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Americas - Chile

Fighting for change

Citizen activism challenges protected media oligopoly

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"A new Chile is born," said President Sebastián Piñera as he personally welcomed 33 miners at the surface after their spectacular rescue from a collapsed mine in the Atacama desert 10 months ago. The country has indeed changed since then but not as La Moneda palace's current occupant expected.

Students are staging massive [protests](#) against an inegalitarian and expensive education system. Civil society groups and ecologists have been campaigning against the HydroAysén dam project, with some success on the legal front. Miners still have to endure terrible conditions and still get paid badly, but they will be staging angry celebrations on the first anniversary of the rescue of "the 33." In the south, the Mapuche indigenous minority is winning new support for its land and cultural demands. In Santiago, students have staged several occupations of *Chilevisión*, a TV station that Piñera owned before he became president. And despite police repression, there have been more than 500 protests marches in the capital alone since the start of the year.

During a visit to Chile in June for the 20th anniversary of community radio station [Radio Tierra](#), Reporters Without Borders saw how the issue of news and information is playing a central role in this upsurge of citizen unrest. Participants in online, community and alternative media, representatives of civil society groups and foreign journalists all see the protests as a challenge to a political, economic and media system inherited from the Pinochet years. During the last 20 years of rule by the Concert of Parties for Democracy, media ownership continued to be concentrated in very few hands, hindering pluralism and leading to conflicts of interest. Is the media oligopoly about to be broken?

Concert and concentration

Cause, *Análisis*, *Apsi*, *Fortín Mapocho*, *La Época* – these names do not mean much to the generation of students now on the streets. These magazines nonetheless played a major role in the advent of a new era, the 1988 referendum that ended the dictatorship and opened the way for the Concert of Parties for Democracy, a coalition of Christian Democratic and centre-left parties, to come to power two years later. Founded on the basis of the 1987 campaign for a "No" vote to Pinochet and backed by the then dissident press, the coalition finally put an end to 17 years of direct censorship. It was a great achievement, but many say it was not enough.

Former *Cause* journalist Francisco Martorell, vice-president of the College of Journalists from 2006 to 2008 and now editor of *El Periodista*, a monthly with a print-run of 12,000 copies and a well-known [online version](#), is very critical of the Concert's 20-year record.

"*Cause*, *Fortín* and the other magazines of that tendency survived for a while thanks to the external aid that was organized under the dictatorship. After 1990, the media ceased to be a priority for the government, which regarded the return to democracy as a given and never touched the system of subsidies established under Pinochet. This system, which had resulted in the disappearance of the opposition press, killed if off again after the return to democracy, although it had just barely been revived. To cap it all, there are now fewer print media in Chile than there were at the end of the dictatorship!"

The Chilean media have been characterized since then by an extreme concentration of ownership. One example is the Spanish media group Prisa (publisher of the Madrid-based *El País* newspaper), which owns nearly 60 per cent of Chile's radio stations. But the leading cases are the two national media oligopolies – the *El Mercurio* group, publisher of the daily *El Mercurio*, and Copesa, owner of the daily *La Tercera* and the leading magazine publisher. These

two media conglomerates were the sole beneficiaries of the subsidy system established under the dictatorship, worth 5 million dollars a year, and have continued to be its exclusive recipients since 1990, leaving the rest of the media to face the vagaries of the market without any form of cushion.

Mauricio Weibel, now the correspondent of several foreign news media, has participated in five attempted media projects in recent years. "Without the Internet, it would be completely impossible to launch any kind of alternative media," he said. "Distributing newspapers is already difficult because of this country's very special geography. To print a newspaper, you have to turn to the oligopolies. And it is the same for distribution, because they own the sales outlets. As for radio stations, they are owned by a private sector which in this country is completely indistinguishable from the financial sector." One that decides how the much-needed advertising is allocated, without any public oversight.

Long wait for radio stations

"If this model is now being questioned, it is partly because Sebastián Piñera's government, which has part of its origins in the pro-Pinochet right and is closely linked to the dominant economic groups, is interested solely in maintaining it," a journalist told us. There could be a long wait for the many community media, which still lack funding and legal status. Hopes could nonetheless be better founded now than during the Concert era in 1994, when a law on low-power radio stations was adopted at the time of the succession from President Patricio Aylwin to Eduardo Frei. This law, the first of its kind in Chile, legalized community-type radio stations with a transmitting power limited to 1 watt. It was passed despite strong resistance from the conservative opposition, which wanted to penalize such broadcasting as illegal.

During Michelle Bachelet's presidency (2006-2010), a new community and citizen services law was adopted that increased the permitted transmitting power to 25 watts, or 40 watts in the case of radio stations located in remote communities, including indigenous communities, in order to comply with Inter-American legal standards on promoting minority cultures. The new law also introduced two new elements. One was the need to be a "civil society organization" in order to be able to operate such a radio station under this law. The other was the right to broadcast advertising, but only for companies physically present in the area covered by the station's signal. Maria Pia Matta, co-director of *Radio Tierra* and international president of the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), criticises the Concert for passing this law, whose promulgation is still pending.

"The notion of a limited geographical area won out as a criteria over a clear definition of what a community radio station or media is," she said. "The law talks of 'civil society organizations' without any precision. They could be a protestant churches or businesses." The number of community radio stations in Chile depends on whether you use the new law's criteria or AMARC's, which excludes stations that do political or religious proselytism. If you use the first, it is 350. If the second, 30. Matta is extremely critical of "the major error made by Michelle Bachelet in 2008 with the so-called 'fast' law, one which was promulgated and which prioritized the granting of perpetual frequencies to commercial radio stations."

