

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS
IN LATIN AMERICA:
A Thirty-Year Survey

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Freedom of the press has long been considered a critical requirement for the maintenance of democratic government. Most previous writings on the position of the press around the world, however, have argued that restrictions on the press have become generally more numerous in recent years and, hence, press freedom levels have been declining over time. Merrill et al., in their survey of national press systems, note that "recent surveys and studies tend to indicate that in many ways freedom of the press is eroding slowly in a worldwide context. Press laws are proliferating, sanctions of many kinds are growing up to thwart the free workings of the press, and press councils and other groups are moving in to restrict activities of the press."¹ Survey articles on the state of the press in Africa and in Asia² reach the same conclusion for those regions, and a recent report of the prestigious Inter-American Press Association argued that press freedom in the western hemisphere is under greater threat than ever before.³ Even in some advanced western nations the press has come under attack by governmental officials, as is evident in the United States with both the Nixon administration's antipress activities as well as recent court rulings that limit press coverage of legal proceedings and the secrecy of newsmen's sources and working materials.

Despite the widely held view that press freedom levels have been declining throughout the world, no systematic empirical research has yet demonstrated the actual extent of the decline. The problem, of course, has been an absence of data on press freedom levels at different time points to support longitudinal comparisons. The best known cross-national analyses of press freedom levels, by Nixon and Lowenstein,⁴ both generated data for the early to middle 1960s, so they were not able to make long-term comparisons. Most other comparative research on this topic, as by Nam and Oh and by Jackman,⁵ relies on secondary analysis of Nixon's data. Furthermore, while the International Press Institute and the Inter-American Press Association regularly survey press freedom levels in the world and the western hemisphere, respectively, their surveys are not structured as systematically as a social scientist would prefer. That is, neither of these surveys discriminates degrees of press freedom as extensively as did Nixon and Lowenstein.

For Latin America, at least, there is an alternative source of data that allows a long-term assessment of the argument that press freedom levels have been in decline. Employing those data, we will examine post-World War II trends in press freedom in Latin America and comment upon the implications of those trends for the future of press freedom in that region.

THE PRESS FREEDOM INDICES

For this analysis we will rely on indices of press freedom in twenty Latin American nations coded at five year intervals for the period 1945–75. These figures are taken from regular surveys of Latin America area experts by Russell Fitzgibbon and Kenneth Johnson.⁶ In each survey individual scholars were asked to rate each nation's press freedom (as well as a number of other attributes) as "excellent," "good," "average," "poor," or "none." These individual codings were assigned the numbers 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 and then accumulated and averaged to yield scores at each year scaled onto a comparable range of 10 to 50.

It is important to note that these indices of press freedom rest on the distinction between authoritarian and libertarian views of the press.⁷ That is, they assess the extent of domestic governmental constraints in the form of censorship, persecution of editors, and the like, and the extent to which the media are permitted to critique the government. While the degree of concentration of ownership and the extent of foreign media penetration are relevant to a broad view of press freedom, our data do not address these latter issues.

The procedures of the Fitzgibbon-Johnson survey are generally comparable to those of Nixon and Lowenstein, but their respondents are not strictly press experts. Consequently, we were concerned with the validity of the indices and sought to test it before proceeding with the analysis. At 1965 we intercorrelated the Fitzgibbon-Johnson scores with those produced by Nixon for the same year relying on panels of press experts. The Pearson correlation was 0.94, reflecting exceptional agreement for judgmentally coded data. At 1975 we intercorrelated the Fitzgibbon-Johnson scores with a trichotomous press freedom index derived from the 1975 annual conference report of the Inter-American Press Association.⁸ The correlation in this instance was 0.68, again reflecting high agreement. The relatively lower correlation here is probably partially attributable to the simpler classifications made by the IAPA. These tests of convergent validity indicate that the Fitzgibbon-Johnson data are comparable to similar data collected from actual press experts. While we cannot be certain that the scores would be comparable in all the other survey years, our evidence from two different timepoints should strengthen confidence.⁹

