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Of shadows and lights: Latin American investigative journalism

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Abstract

The Latin American Investigative Journalism Award – an event that annually honours the best investigative stories produced in the region – is a fitting point of departure for this article. The award is not only a showcase of Latin American muckraking; but it also reveals some thought-provoking developments. The entries to the award – more than 200 stories each year – emphasize an emerging pattern; the finest expressions of investigative journalism are coming from independent, non-profit, digital and transnational media platforms. The aim of this article is to document this emerging pattern.

Introduction: Glorious early 1990s

The large number of entries to the Latin American Investigative Journalism Award, organized annually by Transparency International and the Press and Society Institute, shows there is not shortage of issues to investigate. As Natalia Salamanca, from the investigative digital platform Connectas, said: ‘good stories abound’ (Connectas, 2014). And with a doses of irony, Peruvian muckraker Gustavo Gorriti thought that ‘Latin America is a heaven for investigative journalism’ (Briceño, 2015).

Whereas it might well be a ‘heaven’ for muckrakers, it is a hellish state of affairs for Latin American society. Corruption, a central theme of Latin American investigative journalism over the last two decades – as Waisbord sustains (2001) – is rotting the fragile pillars of democracy. While corruption is certainly a recurrent theme, investigative journalism is also probing abuses of power; the destruction of the environment; sexual traffic and slavery, the abuses of children by the clergy; the list goes on.

Making crime perpetrators accountable – and naming them – is a not an easy task for Latin American muckrakers. Legendary Chilean investigative journalists Mónica González, one of the founders of the Centre of Investigative Journalism (CIPER in Spanish) speaks of a ‘systematic asphyxiation’ of freedom of expression as the main obstacle to investigative journalism in Latin America.

Despite this gloomy scenario – that Gonzalez refers to – the organizers of the Latin American Investigative Journalism Award are confident that “investigative journalism is alive and well across Latin America” (IPYS & GIJN, 2014). And this is good news in the context that corruption in developing nations is really bad news. Corruption, as Blake and Morris points out, is a serious impediment to economic development, poverty reduction and democratic consolidation (2009).

When faced by these urgent social, economic and political demands, investigative journalism is needed more

than ever. It has the power, as David L. Protess et.al remarked, to bring wrongdoings to the public sphere; to investigate and bring about an agenda building process able to introduce changes and foster remedies (1991). 'Changes' and 'remedies' were the results, precisely, behind some of the best-known investigative stories produced in the early years of the 1990s. It was a time of democratic optimism. Most of the military dictatorships that rule the region had ended.

The first major scalp of this period was former Brazilian president Fernando Collor de Mello whose peddling scheme run by his campaign treasurer Paulo César Farias was exposed by Rosental Alves, a investigative reporter for the Brazilian newspaper *Jornal do Brasil*. The investigation by Alves, now a journalism professor University of Texas at Austin, was fundamental in Collor de Mello legal free-fall. He was impeached and his government ended in 1992, just two years after his election.

The uncompromising Brazilian investigative journalism of the 1990s began filtering through Latin America and became a template for regional muckrakers. In Venezuela, investigative reporters uncovered former president Carlos Andrés Pérez' embezzlement of 250 million bolivars belonging to a presidential discretionary fund. Andrés Pérez's political fate was sealed by José Vicente Rangel's investigation for *El Universal* newspaper. Carlos Andrés Pérez was forced out of office in 1993 becoming the second major scalp of Latin America investigative journalism.

Three years later after the fall of Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela a story by Peruvian muckraker Gustavo Gorriti – working then for *La Prensa of Panamá* – forced former Panamanian President Ernesto Perez Balladares, 1994-1999, to admit receiving a massive electoral financial contribution from a Colombian drug cartel. While he survived to the investigation, the scandal sealed Perez Balladares' ambition to run for the presidency in 1999.

In mid-1977 two Colombian cabinet ministers resigned after the weekly news magazine *Semana* published a surreptitiously recorded cellular phone conversation in which they discussed then President Ernesto Samper's plan to give half of the government's radio concessions to his friends. Other investigative stories linked Samper himself to the Cali drug cartel received more widespread international attention. While Samper, who served as the President of Colombia from 1994 to 1998, survived an impeachment attempt and served out his full term, the stories led to the resignation and arrest of his defense minister and are widely believed to have cost him much of his domestic and international political support (Simon, 1998)

During the same period – in 1997 – hardnosed Ecuadorean muckrakers brought down President Abdalá Bucaram. An investigative story published in the daily *Hoy* (Today) exposed how the president known as 'El Loco' (the Madman) had diverted money he had raised during a Christmas telethon to help the poor. Amid a national uproar, Congress ousted him for 'mental incapacity' and ended up in exile in Panama.

