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COMPARATIVE POLITICAL JOURNALISM IN SOUTH AMERICA:

professional configurations and disputes over truth in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay



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ABSTRACT – This article analyzes the (re)configurations of political journalism in the face of the challenges of the contemporary information-communication ecosystem, political polarization, and disputes over the truth. It employs interviews, observations, and literature review to develop an unique model for comparative analysis of political journalism, applied to Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. The results indicate that, despite remaining continuities in the Latin American region, the characteristics of political journalism vary significantly between countries, impacting public debate. In Uruguay and Brazil, efforts are made to contain misinformation, while in Argentina, it is sometimes perpetuated by the journalists themselves.

Key words: Political journalism. Political communication. Fake news. Watchdog. South America.

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JORNALISMO COMPARADO NA AMÉRICA DO SUL: configurações profissionais e disputas pela verdade na Argentina, Brasil e Uruguai

RESUMO – Este artigo analisa as (re)configurações do jornalismo político diante dos desafios do ecossistema infocomunicacional contemporâneo, da polarização política e das disputas pela verdade. Utiliza-se entrevistas, observações e revisão de literatura na elaboração de um modelo próprio para analisar o jornalismo político comparativamente, aplicado à Argentina, Brasil e Uruguai. Os resultados mostram que, apesar das continuidades existentes na América Latina, as características do jornalismo político variam significativamente entre os países, afetando o debate público. No Uruguai e no Brasil, busca-se conter a desinformação, enquanto na Argentina ela é, por vezes, alimentada pelos próprios jornalistas.

Palavras-chave: Jornalismo político. Comunicação política. Fake News. Watchdog. América do Sul.

PERIODISMO POLÍTICO COMPARADO EN SUDAMÉRICA: configuraciones profesionales y disputas por la verdad en Argentina, Brasil y Uruguay

RESUMEN – Este artículo analiza las (re)configuraciones del periodismo político ante los desafíos del ecossistema infocomunicacional contemporáneo, la polarización política y las disputas por la verdad. Se utilizan entrevistas, observaciones y revisión de literatura para desarrollar un modelo propio para analizar el periodismo político comparado aplicado a Argentina, Brasil y Uruguay. Los resultados indican que, a pesar de las continuidades existentes en América Latina, la configuración del periodismo político varía significativamente entre los países, afectando el debate público. En Uruguay y Brasil, se busca contener la desinformación, mientras que en Argentina esta es, a veces, alimentada por los propios periodistas.

Palabras clave: Periodismo político. Comunicación política. Fake news. Watchdog. Sudamérica.

1 Introduction

The fragmented architecture of the contemporary information communication ecosystem challenges the authority of journalism as a legitimate agent in presenting the world to the public (Miguel, 2022). Changes in the dynamics of information circulation are translated in different ways from country to country, raising questions about both democracy and the status of truth. In order to explore this, this paper proposes an original model for the comparison of political journalism in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

The growth of a pronounced social distrust (Benkler et al., 2018) and authoritarian discourse is fueled by the dominance of algorithmic logic and segmentation that produces cognitively congruent communities, in which a diversity of thought is absent

(González-Bailón et al., 2023). Disinformation and conspiracy theories are not new but what has changed in recent years is their scale and extent (Harsin, 2018). This has been enabled through the dominance of social networks and the erosion of the notion of scientific truth that had prevailed since the end of the Second World War in the core countries (Waisbord, 2018), and in the wake of the collapse of dictatorships of the seventies and eighties in South America.

Professional journalism, founded in informative rigor, played a central role in the creation of the notion of scientific truth. Beyond the fact that this was not the only model in Latin America, and sometimes not even the dominant one (Fox & Waisbord, 2002), the radical changes in the digital environment have been concomitant with developments affecting journalism on two other fronts. The first, according to Nielsen (2017), consists in the fact that while media companies were able to combine influence and commercial success during the twentieth century, in the third decade of the twenty-first century we have seen the reassertion of a dynamic in which what prevails is the power of influence. There has, then, been an increased instrumentalization of the media for other more profitable businesses (Peterson & Dunaway, 2023) and this has raised challenges for journalism in the negotiation of boundaries between the commercial arena and its informative work (Cornia et al., 2018). There have also been repercussions in terms of its autonomy, something that is key for the profession (Lemieux, 2010). The second development is related to the proliferation of content production in the digital media ecosystem and the crisis in the mediating centrality of news media and journalists (Hameleers & Yekta, 2023). In spite of this, a significant section of society still looks to journalism to “tell what happened” (Orchard & Schuliaquer, 2024) and a large proportion of the public still references it as a device to guide them on what is “true” and what is not. At the same time, political journalism is a very hierarchical specialization within the field of journalism itself (Neveu, 2002), and different studies have shown that traditional media and journalists are important influencers in digital media (Calvo & Aruguete, 2020).

