

## Latin America's media systems and their dynamics. The cases of Argentina and Uruguay

*Los sistemas mediáticos de*

*América Latina y sus dinámicas.*

*Los casos de Argentina y Uruguay*

*Os sistemas midiáticos da América Latina*

*e suas dinâmicas. Os casos da Argentina e*

*do Uruguai*

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This article presents a model to study media systems, political communication, and communication policies comparatively and dynamically. Based on extensive empirical work, including systematic observations and more than 60 interviews, it explores the left-turn governments of Kirchnerism in Argentina (2003-2015) and the Frente Amplio in Uruguay (2005-2020) and their conflictive relationship with the media. Despite these tensions, in Argentina there were radical changes and in Uruguay there were not. This is explained because media systems strongly conditioned the political process.

**KEYWORDS:** Media systems, Latin America, political communication, communication policies.

*Este artículo propone un modelo para estudiar, de manera comparada y dinámica, los sistemas mediáticos nacionales, la comunicación política y las políticas de comunicación. A partir de un amplio trabajo empírico, que incluyó observaciones sistemáticas y más de 60 entrevistas, explora los gobiernos del giro a la izquierda del kirchnerismo en Argentina (2003-2015) y del Frente Amplio en Uruguay (2005-2020) y su relación conflictiva con los medios. A pesar de esas tensiones, en Argentina hubo cambios radicales y en Uruguay no. Eso explica por qué los sistemas mediáticos condicionaron el proceso político.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Sistemas mediáticos, América Latina, comunicación política, políticas de comunicación.

*Este artigo propõe um modelo para estudar, de forma comparativa e dinâmica, os sistemas midiáticos nacionais, a comunicação política e as políticas de comunicação. A partir de um amplo trabalho empírico, que incluiu observações sistemáticas e mais de 60 entrevistas, ele explora os governos de esquerda do kirchnerismo na Argentina (2003-2015) e da Frente Ampla no Uruguai (2005-2020) e sua relação conflituosa com a mídia. Apesar dessas tensões, na Argentina houve mudanças radicais e no Uruguai não. E isso se explica porque os sistemas midiáticos condicionaram o processo político.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) work on comparing media systems changed the study and understanding of the links between politics and communication. Although its adaptation to the Latin American context has taken different forms, most have focused on the similarities between the region's national systems (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Hallin & Echeverría, 2025). Since media systems are not set in stone (Hallin & Mancini, 2017), it is crucial to explore how they are reconfigured based on political, economic, and communicational logics that arise from their own dynamics, as well as in response to environmental challenges (such as the massification of digital media).

Within this framework, this article proposes a model that focuses more on cases than on variables (Della Porta, 2008), based on a dynamic research that investigates the relationship between media systems, political communication, and communication policies in different countries. This is critical and complementary to other work and approaches because a persistent issue in Latin American media systems is instability (de Albuquerque, 2013; Hallin & Echeverría, 2025).

The model is applied to two national cases: the three consecutive Kirchnerist governments in Argentina (2003-2015) and the three consecutive Frente Amplio governments in Uruguay (2005-2020). These governments were part of the South American "left turn" at the beginning of the 21st century, when governments changed how they publicly problematized the media, which they had identified as their main opposition (Kitzberger, 2016). Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Uruguay were among these countries. Despite these similarities, the way in which they engaged with them as political actors, as well as the manner in which they appeared on the scenes, was very different. A key factor that explains both the political action and its results was the media system in each country. On this basis, we study the "negotiation of media scenes": the conflictive interaction between social actors to dispute and define communication policies and political communication. This is where their relative powers, ideologies, interests, action repertoires, and wills come into play.

The history of the media in the region shows that government media intervention policies (communication policies) are not detached from their forms of media appearance (political communication) (Fox & Waisbord, 2002) and that the scenes of big media conglomerates (political communication), in line with the tradition of state capture (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014), cannot be analyzed separately from their interests as political and economic actors (communication policies) (Kitzberger, 2023; Mastrini et al., 2021).

This article raises three central questions that consider actors' agency when they participate in the media scene, but also encompass the characteristics and constraints of national media systems.

The first question concerns the relative power of governments and big media companies, depending on how the media system is configured. The second question explores how the negotiations on political communication and communication policies between these actors are established, with political journalism and political parties also playing a role. The third question explores how governments and big media conglomerates assess how a change in the game's rules would affect them and how they would respond.

From here on, the article has four parts. The first part presents the theoretical and methodological approach. The second develops the negotiation of media scenes in Argentina and Uruguay. The third shows the form it took in each case and the factors that explain the differences. The fourth part explores the changes in each country and the usefulness of the proposed model for studying media systems from a comparative perspective, focusing on the cases and their dynamics.

#### MEDIA SYSTEMS, POLITICAL COMMUNICATION, AND COMMUNICATION POLICIES

From this point onwards, the relationship between politics and communication is analyzed through three central dimensions. The first refers to the terrain where the negotiation occurred: national media systems. The second and third are the negotiations of the media scenes themselves, which are played out in two areas in continual interaction: political communication and communication policies.