It is not surprising that these stories – and many others – produced in the first half of the 1990s coincided with the fall of the 1970s and 1980s military dictatorships that ruled most Latin American countries. The return of the *generals* to their barracks in the 1990s saw a *renaissance* of Latin American investigative journalism, a modest renaissance that was not exempt from major hurdles. Unfortunately, these hurdles remain in place. They are hurdles attempting to discourage what David L. Protess et al. shrewdly described as 'the journalism of outrage' (1991).

Ettema and Glasser point out that 'Investigative reporting can be journalism at its most politically vigorous and methodologically rigorous'. Sometimes, however, it is also journalism at its most vulnerable (2007, p. 491). And one could argue that 'vulnerable' is a fitting word to describe the reality of Latin American investigative journalism. It is vulnerable to economic and political assaults.

Jorge Luis Pizarro, a Mexican investigative journalist and Knight Fellow at the ICFJ, points out that the Latin American muckraker's vulnerability rests on the mutually beneficial relationship between the commercial media and the so-called 'private power' (quoted in Enrique Armendarez, 1999).

Stories that make advertisers uncomfortable and the political elite aggravated will be hastily dropped from the pages and the screens of the commercial media (Greenwald and Bernt, 2000, p. 35). The commercial Latin American news media is largely privately owned and is engaged in lucrative commercial arrangements powerful financial players.

This is something that worries Chilean muckraker Nancy Gúzman. In an interview she told me: 'Reporting the business of important individuals – or against the government – brings sanctions that not many journalists are willing to experience,' (2015). Guzmán is the author of major books on investigative journalism, including *Un grito desde el silencio* (a scream from the silence); *Ingrid Olderoock: La mujer de los perros* (*Ingrid Olderoock: the woman of the dogs*) and *Romo: confesiones de un torturador* (*Romo: the admissions of a torturer*).

She points out that the obstacles to her work are the same experienced in the past and today: 'financial asphyxiation, lack of access to public information and a pervasive culture of censorship (2015). Throughout her

distinguished career, Guzmán has faced all the obstacles previously mentioned. However, it's the lack of access to information that exasperates her most. 'The documents exist, but when you find them the only thing you can access are their front covers', she said (2015). This was one of the stumbling blocks she faced when investigating her latest book – *El clan Edwards y la conspiración permanente* (The Edwards clan and constant conspiracies).

Published in 2015, the book is an *exposé* into the financial and political scheming of Agustín Edwards Eastman and his family. Edwards Eastman is one of the most powerful men in Chile. He is the owner of *El Mercurio* newspaper; an ultra-right wing publication that played a key role in the CIA sponsored 1973 *coup d'état* against the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende. When Guzmán requested Chilean Court documents over the financial fraud Agustín Edwards had committed against the state, the only things she received was 'the cover of the legal documents' (2015).

Access to public and private information, fundamental principles of investigative journalism, is not constitutionally guaranteed in most Latin American countries. This is a critical point since open access to information about issues that affect the lives of many, has been regarded as one of the fundamental rights in a democratic society. Colombia's Ignacio Gómez from *Noticia Uno* reminds us that – in the context of a rapid process of digitisation of public documents – there is no *ad hoc* legislation on what public documents should be made available on the web. In addition, Gómez points out that there has been a drastic reduction of digitalised public information available to journalists and to the public in general (Gómez, 2009).

While it is true some advances have been made, such as the introduction of freedom of information (Fol) regulations, they have failed – as UNESCO has argued – 'to be fully implemented' (2015). Most of these laws are in effect *letras muertas* (dead letters).

Key to the deficiency in access to information is the political culture that reigns in most Latin American countries. It is a culture where the political elite deems information as an object that is privately owned. It is not considered – as is in the case of consolidated democracies – a public right. Regularly, political leaders resort to the 'national security' trick to block the release of documents related to questions that are considered in the public interest. The principle of the public right to know – so celebrated in western democracies – is unapologetically ignored.