The fragmentation of information consumption (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018) calls into question the ability of mainstream media to provide a catch-all offering (Lycariao et al., 2018), problematizing the concept of a shared reality among citizens. This challenge affects all democratic societies and different questions arise: does the

mainstream media share the most relevant facts? What does it do when it encounters information that is out of step with its editorial line? What does it do when faced with audiences that demand a more explicit political alignment, with no room for divergence? To what extent are the segmented realities of the digital world also accentuated by mainstream media?

Although dominant logics in digitization exist at a global level, national translations continue to matter. In contexts of growing disinformation, polarization, and homophilia (Marques, 2023; Gomes & Dourado, 2019), journalism does not always function in the same way in different national contexts. Understanding the dominant political journalism configurations in each country is therefore key as such configurations impact the verification of data, the retraction of errors, the relatively balanced treatment of different democratic forces, and the equitable application of watchdog mechanisms.

In what follows, we first present a brief review of the literature on media systems, political journalism, and digitization. Then, we propose a model for the comparative study of political journalism and apply it to the contexts of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Later, we discuss the differentiated configuration of political journalism in each country and, then, its implications in the face of the challenges of contemporary public debate.

2 Media systems and political journalism in the digital age

Changes in the socio-technical bases of modes of production impact news production and have given rise to terms such as “post-industrial journalism” (Anderson et al., 2015) or “platform journalism” (Bell & Owen, 2017). This environment, dominated by big techs, has led to “a hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2017) in which the traditional and digital media are interdependent. Distinctions in roles, identities, and norms for producing news have become blurred. Much of the professional infrastructure is now in the hands of digital platforms (Figaro & Silva, 2020) and these giants have built an asymmetrical relationship with the media and journalism (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022).

In their classic work, Hallin and Mancini (2004) note the co-evolution between media systems and political systems. Despite the impact of platforms and networks, as well as their performative dynamics, media systems still matter, as much of politics is still

transacted at the national level (Hallin, 2020). Thus, it is key to take into account issues such as the influence of the State on the communication environment, the centrality of political parties, the media structure, and the national characteristics of journalism. This last component is of particular interest in this paper. Its configuration affects the form and tone of public debate, as well as the dynamics of the representation of reality and the status of facts. As journalists select, treat, and report information based on professional rituals, they play a key role in public debate (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021).

There is less state-owned media in Latin America than anywhere else on the planet and this situation was accentuated with the pro-market reforms and concentration of the 1990s (Becerra & Mastrini, 2017). At the same time, the dictatorships of the 20th century had an impact on the media and journalism. Many of the main media actors survived the authoritarian periods, while others were persecuted (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). Guerrero and Márquez (2014) define Latin American media systems as “captured liberal” because they combine private-commercial models and liberal rules with practices in which press regulation is usually defined by the interests of big business and governments. Despite these common points and the political biases involved, no single model fits all countries in the region. While there are continuities, there are also differences. Exploring these differences allows us to situate and better understand the political communication phenomena.

Historically, Latin American journalism has been characterized by porous boundaries between the work of informing the public and the direct influence of owners. Collective instruments have not always been in place to defend professional prerogatives against the usual pressures from businesspersons and politicians (Hughes & Prado, 2011). Although the role of journalism in safeguarding democracy and freedom of expression has been historically highlighted in the region, standards regarding adherence to the facts and the fair representation of the different democratic actors in the media space are not the same in all countries, nor are they guaranteed.

The increasingly pronounced dispute to define what truth is calling the position of the centrality of journalism into question. This is coming about in an era characterized by a growing estrangement towards social others, aggravated by the homophily fomented

by networks and an increase in distrust (Schedler, 2023; Calvo & Aruguete, 2020). Severe polarization is undermining both social consensus and the acceptance of a shared reality (Schulhauser & Vommaro, 2020). Established practices of manipulation and political propaganda have acquired new contours and now feed “disinformation guerrillas” (Gomes & Dourado, 2019). Trolls, whose objective is not to dispute interpretations of events but to raze conversation and damage opponents, also intervene (Calvo & Aruguete, 2020). Although bots play a fundamental role, the success of these operations depends on the active role of people who believe in them and/or disseminate them (Chagas, 2022). This is the terrain on which fake news, understood as a genre of disinformation (Harsin, 2018) that takes the form of planned political operations to damage an opponent and take economic or political advantage (Chadwick, 2017), finds fertile ground. By operating according to the informational logic and habits of the digital environment, fake news can be easier to digest for a significant proportion of the public than rigorously researched news, generating environments conducive to the triumph of simplistic arguments over the long term (Mendoza et al., 2023).

An examination of the configurations of political journalism is relevant in order to explore how it participates in and converges with the public theatre. These configurations offer different conditions of possibility depending on whether there is a greater or lesser consensus on how political journalism should perform its public information mission and whether it sets clear or blurred professional boundaries to protect this work from intervention by other actors. In some cases, these configurations stop the dissemination of unverified, denied, or misleading facts, while in others they accredit or even play a leading role in such dissemination (McIntyre, 2018).