Community radio stations, which are in worse shape after the February 2010 earthquake despite their proven usefulness during local emergency situations, are also the big losers from a decree signed by the current president in October 2010, which allows the redistribution of certain broadcast frequencies without setting aside any for media that is too small to compete in any bidding.

Mapuche taboo

"Are we witnessing a political upheaval?" asks Manuel Fuentes, the Santiago bureau chief of the Spanish news agency *EFE*. "It is clearly too soon to say. But it is obvious that the current disputes over educational and environmental issues are running up against a lopsided and brutal economic model. There is an increase in awareness and even an emerging citizenship that was reined in for a long time because of the trauma left by the dictatorship." And, logically, it is where this grim heritage from the past is felt most that this sudden surge has been most marked. In Araucanía, the ancestral land of the Mapuche.

There are long-standing ecological and political disputes between the Mapuche indigenous communities and agro-industrial groups linked above all to the powerful Matte and Angelini families. These families, which made much of their money from logging and fish farming, are reputed nowadays to possess 3 million hectares of land, five times more than the land still available to the Mapuche. The direct influence of their business interests accounts for the almost complete lack of coverage of Araucanía's conflicts in the mainstream media. In fact,

there is still an all-out taboo on media coverage of this subject, which the [HydroAysén affair](#), a national issue, is only now barely beginning to lift.

Charges were finally withdrawn on 22 June against Marcela Rodríguez, a young photographer for the [Mapuexpress](#) website who was arrested during an anti-HydroAysén demonstration in May. But would this have happened if the opposition to the dam project had been confined to Araucanía? It is a fair question, especially as it was around this time that documentary filmmaker Elena Varela's film *Newen Mapuche*, about the Mapuche people's land claims, was refused distribution by CORFO, a public agency that supports film production, on the grounds that it promoted a "negative image of Araucanía." The now very discouraged Varela was arrested while shooting the film in 2008 and it was only two years later that she was finally acquitted of "links with a terrorist enterprise," a charge that is a hangover from the dictatorship. Introduced under a 1984 law, the charge is nowadays applied only to Mapuche activists.

"Nonetheless, the protests about HydroAysén have also introduced the Mapuche issue into the public debate," Varela said. "It was only at the last moment that the public became aware of this hydroelectric project's existence, after the contracts had been signed. People discovered that the facts had been hidden from them for a long time, that there was no real access to information."

Alternative roads

Her view is shared by Flavia Liberona, an environmental activist who has been running the non-profit Terram for four years. "Most of the citizens who demonstrated against HydroAysén in Santiago did not know the details of the project and were not familiar with those remote southern regions where the dams were to be built. It is a sign that a new generation of media or information circuits is emerging."

Created as an NGO in 1997, Terram publishes a [daily bulletin](#) monitoring environmental issues that range from fishing and biodiversity to mining. Liberona says it now has 4,000 subscribers and is beginning to be seen as an authoritative source, even by the authorities. "As a result of the scale of the opposition to HydroAysén, a senator from the Aysén region, Antonio Horvath, adopted an ecologist stance although he is from the conservative right. Such support has played no small part in the Puerto Montt appeal court decision on 20 June to suspend the project. In other words, everything is up for debate again."

"Existing on the margins has ended up bringing us together in an alliance," said Pia Figueroa, the head of [Pressenza](#), an online agency that specializes in covering conflict and promoting non-violence. "The support of our external networks is decisive in the process of building alternative forms of communication."

Mauricio Weibel would not disagree. Weibel is currently working on creating a South American Union of Foreign Media Representatives, with an inaugural congress to be held in Santiago in October. "It is often easier for foreign media correspondents like me to obtain information, even from the authorities, than it is for the national media," Weibel said. "The challenge now is knowing how to ensure that information about Chile that is initially reported abroad gets back and reaches the public that it concerns. I was, for example, one of the first to reveal government plans to control social networks nearly two years ago. The current protests were needed before the mainstream Chilean media finally decided to cover the story, which is still news."

Francisco Martorell of *El Periodista* is cautious, and foresees many more stages before news and information is truly democratized in Chile. "No political parties of any tendency show a firm commitment to freedom of expression and pluralism," he said. "What's more, the decriminalization of media offences such as defamation is still not a given. The danger of being imprisoned still exists for journalists." The risk has been real for Martorell himself ever since he reported a pedophilia case in which a highly-placed person is implicated.

EFE bureau chief Manuel Fuentes has been waiting for signs of a determination not to tolerate impunity ever since EFE photographer Victor Salas lost an eye after being hit repeatedly with a baton by a member of the carabinero police while covering a teachers' demonstrations in Valparaíso in May 2008. The carabinero sergeant who attacked Salas has nonetheless been identified. So, what happened?

"The prosecutor tried to close the case a year ago," Fuentes said. "He had to back down because of all the evidence that the Investigations Police (PDI) gathered in the course of their

investigation. But that unfortunately does not solve the problem of the military courts, which are in charge of the case because the accused is a carabinero." The heritage of the 1973 military coup lives on. Nonetheless, as regards information and media pluralism, the fight is now under way for Chile to become something more than what Patricio Aylwin, at his inauguration as president in 1990, called "a democracy as far possible."

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