Important financial information, such as those related to official economic indicators are not freely available or, in the best of cases, are hard to come by. When they are achieved, however, the results can be explosive. This was the case – as mentioned earlier – in stories that brought down the governments of Collor de Mello in Brazil and Abdalá Bucaram in Ecuador. These stories were heavily reliant on financial and banking information. This culture of concealment is prevalent in societies that have experienced authoritarian and dictatorial regimes, either in the past or recently. In some countries, for example in Mexico, the law to access information is abstruse and almost inoperable (Enrique Armendares, 1999).

Only Colombia and Costa Rica have established legal guarantees that allow journalists to access to information. Uruguay – in many aspects a progressive nation – is one of the few countries in the region in which freedom of the press is more or less guaranteed and independent journalism can be exercised relatively freely.

In Latin America censorship comes in many forms. One of them is the world's most punitive media legislation. It is an attempt to systematically asphyxiate investigative journalism. In most Latin American countries anachronistic laws persist – such as the law of *desacato* (contempt) whereby journalists risk jail terms when expressing opinions critical of public officials or institutions (Botero & Camilleri, 2011).

Latin American reporters – as Tina Rosenberg points out:

... must also contend with laws that make libel a criminal offence, and use of the term libel has a broad definition. Venezuela criminalizes expressions deemed disrespectful to public officials even if completely true (2006).

The legal system, in most of the region, displays significant autocratic features. Judges enjoy unrestricted powers on matters of defamation leaving journalists with few avenues of defense.

And while the legal system can have a paralyzing consequence on investigative reporters, organized crime has a frightening effect. In the last decade there has been an increasing level of violence and intimidation against investigative reporters. In fact Mexico's organized crime violence against journalist makes more headlines than investigations into the activities of drug lords. In Mexico today political power and organized crime – very often in collusion – are the main threats to investigative reporters. Mexican muckrakers at the outstanding *Proceso* magazine (Process) work under permanent harassment from disgruntled politicians and brutal drug lords.

Lights

While shadows still engulf most Latin American investigative journalism, the explosion of digital platforms, has broken a crack in the system, a crack – paraphrasing Canadian songwriter and poet Leonard Cohen – that allows the light in. Nelly Luna, from the Peruvian investigative journalism web site *OjoPúblico*, points out that ‘digital platforms have prompted a renaissance of investigative journalism in Latin America’ (2015). Luna argues that the closure of investigative units in the mass media has encouraged the establishment of independent and innovative investigative journalism projects. It was in this context that *OjoPúblico* (Public Eyes) was set up.

‘The closure of the investigative unit at *El Comercio* newspaper accelerated the establishment of *OjoPúblico*,’ Luna points out (2015). The founders of *OjoPúblico* were actually investigative reporters at *El Comercio*, a newspaper founded in 1839. It is the oldest newspaper in Peru and one of the oldest Spanish-language papers in the world.

Giannina Segnini, head of the investigative unit of Costa Rica’s *La Nación* newspaper, suggests that the experimentation with new digital multiplatform has brought about a historical moment, a moment when good journalism in Latin America is possible (Salazar, 2014). And while some sections of the traditional media – as is the case Segnini’s *La Nación* for example – are engaged in investigative journalism, it is in the digital world that this genre is setting the news agenda. Salamanca et al. states that Latin America is an attractive region for digital investigative journalism, a point that is clearly demonstrable by the upsurge in the last decade of a vast number of independent and non-for profit investigative journalism platforms (2014).

The foundation of independent investigative journalism platforms materialized in the context of several initiatives undertaken to reduce corruption in the region, most of them commenced by international organizations – such as the World Bank and the United Nations. It is in this context that digital experiences of investigative journalism began flourishing throughout the region.

Peru’s Gustavo Gorriti maintains that the internet and new technologies have helped to reshape the nature of investigative journalism in Latin America. In addition José Luis Sanz, Director of El Salvador’s *El Faro*, maintains that ‘the best contemporary investigative journalism in Latin America is been done by digital media’ (2012).