The following pages propose a model for the study of comparative political journalism and then explore the characteristics of political journalism in Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

3 Comparative political journalism: a model

In order to investigate political journalism, we present a theoretical-methodological model that arises from the accumulated work of different theoretical and empirical investigations carried out

by the authors of this article in parallel with a comparative approach to politics and communication, media systems, political polarization, and, of course, journalism.

In Uruguay, between 2013 and 2023, were conducted more than 70 interviews with politicians, journalists, and media entrepreneurs, among others, on the links between politics and communication. At the same time, in the three countries, journalists from different media were accompanied during the coverage of political events, press conferences attended, and work “from the inside” in television channels, radio stations, and newsrooms of traditional and digital media observed. In Argentina, from 2014, more than 30 interviews with politicians, journalists, academics, and media entrepreneurs were done. Research has also been conducted within broader teams since 2018 on political content in media and issues of political polarization and disinformation. Further specific studies have also been carried out including dozens of interviews with journalists about their practices. In Brazil, the empirical data comes from research on the media treatment of elections, corruption scandals, and institutional crises at a time of heightened social tensions between 2010 and 2022. Documentary research was also conducted on the trajectories of press advisors to presidents between 1960 and 2010, complemented by interviews with 20 journalists between 2015 and 2017. At the same time, the political uses of messaging applications as a source of information and trust in journalism (2018 to 2022) were studied. In addition, the authors have drawn on their own experience as journalists in the media in Argentina and Brazil.

In all three countries, studies have involved a systematic and wide-ranging examination of literature on politics and communication with a focus on political journalism. In Uruguay, there is a marked lack of studies on political journalism. Therefore, our presentation of the environment in this country is more dependent on our own previous work.

This qualitative work proposes a comparative analysis model that, in line with Della Porta (2008), prioritizes the depth of the case studies rather than the variables encompassing several studies at once. Thus, it proposes a reflexive synthesis of knowledge on political journalism with a national scale focus and, therefore, passes over local specificities of subnational systems

(Aguiar, 2016), detailed attention to which exceeds the possibilities of this work.

The model explores three main dimensions: the type of journalism that prevails, the existence or otherwise of celebrity journalism, and the way journalistic work is structured. This allows us to explore the three cases comparatively and to investigate continuities and differences.

When looking at the type of journalism that prevails we distinguish between accepted ways of making a reputation within the journalistic field. At the same time, an exploration of the link established between politicians and journalists is offered within an allies-rivals logic (Legavre, 2014), in order to examine whether more cooperative or competitive relations are dominant between them. Who appears in the media as the representative of the citizenry? Is it usually the journalists, from positions more associated with a watchdog role, or rather the politicians, with journalists giving them deferential treatment?

The existence of celebrity journalism is characterized by the centrality (or otherwise) of certain media figures recognized by the public as political journalists. These actors present their audience with successful political representation, as Champagne (1994) notes, and simultaneously use opinion-based and information-based discourse in a fairly uniform way. They occupy recognized positions in the professional journalistic field, then, (Fontenelle & Guazina, 2016) and are agents with prominent incidence in the framing and tone of public debate.

The structure of journalistic work focuses on different questions: the degree of autonomy journalists have, the preeminence of facts as the basis of journalistic discourse, whether or not a distinction exists between information-based and opinion-based discourse, and the opportunities for / obstacles facing owners in influencing editorial line. At the same time, does ideological diversity exist among journalists within newsrooms? That is to say, are newsrooms pluralistic spaces, or does their composition imply partisan political alignments that make it difficult to mediate between different ideological perspectives?

Figure 1
A model for studying political journalism

Political journalism. A model		
	General description	National characteristics
Type of journalism	More prioritized news and ways to gaining notoriety	Formas de ganar reputación, qué es lo que se espera de su trabajo y qué se premia.
	Relationship between politicians and journalists	Competition or cooperation? More asymmetrical or symmetrical relationships?
	Who represents the citizenry in the staging?	The journalists? The politicians? Is this in dispute? How?
Presence of journalists-as-celebrity actors		Does audience success appear as a synonym of political representativeness? Is there an indistinction between opinion-based and information-based discourse?
Type of professionalization	Distinction between opinion and information	What barriers protect informative-journalistic work? What is the preeminence of facts within journalistic discourse? What opportunities and obstacles do owners have to influence the editorial line?
	Distinction between commercial and journalistic remits	
	Ideological diversity in newsrooms	Is there ideological plurality among media news personnel?

As proposed by O'Donnell (1994), the informal institutionalization of political journalism is of more interest than formal institutionalization insofar as how this process functionalities in practice are known by the actors and guide their work and expectations. As researchers, we start in the field to investigate the configuration of journalism in each country. Our approach is inductive: we do not assume that journalism is always

the main agent in the fight against disinformation actions, nor that it acts in the same way in all countries. Furthermore, we understand that journalism exists in a dynamic environment and does not act in a vacuum or isolation: journalism is influenced by the configuration of the news media and its historical, material, cultural, and ideological dynamics.

4 Case studies

4.1 Argentina

Journalism in Argentina combines both denunciation and opinion journalism.