Much of the research on media and politics in the region has been heavily influenced by studies on Anglo-Saxon countries. Thus, beyond significant contributions, concerns, and empirical observations from unique cases have been transplanted (Waisbord, 2023). The model proposed here is inspired by Hallin and Mancini (2004), although it pays special attention to specific developments in the region. The challenge is important: there is still no model that works better outside the central countries. Therefore, this is not a model proposed *a priori* but emerges after examining the cases and proposing categorizations to understand their characteristics. The aim is to propose dimensions that give rise to the particularities of each system. This applies to the Latin American context, but it goes beyond it.

From there, a model is proposed to define media systems, the field –material, regulatory, cultural, economic, political– where scenes are negotiated, given that the relationship between governments and big media conglomerates is historically and geographically situated.

The rise of platforms and their dominance of the digital space (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022) has eroded much of the centrality of media and journalism in public debate (Mancini, 2020). However, studying media systems comparatively is crucial to figure out how these dynamics translate and are incorporated (Hallin, 2020), since much of politics is still shaped at the national level.

The second key issue is political communication, the conflictive space of interaction that occurs in the media arena (including traditional media, but also digital media and platforms) where different political and social actors participate to define the current juncture and its problems, and where different actors and logics of action articulate (Vommaro, 2008). This definition considers the erosion of traditional media's centrality as a public forum for expression (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). On the one hand, there is the massification of digital media and social media, where new and old ways of producing and circulating information converge and audiences are fragmented. On the other hand, based on the decision of the governments under study to reduce their participation in these spaces, to question them, and to intervene in them in different ways.

The third issue focuses on communication policies. Here we refer to two aspects. On the one hand, governments and states' regulations, measures, and actions that affect media companies as political and economic actors. On the other hand, communication policies refer to what the media do as political actors and projects. Freedman (2008) states that communication policies involve actors with diverse interests. Historically, certain private media actors have gained privileged access to capture them through agreements defined far from the public eye (Freedman, 2008). The following section explores each of these points.

#### *A model: the negotiation of media scenes*

Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose four points to define media systems: the structure of media markets, political parallelism, the professionalization of journalism, and the state's role. The model proposed here draws on some of these elements, but reconfigures them and adds others. Two major issues are examined to define media systems: the structuring of the political field and the structuring of the media field. Describing each one allows us to highlight the configuration of the actors at the beginning of the period and the constraints they faced based on the correlation of forces between them, with a more comprehensive focus on the cases and their dynamics.

The structuring of the political field focuses on two matters. On the one hand, the state's relative power over the media market. In the history of this relationship, and in its evolution and current situation. On the other hand, there is the centrality of party mediation. In Latin America, party systems, their history, and their role as political articulators vary significantly from country to country (Hallin et al., 2025). This is even clearer when considering several dictatorships that marked the region's 20th century.

The structuring of the media field explores two questions. One is the formation of major media companies, with a focus on the concentration of ownership. The other is the type of political journalism that prevails under the premise that journalism is diverse and has specific configurations, with formal and informal norms that do not replicate the same model.

As shown in Table 1, the trajectory of each dimension is reconstructed. In addition, sub-dimensions and indicators relevant to the analysis are included.

TABLE 1  
MEDIA SYSTEMS

Structure	Dimension	Sub-dimension
Political field	Relative weight of the state over the media field	Historical role of the state in the configuration of the media market Ownership and economic weight (Indicators: state ownership in the information and communication industries, state investment in relation to GDP, advertising expenditure)
	Centrality of partisan mediation	Crisis of representation in the party system Structure of the ruling party
Media field	Structure of media companies	Configuration of the big national media conglomerate Stability of ownership and editorial line
	Characteristics of political journalism	Type of journalism that prevails (more hierarchized news and ways of gaining notoriety, relationship between politicians and journalists, who appears as representing the public on set)
		Presence of <i>vedette</i> journalists
		Type of professionalization (division between opinion and information, division between commercial and journalistic areas, and ideological diversity within newsrooms)

Source: The author.

To study how the negotiation of media scenes unfolded, we examine the two areas in which it takes place: political communication and communication policies. Table 2 summarizes the dimensions to observe.

TABLE 2	
THE NEGOTIATION OF MEDIA SCENES	
Political communications	Government media appearance strategies Scenes from major media companies on national politics
Communication policies	Government policies on the media sector Political and commercial strategies of big national media companies

Source: The author.

The rise of platforms and their dominance of the digital space (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022) has eroded much of the centrality of media and journalism in public debate (Mancini, 2020). However, studying media systems comparatively is crucial to figure out how these dynamics translate and are incorporated (Hallin, 2020), since much of politics is still shaped at the national level.

The second key issue is political communication, the conflictive space of interaction that occurs in the media arena (including traditional media, but also digital media and platforms) where different political and social actors participate to define the current juncture and its problems, and where different actors and logics of action articulate (Vommaro, 2008). This definition takes into account the erosion of the centrality of traditional media as a public forum for expression (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). On the one hand, there is the massification of digital media and social media, where new and old ways of production and circulation of information converge and where audiences are fragmented. On the other hand, based on the decision of the governments under study to reduce their participation in these spaces, to question them, and to intervene in them in different ways.

