

ISOJ 2019: Day 1, Afternoon Session

RESEARCH PANEL: Digital Media and Democracy in the Americas

Chair: Eugenia Mitchelstein, associate professor and director of the communication degree, **University of San Andrés, Argentina**

#ISOJ Journal research paper authors:

- **Matías Dodel, Federico Comesaña & Daniel Blanc**, *A case of reverse-agenda setting: How 2018's FIFA World Cup coverage reduced media reporting of Uruguayan budget bill's yearly revision*, **Universidad Católica del Uruguay**
- **Shearon Roberts**, *Mixing the Old with the New through Digital Media: Political Representation, Race, and Millennial Voices in a changing Cuba*, **Xavier University of Louisiana**
- **Magdalena Saldana**, *Exposing the President: The political angle of a natural disaster in Chile*, **Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile/Millennium Institute for Foundational Research on Data (IMFD)**

Discussant: Pablo Boczkowski, professor, Department of Communication Studies, **Northwestern University**

Eugenia Mitchelstein: Hi! Thank you all for being here and thank you Rosental and Amy for making this possible. When we issued this call for papers for this special issue on digital media and democracy with my colleague Paolo Boczkowski, we had no idea what was going to happen. Would anybody submit any proposals at all?

In the end we had thirty one proposals and the top three were selected for publication in the journal, and they're by Magdalena Saldaña, Shearon Roberts, Matías Dodel, Federico Comesaña and Daniel Blanc. That's right and we thank them for sending their work. And Barbie Zelizer kindly accepted to write an invited commentary also for this special issue of the journal. One of the most important roles of journalism is holding the powerful accountable. Accountability refers to the ability of citizens to hold those in office accountable for their actions and to sanction them appropriately if they're not working in their

best interest. These are only some famous examples of journalism enabling accountability: Watergate, Pentagon Papers, Spotlights on sexual abuse by members of the clergy.

In Latin America, watchdog journalists played an essential role during the democratization process of the 80s and 90s. These are also some examples: Corruption in Brazil during Collor de Mello's presidency, which led to his impeachment, corruption in Argentina which actually sold guns and weapons to Croatia and Ecuador, which they shouldn't have done.

But as democracy stabilized in the countries and income dwindled for the... revenues dwindled for the media, watchdog journalism became all but nonexistent in online outlets. However the three papers included in this special issue deal with instances of the media holding the powerful accountable during extraordinary circumstances, and explore the limits to a journalism of accountability.

Federico Comesaña with Matías Dodel and Daniel Blanc used big data to compare coverage of the budget bill in the Uruguayan Parliament in 2017 and 2018, and they found that during 2018 while the soccer World Cup was being played, coverage of government actions greatly diminished, significantly diminished. Of course, the soccer World Cup is a very important event, and I'm Argentinian I would know that, but it's not as important as a budget bill, right?

Magdalena Saldaña looks at another instance of journalism holding the powerful accountable during extraordinary circumstances. The earthquake that hit Chile in 2014. And she finds that despite President Bachelet's competent handling of the natural disaster and the low number of casualties, journalists still held her responsible and this was due to ownership of the media and their ideological stance and market orientation.

Of course Uruguay and Chile are established democracies. In contrast, Shearon Roberts looks at a journalism of accountability in an authoritarian government, an authoritarian regime, Cuba. And she finds that digital platforms enable journalists in Cuba to enact investigative reporting in ways that they cannot do in state-run newspapers such as Granma. El Estornudo is one of those platforms. So, why does

accountability matter? And why should we still work to resist the creep of authoritarianism?

What these papers show is that even in democratic countries there are limits to a journalistic accountability and there is a role that journalists should play to hold those in power accountable. In many corners of the world, trust in journalism news is diminishing, trust in institutions is diminishing, and that does not allow journalists and citizens to hold those in power accountable.

So, what is to be done? And I want to end this in a high note to give way to my colleagues. What journalists could do and they should do is convey not only institutional rationality and practice, but also emotions. Emotions are what drives people. People who don't trust institutions anymore also deserve a place at the table, they deserve to tell their stories, and in bringing different voices and opinions together, and different emotions as well as rational arguments together, journalists and news media will be able to tell the stories that deserve to be told to hold those in power accountable. Thank you very much.