Concerning the news that is most prominent in the media, the denunciation of “deviant practices” of political actors stands out. However, rather than classic watchdog journalism, what prevails in Argentina, and has done so in a marked way since 2012, is a selective watchdog model that only exercises its role with respect to certain political actors (Schuliaquer, 2018). It separates the like-minded from those considered rivals and, therefore, renders the informative approach partisan to the point that political alignment defines much of newsworthiness. Pronounced suspicion positions the journalist as a comptroller of politicians (Vommaro, 2008), but in a segmented way. At the same time, this denunciation journalism does not follow reality but rather produces it (Pereyra, 2013). That is, it brings to light events and produces scandals that influence public debate (Lemieux, 2010). Although they coexist, the production of scandal has been gaining ground over the centrality of investigative journalism, often resulting in “denuncismo” [denunciation] (Waisbord, 2000). Since 2016, opinion and panel spaces have grown in the media to become the main platform for scandal in the face of the political other, while investigation has a less prominent position (Schuliaquer, 2018).

Within this context, the relationship between politicians and journalists cannot be said overall to comport the constant tension of the allies-rivals model, as actors who need and distrust each other, but are rather split: the two groups are therefore allies with those close to them and rivals with those who are considered political adversaries. A bond of clear cooperation is established with those

close to them and of evident competition for representativeness with those perceived as opponents. The latter are rarely given a platform to express themselves and are the main focus of the invective (and opinions) through which their reputation is eroded.

Media staging often shows certain journalists as representatives of the citizenry above politicians and many others take on the role of “political prosecutors” (Baldoni, 2024). They are presented, then, as comptrollers of politicians. However, as we said, only for a part of politics: of those who are considered illegitimate and who do therefore require journalistic surveillance.

Celebrity journalists occupy a central place in structuring Argentine journalism. These figures present their audience success as a synonym of representativeness and continuously combine opinion-based and information-based discourse. These journalists are cut within the media field, and their public capital is not overly invested in the institution (or media outlet) in which they work (Baldoni, 2024). These journalists are conductors and hosts of news programs on radio or television, on which they are usually accompanied by other journalists and panelists. Their position is adversarial against a certain political sector, which they often denounce, while they act as analysts who editorialize. They practice opinion and information-based journalism all at the same time. The importance of these figures in Argentina is even more relevant as seven 24/7 news television channels operate in the country.

In addition to a blurring of the boundaries between opinion-based and information-based discourse, lines of separation between commercial and journalistic remits also lack clarity in Argentine journalism (Balán, 2013). It is common, and has been so especially since 2012 – in the light of what was termed “the fight” between the Kirchnerist governments (2003-2015) and the large media group Clarín –, for owners to participate in journalistic work, directly influencing content (Sivak, 2015). At the same time, because of the centrality of journalists as celebrities and the combination, in their discourse, of denunciation and opinion the boundaries between the commercial and the journalistic have become increasingly difficult to distinguish in practice. This has also been fueled by the growing partisanship of editorial lines in the private-commercial media (Kitzberger, 2023).

Another important factor is that from 2010, a time of full employment in Argentine journalism when the fight between

Kirchnerism and anti-Kirchnerism moved into the inner workings of the media, political alignment was also configured “from below” in the newsrooms (Schuliaquer, 2020). In this context, journalists chose to work in media more in line with their ideology. Thus, something that had seemed to be established was broken. Since the return of democracy and until 2010, newsrooms have been ideologically diverse spaces where the usual mediation between different journalists included political mediation, with different views on the world and reality. This was now compromised and not only because of what media management was pushing for. Thus, there were Kirchnerist and anti-Kirchnerist newsrooms. This had a problematic impact on the sharing of an agenda of facts. A “divided media scene” (Schuliaquer, 2018) came into being in which there were two differentiated spaces, with very dissimilar news menus and also with separate audiences. At this stage political representation strongly conditioned the representation of reality and political positioning had an impact on the newsworthiness of facts. This division, so common in times of segmentation produced in social networks by algorithms and cognitive congruencies, was produced in Argentina in the media before the massification of social networks.

The ascension of Javier Milei to the presidency in December 2023 may well turn out to have been a critical moment for journalism, this event being in several respects comparable to the election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Marques, 2023). It will no doubt merit future studies. However, Milei’s emergence as a public figure did not take place outside the media, but rather within one of the parts of the divided media theatre. As of 2016, before his success on networks and in institutional politics, Milei was a regular figure in television and radio media aligned with anti-Kirchnerism.

Figure 2

Characteristics of political journalism in Argentina

Political journalism in Argentina		
	General description	National characteristics
Denunciation and opinion journalism	Most prioritized news and ways of gaining notoriety	Denounce “deviant” practices, even if selective watchdog.
	Relationship between politicians and journalists	Competition with adversaries, cooperation with supporters.
	Who represents the citizenry in the staging?	Journalism is presented as representative and as comptroller, only of one party. Some are illegitimate.
Presence of journalists		Yes.
Type of professionalization	Distinction between opinion and information	No.
	Distinction between commercial and journalistic remits	Diffuse.

