage focused on "soft" or media coups do not have the tradition they deserve in the

academic field, considering the importance that some propaganda processes attained in dictatorships such as the Chilean or Colombian ones or in recent election or political processes in Mexico, Brazil and other countries.

In relation to the first research question concerning propaganda, disinformation and manipulation strategies in the four studied cases, the following can be concluded: The media coups of the last decades in the region, rather than hinting at a counter-revolutionary war –which, undoubtedly, exists and prevents the development of the forces of the South–, manifest a "climate of total war", which is constant and affects the entire population. This climate is created and fueled by information manipulation and disinformation.

Regarding the second question about the way these media coups operate, the conclusion is that, as long as the mainstream media is in the hands of a few and the media systems is subject to the logic of the elites and to transnational interests, the dirty war will continue to rampage, preventing any democratic development and the citizenry's well-being. The observation of the disinformation processes and media dynamics developed in the form of media coups in Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil or Ecuador accounts for a vigorous and integrated application of totalizing efforts at the political, social, economic, communicative and psychological levels in favor of the dominant economic and geopolitical interests. It is, therefore, useful to reflect on media coups as an essential element of a new political-military doctrine present in today's digital societies. In this sense, both the traditional media, concentrated in the hands of companies or families, and the digital social networks and platforms orchestrated by lobbies and elites, as well as by the citizenry –who is increasingly active and involved, but also less critical–, play a key role in endorsing and promoting public intervention strategies, whether at the regional or global level.

As a result, the continuous discourse about "communist" threats, the "dangers" to democracy and other terrors, or the fake news persistently disseminated by the right and by United States media –from their headquarters in the region or via WhatsApp– have become resources for those strategies that prevent democratic advancement and development

in the region, nullifying plurality, diversity and transparency.

Furthermore, those strategies legitimize the surveillance carried out by the new digital information systems, and condemn any form of action or mobilization contrary to the hegemonically imposed values. Although there are more than 150 "fact-checking" or "data verification" initiatives worldwide devoted to curbing fake news (such as *Verificado* in Mexico, to mention one), which is an interesting way of preventing disinformation, the truth is that there is still no consensus on the matter and there are legal gaps concerning the creation of false profiles or blogs for the purpose of spreading fake news or making them go viral (Fregoso, 2018).

For all these reasons, and in relation to the third question of this research work focused on the measures that should be taken to prevent media coups and their rapid spread in digital environments, it is possible to conclude that there is a need for social movements and citizens to question the meaning of the Internet as a common good. In addition, it is time to demand public policies aimed at democratizing the telecommunications system in order to avoid concentration logics, the absence of control and regulation, and the unlimited proliferation of fake news. Starting by monitoring every intelligence action, video surveillance and human rights violation that lobbies, local governments and the transnational financial capital are carrying out, as Morozov (2011) has warned.

In short, it is necessary and urgent to promote the regulation of the traditional and digital media systems since both are at the root of harmonious coexistence and peace, and their democratic functioning is one of the keys to end or prevent new media coups.

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