

The Colombian media system in the 21st century: new media, old problems

*El sistema mediático colombiano en el
siglo XXI: nuevos medios,
viejos problemas*

*O sistema midiático colombiano no
século XXI: novos meios, velhos problemas*
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This study describes and analyzes Colombia's contemporary media system. Using a historical overview, it shows that, despite the proliferation of new digital media, the system remains dominated by a handful of monopolistic actors. As such, three historical and structural features continue to define the Colombian media system in the 21st century: the instrumentalization of media and journalism, ownership concentration, and geographic centralization.

KEYWORDS: Media history, digital media, journalism, Colombia, media system.

Este trabajo describe y analiza el sistema mediático colombiano contemporáneo. A través de un recorrido histórico, busca destacar cómo, a pesar de la proliferación de los nuevos medios digitales, el sistema de medios es dominado por unos pocos actores monopolísticos. Por tanto, en el sistema mediático colombiano del siglo XXI persisten tres características históricas y estructurales: instrumentalización de los medios y del periodismo, concentración en la propiedad y centralidad geográfica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Historias de los medios de comunicación, medios digitales, periodismo, Colombia, sistema de medios.

Este trabalho descreve e analisa o sistema midiático colombiano contemporâneo. Através de uma revisão histórica, procura destacar como, apesar da proliferação dos novos meios digitais, o sistema midiático é dominado por alguns poucos atores monopolistas. Portanto, no sistema midiático colombiano do século XXI persistem três características históricas e estruturais: instrumentalização dos meios e do jornalismo, concentração na propriedade e centralidade geográfica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Histórias dos meios de comunicação, meios digitais, jornalismo, sistema midiático, Colômbia.

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INTRODUCTION

A media system reflects specific historical circumstances, a particular model of the state, and the power relations that shape its structure and operation (Hallin & Echeverría, 2025; Hallin & Mancini, 2008). While globalization and advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) have expanded access to information and facilitated the rise of transnational media conglomerates and global tech companies, national contexts remain decisive. Political cultures and local dynamics set the rules under which the media industry develops. This makes it both necessary and relevant to continue examining national media systems, while also keeping sight of technological change and global trends (Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Mancini, 2020; Márquez & Guerrero, 2023).

To study a country's media systems, researchers have identified a set of variables and dimensions that help define their specific characteristics while also allowing for comparison across countries and regions. One of the most influential contributions in this field is the work of Hallin and Mancini (2008), who identified three models that are widely used in such studies and analyses: the liberal, the democratic corporatist, and the polarized pluralist. Like any framework, Hallin and Mancini's models have limitations, which have led several scholars to explore new variables and categories to define media systems beyond those associated with Western countries (Echeverría et al., 2024; Guerrero & Márquez, 2014; Hallin & Mancini, 2011; Márquez & Guerrero, 2023).

Hallin and Mancini (2008) identified four key dimensions of media systems: the media market, political parallelism, the professionalization of journalism, and the role of the state. Contemporary analyses, however, must also account for new dimensions such as ICTs and their influence on the production, circulation, and consumption of content (Humprecht et al., 2022). International studies show that most news consumption now occurs through the Internet and social media (Newman et al., 2024).

In Colombia, scholarly interest in analyzing and characterizing the media system has grown in recent years (Bonilla & Narváez, 2008;

García-Perdomo, 2024b; Montoya, 2014; Montoya & Bonilla, 2025). The system exhibits traits of the polarized pluralist model (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002), though it does not fully align with it. Similarly, while it shares certain features with the “captured liberal” model proposed for Latin American media systems, it also presents specific characteristics that set it apart (Guerrero, 2014; Guerrero & Márquez, 2015).

Previous studies have examined the media market (Bonilla & Narváez, 2008); the relationship between the media and power, along with native digital outlets (García-Perdomo, 2024b); and journalism’s resilience in the face of actors that have targeted it with violence (Montoya & Bonilla, 2025), making valuable contributions. Nonetheless, there remains a need to further investigate and connect historical and structural factors such as ownership concentration, geographic centralization, and the instrumentalization of journalism.