4.2 Uruguay

Uruguayan political journalism can be defined as “statement journalism” (Schuliaquer, 2017). The shared notion in the trade is that the statements of politicians and representatives of each party constitute the fundamental material for journalistic coverage. Due to the centrality of parties in Uruguayan public life and their enduring legitimacy (Buquet & Piñeiro, 2014), journalists assume that the principal definers of reality to be consulted on the country’s situation are actors who have been raised within institutional politics.

In this context, the journalist-politician relationship is above all one between allies. It is a cooperation that serves both actors in a bond of mutual convenience: the journalists because they fulfill their mission by obtaining testimony and the politicians because they exist in a theatre in which they are the principal definers (Schuliaquer, 2022). Far from taking up the role of “prosecutor of

politics”, as in denunciation journalism, journalists are placed a rung below politicians. In this culture, the journalist is a facilitator rather than a protagonist (as in Argentina). This deference speaks of an asymmetrical link: politicians have more tools and prerogatives and journalists are more dependent on them than the other way around.

In terms of the public staging of representation, government, and political parties appear as the legitimate representatives of the citizenry under informal quota systems for each of the major parties (Schuliaquer, 2017). Unlike in other countries, journalists rarely present themselves as the representatives of the citizenry vis-à-vis politicians. The centrality of the party system plays a key role in political mediation and the configuration of social identities (Pérez et al., 2020).

In Uruguay, there are few celebrity journalists. Most news anchors, both radio and television, expressly avoid giving opinions. They are recognized and successful figures but are simply presenters. They do not editorialize. Nor do they present their success in ratings as synonymous with political representativeness. The link with politicians is not presented as a form of dispute for “giving voice” to citizens, but journalism and institutional politics are considered to be differentiated spheres, with different tasks to fulfill.

In terms of the structure of journalistic work, since the return of democracy in 1985, there has been a growing separation between areas for the expression of opinion and information in the media. This was a novelty for Uruguay, whose media tradition (especially the print media) had been that of a partisan press. With the advent of a new journalistic theatre at the end of the dictatorship, a different media grew and many journalists questioned themselves about their role during this period (Albistur, 2012), resulting in a more marked border between the two spaces (Schuliaquer, 2022). In practice, this also implied a clear division in the daily work between reporters and journalists writing opinion pieces.

At the same time, this was accompanied by a distinction, with tensions, between the realms of press ownership and content production. While the boundaries were clear during the first two decades of the 21st century, they have begun to erode since 2020 with some episodes revealing indirect but evident intervention by owners in the work of journalists. In the case of the daily *El Observador*, this resulted, for example, in the nonpublication of a story on espionage in the government. A logic of collective professional protection was

now asserted: in protest, however. Journalists published the story on social networks and were supported by colleagues from media with different editorial lines.

Unlike other South American countries that were part of the shift to the left at the beginning of the 21st century, in Uruguay the links between politics and the media were not strongly disrupted (Schuliaquer, 2020) during the three Frente Amplio administrations (2005-2020). There were also no major transformations within media institutions or in the ways of practicing political journalism, except for the enormous cultural and technological changes linked to the massification of digital media. Alongside this, the ideological diversity of newsrooms was maintained. Thus, the internal pluralism that characterizes the Uruguayan media is accompanied by diverse ideological positions of journalists themselves in the different media.

Figure 3

Characteristics of political journalism in Uruguay

Political journalism in Uruguay		
	General description	National characteristics
Statement journalism	Most prioritized news and ways of gaining notoriety	Statements by politicians. Government and party-political actions
	Relationship between politicians and journalists	Cooperative. Asymmetric
	Who represents the citizenry in the staging?	Government and political parties
Presence of journalist		No
Type of professionalization	Distinction between opinion and information	Yes, since the return of democracy.
	Distinction between commercial and journalistic remits	Yes, although in decline.
	Ideological diversity in newsrooms	High.

4.3 Brazil

Brazilian journalism is based on the idea of the journalist as a watchdog and defender of the citizenry against political “deviations”. Since the return of democracy, the media, especially television, has been key in political socialization and construction of the public image of actors in the political field (Weber, 2004; Miguel, 2002). In contrast to the previous period, media companies positioned themselves as “arbiters of national interests”, assuming a power moderation role (Albuquerque, 2005). This new context saw the development of a type of journalism dedicated to investigating “the hidden acts of the government” (Guazina, 2014), adhering to a combative tone as a strategy for notoriety, sometimes flirting with a denunciation culture and tending to present “the politicians” as eminently corrupt and worthy of suspicion (Guazina, 2011; Cesar, 2020). Journalists and politicians therefore maintain a combative relationship in the media theatre, competing over who represents the citizenry. Nevertheless, the treatment received by political actors can vary according to the interests at stake for media owners and political forces in government. In this respect, it is worth citing the negative coverage of the Petista governments between 2003-2016, contrasting with the generous treatment received by the previous center-right president (Gagliardi, 2018). More recently, in line with the disruptive practices of other far-right populist presidents, Jair Bolsonaro did not hold back in his attacks on the media and journalists, favoring digital platforms to mobilize public opinion, although he also had the support of traditional broadcasters such as Record (Porto et al., 2020).