Federico Comesaña: Thank you everyone of you. In the first instance I will apologize because my English is limited and misspeaking English, I'm kind of profaning such a beautiful language, and well, sorry. I will briefly present our paper. It is "A case of reverse-agenda setting: How 2018's FIFA World Cup coverage reduced media reporting of Uruguayan budget bill's yearly revision" by Matias Dodel, myself, and Daniel Blanc.

We are working in one of the main roles in news media in liberal democracies, the potential to modify and expose social discussion and debate of diverse policy issues. We found a quasi-natural experiment, an extraneous sport event, the FIFA World Cup, and we want to know the influence it has in a critical one-time-a-year event that occurs in the middle of another event.

It's the budget bill's yearly revision that is an important instance in our political system where the government changes some expenses planning to the next year in its administration and I need to provoke a series of reactions in another politician, in lobby groups, in unions, and a lot of reaction, analysts, academics, and all talking about their budgets in different instances around one date, that is the date that the government has to present the bill to the parliament.

We described the theory of agenda setting, “the orientation, conduction or channeling that the minds of citizens suffer towards a repertoire of issues of public concern, to the detriment of others that are not mentioned or highlighted.” The main question around this is: News media shift their reporting agendas anticipating the public's interests? or specifically in this case, the number of news articles published in the main digital media are diminishing because the budget revision competes with another event that is the FIFA World Cup. And something that we have to understand is soccer for Uruguayans matters and matters a lot because some authors say that in Uruguay football, soccer, serves as the basis of national identity and we are not exaggerating, the narrative of its modern heroes myths. It's really important the football for us and important more in a tournament where it has generated a lot of expectations because the performance of the Uruguayan football, soccer, selection.

Well, the data. This is my specialization. We generate a data scraper algorithm that captures, processes, and normalizes all the publications of three of the most important websites in Uruguay of media coverage: El País, El Observador, and Montevideo Portal. Two years of all the content they published on the web and we process it.

We generate a model because it's not enough to take, “Well, what was the number of items that speak about Rendición de Cuentas and what was it last year and compare it.” It's not enough. We fit a lagged dependent variable Poisson model to standard the statistical significance of the variation in the number of publication because we have to control a lot of biases in the information such as the days to budget bill's yearly revision entry to the parliament, the days since budget bill's yearly revision entry to the parliament, a one-order lag to control the auto-correlation and the days of the week because there is an important seasonality in the data we were working. It's not the same number of a publication on a Sunday than a Wednesday in the media in general.

Well the results. We analyzed more than 100,000 articles in the total period and from each, 2,000 were talking about "rendición de cuentas," and you can see the dynamics of the time series of the phenomena of the topic of coverage. We see here we normalize the data and compare the two years. In the center, you see the date that the "rendición de cuentas" is presented to the Parliament.

Now the model and the results. The results in the model were fitting according to our expectations. We normalized the day of the week, eliminating the seasonality

in the data, we eliminated the correlation in the data, and the distance from the date of the presentation of the bill.

And when we analyzed the phenomena that we are addressing, The World Cup, we found a significant statistical impact on the data. A coefficient of -0.3 is a huge impact and is like you see, significant at the statistical standards.

In conclusion, the study aims to provide empirical evidence of an agenda-setting scenario in which media could have shifted their agenda by anticipating or estimating public interests on two competing events.

And it is not only about media, it can be media that anticipated or the proper political actors that anticipate less interest in the public and prefer not to get to the attack to the bill and reduce the efforts to go to the public media and defend their interests in the presence of the FIFA World Cup scenario.

The amount of aggregated "rendición de cuentas" daily news items were critically determined by the day of the budget bill's entry to the Parliament, that says the statistics have significant negative effect of the period in which the World Cup was occurring compared to the previous year, that was the finding of the model.

The study presents strong evidence of the lesser-studied agenda-setting phenomenon with relevant consequences for how social and political issues are covered by news media.