This article describes and analyzes a set of characteristics of the Colombian media system in order to identify ruptures and continuities. It focuses on the formation of media conglomerates during the twentieth century, the rise of independent digital outlets, and the struggle of both new and traditional media for visibility and credibility in digital environments. It underscores that, despite the gradual growth of digital media, their independence from political and economic powers, and their thematic and narrative innovations that foster informational diversity and pluralism, the flow of news in Colombia remains dominated by a small group of monopolistic actors. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the study and understanding of the contemporary media landscape, offering insights to address the needs and challenges of shaping a media system attuned to current democratic, economic, and technological dynamics.

The article is divided into two sections, followed by the conclusions. The first section offers a brief overview of the media market, with a focus on the process of ownership concentration in the press, radio, and television. The second section examines the emergence of native digital media, highlighting their specific characteristics and contributions to the media system. Finally, the conclusions outline some of the structural and historical features of the Colombian media system.

FROM PARTISAN PRESS TO MEDIA CONCENTRATION

In Colombia, the press began as an elite institution closely tied to political parties, circulating in limited numbers and concentrated in major urban centers. Newspapers were founded with either liberal or conservative affiliations, and their readership consisted mainly of literate citizens loyal to those parties (Martín-Barbero & Rey, 1997). News content reflected partisan allegiances, with party members often serving as journalists and addressing readers primarily as voters (Santos, 1989).

With few exceptions, nineteenth-century newspapers emerged as vehicles for defending partisan ideals. Rather than serving as watchdogs over those in power, they were owned by them (Fox, 1982). As a result, many newspapers during this period faced censorship or closure for political reasons (Fonnegra, 1984). Members of the families that owned the press often moved seamlessly between political life, state bureaucracy, and the newspaper business.

At national level, the twentieth century saw the consolidation of two major liberal newspapers: *El Espectador*, founded in Medellín in 1887 by Fidel Cano, and *El Tiempo*, founded in Bogotá in 1911 by Alfonso Villegas, later acquired by liberal politician Eduardo Santos. The Cano and Santos families retained ownership of these newspapers until selling them to the economic conglomerates that own them today. Conservative ideas, meanwhile, found their platform in *El Siglo*—now *El Nuevo Siglo*—founded in 1936 by Laureano Gómez, leader of the Conservative Party.

In the regional press, Medellín's *El Colombiano*, founded in 1912, quickly became associated with the conservative Gómez Martínez family, which has held an influential role in local and regional governments in Antioquia as well as in national politics. In Cali, *El País* has been in operation since 1950, established by the conservative Lloreda family, whose activities extend across multiple sectors of the regional economy and whose influence reaches local, regional, and national politics.

In mid-sized cities like Bucaramanga and Barranquilla, the liberal press rose to prominence. In Bucaramanga, *Vanguardia Liberal*—owned by the Galvis family—became the dominant newspaper, while

in Barranquilla, *El Heraldo*, founded in 1933 by liberal politician Alberto Pumarejo and journalist-politician Juan Fernández Ortega, established itself as the leading outlet, extending its influence across the entire northern region of Colombia (Muñoz & Velásquez, 2022). In recent years, the Galvis family has expanded its holdings by acquiring several regional newspapers, including *El Universal* (Cartagena), *La Tarde* (Pereira), *El Nuevo Día* (Ibagué), and *La Patria* (Manizales), positioning itself as one of the country's most significant subnational media groups. Together with the families that own *El País* and *El Colombiano*, they co-founded Grupo Nacional de Medios S.A., which publishes the popular daily *Q'Hubo*, distributed in 12 cities.

Although national newspapers remained closely tied to political parties, by the late 1970s some began developing investigative journalism that addressed a wide range of social and political issues, including drug trafficking, corruption, and the armed conflict (Santos, 1989; Waisbord, 2000). This investigative work coincided with a surge of violence against the press during the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in threats, forced exile, and murders, and turning Colombia into one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. Violence—carried out by both illegal armed groups and state forces or agents—shaped news agendas on the armed conflict as well as on other socially and politically sensitive topics (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015).

The commercialization of the press—marked by a shift toward broader audiences and less overtly partisan content—took shape as founding families sold their newspapers to large economic conglomerates. This trend was most visible in the national press, which came under the control of business groups with investments across multiple sectors of the economy. *El Espectador* was sold to the Santo Domingo Business Group in 1998, while *El Tiempo* was acquired by the Planeta Group in 2007 and later sold to the Sarmiento Angulo Organization in 2011.