The third issue focuses on communication policies. Here we refer to two aspects. On the one hand, regulations, measures, and actions taken by governments and states that affect media companies as political and economic actors. On the other hand, communication policies refer to what the media do as political actors and projects. According to Freedman (2008), communication policies involve actors with diverse

interests. In this regard, historically, certain private media actors have gained privileged access to capture them through agreements that have been defined far from the public eye (Freedman, 2008). The following section explores each of these points.

## METHODOLOGY

The strategy for reconstructing the portrayal of the media systems and negotiating scenes in Argentina and Uruguay covered various aspects. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with key actors (between 2013 and 2019) were essential: politicians, civil servants, journalists, media executives, and academics. This was complemented by documentary sources produced by these actors and a monitoring of media productions and government speeches. At the same time, special attention was given to changes in media market regulation and government intervention in the market. How governments appeared in the media was also analyzed, through the observation and systematization of the channels they favored, the connections they established with leading journalists and media companies, and the less mediated communication mechanisms they used.

A literature review and journalistic and governmental documents on media and politics accompanied this. In Uruguay, 32 interviews were conducted with key figures involved in the relationship between media and politics, while in Argentina, 25 interviews were conducted. Key informants also made contributions. In both countries, there were observations of debates at party and university venues, visits to parliament, observation of political party and government events, accompanying journalists in their political coverage, visits to digital newsrooms, newspapers, and magazines, and observation of television and radio news programs from the studio. The author's experience as a journalist in Argentina between 2004 and 2012 contributed to the work. The conflict between the government and the big national media conglomerate and its centrality in the Argentine public debate was followed by a profusion of publications, which provided many secondary sources, and was not replicated in the Uruguayan case.



Based on O'Donnell's (1994) premise that it is necessary to examine the informal institutionalization of links between actors in order to reach meaningful conclusions, the model proposed here is the result of sustained empirical work that seeks to be permeable and useful in demonstrating the consistent and dense differences between different cases, challenging the idea that Latin America has a sole media system.

The following characterization is based on fieldwork. Among the countries where the left-turn governments publicly confronted the media, we analyze the cases of Argentina and Uruguay, which at first glance appear similar: both are Southern Cone countries with historically similar levels of human development (above the Latin American average) and with similarities in the original development of their media markets. Despite this, the comparison shows that the negotiation of media scenes in both countries had marked differences, and that a central part of the explanation arises from examining the media systems.

## RESULTS: THE NEGOTIATION OF MEDIA SCENES IN ARGENTINA AND URUGUAY

This section explores each country's media systems, political communication, and communication policies to show how media scenes were negotiated. The comparative perspective demonstrates the usefulness of this model for studying issues of communication and politics in other cases and periods.

### *Media systems*

The field on which the relationship between left-wing governments and big media companies developed is characterized by sharp differences between Uruguay and Argentina.

When the study period began, the state had a significant influence on the media market in Uruguay due to its weight as an advertiser, the centrality of state investment in the economy, and, primarily, through Antel. This state-owned company was the undisputed leader of the telecommunications market, in stark contrast to Argentina, where the state's direct ownership in the communications markets was weak. Privatizing the telecommunications company in the 1990s created a duopoly in

landline telephony that retained its leadership in mobile telephony and the Internet. In both countries, the state played a key role as protector of media groups against large-scale foreign actors. Throughout history, it provided specific resources –regulations, taxes, and laws. In Argentina, the government was the leading advertiser, but in relative terms, it accounted for half as much as in Uruguay. At the same time, its impact on the overall economy was 35 % lower (see Table 3).

Concerning the centrality of party mediation, the contrast is striking (see Table 4). Since the country's inception, parties in Uruguay have structured the political preferences of the population (Chasquetti & Buquet, 2004). The crisis at the beginning of the century did not translate into a crisis of party representation, but rather into a crisis for the Colorado Party, which was in power at the time. The political alternative had already been built by another force, the Frente Amplio, an organic mass party with institutionalized mediation bodies (Pérez et al., 2020).

In contrast, political parties had historically played a minor role in Argentina due to repeated dictatorships throughout the 20th century. The 2001 crisis called into question the legitimacy of political parties. As their centrality eroded, that of other mediating bodies, such as the media and political leaders, grew. In this context, Néstor Kirchner came to power in 2003 from a faction of Peronism that he did not control (Mauro, 2018), from an informal and decentralized mass party (Levitsky, 2001).

There are also significant differences between Argentina and Uruguay in the structure of media companies (see Table 5). In Argentina, there is one large, dominant national media company, Clarín, which is the leader in various sectors –newspapers, free-to-air and pay television, radio, and Internet connection– and has grown rapidly since 1989 (Mastrini et al., 2021). In Uruguay, there is no single big national media company. There are the *Tres Grandes*, leading companies in broadcast and pay TV and radio since these markets were first set up, which act as a cartel (Buquet, 2023), but have different owners. It is a stable media landscape in terms of ownership (since the beginning of broadcasting) and editorial lines (which remain consistent). In contrast, in Argentina, editorial lines and media ownership structures are more unstable, with more changes from one period to the next.