PRESS FREEDOM TRENDS

As evidence of long-term changes in press freedom levels, the following table reports the ratings of Latin American nations for all the surveys between 1945 and 1975. The data are categorized such that original averaged scores of 46–50

are coded "excellent," 36–45 as "good," 26–35 as "average," 16–25 as "poor," and 10–15 as "none." Examination of the terminal years in the table offers strong support for the secular decline thesis. Between the first and last surveys there is a significant shift of countries from higher to lower scores. The numbers of countries at the endpoints of the scale are completely reversed with four scoring "excellent" and one "none" at 1945, while only one scores "excellent" and four "none" at 1975. Furthermore, in 1945 eight nations were coded in the good to excellent range, whereas by 1975 that number had been halved. These results are even more discouraging when one considers that two nations in the excellent-good range at 1945—Chile and Cuba—end up with scores in the "none" category at 1975. The table offers specific empirical evidence, then, for the argument that press freedom levels have shown a secular decline in post-World War II Latin America.

While the preceding discussion highlights long-term changes in press freedom, there is a sense in which it oversimplifies the underlying dynamics of the process. If one examines the year-by-year press freedom scores for each of the twenty nations individually, there are some important differences in the cross-time patterns. Nine of the nations—Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Paraguay—have roughly stable scores throughout all of the surveys. That is, their scores fall within the same category over time or they fluctuate only between adjacent categories. Of these nine nations only Costa Rica scores consistently at very high levels throughout the time period, falling as low as the "good" category in only one survey (that for 1970). Of the remaining nations, only Mexico is consistently rated in the "good" category. For these nine nations, then, there has been little significant change in press freedom over time and most have been stable at low to average levels.

The other eleven nations reveal rather unstable patterns when their scores are viewed longitudinally. Among these, three different patterns of press freedom changes are evident. In Chile, Cuba, Haiti, Panama, and Uruguay, what appear to have been relatively stable systems for several years suffered a single change in government or government policy that resulted in long-term downturns in press freedom levels. Unfortunately, as well, all these nations except Haiti had been at relatively high press freedom levels before the downturn.

A second group of "unstable" nations—Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Peru—exhibit marked swings up and down during the 1945–75 period. Despite this fluctuation, none of these four nations is scored at 1975 very far from its 1945 rating. Among these four nations only Colombia has stabilized a relatively free press system after prior instability (scoring in the "good" range since 1960).

Finally, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela exhibit longitudinal instability but show notable long-term increases in press freedom despite the instability. After the 1960 survey (and the end of the Trujillo era) the Dominican Republic rose from the category of no press freedom to the "average" level. Venezuela moved after the 1955 survey (and the end of the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in 1958) from consistently "poor" to consistently "good" scores.

It is important to observe these historical patterns because they describe

TABLE 1 *Press Freedom Ratings for Latin America, 1945–1975*

| Press Freedom Level | 1945 | 1950 | 1955 | 1960 | 1965 | 1970 | 1975 |
|---------------------|--|--|---|--|--|--|---|
| Excellent | Chile Colombia Costa Rica Uruguay | Cuba | Chile Costa Rica Uruguay | Argentina Chile Costa Rica Uruguay | Chile Costa Rica Uruguay | None | Costa Rica |
| Good | Argentina Cuba Mexico Panama | Brazil Chile Costa Rica Ecuador Mexico Panama Uruguay | Brazil Panama Mexico | Brazil Colombia Ecuador Mexico Panama Peru Venezuela | Argentina Brazil Colombia Mexico Panama Peru Venezuela | Chile Colombia Costa Rica Mexico Uruguay Venezuela | Colombia Mexico Venezuela |
| Average | Ecuador Guatemala Peru Venezuela | Colombia Guatemala | Cuba Ecuador El Salvador Guatemala Haiti Honduras | Bolivia El Salvador Guatemala Honduras | Bolivia Dom. Rep. Ecuador El Salvador Guatemala Honduras Nicaragua | Argentina Bolivia Dom. Rep. Ecuador El Salvador Guatemala Honduras Panama Peru | Argentina Dom. Rep. Ecuador El Salvador Panama Uruguay |
| Poor | Bolivia Brazil El Salvador Haiti Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay | Argentina Bolivia El Salvador Haiti Honduras Nicaragua Paraguay Peru Venezuela | Bolivia Colombia Nicaragua Paraguay Peru Venezuela | Cuba Haiti Nicaragua | Paraguay | Brazil Nicaragua Paraguay | Bolivia Brazil Guatemala Honduras Nicaragua Peru |
| None | Dom. Rep. | Dom. Rep. | Argentina Dom. Rep. | Dom. Rep. Paraguay | Cuba Haiti | Cuba Haiti | Chile Cuba Haiti Paraguay |