Most regional newspapers continued under the control of their founding families, preserving political agendas closely tied to traditional parties. Only in recent years—largely due to the financial crisis facing the media—have these outlets begun to be sold to business groups. In 2023, Cali's *El País* was acquired by the Gilinski Group, linked to the

financial sector, while Medellín's *El Colombiano* was sold to regional investors.

Although commercialization reduced the direct influence of the founding families over media agendas, political and ideological interests did not disappear; rather, they shifted to align with those of the new owners.

The acquisition of the country's leading national newspapers by economic conglomerates did not necessarily result in more critical or less politicized journalism. Whereas the press had once pledged loyalty to political parties, it now aligns with the interests of the economic groups that own them (Neff & Benson, 2021). Although openly partisan outlets have largely disappeared, many media organizations still reflect political tendencies and orientations close to certain parties, while disguising their information production as serving the public interest. Some authors describe this phenomenon as "media capture" (Schiffrin, 2021), in which the content produced serves to safeguard the interests of owners and financiers (Nielsen, 2017).

The entry of newspapers into the hands of economic groups was part of a broader process of concentration that had already been underway in radio and television in earlier decades (Becerra & Mastrini, 2016; Bonilla & Narváez, 2008; Federación Colombiana de Periodistas, 2017; Herrán, 1991; Melo, 1978).

Since its emergence in the late 1920s, radio quickly established itself as a commercial medium and advertising platform, while also offering cultural programming such as music, comedy, and sports (Castellanos, 2001, 2003). Its reach expanded rapidly, bringing information and entertainment to cities and regions that had previously been beyond the scope of the printed press.

The growth of radio was deeply intertwined with politics: both liberals and conservatives viewed it as a channel for projecting their ideas and ideals beyond major urban centers (Castellanos, 2003). In 1940, the government created the National Broadcasting Service, a state-owned enterprise with an educational mandate, designed as an instrument for national integration (Silva, 2000).

By the mid-twentieth century, radio's wide reach had taken on a distinctly partisan character, making it a central force in local, regional,

and national politics. Its political weight became especially clear on April 9, 1948, when the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán sparked a wave of violence across the country. In response, the administration of President Mariano Ospina Pérez censored and shut down radio stations nationwide, accusing them of inciting unrest.

In the second half of the century, ownership of radio stations became concentrated in the hands of a few proprietors who came to dominate the news and entertainment market.

Television broadcasting in Colombia began in 1954, during the administration of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, an army general who rose to power with support from both conservatives and liberals –only to be ousted three years later through their joint efforts (Bushnell, 2007; Palacios, 2003). Unlike in many other Latin American countries, Colombian television was launched under state control and developed as a government-run medium (Anzola, 1988).

For nearly fifty years, Colombian television operated under what was known as the “mixed system”. In this model, the State owned and managed the transmission networks and infrastructure, while commercial production companies were responsible for much of the content broadcast on public channels (Martín-Barbero & Rey, 1999; Téllez, 1979; Vizcaíno, 1992). This arrangement gave governments considerable influence and control over television, making politicization and clientelism central to the management and development of the medium (Garzón, 2015).

Before the arrival of private channels in 1998, more than 20 companies produced content for Colombia’s national public channels. This changed with the passage of Law 335 in 1996, which authorized the creation of private channels and reshaped the country’s audiovisual landscape. After a competitive bidding process, Caracol and RCN –both owned by economic groups with interests in other sectors– began broadcasting in June 1998. These two networks had long been central players in the Colombian media system: they originated as radio networks in the 1940s and moved quickly into television during the early years of the mixed system.³

³ Canal Uno, which inaugurated television broadcasting in 1954, remains on air today. During the mixed system era, it operated alongside Canal A as a

In the 1980s, RCN –radio and television– was acquired by the Ardila Lülle business group, while *Caracol* was purchased by the Santo Domingo Group (Silva, 2004). With their ownership of radio stations and the launch of private television channels, the Ardila Lülle and Santo Domingo groups consolidated their positions as media conglomerates, extending their influence across the press, radio, and television. Alongside Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo, owner of *El Tiempo*, they became the country’s most powerful communication empires (see Table 1) (Bonilla & Narváz, 2008; Mastrini & Becerra, 2017; Montoya & Bonilla, 2025; Moya, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, n. d.; Zambrano, 2020).