TABLE 3  
RELATIVE WEIGHT OF THE STATE OVER THE MEDIA FIELD

Sub-dimension		Uruguay	Argentina
Historical role of the state in the configuration of the media market		Constitutive. With discretionary allocation of resources.	Constitutive. With discretionary allocation of resources.
Ownership and economic weight	State ownership in the information and communication industries	Very high. Exclusive in telecommunications. Monopoly on landline telephony and Internet. Leader in mobile telephony. Some audiovisual media.	Very weak. Not present in telecommunications. It has some audiovisual media.
	State investment in relation to GDP	25.4% (2004) - 29.8% (2019)	13.6% (2002) - 24.5% (2015)
	Advertising expenditure	18% (2010)	9% (2010)

Source: The author, based on own data and data from ECLAC, World Bank, Buquet et al. (2012) and Becerra (2011).

TABLE 4  
CENTRALITY OF PARTY MEDIATION

Sub-dimension	Uruguay	Argentina
Crisis of representation in the party system	Low. Sustained historical centrality of political parties prior to the creation of the state. Crisis of the Colorado Party.	High, but varying according to political force. Low historical centrality of parties, movementist, interrupted by dictatorships.
Structure of the ruling party	Mass-organic party. With factions and militants represented by institutionalized mediation bodies.	Internal leadership crisis. A mass, informal, and decentralized party with few institutionalized mediation mechanisms and an emerging, institutionalizing leader.

Source: The author.

The characteristics of political journalism also differ radically (see Table 6). In Uruguay, statement-based journalism prevails, placing politicians one step above journalists. Journalists do not see themselves as watchdogs of politicians, as in Argentina, but rather as those who must seek out their statements, given that politicians are the legitimate representatives of the citizenry.

In contrast, denunciation journalism prevails in Argentina: journalists see themselves as “political prosecutors” and therefore dispute the representation of society with the politicians they seek to control to expose their deviant practices (Vommaro, 2008). However, priority has often been given to the production of denunciations and the resulting scandals, rather than to the investigation and documentation needed to support accusations (Pereyra, 2013).

Thus, in Argentina, relationships are characterized more by competition, while in Uruguay, they are more cooperative (Schuliaquer & Cesar, 2024). Moreover, the tradition of partisan media in Uruguay meant that, after the end of the dictatorship, there was a push from both

TABLE 5  
STRUCTURE OF MEDIA COMPANIES

Sub-dimension	Uruguay	Argentina
Configuration of the big national media conglomerate	Three groups acting as a cartel on free-to-air and pay television. Without a presence in telecommunications, where they have divergent strategies.	A dominant national media group, leader in print, online media, audiovisual, pay TV, and telecommunications.
Stability of ownership and editorial line	High. The three actors have been leading since the beginning of broadcasting.	Low. Radical changes in ownership since 1989.

Source: The author.

companies and journalists to professionalize by distinguishing between opinion and news areas and limiting the influence of owners on content. In contrast, in Argentina, there is no clear distinction between opinion and news areas or between business and content areas. Another difference is that Argentina has a strong presence of *vedette* journalists, which is not the case in Uruguay. These *vedettes* are television and radio presenters who equate their audience success representation success, and who combine and blur the lines between information and opinion discourse (Schuliaquer & Cesar, 2024).

During the period studied, Uruguay had a state with considerable influence over the media market, controlling the leading telecommunications company, with strong political parties without a legitimacy crisis. Meanwhile, there are three large media groups with stable ownership and editorial positions that, although they tend to act as a cartel, are companies with different shareholders. At the same time, journalism puts itself one step behind politicians and seeks their statements rather than scrutinizing them.

Argentina has a strong state that allocates resources, but it is weaker than in Uruguay due to its relatively lower economic weight. In addition,

TABLE 6  
POLITICAL JOURNALISM

	Sub-dimension	Uruguay	Argentina
Statement journalism in Uruguay and denunciation journalism and opinion journalism in Argentina	More hierarchized news and ways of gaining notoriety	Statements by politicians. Government actions and party politics.	Exposing deviant practices: of politicians, of the government, of the state.
	Relationship between politicians and journalists	Cooperation. Asymmetric.	Competitive. Symmetrical.
	Who appears as representing the public on set	The government and political parties.	In dispute: journalism presents itself as representative.
Presence of <i>vedette</i> journalists		No	Yes
Type of professionalization	Division between opinion and information	Significant since redemocratization.	No. The duties overlap.
	Division between commercial and journalistic areas	Yes, although not categorically.	No
	Ideological diversity within newsrooms	High	High

Source: The author.

party centrality is weak, with a severe crisis of legitimacy. On the other hand, a large, dominant media group is a leader in various areas. The mainstream political press seeks to present itself as a watchdog of politicians through its denunciations and establishes a competitive relationship with them to represent the citizenry.

### *Political communication*

The way political communication developed under the Frente Amplio and Kirchnerist governments differed. In Uruguay, Presidents Tabaré Vázquez (2005-2010 and 2015-2020) and José Mujica (2010-2015) considered the ways in which they participated and were represented in the media acceptable or beneficial. With very different styles, they had the opportunity to decide when and how to speak and define part of the frames under which their actions would be presented. Vázquez did so through an economy of words, with few press conferences, few interviews, and carefully choosing with whom to interact in the media. Mujica, an audience success, spoke daily with different media outlets, while cultivating a privileged relationship with a handful of journalists.