El Faro – an online digital newspaper founded in 1998 – is considered to be the first Latin America digital media that began publishing investigations. The investigative news agenda staple was as expected: corruption, human rights, immigration and organized crime. It was a bold publishing experiment in a country where only 13 per cent of the population has access to the internet. But the experiment has paid off. In 2013 *El Faro* received the Latin American Investigative Award for a story into secret negotiations between the government and the Maras, the criminal gangs largely responsible for an epidemic of street violence plaguing Central America. The story showed that the government had struck a deal with the gangs to reduce the number of murders. In return the leaders of the criminal groups were transferred to low security jails and received thousand of dollars. The government misled the public and attributed the drop in criminal activities to its efficient intelligence and policing actions.

But perhaps the greatest scoop of *El Faro* was solving the country’s most notorious crime: the 1980 murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero, which sparked a 12-year civil war that led to the slaughter of 70,000 Salvadorans. In the Spring of 2010, the website editor Carlos Dada patiently tracked down one of Romero’s killers and extracted an extraordinary confession that implicated the highest levels of the government in the archbishop’s assassination (Feldstein, 2012).

Alongside *El Faro*, Guatemala’s *Plaza Pública* is also reinventing investigative journalism in Central America. Established in 2011 Guatemala’s *Plaza Pública* operates only online and has earned a well-deserved reputation as a hard-hitting investigative publication. ‘We audit the private sector as part of our mandate’ *El Faro*’s director Martín Rodríguez Pellecer contends (Jiménez, 2012). Rodríguez Pellecer is convinced investigative journalism will keep on coming from these new digital platforms -as the traditional media won’t cover controversial issues. ‘They’re afraid companies would remove ads,’ he points out (Jiménez, 2012).

Plaza Pública’s name and concept were inspired by Jürgen Habermas’ thoughts on the public sphere, a space in which public opinion can be formed and private citizens come together to discuss matters of public interest. It is a non-profit news organization with two-thirds of its annual budget coming from the Universidad Rafael Landívar, a private university administered by the Society of Jesus, Catholic religious congregation (Jiménez, 2012).

In neighbouring Nicaragua, the Centro de Investigaciones de la Comunicación (The Communication Research Centre or CINCO) has become, since its foundation in 1990, an effective muckraker. Some of its founders include CINCO’s president, the renowned Nicaraguan journalist Carlos Fernando Chamorro, former president of *Barricada* newspaper and the current director of the TV programs *Esta Semana* (This Week), and the digital newspaper *Confidencial* (Confidential). The journalist Sofia Montenegro – author of several publications on national media, gender, political culture and governance – is the executive director of the organization.

Peru is a country that has suffered its fair share of problems. According to Proética, the anti-corruption Peruvian chapter of Transparency International, corruption was the second-biggest concern among Peruvians, following crime (The Economist, 2013). Corruption and crime were two powerful reasons that moved Gustavo Gorriti to establish in 2013 IDL-Reporteros.

IDL-Reporteros – an independent Peruvian investigative journalism digital program of the Instituto de Defensa Legal (Institute of Legal Defence or IDL) – has become a landmark for investigative journalism in the region. It has received some of the most coveted journalism prizes, such as the Maria Moors Cabot Prize, the New Journalism award conferred by the Ibero American New Journalism Foundation, and the International Freedom award given by the Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ).

Gorriti, a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University since 1986, was a commercial television newsman. He was visionary enough to acknowledge that investigative journalism and commercial television were incompatible. He posed then an existential question: where will the future investigative journalism come from? Gorriti tried to answer this by setting up an experimental investigative project. He obtained US\$160,000 from the Open Society Foundations to create a web site and train a small group of journalists. The digital platform was launched in February 2003. Gorriti's working philosophy points to two principles: the investigations have to be well done and they have to have impact (2010).

IDL-Reporteros – like the majority of these new digital platforms of investigative journalism – is a small operation. The organisation is, as Resquejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando describes, 'operated by a small group of journalists often led by veteran investigative reporters' (2014). The team is also comprised of journalism students on professional placements (Resquejo-Alemán and Lugo-Ocando, 2014).

LaSillaVacía.com is one of those small enterprises that are having an impact on Latin American muckraking. Led by *LaSillaVacía.com* Colombian investigative journalism has seen a renaissance. This is due, partially, to policies of openness and transparency implemented in the last few decades in Colombia. This has allowed journalists access to digital sources, such as laws, decrees, resolutions, administrative acts, edicts, and legal notices. This information is channeled through the digitalized versions of the *Diario Único de Contratación* (Procurement Daily), the *Diario Oficial* (Official Gazette) and the decisions by the Procuraduría General de la Nación (Attorney General).