In 2002, the Santo Domingo Group sold most of its stake in Caracol Radio and its affiliated stations to the Spanish conglomerate PRISA. A more recent example of traditional media being acquired by economic groups took place in 2019, when the Gilinski Group purchased *Semana* magazine, founded in 1982 by former president Alberto Lleras Camargo. Long recognized for its political influence and investigative journalism, *Semana* remains the country’s only political news magazine, following the 2010 closure of *Cambio*, a publication in circulation since 1993, which had been acquired by Casa Editorial El Tiempo in 2006 and shut down four years later.⁴

Since its acquisition by the Gilinski Group, *Semana*’s editorial line has shifted toward an explicitly right-wing stance, defending the interests of its owners and prioritizing journalism driven by clicks and social media virality.⁵ As noted earlier, in 2023 the group also bought a regional newspaper. With this move, the Gilinski Group has begun consolidating its position as a nationwide media conglomerate, reinforcing a trend toward journalism built around fast-circulating content on social networks.

public commercial network. In October 2024, the license to operate Canal Uno was awarded to the PRISA Group.

- ⁴ In September 2021, a group of investors—including several journalists—decided to relaunch *Cambio* magazine in a digital format, publishing its new version in February 2022.
- ⁵ The shift in *Semana*’s editorial agenda and ideology led to the departure of many of its most renowned columnists, along with its director and several editors.

TABLE 1 MEDIA CONGLOMERATES IN COLOMBIA, 2024					
Name	Press and magazines	Radio	Television	Native digital media	Participation in other sectors
Grupo Empresarial Santo Domingo- Valorem	<i>El Espectador</i>	Blu Radio La Kalle	Caracol Televisión	<i>Pulzo</i>	Agribusiness, e-commerce, energy and gas, finance, supermarkets, transport
Organización Ardila Lülle	<i>La República</i> <i>Revista Caras</i>	Amor Estéreo Antena 2 El Sol Fantástica Fiesta La Cariñosa La FM La Mega Radio Red Radio Uno Rumba	RCN Televisión NTN 24 Win Sports		Agribusiness, automotive industry, food and beverages, sports, finance

Name	Press and magazines	Radio	Television	Native digital media	Participation in other sectors
Organización Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo	<i>El Tiempo</i> <i>ADN</i> <i>Revista Bocas</i> <i>Revista Carrusel</i> <i>Revista Don Juan</i> <i>Revista Aló</i> <i>Revista Elenco</i> <i>¡Hola!</i> <i>Revista Motor</i> <i>Portafolio</i> <i>Llano Siete</i> <i>Días</i> <i>Boyacá Siete</i> <i>Días</i>		CityTV	<i>Futbol red</i>	Agribusiness, construction, energy and gas, finance, infrastructure, mining, tourism

Source: The authors.

This overview of the evolution of media in Colombia highlights their deep-rooted ties to political and economic power, the persistent trend toward ownership concentration, and the geographic centralization of their development. Together, these dynamics shape the diversity and plurality of information, as ownership directly influences both the issues covered and the way they are presented (Observatorio Latinoamericano de Regulación, Medios y Convergencia [Observacom], 2018). Media ownership also carries broader implications, affecting freedom of expression as well as the working conditions of journalists (García et al., 2025).

As experts on diversity and pluralism have pointed out (Becerra & Mastrini, 2009, 2016; Mendel et al., 2017), concentrated ownership brings a series of consequences that extend beyond the media agenda, affecting public opinion, freedom of expression, and democracy itself. It leads to fewer sources of information, thematic and news homogenization, unified editorial lines, and the geographic centralization of content production.

Another defining feature of the Colombian media system is its geographic centralization. The press developed mainly in Bogotá and a few departmental capitals –Cali, Medellín, Bucaramanga, and Barranquilla. Radio has achieved wide coverage and reach in rural areas, yet most production remains concentrated in urban centers. Television, meanwhile, was conceived and planned from the capital; since its launch in 1954, national programming has been produced in Bogotá and broadcast to the rest of the country.