Both Vázquez and Mujica were the hosts of these scenes. Both prioritized commercial media outlets with conservative editorial lines. To this end, statement journalism was central, elevating political figures while giving a reputation to journalists with access to the most prominent leaders. This allowed them to establish cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships. For these journalists, speaking frequently with the president meant “having struck oil” (interview with editor of the weekly magazine *Búsqueda*, February 2014). At the same time, presidents publicly questioned the political opposition role of these media outlets. They did not do so disruptively but appealed to the memory of the link between the Frente Amplio and private media in a country characterized by stable editorial lines and a tradition of partisan media. The interaction between governments and national media groups occurred in a context with a relatively clear distinction between companies and journalists. This was aided by the division, in practice and in the public imagination, between the opinion section –generally critical– and the news section.

In Uruguay, interaction and mutual persuasion between politicians, the media, and journalists maintained the rules of previous periods, in a context where the government had greater relative power to define the scene. Therefore, there was little incentive to change it. The various actors accepted these scenes of conflictive interaction as legitimate. The same had happened in Argentina during the administration of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007), when the government considered that it was successfully negotiating the scenes. The president decided when to speak and how, and was able to set part of the public agenda for the media to follow. Kirchner did not give on-the-record interviews or press conferences. However, he maintained frequent contact with various journalists from the most widely read commercial media outlets, especially those belonging to the Grupo Clarín. He benefited from a restoration of the government's central role in society (Pucciarelli & Castellani, 2019), in a post-crisis scenario where, in line with his growing popularity, he was portrayed as the legitimate representative of the citizenry. These were times when denunciation journalism had little presence in the commercial media. At the same time, he carried the scenes from television studios to political events, where he appeared alongside mobilized citizens, something that would become more pronounced during the administrations of Cristina Fernández (2007-2011 and 2011-2015).

In 2008, following the conflict surrounding Resolution 125,<sup>2</sup> the rules of that game changed radically. The Grupo Clarín's scenes shifted to outright opposition, proof of the historical instability of its editorial line. Cristina Fernández's government considered that it could no longer negotiate its participation in these media outlets acceptably. Thus, it abandoned its scenes and problematized Clarín as its primary opponent, constituting a critical event for the relationship between media and politics. The government mobilized alternative forms of political communication, including less mediated communication mechanisms led by the president, such as national networks, and the officialization

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<sup>2</sup> This resolution changed the withholding regime for grain exportations. The government became embroiled in a crisis of legitimacy after export sectors succeeded in bringing together a broad group of actors and managed to block the resolution in Congress (Aronskind & Vommaro, 2010).



of specific content in state media and some private media. By 2012, this would result in a divided media landscape: pro-government media on one side and opposition media on the other. The government agenda organized information in the former, but had less and less influence on the latter.

In 2012, Grupo Clarín's outright opposition intensified, characterized by "war journalism" (Sivak, 2015), when basic professional standards were disregarded and journalism reappeared as a selective watchdog, which was applied especially to the national government. To do so, he referred to the professional value of independence from political power, while delving into the lack of a clear distinction between news and opinion pieces and between owners and the news area.

Journalistic *vedettes* played a central role. Far from the statement journalism of Uruguay, they disputed the representativeness of a government they presented as illegitimate and farcical. The conglomerate nature of the big media group allowed them to sustain a narrative in which, through denunciation journalism, they produced the news (and reality) and replicated it across their various platforms. The government's refusal to interact with them meant that there was no government version of events for large sectors of society. Added to this was that, at a time of division and full employment in journalism, journalists chose to work in media outlets that were more ideologically aligned with them (interview with the editor of the *Clarín* newspaper, August 2014). Thus, the editorial line changed not only "from above" but also "from below": in newsrooms, professional mediation lost ground to the ideological homogenization of journalists.

In both Uruguay and Argentina, governments questioned the centrality of large private media companies and pointed out that their narratives were those of the status quo. At the same time, they sought to define part of the media landscape and negotiate their participation acceptably. Vázquez, Mujica, and Kirchner achieved this through the established actors' scenes: they strained the relationship between media and politics by publicly problematizing and shifting the scenes, but without breaking the game. Cristina Fernández did not achieve this; the relationship broke down after an editorial shift by the big media conglomerate (interview with the editor of the *Clarín* newspaper, July

2015). Faced with this, the government prioritized nearby spaces and renounced interacting in the Grupo Clarín's scenes.

### *Communication policies*

The communication policies of the governments of the left turn were characterized by regulatory activism that ran counter to the global context, previous neoliberal policies, and the history of regional media regulation (Badillo et al., 2015). However, the paths to these new regulations were winding and their results varied (Hallin et al., 2025), in a region where concentration is among the highest on the planet and where private-commercial systems prevail without a tradition of public media (Becerra & Mastrini, 2017).