In this environment of access and openness *LaSillaVacía.com* has broken major stories. In 2009 it published documents related to the so-called 'false positives' scandal. The investigation exposed one of the worst episodes of mass atrocity in the hemisphere – civilians across the country were allegedly murdered by soldiers and presented as guerrilla fighters. The aim was to boost body counts. The documents *LaSillaVacía.com* uncovered and published assisted the families of the victims to launch a court case against the military.

In Colombia, the role-played by the Consejo de Redacción (Editorial Council or CDR) is also significant. CDR was the brainchild of Carlos Eduardo Huertas, head of the investigative unit at *Semana* magazine. Established in 2006 by a group of journalists, CDR is supported by The University of Texas' Knight Centre for Journalism. The organization not only engages in highly complex investigative stories, but also functions as a training institution for investigative techniques. And its web site functions as a clearinghouse; it published some of the best Latin American investigative stories.

With an internet penetration of more than 70 percent – the highest in Latin America – it's no surprise that the renaissance of Chile's post-military dictatorship investigative journalism comes from the digital world. The digital platform the Centro de Investigación Periodística (Centre of Investigative Journalism or CIPER) has had, since its foundation in 2007, a major impact on Chile's investigative news agenda. CIPER was the idea of investigative journalist Mónica Gonzalez whose notoriety as a fierce muckraker was manifested during the 1973-1989 Pinochet's dictatorship. Based in Santiago, CIPER is part of the first generation of investigative reporting digital platforms that surfaced in Latin America. It has been funded by COPESA, the second largest media conglomerate in Chile and publisher of *La Tercera*, which it is the second most read newspaper after *El Mercurio*. CIPER has also received funding from The Ford Foundation and Open Society Foundations.

CIPER's major breakthrough came a year after its foundation. A 2008 investigation by Mónica Gonzalez and Cristobal Peña – who used to be a Co-Director of CIPER and now is the Director of Journalism at the University Alberto Hurtado – exposed the irregularities surrounding the award of million-dollar contract by the Chilean government to an Indian technology company, TATA Consultancy Services BPO Chile S.A.

The contract would have given the company control of administering Chile's entire public records database. It was this investigation that launched CIPER's reputation as an influential watchdog of public policy (Merlan, 2015). CIPER has one of the best-developed databases of *who is who* in Chile's elite and also on the lobby groups that tend to work at the margins of the elected powers, the so-called *poderes fácticos* (de facto powers) as they are called in Chile's political lexicon.

What CIPER has done in Chile is very much like the work done by the *Foro de Periodistas Argentinos* (Forum of Argentinean Journalists or FOPEA). Established in 2003, FOPEA has attracted to its headquarters some of the best Argentinean investigative journalists. Funded largely by its own members – and some donations from journalism schools – FOPEA has filled the investigative vacuum left by the commercial media that, since the economic crisis of 2001, has been starved of advertising revenues.

Brazil has not been left behind in this new wave of investigative journalism awash in the region. The Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (ABRAJI) is one of the best-known digital platforms of investigative journalism. With the assistance of the University of Texas' Knight Centre for Journalism, ABRAJI was set up in 2002. ABRAJI played a key role in the enactment of the 2011 Brazil's Freedom of Information Act, an act that has been fundamental in the new wave of Brazilian muckraking. ABRAJI has 2000 members and has trained thousands of reporters. It also sponsors the annual Brazilian investigative journalism congress, which attracts hundreds of journalists and journalism students.

In the last few years Brazil's muckraking has been further strengthened by the foundation, in 2013, of Agência de Reportagem e Jornalismo Investigativo (Reportage and Investigative Journalism Agency or *A Pública* in short). As stated in their English version of the web site, 'In order to preserve its independence, *A Pública* is a non-profit journalism project' (Agencia Pública, 2015). Under the Creative Commons, articles by *A Pública* can be freely reproduced.