Decentralization began in the mid-1980s with the creation of regional channels, established as public broadcasters under the authority of departmental governments. Today, there are eight such channels: Teleantioquia, Telecaribe, Telepacífico, Telecafé, Canal TRO, Canal Capital, Canal 13, and Teleislas. While regional television has contributed significantly to regional media and cultural industries, and to the shaping of local identity, its reliance on political power has tied its development to the clientelist and partisan dynamics of the regions. As a result, most of these channels have largely served as platforms for promoting the interests of local governments in power (García, 2016).

NATIVE DIGITAL MEDIA

The growth and expansion of the press, radio, and television in Colombia were reinforced by their close ties to political and economic power (Silva, 1977, 2004). This explains why the arrival of the Internet and the web generated expectations of broadening and diversifying media and information sources, under the belief that they would, in some way, challenge the dominance of monopolistic actors.

A defining feature of the digital environment has been the disappearance of both natural and artificial barriers to creating media outlets. In the analog era, launching a newspaper, radio station, or television channel required significant financial backing, accessible only to a few. In the digital era, however, with the right technical tools and knowledge, virtually anyone can –or could– create and operate a media outlet (Castells, 2009).

Many believed that the expansion of the Internet would foster the creation of more and better media outlets producing content of public interest (Shirky, 2008), and that a landscape with numerous information producers would dismantle the information monopolies consolidated throughout the 20th century. In practice, however, although new digital media have disrupted certain aspects of existing systems, they have also become absorbed into the very dynamics of the media structures in which they emerge and operate.

In Colombia, native digital media emerged later than in other countries in the region, but over the past decade they have grown exponentially (Gutiérrez & García, 2016; Zuluaga & Gómez, 2019). While traditional outlets gradually shifted part of their content to digital platforms (Zuluaga & Martínez, 2012), fully digital media only began to appear in the late 2000s (Toro et al., 2018). Their creation, consolidation, and survival have faced the same challenges confronting contemporary media, with economic sustainability standing out as the central concern.

Most of these outlets have been founded and led by journalists, which distinguishes them from traditional media not only in ownership, but also in their news agendas, business models, and relationships with audiences. As a result, unlike traditional outlets, native

digital media maintain a critical distance from established powers; in other words, they do not depend on or maintain close ties with political or economic groups (Zuluaga & Gómez, 2019).

Digital media outlets generally rely on more diverse revenue streams (Colussi & García, 2021). While advertising continues to be a major source of income, they also turn to grants, memberships, donations, international cooperation, and other strategies (Meléndez, 2016; SembraMedia, 2019, 2021, 2024; Zuluaga & Gómez, 2019).

The digitization of news has profoundly transformed media systems and the public sphere. One of the most significant changes lies in how recognition, relevance, and importance are measured. In the digital realm, metrics such as the number of unique visitors, the time users spend on websites, and the size and visibility of a media outlet's social media following have become the main indicators of success. A variety of data sources and audience indices are now used to assess performance online. Among the most widely acknowledged by journalistic organizations and advertisers is Comscore, which tracks the circulation of content across multiple platforms and the types of devices used to access it. Similarly, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism's annual *Digital News Report* has become a key reference for identifying the outlets with the largest digital reach and consumption in each country. Table 2 lists the Colombian news sites most frequently visited, according to different sources.

According to the data in Table 2, the traditional outlets *El Tiempo*, *Caracol*, and *Semana* continue to hold the highest levels of online visibility and consumption. Among native digital outlets, *Las2orillas* and *Pulzo* stand out for their strong online presence. Both primarily function as content aggregators, republishing material from other media that is then edited and summarized in eye-catching formats designed to generate clicks, traffic, and visits. *Pulzo* is also notable for being a digital outlet owned by the Santo Domingo Group.

In Colombia, as in many other countries, native digital media do not command the largest reach in digital environments. Instead, the outlets with the greatest audiences and visibility are those that originated in the analog era, an outcome of the monopolies they consolidated over time and the strength of their established brands.