In Uruguay, there was no radical break with the game's rules in communications policy. However, during the Frente Amplio governments, the *Tres Grandes* shifted from an offensive strategy, attempting to provide telephone and Internet services, to a defensive one, seeking to maintain their oligopolistic positions in free-to-air and pay television. Each of the *Tres Grandes* had different strategies, as they began to compete in telecommunications by either allying themselves with Antel, which still had a de facto monopoly on the Internet and landline telephony and was the leader in mobile telephony, or not (Kaplún et al., 2021).

For its part, the government moved from frustrated concessions to agreed regulation. While Vázquez's first administration attempted to involve them in a state plan to provide "triple play" services –landline telephone, pay TV, and Internet– during his second term, the approval of the Audiovisual Communication Services Act (SCA Act) and the conditions for entering the digital television market sought to provide a formal legal framework for markets where these media groups were de facto leaders.

In an unprecedented move, attempts were made to regulate the concentration of ownership and limit the terms of licenses, which until then had been "precarious and revocable" (Kaplún et al., 2021). Within this context, the government negotiated regulations informally with these actors and granted them various concessions. However, the ruling political party was decisive (Schuliaquer, 2023). On the one hand, because

it mobilized a new regulatory framework for the audiovisual market from the Legislative Branch, which was approved in 2014, although Vázquez's second administration (2015-2020) did not apply it in its fundamental aspects (Gómez, 2018). On the other hand, it prevented Antel from having these media groups as competitors in telecommunications by acting as a veto player against the possibility of them offering "triple play," as intended by Vázquez in his first presidency.

In Argentina, the big media conglomerate had different strategies. First, during Kirchner's administration, which was faced with debts that cast doubt on its sustainability, it ensured its survival with tailor-made regulations (Sivak, 2015). Then, it moved on to an offensive stage to expand into new sectors. There, it obtained government authorization for the merger of Cablevisión and Multicanal in 2007, which made it the exclusive leader in the cable market and the leading provider of fixed Internet services. However, it failed to obtain government authorization to purchase Telecom (Sivak, 2015), which was prohibited by the antitrust regulations at the time.

Radical changes followed the breakdown in relations between the government and Grupo Clarín in communication policies. These actors went from a strategic alliance to direct confrontation, each seeking to discipline the other. Although they neutralized each other on more than one occasion, neither achieved complete victory. Among the strategies mobilized by the government, which considered its survival to be at stake, some were designed to expand its communication channels. In contrast, others sought to undermine the large national media group. This led to the inclusion of a master law on the government's agenda to regulate and decentralize the audiovisual market, which was based on a project developed by civil society organizations and promoted by the president, who placed it at the center of the debate.

In both countries, the governments mobilized previously unseen decommodification agendas. They allied themselves with sectors that proposed democratizing the communications sector, which would modify regulations inherited from the last dictatorships. However, the priority was to guarantee governability and the construction of power. Although the governments strained their ties with the media from the outset, they sought to avoid legislation that would affect the big players

in the sector. They foresaw this as an issue with a political cost they preferred not to pay.

However, these bills appeared and became law. In Argentina's case, this happened after the breaking point. In Uruguay, it was mobilized by the political party as part of its program and not because of a critical situation. As they had predicted, the legislation was a peak of tension in the dispute between the government and the media conglomerates. In that sense, it had a symbolic impact on Grupo Clarín and the *Tres Grandes* as they were regulated and singled out as concentrated actors. In Argentina, the practices and history of the big media conglomerate became the focus of public debate. However, the most significant economic impact on them came from executive decisions made by the government. In Argentina, for example, it did not help Grupo Clarín to enter Telecom or buy the television rights to national football, which was broadcast free of charge on public television. In Uruguay, by not allowing the *Tres Grandes* to enter the telecommunications market and compete with Antel.

### *Media systems and negotiation in Argentina and Uruguay*

The negotiation of media scenes differed between countries. In Uruguay, there was no break with the game's rules, while in Argentina there was a radical change. This can be explained by the three questions asked at the beginning about media systems and the dynamics of political processes. This paper answers these questions for Argentina and Uruguay, but they can be used to investigate other cases. The questions are: a) What is the relative weight of governments and big media companies in defining the media scene? b) How are the negotiating tables configured, and how do big media companies and governments interact with journalism and political forces? c) How do the government and big media companies perceive that changing the game's rules would affect them?

#### A. The relative weight of the actors in defining the scene

In Uruguay, the state's power—due to its economic importance, presence in telecommunications, and protection against foreign capital—is clearly greater than that of media groups. Therefore, governments have more opportunities to impose their conditions. The main communica-

tions policy of progressive governments was to maintain Antel's monopoly and not to share it. They did not need regulatory change, but rather a *de facto* policy that went against Uruguayan history.

In contrast, in Argentina, big media companies have a dominant position in different media outlets. At the outset, its relative power over the media was greater than that of the government. For its part, the state, which played a crucial role in allocating resources, had no direct ownership of telecommunications, and its relative weight was weakened. At the same time, a short memory indicated that good relations with Grupo Clarín were essential to ensure governability. Restoring legitimacy, centered on constituent leadership, increased the government's power. The state's influence over the economy had also grown, as had the Grupo Clarín, supported by the Kirchner administration's communication policies. Thus, by the time the public confrontation between these actors took place, the relative powers within the media system were more evenly balanced than at the beginning.