Mauri Koning, Brazilian journalist at the *Gazeta do Povo of Paraná*, points out there is a thriving investigative scene in the country and many stories are coming from the Brazilian states. Koning, who received in 2013 the prestigious University of Columbia María Moors Cabot journalism award, has worked for years in high impact stories such as the one that probed into the illegal channeling of money destined to police officers in the southern state of Paraná. In 2011 the newspaper won the first prize of the annual Latin American Investigative Award for a story by James Alberti who spent two years investigating a case of financial corruption engulfing the state of Parana's Legislative Assembly.

These are the halcyon days for Brazilian muckrakers, according to Columbia University scholar Anya Schiffrin (2014). Schiffrin argues that the 2011 Brazil's Freedom of Information Act has had a positive impact on the countries investigative journalism. As it also has been the Porto Alegre 1989's Participatory Budgeting (PB) initiative undertaken by the left-wing Workers' Party after winning power. The PB, a form of participatory democracy where ordinary people have a say on budget matters, followed the demands for greater inclusion in financial decision-making. The FOI and the PB, as Schiffrin points out, have allowed investigative journalists to air important information about the government and its processes (Schiffrin, 2014).

An interesting feature of the new wave of Brazilian investigative journalism is – paraphrasing Silvio Waisbord – its 'hybridity, NGOs working along investigative journalists (1996, 2000). This hybrid projects has seen the development of notable NGO journalism projects – one of them is *Infoamazonia*. Launched in 2012 *Infoamazonia* was created by Gustavo Faleiros, a Brazilian environmental reporter who has assembled a team of investigative journalists and environmental activists. Their role is to watchdog and map the activities underway in the Amazon rainforest.

The cutting-edge investigations carried out by these digital platforms – among many others to spring up across the region – have not gone unnoticed by the commercial media. In the case of CIPER and others, these digital initiatives have established editorial agreements with some commercial news organizations – newspapers, magazines, television and radio – to reproduce and disseminate their investigations. This engagement allows, as Schiffrin's puts it, the 'amplification' of the stories produced by these independent platforms (2014, p. 10). This is important as traditional media outlets still have a powerful social influence due to their 'strong brands names' (2014, p. 10).

Alongside the new wave of investigative platforms contemporary Latin American investigative journalism has been strengthened by the creation of *Poderopedia*, a data journalism website launched in Chile in 2012. Its founder is ICFJ Knight International Journalism Fellow Miguel Paz. The aim of this investigative tool is – as stated by Paz – is to map who is who in business and politics and foster transparency and accountability and revealing potential conflicts of interests among the political and financial elite (2014). The platform is now a wealth of information about the powerful in Chile. Paz states that it stores information on 3,107 influential individuals, 1,398 powerful companies and 812 institutions.

Six Chilean commercial newsrooms are *amplifying* – using Anna Schiffrin's term – the work *Poderopedia* is doing. *Poderopedia* has 3,590 registered users. As Paz indicates, *Poderopedia* cuts information asymmetry and helps citizens to make more informed decisions; it makes the powerful accountable and promotes a better democracy (2014). *Poderopedia* has been spreading fast in the region. In 2014 the Colombian version of this platform began operating in collaboration with the Consejo de Redacción (CdR). And in Venezuela it has established a collaborative alliance with the Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela (Institute of Press and

Society of Venezuela, IPYS).

New paradigm

Trans-border, independent and digital seem to be the new paradigm in Latin American investigative journalism. The experience of *Poderopedia* – and its expansion into Colombia and Venezuela – has foreshadowed a remarkable facet of contemporary investigative journalism in the region. It is a cross-border collaborative inquiry. In the last decade the hemisphere has seen the incubation of transnational and collaborative investigative journalism projects. These are projects that make accountable – as CIPER's Monica González put it – ‘holders of financial power whose interests are beyond the local borders’ (2009).

Transnational or trans-border journalism is doable in Latin America due to some key factors. First of all there is a common language and a more or less common journalistic culture. In addition the problems faced, from corruption to impunity, are common to most Latin American countries. The Investigative Journalism Initiative for the Americas has been playing – since 2013 – a fundamental role in the development of collaborative trans-border journalism projects. The initiative is a four-year program – 2013-2017- co-funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL). The key objective was to support new initiatives focusing on promoting and strengthening transparency, security and freedom of expression for the media (ICFJ, 2013).