Concerning journalists as celebrities, the situation in Brazil is different from that in Argentina. As far as news programs are concerned, in compliance with shared professional standards, anchors tend to avoid both editorializing and talking in the first person. They are, above all, news anchors. At the national level, there are examples of media celebrities, but they have a different profile. They are presenters of non-news programs combining entertainment, politics, journalism, and religious content and articulate dynamics founded in scandal. These notorious figures do have an impact on what is a polarized public debate, but they are not part of news programs and are not seen as journalists by the journalistic field.

Bolsonaro’s government provoked a significant change in Brazilian journalism. Marques (2023) shows how the President’s

criticism of journalists, in many cases via personal attacks, changed their practices and behaviors. While they did not adopt a celebrity stance, several left editorial neutrality aside to publicly criticize the President, either in opinion sections or on their personal social media profiles. Thus, “the opportunity to react publicly normalizes [journalists’] willingness to take positions, making it difficult for the public to differentiate news and opinion” (Marques, 2023).

Historically, the structure of journalistic work in Brazil has encouraged adherence to the values of objectivity and impartiality in which the professional ethos of actors is founded. This historical situation was created in two stages. First, through the importation of the American model during the process of modernization in the 1950s. Second, through a reform of communication training that culminated in the requirement – imposed by the military in 1969 – to hold a journalism diploma in order to practice the profession. This obligation was removed in 2009 through a decision by the Federal Supreme Court, with the support of the major players in the Brazilian media and this climate can be interpreted as part of a questioning of a mechanism of recognition of the status of journalists (Pereira & Maia, 2016). This “crisis” however reinforced the ideology of a profession whose identity had historically been rooted in its corporate logic, thus revealing a certain structural endurance (Le Cam & Ruellan, 2014). The resultant environment is one in which newsrooms are composed of professionals from different ideological currents who share a certain professional dynamic and feel part of a collective that fulfills a certain role.

The separation between information-based and opinion-based discourse in Brazilian journalism is linked to the process of modernization of newspapers that marked the move from literary and opinion journalism to a commercial model, committed to facts (Marques et al., 2018). This importation of the Anglo-Saxon model was also a way of affirming journalism’s role as representative of the public interest.

Albuquerque and Silva (2007) also highlight the role of communist journalists in the configuration of newsrooms between 1950 and 1970. Committed to public service information, they contributed to shaping the journalism practiced in the country’s main newsrooms, whose bureaucratization established a clearer hierarchy that allowed journalists to unite as a professional group. Of course, this did not mean an end to all limitations. The suppression of articles

when not in keeping with the editorial line, as well as self-censorship, marks a certain porosity between information and opinion, as well as between editorial and commercial remits.

Figure 4

Characteristics of political journalism in Brazil

Political journalism in Brazil		
	General description	National characteristics
Informative and denunciation journalism	Most prioritized news and ways of gaining notoriety.	Denounces “deviations” in public life, although historical bias persists.
	Relationship between politicians and journalist.	Competition.
	Who represents the citizenry in the staging?	Journalism is presented as the arbiter of public debate.
Presence of star journalists		No, but with hybrid figures
Type of professionalization	Distinction between opinion and information	Yes.
	Distinction between commercial and journalistic remits	Yes, but diffuse.
	Ideological diversity in newsrooms	Medium.
	Ideological diversity in newsrooms	Low.

5 Political journalism and challenges to rigor

After analyzing political journalism in the three countries, it is worth responding to various questions raised in the face of the challenges posed by digitization. What are the news priorities of the various journalistic configurations and how does the tension between sustaining audiences and safeguarding informative rigor play out within the different configurations? What status do facts have and to what extent do they impose themselves on the journalistic agenda? How is the criterion of newsworthiness handled in each

case? The different journalistic configurations have an impact on the organization of the profession. In the following section, we will highlight the differences between countries.

The first aspect of journalistic configurations we looked into focused on accepted ways of making a reputation within the field of political journalism, on the type of relationship existing between politicians and journalists (more cooperative or competitive), and on how journalism positions itself, whether as a mediator between politics and the citizenry or as a representative of the citizenry ahead of politicians.

At this point, we see a clear contrast. While in Argentina and Brazil, journalism is more strongly identified with denunciation and, therefore has a more competitive relationship with politicians (usually the object of accusations and suspicion), the statement journalism that holds sway in Uruguay leads to relations of cooperation and mutual convenience, since having access to the voice of politicians is what allows journalists to fulfill their mission and stand out.