#### B. The articulation between actors and negotiation tables

In Uruguay, mainstream journalism considers politicians to be the legitimate representatives of the citizenry and the ones to consult to make sense of current problems. This "statement journalism" implies that the tension between the representation of reality and the political representation of the citizenry is less pronounced than in other countries, and that politicians and journalists establish relationships of mutual convenience (rather than competition). What politicians say and do is particularly hierarchized. Therefore, it is easier for governments to impose different conditions on those scenes. At the same time, those professional standards are accompanied by practices establishing an organizational distinction between information and opinion and between the commercial and journalistic spheres. Moreover, political parties select the prominent leaders. In Argentina, the same question was articulated differently. Denunciation journalism prevails, presenting itself as a comptroller of politicians and the government. If, at first, the good relationship between the government and the big media conglomerate had been accompanied by the suspension of denunciation journalism, after the breaking point, it reappeared in contexts where media owners

increased their influence over news content. Journalism as a professional group did not impose limits on these interventions to protect its practices.

On the other hand, in the media near the government, denunciation journalism changed its target to corporations rather than political leaders. The lack of centrality of party mediation allowed the ruling party to gather around the presidential figure, and the fragmentation of the opposition political forces left a vacant space that other social actors filled. Since 2012, the Grupo Clarín, some *vedette* journalists, and the logic of denunciation journalism have been among the leading articulators of this opposition.

The negotiation tables were different in each country. In Uruguay, neither the government nor the media groups can change the rules of that relationship on its own. On the one hand, the government needs its party and its legislators to move forward with some regulations. On the other, because the large groups had different strategies, while professional values limited their influence on journalism. In contrast, in Argentina, both on the government side and on the side of the big media conglomerate, a single actor had the power to change significant parts of the scene. Due to its exclusionary weight and ability to influence journalistic work, the president did not need to consult with his political force, which depended on him, and the large media group did not need to ally with other media outlets.

### C. Perception about the possibility of changing the rules

In Uruguay, governments managed to negotiate media coverage in a profitable way. Meanwhile, media groups, which perceived themselves as weaker than the government, managed to negotiate regulatory policies and preserve the status quo. Given this, the actors had no interest in breaking the relationship. At the same time, the stability of the actors allowed public criticism between them to remain within parameters consistent with history. In other words, stability is an important explanatory factor (Albuquerque, 2013).

In Argentina, during Kirchner's presidency, the government received favorable coverage in the Grupo Clarín's media outlets, and the group secured a law from the state that allowed it to continue operating

and a merger that increased its economic clout. After the presidential changeover in 2007, Grupo Clarín changed how it portrayed the government in its media outlets. It intended to buy Telecom through particularistic negotiations of the Executive that did not materialize. As it perceived itself to be stronger than the government, it radicalized its opposition from its platforms, which became dependent on its political strategies. The modification was part of both the rhetoric of independence from political power and the instability of the editorial line of the Argentine media and the history of Clarín.

Faced with this public rupture, the government considered its survival to be at stake and radicalized its public confrontation, something consistent with the reformist will it had expressed in other areas and with the strengthening of the state's influence. It adopted an offensive strategy to counterbalance the Grupo Clarín, which included regulatory changes, public problematization, prioritization of nearby media scenes, and promotion (via state resources) of other media actors. This led to a divided media scene where the representation of reality and the political representation of citizens overlapped to the point of confusion and varied radically between the Kirchnerist and anti-Kirchnerist poles.

#### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS ON MEDIA SYSTEMS AND THEIR STUDY

This article showed that, beyond the willingness of the left-turn governments to change course, the possibility of setting rules for the negotiation of scenes depended mainly on the media system, which affected them in three ways.

One is the tools they had institutionally, depending on the configuration of the media system. Those that existed previously (such as direct ownership of the media, its weight on the national economy, or the centrality of other mediating actors) and those they created (such as the growth of state intervention in the economy, or new regulations).

Second, based on the correlation of symbolic and material forces vis-à-vis big private media companies. In both cases, private media companies went from seeking discretionary state concessions to trying to keep their properties as they were. However, how they did this differed based on their power and what they could do in each country.

Third, how the dispute between governments and big business changed over time and interacted with other actors, such as political forces and journalism. In other words, with the different dimensions of the media system.

Since media systems influence the political process and are also influenced by it, it is pertinent to conclude by examining how they were reconfigured when the governments of the left turn were replaced. The characteristics marked in bold in Table 7 are those that changed during that period and which, due to space constraints, are explored in greater depth for the subsequent period. Studying the dynamics of the media system makes it possible to understand them at each historical moment and to compare not only between cases, but also between periods within countries.

In Argentina, by 2015, the state had a greater relative influence on the media than before, and party representation had been realigned around the polarization between Kirchnerism and anti-Kirchnerism (Kitzberger, 2023). The right-wing coalition Cambiemos emerged from these circumstances, which won the 2015 elections. In the media field, there were also numerous changes. The large dominant group remained the same, Grupo Clarín, although its agenda still included the pending acquisition of Telecom. At the same time, new owners close to the Kirchnerist government had emerged, whose survival would depend on new business models or their connection to the state. In addition, there was external pluralism in the system, as political polarization went hand in hand with polarization in communications and an increasing partisanship in editorial lines, generating path dependence.