Despite some limitations, the study shed light on the need to study and address the caveats of social and political issues coverage by news media in the wake of mega sporting events. Well, thank you.

Shearon Roberts: All right! Good afternoon everyone, I am Shearon Roberts and I come to you from New Orleans. I teach digital media, converge media, and a broad range of mass communication courses as well as Latin American and Caribbean courses at Xavier, which is a Historically Black University in the city and I'm interested in understanding how digital media is transforming the work of journalism in the Caribbean and Circum-Caribbean countries, particularly countries that are going through political and social change.

And so, I wanted to share with you a little bit of insights from some 2017 field research in Cuba to see how things are similar and different to different places. I've primarily done some research with journalists in Haiti and so I wanted to see how things were also changing for journalism in Cuba. So, I wanted to see how journalists under the age of 28 were being impacted by digital media, and in the case of Cuba, this is something that started after 2007 and then really took off after 2010 with these main 14 blogs.

Currently, there are 25 non-state media blogs and then 75 more and another 200 government-approved blogs run by Cubans. And in this case, the blogs that you see behind me, the main leading Cuban non-state blogs have all been censored at different points in time. Their audiences are primarily not in Cuba, so what does that mean for the type of work that they're covering for changing social and political issues and factors facing Cubans if their content is not able to be accessed and reached by most Cubans?

So, I wanted to see how 35 journalists from nine different organizations who work for independent and state media and who are young journalists still in Cuba are using digital media, having been influenced by these 14 more prominent sites, to address some of the issues that are facing a changing Cuba. One of the main things that is inspiring, why I think this is important, and why it matters, is primarily because most Cubans don't have access to the Internet. Most of them will access content through some type of mobile device. The cost of using El Paquete is 5 CUC and the average salary is 25 CUC, so you're looking at economic barriers for people who are in Cuba to be able to access digital content that they may not be able to get from state-controlled media or media that self censors itself in Cuba.

And then most of the sites that are the most prominent sites do not focus on the experiences and lives and issues of people outside of Havana. So, what does that mean for those young journalists who want to engage with digital media and they are based in Cuba and they are working for state media or independent approved media that self censor. So this is the group of journalists that I studied while I was there. And so it's important to note that even though Cuba is in an authoritarian state, that there are challenges to the status quo that exist in traditional media.

That's one study by Santa Maria in 2017 that outlines that, and that the Cuban state tolerates this type of checks on different issues that are facing Cubans. Another thing to understand is that even though Cuba is unique from the rest of the region in the sense that it had a Cuban revolution and it provides for addressing issues of inequality, because there is more neoliberal practices in place, certain people get access to more remittances than others, and because of this there is a new growing economic apartheid, which also impacts who gets access to information and whose issues are addressed.

And so this brings it closer to the cases of other places in terms of the need to address inequalities and what the role of the media is in these particular spaces and I liken this a lot to Haiti under the dictatorship where there was a new media in place under an authoritarian rule and that new media was radio and it was journalists in Haiti who were able to mix an old and new to be able to advocate for different changes to improve the quality and well-being and to address human rights in Haiti and I have this framework in mind in understanding how journalists are mixing the old and new when looking at Cuba.

OK, so what did these journalists sort of share? Most of the prominent blogs, those bloggers take positions or sides that could be pro-state or anti-state, but these young journalists have identified that even though they work for state organizations, state media organizations, they aspire to be neutral. They aspire to have work that is balanced and they aspire to look for truths, and truths may put them more in-line with a state policy or it may put them against, and they don't want to develop careers like the more prominent blogs that actually put them on one side or the other side so, their understanding of objectivity is something that holds despite the fact that they have grown up as teenagers and then entered a career into journalism under these more prominent Cuban blogs.