TABLE 2
MOST VISITED COLOMBIAN NEWS WEBSITES

Comscore (2021)*		Digital News Report (2022)**		Digital News Report (2023)**		Digital News Report (2024)**	
Rank	Outlet	Rank	Outlet	Rank	Outlet	Rank	Outlet
1	<i>El Tiempo</i>	1	<i>El Tiempo</i>	1	<i>El Tiempo</i>	1	<i>El Tiempo</i>
2	<i>Semana</i>	2	<i>Caracol Noticias</i>	2	<i>Caracol Noticias</i>	2	<i>Caracol Noticias</i>
3	<i>Caracol TV</i>	3	<i>Las2orillas</i>	3	<i>Pulzo</i>	3	<i>Semana</i>
4	<i>BLU Radio</i>	4	<i>El Espectador</i>	4	<i>Semana</i>	4	<i>Pulzo</i>
5	<i>El Espectador</i>	5	<i>Pulzo</i>	5	<i>El Espectador</i>	5	<i>El Espectador</i>
6	<i>Pulzo</i>	6	<i>Semana</i>	6	<i>Las2orillas</i>	6	<i>Las2orillas</i>
7	<i>Noticias RCN</i>	7	<i>Noticias RCN</i>	7	<i>Prensa Regional</i>	7	<i>Prensa Regional</i>
8	<i>RCN Radio</i>	8	<i>Caracol Radio</i>	8	<i>Noticias TV Regional</i>	8	<i>Noticias TV Regional</i>
9	<i>Portafolio</i>	9	<i>Noticias Uno</i>	9	<i>Noticias RCN</i>	9	<i>Noticias RCN</i>
10	<i>La W</i>	10	<i>La Silla Vacía</i>	10	<i>Caracol Radio</i>	10	<i>Caracol Radio</i>

Fuentes: *Marchant (2022); **García-Perdomo (2022, 2023, 2024a).

El Tiempo and *El Espectador* continue to be the most influential newspapers at the national level, while Caracol and RCN, through their various brands, still dominate the radio and television markets. In addition, the extensive media networks of outlets owned by major economic groups give them a stronger presence on the web and social media (Levy et al., 2023).

Along the same lines, the SCImago Media Ranking (2024) –a metric that assesses the reputation and digital positioning of media outlets worldwide based on factors such as website quality, search engine optimization influence, web traffic, and social media activity– shows that traditional brands continue to hold the highest reputations (see Table 3).

TABLE 3		
NEWS SITES WITH THE HIGHEST REPUTATION AND ONLINE POSITIONING IN COLOMBIA		
Rank	Outlet	Owner
1	<i>El Tiempo</i>	Organización Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo
2	<i>El Espectador</i>	Grupo Empresarial Santo Domingo - Valorem
3	<i>Portafolio</i>	Organización Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo
4	<i>Semana</i>	Grupo Gilinski
5	<i>El Colombiano</i>	Business Leaders from Antioquia
6	<i>Pulzo</i>	Grupo Empresarial Santo Domingo - Valorem
7	<i>La República</i>	Organización Ardila Lülle
8	<i>El País</i>	Grupo Gilinski
9	<i>El Heraldo</i>	Fernández and Pumarejo families
10	<i>Vanguardia</i>	Galvis Ramírez family

Source: SCImago Media Ranking (2024).

All these data indicate that, in the digital environment, most of the information consumed by online users continues to flow toward traditional media and brands. Among native digital outlets, those with the greatest reach and visibility are the ones dedicated to producing short, fast-consumption content tailored for social media.

Although many optimists once envisioned the end of monopolies, an expanded public sphere, and the democratization of information,

these expectations have largely gone unmet. Instead, the major and most powerful actors of the analog era have expanded and consolidated their dominance. Colombia continues to be narrated and represented primarily through the media of conglomerates based in the capital, which use these outlets to safeguard the interests of their owners.

Previous studies show that the number of native digital media outlets in Colombia has increased over the past decade (Toro et al., 2018). While these studies highlight the growing number of initiatives, they also underscore the financial challenges that threaten their survival (Rey & Novoa, 2012). Economic vulnerability is especially pronounced in cities and regions with small advertising markets, where external pressures on journalism restrict press freedom and professional practice. Although the exponential growth of the Internet could, in theory, facilitate the creation of more outlets, journalistic media remain concentrated in urban centers, leaving many municipalities and regions without news organizations that shape public opinion and serve as watchdogs of power (Echeverría et al., 2024).