The denunciation journalism typical of Argentina became “war journalism” and selective watchdog journalism, which did not ensure counterpoint or newsworthiness for information inconsistent with the political alignment within the divided media scene. The growing homogenization of ideology within newsrooms, coupled with the increased influence of owners over content, made it easier to instrumentalize the media. This was even easier amid the massification of digital media, where actors with other logics dispute the centrality of news media.

Although it exceeds the studied period, the media system explains part of the dynamics that took place in the negotiation of scenes during



TABLE 7 ARGENTINE NATIONAL MEDIA SYSTEM (2015)		
Political field	Relative weight of the state	The state played a constitutive role in the media landscape by supporting certain private groups. <b>A reinforced state (also in the media).</b>
	Centrality of partisan mediation	<b>Polarization, “kirchnerism” &amp; “antikirchnerism”.</b> Low historical centrality.
Media field	Structure of media companies	<b>A dominant media group seeking government benefits in telecommunications.</b> Unstable structure and editorial line. <b>New owners, many linked to the state.</b> <b>External pluralism.</b>
	Characteristics of political journalism	Denunciation journalism. <b>“War journalism” and selective watchdog.</b> <b>Massification of digital and social media.</b> Presence of <i>vedette</i> journalists. <b>Increased influence of owners over the work of journalists.</b> <b>Less ideological diversity in newsrooms.</b>

Source: The author.

Mauricio Macri’s presidency (2015-2019). In political communication, the government was treated particularly well in scenes from Grupo Clarín and other commercial media. A selective watchdog was applied to the previous government, which was already in opposition, through denunciation journalism (Schuliaquer & Cesar, 2024). Government oversight was significantly reduced, several media outlets previously close to Kirchnerism changed hands or ceased publication, attempts were made to close some public media outlets, and others suffered policy drift (Kitzberger & Schuliaquer, 2022).

In a system with external pluralism, asymmetry grew significantly in favor of pro-government or anti-Kirchnerist media. In terms of communications policy, the Grupo Clarín managed to buy Telecom and become the leader in telecommunications as well, thanks to tailor-made legal decisions. Thus, Clarín achieved a concentration at the national level, between media and telecommunications, that is unmatched in the Americas. Along these lines, the Audiovisual Communications Services Law was amended in its anti-concentration articles, a direct benefit to big media companies.

TABLE 8  
URUGUAYAN MEDIA SYSTEM (2020)

Political field	Relative weight of the state	A centralized state, leader in telecommunications, and a low-intensity neoliberalism. <b>Antel strengthened by its investments and growth.</b>
	Centrality of partisan mediation	Sustained historical centrality of political parties. <b>Emergence of outsiders, but far from being dominant.</b>
Media field	Structure of media companies	Three leading partner companies <b>seeking to participate in telecommunications, emergence of new owners.</b> Stable structure. <b>Massification of digital and social media.</b>
	Characteristics of political journalism	Statement journalism. No <i>vedette</i> . A clear division between informative, commercial, and opinion areas. Ideological diversity in newsrooms.

Source: The author.

Concerning the Uruguayan national media system encountered by Luis Lacalle Pou’s Multicolor Coalition government (2020-2025), the changes were fewer. In terms of the relative weight of the state, the most significant change was the strengthening of Antel, which saw a significant increase in its revenues. Its investments in areas where it was monopolistic or dominant allowed it to increase its distance from those

seeking to compete with it (Beltramelli, 2017). Contrary to historical logic, the *Tres Grandes* did not capture a newly emerging communications business (Buquet, 2023). The high centrality of partisan mediation continued, and there were no major changes in journalism.

During Lacalle's administration, there were both continuities and changes. The most significant change concerned Antel. In its final year, the administration authorized the *Tres Grandes* to offer pay TV and Internet connection as a consortium. Two years earlier, the administration had authorized the three companies to offer data transmission services. It also allowed them to use Antel's network for free, which had cost one billion dollar (Buquet, 2023). The most important players in the media structure gained advantages from the free privatization of state assets to compete with Antel (which cannot offer pay TV). This is a historic policy legacy of Latin American communication, combining capture and particularism. It further proves the relevance of studying communication policies and political communication together.

Regarding theoretical and methodological contributions, this article proposes a model to characterize media systems, without taking central countries as the norm, focusing on national cases and their dense trajectories, to make them comparable and explore their similarities and particularities. To this end, it focuses on political processes, which are studied through the negotiation of media scenes. Inspired by the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004), other dimensions and components are proposed, and the focus is placed on the structure of the political and media fields. This classification is fundamental, as media and political issues are always historically, territorially, and socially situated.

Another theoretical and methodological contribution involves studying the negotiation of media scenes and analyzing media systems, political communication, and communication policies simultaneously, a model that could be replicated for other cases and research. The empirical evidence shows the relevance of working jointly on three issues often studied separately, even though they are mutually dependent. This was clear in the cases under study, where the dynamics of political communication and communication policies were strongly influenced by media systems, while the disputes and links that arose in political communication and communication policies affected and (re)configured media systems.

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