In Uruguay, the government and the political parties appear as the legitimate representatives of the citizenry in the public theatre and journalists have a more mediating role. In Argentina and Brazil, journalists are usually presented as representatives of the citizenry ahead of politicians, and at the same time as the comptrollers of politicians. Since 2012, however, and in a very marked way, Argentine journalism has applied a selective watchdog model. In a context of polarization, only the party considered as an ideological adversary is held to account. This journalistic partisanship translates to friendly treatment, plus the suspension of the watchdog role when it comes to allied sectors. A determining factor of newsworthiness for Argentine journalists is who the injured parties are, ignoring the basic standards of the profession. This has a clear elective affinity with the preference for the cognitive congruence of the digital space while eroding the centrality of facts. In Brazil, journalism also considers itself the representative of the citizenry and mobilizes, among its main elements, denunciation as a strategy to legitimize its actions (Guazina, 2011). However, in the Brazilian case, an expanded professional ideology persists among journalists, who share formal and informal standards concerning how to do their work properly. There isn't, then, as clear a separation according to political positioning as in Argentina, since Brazilian journalists sustain a rhetoric of journalistic objectivity. Nevertheless, their work is not

exempt from the historical biases of the editorial lines held up by the media for which they work (Gagliardi et al., 2022).

With respect to the centrality of facts in the organization of journalistic agendas, the existence or otherwise of journalists as celebrities is key. This is so because such celebrities are the most notorious and recognized figures in journalism and have the ability to combine information and opinion-based discourse indistinctly. In Argentina, celebrity journalists are central to the composition of public debate. They are radio and television hosts and have special columns in graphic or digital media with mass audiences. These journalists as celebrities are usually hosts on 24/7 news channels. Here the center is occupied by opinion, expressed in the first person and with a clear positioning from which it is usual to disqualify adversaries. On the other hand, in Uruguay and Brazil, celebrity journalists do not dominate the media-journalistic ecosystem. With some exceptions, the most recognized figures of radio and television news programs avoid editorializing. Thus, they do not present themselves as competitors with politicians for citizen representation, but as part of another dynamic, with established boundaries with institutional politics. Those responsible for giving opinions in the media are analysts. They are not anchors and their tasks do not include reporting. They are responsible for expressing a marked editorial positioning. In Brazil, however, hosts of shows do exist that are recognized by the general public and tend to adopt a scandalmongering stance in the treatment of current affairs and to combine opinion, entertainment, and information. Nevertheless, they do not exert influence as political journalists.

There are also marked differences in terms of how journalistic work is structured. With no division between information and opinion-based discourse, or between journalistic and commercial remits, there is more potential for the instrumentation of editorial line, since journalists possess fewer deontological tools to protect professional boundaries against powerful actors with interests in the media. In such cases, when faced with the elaboration and dissemination of fake news by parties including high-ranking politicians, renowned journalists, businessmen, intelligence agents, leaders of different spaces, or social network trolls, political journalism finds it more difficult to fulfill the task of verifying information and giving as reliable a version of the facts as possible (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). Rather, there is a growing incentive to promote versions that can

be instrumentalized and to leave to one side those that may be inconvenient for the interests that the media seeks to defend.

In Argentina, journalistic configurations function in this way. An informally institutionalized logic is at work (O'Donnell, 1994): it impacts the expectations of actors with respect to journalistic dynamics and this is something that has taken a stronger hold since the 2010s, when ideological diversity within newsrooms fell dramatically as a result of polarization in times of full employment, when workers could choose where to practice their profession. Above and beyond professional ideology, what united journalists in each media outlet was their political ideology. In the context of a divided media theatre and denunciation journalism (Schuliaquer, 2018), with audiences circulating through clearly differentiated spaces, spaces of mediation between journalists to collectively safeguard informative rigor were marginalized, while news media was managed with clearly differentiated, and sometimes opposing, agendas of facts. Partisanship made facts subsidiary to the editorial line.

The Uruguayan case is different, since there is a separation between the informative and opinion-based realms and, although less clear since 2020, between journalistic and commercial remits. Journalists who deal with information use professional fact-checking parameters. Political leaders of the most important parties value journalism positively and do not see strong biases (Schuliaquer, 2024). At the same time, newsrooms tend to be ideologically diverse spaces. There is a paradox here: despite consisting of statement journalism in which politicians are ranked above journalists in the hierarchy, news journalism is structured through a professional ideology shared across media allowing it to be less partisan. This provides it with a more rigorous information verification apparatus, enabling the combating of fake news.

In Brazil, there has been a separation between information and opinion-based discourse since the 1950s, when political-libertarian journalism lost ground to a journalism that sought to assert its professionalism through ideals of objectivity and impartiality. Within this environment, journalists are expected to exercise their work neutrally, and position-taking should be restricted to the opinion section of the media. Although subject to criticism, this model can be seen as a way of ensuring the intermediary role of journalism in Brazilian public debate. In this sense, the fight against fake news in the country stems from initiatives launched by journalists, fact-checking

agencies, or the newspapers themselves, which seek to reaffirm their role as mediators of the truth. This was especially visible during the covid-19 pandemic when journalistic work included both informing society about developments regarding the disease and disproving President Bolsonaro's statements daily (Marques, 2023; Santos & Cesar, 2022). Journalistic interventions themselves can however legitimize fake news, as in the case of the "gay kit", when the mediatization of the story under this name made it more credible and facilitated its crystallization within public debate (Gomes & Dourado, 2019).