the dynamics of press system changes more completely than does mere examination of the 1945 and 1975 surveys. Nonetheless, nations with similar longitudinal patterns do not necessarily share similar causes of press system change. One might, for example, assume initially that the relatively unstable nations have also experienced the most unstable domestic politics. Bearing in mind the subjectivity of such comparisons, this conclusion would seem only partially correct. The four nations with literally “unstable” patterns of press freedom—Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Peru—have probably experienced some of the most violent and conflictual politics in post-World War II Latin America. Yet,

most of the nations with relatively stable press systems have also experienced multiple military coups, authoritarian governments, or both—the exceptions being Costa Rica and Mexico. The major difference between these two groups of nations may be that political instability in the set with stable press systems has typically meant the replacement of one relatively authoritarian regime with another. On the other hand, in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Peru there have been some constitutional governments in between periods of military or authoritarian rule. In Argentina periods of constitutional government have been admittedly brief, but the 1958–63 Frondizi administration was one of those and explains the high press freedom score in 1960. For most of the remainder of the post-World War II period Argentina has, of course, been dominated by Peronism or by military backed opponents of Perón.

Among those nations evidencing absolute increases or decreases in press freedom, there has also been a diversity of experience. Of those showing a single *decline*, Chile, Panama, and Uruguay experienced military coups against constitutional, relatively democratic governments. In Cuba and Haiti dictatorial or military regimes were replaced with eventually more authoritarian communist and dictatorial governments, respectively (following Castro's overthrow of the Batista regime in 1959 and Duvalier's consolidation of power after 1957). Finally, the press freedom *increases* in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela have arisen under roughly stable semidemocratic politics succeeding periods of military and dictatorial rule. Yet, the military retains important behind-the-scenes political influence in both countries, and their history of instability is hardly auspicious for the future. The intervention of the military into the Dominican Republic's 1978 presidential election attests to the fragility of the democratic formula in that nation. While the current political systems in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela may become institutionalized with time, neither has yet faced a serious test of durability.

IMPLICATIONS

While it may not elucidate the causes of press system changes, examination of the preceding temporal patterns does suggest several conclusions regarding future prospects for press freedom in Latin America. First, those nations which have exhibited secular changes in press freedom have mostly experienced declines; only two have made long-term improvements. Thus, the recent historical record offers little evidence upon which to base hopes for upturns in the immediate future. These data appear to support Nam and Oh's contention that press freedom may simply not be compatible with the development efforts of Third World nations.

Just as the character of press freedom *changes* supports pessimistic conclusions, so does the evidence for press freedom *stability* in several Latin American nations. All but two of the nine nations showing long-term stability were at average to poor press freedom levels. Only one of all twenty countries remained at a consistently high level. Thus, most of those nations which have developed relatively consistent political formulas have done so with authoritarian regimes.

To the extent that the political systems of these nations remain stable in the future, the opportunities for expanded press freedom appear slim.

