

John Sinclair and Joseph Straubhaar, **Latin American Television Industries**, London; New York: British Film Institute; Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 216 pp., \$27.95 (paperback), \$89.95 (hardcover).

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### Reading the Book

In order to assess the values of the TV industry in Latin America over the years and up to now, John Sinclair and Joseph Straubhaar's **Latin American Television Industries** updates the media history of the region—mainly that of Brazil and Mexico—with some new case studies such as the rise of Xuxa as an international pop star in the 1990s, and Venezuelan censorship during the Colonel Hugo Chavez era (1999–2013), a turning point of the government takeover of the RCTV signal. Throughout the text, by describing and analyzing specific cases, the authors attempt to put forward their core hypothesis: The regional TV industry maintains its uniqueness within a deeply globalized means of expression. The great contribution of Straubhaar in this book (co-author Sinclair has previously written and published on the topic in *Latin American Television: A Global View* on which the current title is based) is to add a postcolonial gaze rather than examining only history and political economy. Straubhaar, an expert on Latin American soap operas and digital inclusion, was able to politicize and question the postcolonial arguments and cultural studies lexicon in order to explain the transition from the old television model to what is envisioned as the new one. Cultural capital and cultural proximity are among the book's most important notions.



We follow the authors' evolution of thought according to the book's table of contents and then point out issues that could be reformulated in the next edition or in future studies. First, in the four initial chapters, Sinclair and Straubhaar examine the beginnings and early development of Latin American broadcasting, mainly based on how local entrepreneurs were influenced by the major U.S. networks NBC and CBS, rather than by official initiatives from the U.S. government, specifically those of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs then headed by Nelson Rockefeller. Sinclair and Straubhaar describe the origins of the main regional groups such as Cuba's CMQ, Mexico's Televisa, and Brazil's Globo. This part of the study is very descriptive, and the most interesting information presented by the authors is related to (1) the creation of the Central American Television Network (CATVN); (2) ABC's investments in Argentina and Chile, which are largely unknown among U.S. and even Latin American audiences and scholars; (3) the current Brazilian law that regulates the cable TV system, which is now required to broadcast national and independent programs and content; (4) the creation of TeleSUR and TV Brasil, and the efforts of TV Azteca in Central America; (5) the emergence and difficulties of some players in the region, such as Grupo Cisneros in Venezuela and Grupo Clarín in Argentina, in the face of new media

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policies; (6) and the fact that Spain imports more TV programs that are Latin American productions made in the United States than those made directly in Latin American countries. This sort of information is thought provoking, and the authors chose good lines of reasoning to carry out their arguments.

Chapters 5 and 6 are written in a style that manages to criticize and at the same time, inform, which is not very typical in the Latin world where media studies are often addressed with the strength of critical theory and Marxist tradition that emphasizes issues such as economic dependency. (By the way, this is our best tradition.) For instance, the great Mexican company Grupo Televisa did not have a good relationship with the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) when the wave of privatization took place in Spain during the 1980s after Franco's death in 1975. The implication is that this is one of the reasons for the scarcity of Televisa content in the Iberian region today. In contrast, the Brazilian network TV Globo always had a positive connection with Portuguese Prime Minister António de Oliveira Salazar and his successors during the dictatorship (1926–1974) and after when Portugal decided to privatize the sector. Today, both TV Globo and Record (the second most important network television in Brazil) play important roles in the Portuguese media market. The sections in which Sinclair and Straubhaar describe and analyze TV Globo's participation in the Portuguese-speaking African countries (mainly Mozambique and Angola) have an insightful conclusion. The authors point out that the Portuguese war against their African colonies didn't lead to success for Portugal in the media market in the region, because African people didn't feel friendly toward Portuguese cultural influence and preferred the Brazilian association. In the final chapters, the authors examine the new challenges the Latin American TV industry will face in the coming years when globalization will become a definitive factor. Strong telenovelas and cultural elasticity are the vernacular values promoting the uniqueness that Sinclair and Straubhaar believe will allow the Latin American TV industry to face those challenges.

### **Misreading the Book?**

The book balances strong data and good style with some tacit ideas that underlie English-speaking academic thought. One of these notions is that Latin American countries have strong states, because they seem to exert great influence over their inhabitants' lives. But the authors seem to forget that in the case of the television industry, those countries claiming to have strong states didn't show their power. From its origins in the 1950s, television had a commercial purpose, but within a public legal framework. The book does not mention that radio and television broadcasts are a public concession, with very specific guidelines about their public and social orientations that are clearly stated in the constitutions of Latin American nations. In contrast, the United States allows commercial content to take over a large share of the market. In Latin American, our republicanism works by hidden laws and absent structures. It truly seems that the Latin American states simply disagree with that crucial separation, frequently dealing with public affairs as if they are private matters.

That is why, for Latin American readers, some things in the book might sound contradictory. For example, considering the ideas outlined in the former paragraph—even taking into account that the book was written for an Anglophone audience—how can the text state that "Corporatism in Latin America is seen as an inheritor of Iberian, and also Italian, tendencies toward patrimonial, hierarchical economy and politics" (p. 146). Moreover, on page 147, the current governments of Argentine, Bolivia, Ecuador, and

Venezuela are all described as populist. We wonder how the authors can reconcile the fact of a patrimonial and populist government (state?) that has delegated to private hands the control of the national mass media industry? Wouldn't it be a contradiction? We don't know for sure. It is true that sometimes we live in a dialectical world in which seemingly contrary views can come together. Although this is not the place to argue about the vagaries of capitalism, we are able to say that in Latin America, there is a gap between the Magna Carta's guidelines and the realities of life, which promote a sense of fragility brought about by the necessity of finding dialectical solutions in various situations. According to Sinclair and Straubhaar, in the Latin American television industries, the synthesis is peaceful. On the contrary, for us, the big challenge is not only to rethink the Latin America's state, but to overcome the fragile certainties that dialectical methods inspire in the social sciences.

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