At the same time, the boundaries separating the editorial and commercial remits in Brazilian journalism are porous. As in Argentina and Uruguay, economic conditioning factors systematically weigh on journalistic activity and are structural. Thus, it is not uncommon for certain topics to be neglected or vetoed in newsrooms because they involve given economic actors (Marques et al., 2018).

Three different journalistic configurations, therefore, are in evidence in the three countries. Faced with the challenges confronting both journalism and contemporary society in the context of the erosion of the centrality of scientific truth (Waisbord, 2018), we can interpret how the elements present in each case may strengthen or erode public debate. Faced with the phenomena of disinformation, journalism can seek to combat them, let them pass, or encourage them. Of course, no country is exempt, and nor do any national contexts exist in which no journalistic actors are involved. Here we are talking about journalism in general.

Based on what has been developed, there are numerous incentives in Argentine journalism to spread fake news and few barriers to fight it. Denunciation journalism, the centrality of opinion, and the constant combination of information and opinion-based discourse provide a conducive terrain alongside the partisanship and socialization of audiences in a divided media landscape. Direct instrumentation by owners, the importance of celebrity journalists, and the challenges for journalists in sharing an agenda of facts can all be added to this. An example of the dissemination of fake news came about a week before the 2015 elections when the journalistic program with the highest viewing figures on Argentine television dedicated a broadcast to accusing the Peronist gubernatorial candidate in the most populous province of being the mastermind behind three murders linked to drug trafficking. Key testimony was taken at the home of a Peronist opposition leader. The news was

quickly proven to be false, but the program at fault and most of the media in that section of the divided media theatre did not retract or deny it. The celebrity journalist who hosted the program received the most important award on Argentine television and radio the following year, after the defeat of Peronism.

On the other hand, in Uruguay, there are few incentives to spread fake news and there are certain barriers. A shared professional ideology, the separation of information-based and opinion-based discourse, and, to a certain extent, the separation of journalistic work from direct owner intervention all conspire in this sense. Without overlooking the limitations of the media's political economy, political alignment does not define the newsworthiness of the facts. The scarcity of celebrity journalists contributes both to sustaining the distinction between opinion and information and to separating representations of reality (journalism) and representations of citizenship (institutional politics). An example here came in the form of the coverage, in 2024, of a complaint by a sex worker made against the Frente Amplio opposition presidential candidate for violence and abuse. Initially, the complaint was raised conditionally. Then, when the accusation was proven false, the whole media system participated in the correction, gave prominence to it, and provided space for sources close to the wrongly accused candidate to testify. At the same time, the accuser was convicted for false testimony, and a political leader of the ruling National Party who had participated in the accusation was expelled from her party. Most elements in Uruguayan journalism, then, come together to fight fake news and the prevalence of statement journalism leaves it in a more independent position in the face of potential disinformation from political leaders and parties.

In Brazil, political journalism is based on the Anglo-Saxon model and its logic of guaranteeing the reliability of the information reported. Registered journalists with professional training predominate in newsrooms (Mick et al., 2022), implying a certain common epistemology and shared work ideology. Denunciation journalism allows journalists to consider themselves as representatives of the citizenry in the face of politics to be distrusted. At the same time, certain boundaries exist to separate informative journalism from both opinion and commercial imperatives. Therefore, certain tools seem to be in use to combat fake news. In this context, mainstream Brazilian journalism set up a joint initiative to keep the population informed during the covid-19 pandemic

and to counteract the fake news about the vaccine and treatments spread by the government and President Bolsonaro. Journalism demonstrated a shared commitment to information provision and a strong professional ideology. However, this coexists with editorial constrictions and with the difficulties that arise in a journalistic configuration so focused on suspicion of politicians when it must act on operations (or fake news) that target, precisely, political actors.

Current transnational dynamics in several countries include radicalized narratives and the continual use of fake news in political operations that seek to damage social actors and erode their legitimacy. This debasement of public debate promotes alternative realities in which political alignment strongly conditions not only the interpretation of facts but the very facts themselves. Rather than fostering plurality and a more open debate, instances of dialogue are eliminated and it becomes more difficult to find common ground. Several actors intervene within this hybrid public theatre. Among them, journalism plays a key, if eroded, role in disputing and defining truth. The elements at its disposal to do so vary from country to country however and this has a bearing on its configuration, influenced by its traditions, its conditions of production, its ideologies, and its informal institutionalization. This can be seen in the cases discussed of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay.

Without intending to be normative, and with the aim of grasping the journalistic dynamics *in situ*, the model proposed here can be used to study political journalism in different countries and regions from a comparative perspective. Beyond this, it remains for further work to carry out studies that, with a focus on empirical cases, investigate, country by country, the tools available to combat, let pass, or foster environments of disinformation.

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