The paradox of the Colombian media system is that, while national and regional outlets continuously generate news to boost their visibility on social media and online platforms, large parts of the country still face an information drought –what some have described as “news deserts” (Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa [FLIP], n.d.). This demonstrates that the Internet, social media, and ICTs alone cannot resolve the issue of information concentration. With ownership and production clustered in major cities, news primarily serve populations with specific sociodemographic profiles, leaving a wide range of audiences unrepresented.

The media industry, both in Colombia and globally, is facing an economic crisis that makes sustainability and long-term viability increasingly difficult. In such a competitive environment, only outlets backed by substantial capital are likely to endure. While creating a media outlet is relatively feasible, sustaining it financially is far more challenging –one of the main reasons ownership continues to concentrate in fewer hands (Reporters Without Borders, n. d.).

Digital media have gained prominence in the Colombian media landscape, and the number of outlets has grown significantly. However,

this increase has not automatically translated into greater informational diversity or pluralism. Although many actors –including regulatory bodies– believed the Internet alone would generate new outlets and reduce ownership concentration, making it unnecessary to actively promote plurality, economic dynamics have revealed just how difficult it is to turn that expectation into reality.

CONCLUSIONS

Native digital media continue to grow, expand, and gain prominence within the Colombian media system. Their ownership and organizational structures remain independent of major economic groups, they promote alternative news agendas, and they experiment with new formats, business models, and ways of engaging audiences. Even so, three structural traits continue to define the media landscape in the 21st century: concentrated ownership, the instrumentalization of media and journalism, and geographic centralization. As other authors have noted, media systems are neither static nor unchanging; yet despite technological advances, they continue to carry over characteristics from the analog era (Guerrero et al., 2024; Hallin, 2020).

The country's media concentration has been shaped through a historical, gradual, and ongoing process in which economic groups with interests across multiple sectors of the national economy own the country's main outlets (Pearce & Velasco, 2022). As a result, the Sarmiento Angulo, Santo Domingo, Ardila Lülle, and Gilinski families control the flow of information in the country. This dynamic leads to journalism being used to defend the interests of media owners, weakening the creation of a diverse and plural public sphere, as well as journalism's responsibility and watchdog role.

Another persistent characteristic of the media system is geographic centralization: the outlets with the greatest reach, consumption, and visibility are concentrated in the nation's capital and controlled by major conglomerates. Although digitization has lowered the barriers to creating new outlets, native digital media also tend to cluster in capital cities, as sustaining journalistic projects is even more challenging in smaller municipalities.

These conditions affect not only diversity and pluralism, but also public opinion, freedom of expression, and professional routines. In the Colombian media system, information is abundant, but diversity remains limited. While digitization and new technologies have fostered the emergence of additional journalistic initiatives, the dynamics of markets, access, and consumption mean they still fail to challenge the informational dominance of traditional brands.

The assumption that technological advances would enable the creation of countless media outlets –and thereby resolve the challenges of the past– needs to be reconsidered. In this context, Colombia must rethink communication policies that foster a diverse and plural media system. This requires not only addressing ownership structures but also encouraging a greater variety of media and content through which national realities and issues are represented. While it was expected that native digital outlets would transform systems long dominated by traditional media, so far these new players have largely assimilated into existing dynamics and practices.

The purpose of this article has been to describe and analyze the Colombian media system, drawing attention to some of its historical particularities. Yet media systems will continue to evolve and adapt to technological and political changes, which makes it necessary to examine other factors shaping their configuration, such as journalistic cultures, the impact of armed conflict on press freedom, the structure and role of public and regional media, the contributions of alternative and community outlets, regulatory bodies, and the influence of global platforms on the national media industry. Advancing the study of these elements will help establish connections and comparisons with other media systems in the region and beyond. While national contexts remain key to understanding media, international dynamics and trends are equally significant. For this reason, it is vital to continue characterizing national media systems, so that continuities and divergences with other national, regional, and global experiences can be more clearly identified.

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