They see that part of the work is also that addressing social issues is part of continuing the revolution, and then they see their revolution in phases that continues to move beyond the Cuban Revolution and that goes, that started before the Cuban Revolution. In sort of identifying things that are important to their understanding of how they should address the issues that are facing change in Cuba, they say that we don't want to turn into another one of their neighbors in,

which there is more inequalities that are brought about by dismantling things that have been put in place for years as a result of the Revolution, and that even though that they're moving to more neoliberal practices they don't want that to necessarily change the benefits that have come out, but they still want to have more freedoms that will help their country advance and develop. And primarily the main freedom that they think that they should agitate for in their journalism is to have a free vote, right?

So, in looking at 2017 digital content that they provided for this study, most of them used blogs that they used either anonymously or they contributed to other blogs to post and write journalism about topics that they couldn't speak about directly in their state media jobs, right? And then secondly they would use social media as a way to share information that they couldn't cover directly in their state media jobs followed by PDFs as well as emails to disseminate their content.

And the primary reason for this is if you aren't one of the major 25 blogs, you have to spend money to be able to disseminate your content offline through El Paquete, and since there's an economic barrier to doing so, social media is very useful for them to be able to disseminate without having to pay to go through El Paquete.

Another finding that came out of this study is that the primary topic that they're able to address more directly digitally that they kind of do in their traditional jobs is the issue of politics. Then they can look at cultural issues, race being the primary topic that they discuss, race and other sorts of class and other parts of the Cuban culture that's up for discussion in a changing Cuba, followed by other issues that you can see over here.

And then, lastly, in terms of which digital platforms work for different types of topics: for posting to blogs, politics remains the primary topic; for PDF, work that's shared over PDF, culture; for social media, there's an equal split between politics, culture and education. And then, lastly, through emails, issues about welfare of ordinary Cubans, how they manage to live their ordinary lives and the experiences of living on a budget of 25 CUC, are all issues that show up in there, and in which platforms they choose to share their content.

And lastly, I just want to thank the participants and my institution and Tulane University for allowing me to travel to Cuba and also to the journal editor Amy Weiss and the other two editors for this issue. Thank you.

Magdalena Saldana: Today we're going to talk about journalism, politics and earthquakes, but before we do that let me tell you that my entire presentation is totally bilingual because I want my findings to be shown in my mother tongue. So having said that, this is part of my doctoral dissertation. In this particular piece I observe how political reporters from three news websites in Chile covered an earthquake that occurred in northern Chile in 2014.

So, just to give you some context, in 2006 we elected our first female president Michelle Bachelet and she was very popular, and by the time that she was finishing her first presidential term there was this massive 8.8 magnitude earthquake that hit the south and then the subsequent tsunami, and she was highly criticized by both the media and the public because of their management of the crisis. They did a terrible job at informing the people how the crisis unfolded and they failed to set the tsunami alert on time, so because of that more than a hundred people die by drowning during the tsunami.

She left office and then we elected Sebastian Piñera. He had to deal with the reconstruction and all the consequences of the earthquake, and when he left we re-elected Michelle Bachelet and three weeks after she took office another massive earthquake 8.2 magnitude and subsequent tsunami hit the country this time in the north.

So, this time around they did a great job, they managed the situation in a very competent way. They set the tsunami alert on time, they evacuated people in the coast, and yet they didn't get very nice coverage. So, I decided to observe this. It was a very interesting setup the same government, almost the same team, almost the same disaster, but two totally different approaches when managing the situation. So, I was wondering how did the Chilean news media covered this earthquake, and I observed three news websites, La Tercera, El Mercurio and La Nación.

And I downloaded all the stories that they published a month after the earthquake, around 400 stories and what I was expecting to find was what previous research had found. So what we know about this earthquakes are considered event driving news as opposed to institutionally driven news and they are reported as a series of

unrelated events.

So, instead of connecting what is going on with previous disasters sometimes journalists do it and use previous disasters as benchmarks, but they usually inform about what's going on right now because people need to know those things right away.

So, we also know that they are covered from an episodic instead of a thematic approach which means that the idea is to inform the day by day situation, but not necessarily to locate the event into a larger context, the larger picture that eventually might impact how they do public policy about disaster management and unofficial sources are more likely to be considered because the most important angle that they usually use for this is human interest.