Finally, the remaining nations which exhibited longitudinal *instability* in government control of the press do not indicate a significant likelihood of permanent increases either. Many of these nations have exhibited "praetorian" political strife¹⁰ involving violent political conflict and the direct involvement of the military in politics. As long as politics remains conflictual in such nations, the prospects for extended civil liberties will be low. Additionally, lengthy praetorian strife tends to institutionalize military involvement in politics. Military regimes have, of course, been the most egregious abusers of civil rights in Third World nations.¹¹ Of the "unstable" nations only Colombia has been able to effectuate a relatively free press system subsequently—and that development has gone hand in hand with civilian control of the military. Overall, then, there is little in the experience of these nations to warrant optimism for the future of press freedom in Latin America. There may be occasional swings toward toleration as one regime replaces another, but the long-run prospects for most would seem to be for another downturn given the absence of a consensual political heritage. Also, if political stability is achieved in such nations, it may be of the relatively authoritarian character demonstrated by the nine nations with stable press systems described earlier.

CONCLUSIONS

This brief paper has sought to fill a gap in our knowledge of comparative press freedom. While many observers have decried the world-wide growth of restrictions on the press, none has offered systematic data on the extent of such changes for specific nations. The evidence presented here for the principal nations of Latin America for a thirty year period allows one to chart the progress of individual countries throughout the post-World War II era. More important, on the basis of these data one can arrive at some informed speculations about the future of the press in Latin America. Unfortunately, all our speculations based on this evidence are pessimistic.

NOTES

1. John C. Merrill, Carter R. Bryan, and Marvin Alisky, *The Foreign Press* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2d ed., 1970), p. 4.
2. Alhaji Babatundi Jose, "Press Freedom in Africa," *African Affairs* 74 (July 1975):255–62; Mori Kyoza, "Freedom of the Press in Asia," *Japan Quarterly* 22 (Apr.-June 1975):119–25.
3. *New York Times*, 21 Oct. 1975, p. 34.
4. Raymond B. Nixon, "Factors Related to Freedom in National Press Systems," *Journalism Quarterly* 37 (Winter 1960):13–28, and "Freedom in the World's Press: A Fresh Appraisal with New Data," *Journalism Quarterly* 42 (Winter 1965):3–14, 118–19; Ralph L. Lowenstein, "Press Freedom as a Political Indicator," in H. D. Fischer and J. C. Merrill (eds.), *International Communication* (New York: Hasting House, 1970), pp. 136–37.
5. Sunwoo Nam and Inhwan Oh, "Press Freedom: Function of Subsystem Autonomy,

- Antithesis of Development," *Journalism Quarterly* 50 (Winter 1973):744–50; Robert W. Jackman, "On the Relation between Economic Development and Democratic Performance," *American Journal of Political Science* 17 (Aug. 1973):611–21.
6. For a compendium of the survey data collected to that point and a guide to the original Fitzgibbon and Johnson articles, see Kenneth F. Johnson, "Measuring the Scholarly Image of Latin American Democracy, 1945–1970," in James W. Wilkie (ed.), *Statistical Abstract of Latin America* 17 (Los Angeles, Calif.: UCLA Latin American Center, 1976), pp. 347–65. For the 1975 survey data, see Kenneth F. Johnson, "Scholarly Images of Latin American Political Democracy in 1975," *LARR* 11, no. 2 (1976):129–40.
 7. Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).
 8. Reported in the *New York Times*, 26 Oct. 1975, p. 14.
 9. We should point out that there remain potential limitations on the reliability and validity of these expert-judges data. No systematic analysis has tested the accuracy of such expert evaluations of national attributes. Even more notable is the fact that the extent of expert agreement has not been satisfactorily described for the Fitzgibbon-Johnson data (by reporting measures of dispersion of responses as well as the usual measures of central tendency). Nevertheless, our independent tests of convergent validity lend support to the quality of the press freedom indices used in this paper.
 10. For a discussion of "praetorian" political conflict, see Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 192–263.
 11. For empirical evidence on this point, see R. D. McKinlay and A. S. Cohan, "Performance and Instability in Military and Nonmilitary Regime Systems," *American Political Science Review* 70 (Sept. 1976):850–64.