The program is intended to build the capacity of investigative journalists in eight countries: Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Paraguay. This project also aims to encourage the use of investigative journalism techniques, the enhancement of networks of peers and the design of collaborative projects (ICFJ, 2013)

In this new paradigm CONNECTAS is playing a key part. Founded in 2012, CONNECTAS is a non-profit journalism project that promotes the production, sharing, training and dissemination of data. It has a transnational approach insofar as it aims to fashion alliances with journalism and media organizations in the region. In essence it functions as a logistical hub that provides technical and professional support to regional investigative reporters.

Labeled as a ‘journalistic platform for the Americas’ (CONNECTAS, 2012), this investigative enterprise has focused its attention on the emerging transnational maladies that the region is facing. The regionalisation of criminality is certainly one of them. Investigative journalism is expensive. In this context investigative reporters in th region collaborate and maximise their limited financial resources.

Equally important in the establishment of Latin American muckraker's transnational and collaborative approach has been the work done by the Peruvian based Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (Institute of Press and Society, IPYS in Spanish). Set up in Lima in 1993, IPYS emerged as a reaction to the authoritarian and corrupt government of Alberto Fujimori, 1990 to 2000. IPYS' fundamental objective is to achieve more transparent governments and assists investigative journalists to look after – as the organization point out – ‘the belongings of the people’ (IPYS, 2015)

The founding members were well-known Peruvian editors whose first task was to create a regional network to protect journalists. From a national initiative it evolved into a regional one with the integration of several Latin American journalists into the IPYS' Regional Council. In 2002 IPYS Colombia was established and in 2008 in Venezuela. The scope of this organization is wide range and the actions ambitious. It has set up a regional network of investigative journalists who are engaged in transnational investigations

ALiados is one of the newest collaborative and transnational investigative journalism projects to materialize in Latin America. Set up in 2013 ALiados (Alliance) is a federation of ten independent news organizations from nine countries; Agência Pública (Brazil), Animal Político (Mexico), CIPER (Chile), Confidencial (Nicaragua), El Faro (El Salvador), El Puercoespín (Argentina), IDL-Reporteros (Peru), La Silla Vacía (Colombia), Plaza Pública (Guatemala) and The Clinic (Chile).

Natalia Vina of Agência Pública said the aim of the federation was, ‘to chase new forms of coverage and to find solutions – financial and economic solutions – at a time when the media is in crisis and the traditional model of financing is facing huge problems’ (quoted by O'Donovan, 2013). As O'Donovan writes: ‘While collaborative journalism and content sharing are interesting prospects to some of the members, the primary goal is to band together in an attempt to locate innovative and alternative sources of revenue for their news organizations’ (2013) Although very different from each other, all the members of ALiados share common guidelines such as: ‘professional quality, transparency, independence from political and economic influences and factual accuracy on the realities of Latin America and the world in a way that traditional media platforms in the region are not doing it’ (Looney, 2013).

Instigated by a growing interest in developing transnational collaboration the International Centre for

Investigative Journalism (ICFJ) began in 2014 developing strategies to strengthen cross-border cooperation. Called the Investigative Reporting Initiative in the Americas, the four-year project involves eight countries: Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and Paraguay. The scheme has allowed reporters from these countries to safely collaborate by resorting to the ICFJ's secure online platform, a platform created by the ICFJ's Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project in the Balkans (Looney, 2013). Now available in Spanish, a selected group of 20 investigative reporters from these eight countries are able to access the ICFJ Investigative Dashboard platform. It consists of an online research and data-sharing tool that provides a wealth of resources and database on organized crime and corruption (Looney, 2013).

Conclusion

Peruvian Literature Nobel Mario Vargas Llosa once said that the main threat to Latin American democracy was corruption. He was correct. It is, however, not only corruption that threatens democracy. The malaise of Latin America is also brought about by the spread of organized crime against the backdrop of weak political and legal institutions. Crimes by the powerful are rarely investigated – let alone punished. Impunity seems to be the norm.

It is against this depressing backdrop that investigative journalism is needed more than ever in the region. And while the traditional and commercial media have relinquished their investigative role, new forms of investigative journalism are burgeoning in the region. It is a wave of Latin American muckrakers who have found in the digital world the appropriate platform to investigate and disseminate their work. It is a wave of independent journalism with a vocation for transnational collaboration. These modern Latin American muckrakers embody today the historical mandate of investigative journalism; to expose wrongdoings and mobilize public opinion.

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