So you get to see people who lost their houses or got damaged because of the situation, and that's why they get a little bit more coverage in this kind of a particular crisis. Yet what I found after analyzing my 400 stories is that there was an intense flow of institutionally driven information because the government was also trying to push their frames to the attention of the journalists, but at the same time the media portrayed the successful management as the lessons learned from the disaster in 2010.

And what they also did was to have a very thematic approach because they were trying to give explanations, but basically what they wanted was for people not to forget what happened four years ago. So they said that most of the stories said: "ok yeah, they are doing a great job now, but let's not forget what happened four years ago."

And finally unofficial sources were irrelevant because the main angle of the coverage wasn't the human interest coverage, it was the political angle. So, we found in this situation that a natural disaster is portrayed as a political issue, and I try to understand what's going on here, what happened, right? and I was unable to answer this question just based on the content analysis of my stories and I decided to ask journalists themselves how they did this, like how did they determine the main angle of the coverage, and I wanted to know also how was the relationship that they had with official sources and also unofficial sources.

So I contacted around 15 political reporters who wrote the stories that I was analyzing and I was able to get seven of them to agree to have a phone interview with me and talk about this issue. So, I had three journalists from La Tercera, two journalists from El Mercurio and two journalists from La Nacion, and I asked them

like how you determine the main angle? and they told me literally it was editorials prompting "my editor told me so" and they also mentioned that the previous earthquake was seen as Bachelet's biggest problem.

And since there was another earthquake when the second term was just starting we had to see how they would act, so we didn't really pay attention to the earthquake itself, we went to the north, but not to cover the disaster, to cover her to cover Bachelet.

And I have a quote here: "La Tercera has made its goal to expose president Bachelet. We did a lot of comparative analysis during the 2014 disaster, but behind such analysis was the intention of exposing the president. The paper likes seeing Bachelet weak". So, this is a quote from a journalist from La Tercera, and just to give you some context La Tercera and El Mercurio are two outlets that are said to be close to the political right wing of the country.

And Bachelet represents the center left side of the political spectrum. So, what happened here? They were not trying to hold the government accountable or to be the watchdogs of democracy, they just wanted to expose the president because her political ideology did not align with the outlet's ideology.

I also ask them about the official sources and I realize that they have kind of an unhealthy relationship with the public officers, a quid pro quo kind of relationship and they are open about it, and then they know it, but there is no way around it. So, they told me sometimes political sources need you to write something about them and you do it even if it's not newsworthy because you need to keep your relationship with them.

I wouldn't say it's an ethical, but it's certainly an "I'll give you this, if you give me that" kind of relationship. This is a quote from a journalism from La Nacion which at the time was supposed to be a little bit closer to the left, and finally I ask them about the unofficial sources. Let's remember that these are political reporters and they told me that "yes, I mean we quote them, but we don't necessarily work with them because we work with politicians and power groups."

So, in this case I ask them also like "do you use social media to find alternative voices or alternative stories or alternative angles?" and they told me "yes, we do use social media, but is more as a system of awareness, but not necessarily to find new voices." So, they are using the affordances of new technologies basically to do the same thing that they could do in offline context to have the sources that they

already know.

So, this is my last quote: "The usual news reader is not my reader, political analysts, political elites, political journalists, they with my stories. Maybe those readers interested in politics do so as well, but those are just a few." So, they don't even see the normal reader as their readers so there is this cycle where they write for their colleagues and for our powerful groups.

So, just to finish my presentation I see Rosental is getting stressed out here. The political angle had more to do with the Chilean media ideology and less to do with a definitive departure, a more mature approach from sensationalistic practices.

Reporters focus on the political angle due to editorial prompting the reliance on official sources is a burden on journalist, but even though the dictatorship base are long gone we still depend on what the powerful group and we feel the pressure, but there is no way around it.

And the nature of political reporting does not allow for unofficial sources to be quoted. So, in summary we see that the journalists source relationship is profoundly symbiotic and it is problematic and unhealthy and we should be concerned about this. So, I'll be happy to keep talking about this with you guys later on maybe during the reception. Thank you so much for being a great audience.