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*Media Power in
Central America*

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
URBANA AND CHICAGO

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Introduction

The cycle of history is at low tide in Central America: the small nations of the land bridge between North and South America were the strategic focus of cold war policy makers in the 1980s, but today they have seemingly dropped from the radar screen of our conscience. Notably, however, the region's civil and guerrilla wars have left an uncertain future as their legacy. With all these countries at peace, and with dictators removed from the scene, the United States has moved its attention elsewhere, to Kosovo, to Colombia, and to China.

But U.S. policy in the region has itself sown the seeds of future problems. Rather than view all U.S. meddling in Central America as inappropriate, this book will argue that once it became intricately involved in the workings of these nations, the United States had a responsibility to help with a transition toward peace. Instead of shouldering this responsibility, the United States continues to do what it has too often done before in Central America: tinkering until business interests and capitalism are served without addressing the fundamental reasons that guerrilla wars erupted in the first place. Once trade and profits are ensured in the region, the United States moves its attention elsewhere, only to return to tamp down the fires that inevitably spring up again and again.

The cycle of U.S. involvement during the past two centuries certainly constitutes one of the region's unique characteristics, an element of media and governmental development that distinguish the area from all others. The United States' attempts to protect its market interests in Central America through military intervention under the guise of constructing democracy are too numerous to document here. But these interventions

continue to affect the perceptions of current U.S. programs to promote democracy and civil society.

This time, in the region's important postwar era, before relegating Central America to its usual place on a dusty back shelf, the United States blithely ignored fundamental concerns for free expression in the Information Age as it rushed to shore up incipient democracies throughout the region. Although democratizing the world has been a cornerstone of U.S. policy in the 1990s, in the Information Age Washington has seemed uninformed or inept in the way it approaches policies to encourage free expression and the flow of information as it tries to support so-called emerging democracies or emerging nations. With the United States' role as global supercop expanding rather than shrinking, and the trend toward U.S. sponsorship of democracy movements, the Central American experience in the 1990s can perhaps teach us a lesson.

We have focused on communications systems in Central America because they present a unique model as nation building and democratization become more important in U.S. and European foreign policy. The intriguing part of this model is that each country acts as a separate building block in creating an image of the entire region. Within each country one can detect different stages of development. Each media system differs from the others. Each of these six countries has a unique history and personality. Each occupies a different location on the spectrum of economic and political development: from the sophistication and longtime democracy of Costa Rica to the corruption and fear in Honduras, a nation still trying to rid itself of a political system dominated by the military. One of the interesting aspects of examining the media in these countries is discovering the ways in which state and corporate interests have developed sophisticated means to manipulate media content now that the days of heavy-handed military censors are over. In addition, we have focused on the media of these nations because their roles in the region's politics have been universally ignored.

It is important to note that the United States is just one factor in the way these countries have developed, but it has often been the most important hegemonic factor governing how these nations formed their political systems after independence from Spain. Nonetheless, the United States has not always sought to promote the same freedoms guaranteed by its constitutional system. Likewise, local elites have often used U.S. intrusions in Central America for their own ends.

For too long those who sought to bring real democracy to the region have neglected to build the systems of communication and free expression that would allow democracy to flourish. In 1858 the philosopher

J. S. Mill wrote, "The time, it is hoped, is gone by when any defense would be necessary of the 'liberty of the press' as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government."¹ The example of Central America shows that Mill's optimistic view has not yet been universally realized.

Authoritarianism may have been removed from the power equation for now, but tacitly republican forms of government in the region are still using tactics honed by authoritarian regimes of the past to maintain their control. In this way a type of semiauthoritarianism has settled over many parts of Central America. Its media systems have been warped by their authoritarian and violent pasts, often becoming corrupt centers of political polarization bent on the personal agendas of elite owners or colluding with government in an attempt to cloud public perception. Those who resist this prescribed pattern of behavior still encounter the strong-arm tactics of military and paramilitary forces. As the Latin American scholar Silvio Waisbord notes, "Recent episodes of violence against journalists show that ideological persecution and the ambivalent stands of government officials on the defense of freedom of expression still persist."²

One might argue that the flaws in the communication systems of Central America merely show how capitalism is a higher priority there than true democracy. Although a few genuine programs to bolster democracy in Central America became a strong part of the foreign policy of the Clinton administration, advancement of business interests in the region remained central among Washington's goals. Further, many Central American leaders were happy to comply with these policies as long as their own economic needs were met.

Some may see this as a universal rather than a regional problem. As Upton Sinclair wrote: "Journalism is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over political democracy; it is the day-by-day, between-elections propaganda, whereby minds of the people are kept in a state of acquiescence, so that when the crisis of an election comes, they go to the polls and cast their ballots for either of the two candidates of their exploiters."³

Sinclair was writing about the United States, a maturing democratic system with a cultural and political history different from Central America's. Journalism developed in Latin America altogether differently than it did in the United States. As Waisbord writes: "Simply, none of the crucial developments that permitted the rise of a market-oriented press and the ideal of objectivity in the United States existed in the region."⁴ Thus the imposition of a system with capital as its primary priority rather than the development of democracy will surely affect not just a nation's political system but also the way that the political and econom-

ic system employs communication to do its bidding. If he were alive today, Upton Sinclair would surely note the capitalist imperative in U.S. journalism has only worsened its quality and that the nation's plutocracy continues to employ the communication system as a measure of control, albeit of a system that has a democratic foundation.

Those who see capitalism and democracy as happily existing coequals in national development should perhaps consider that capitalism and authoritarianism have coexisted in the Latin American model for most of the twentieth century. In her work on Latin American communication systems, Elizabeth Fox notes that "free markets do not guarantee democracy or the open marketplace of ideas when faced with domestic authoritarianism."⁵ Chile under General Augusto Pinochet is just one example. For another example, consider how Panama spent a generation under dictators but became one of Latin America's largest banking centers. In our view the true competitive marketplace of ideas is an essential factor for constructing a media system that supports pluralism and perhaps eventually democracy. This has been absent from much of Central America, and as our profiles of each country demonstrate, to some extent the region still suffers from this affliction.

In the latter sections of this book we will analyze these trends and their meaning for the further development of these countries. We will examine both the theories of Thomas Carothers and others who analyze these nascent democracies as they sometimes slip into semiauthoritarianism and the implications of such developments for key media outlets. Strong central governments often maintain rigid control by colluding with powerful elites who control important sectors of the nations' media operations.⁶

Building on what Fox, Waisbord, and others have written about the interplay among politics, media systems, and attempts to foster democracy in Latin America, this book will focus on the nations of Central America to construct a model for analyzing the development of media systems in emerging nations generally. One of our central tenets will be that in the Central American context, lacking strong historical roots in democracy, media systems tend to support and reflect a country's oligarchic tendencies. Furthermore, the owners of media systems tend to protect their market interests in a nation, which usually means providing support for an institutionalized hierarchy or oligarchy rather than opening the market to nation building, democratic forces, or the true marketplace of ideas. What initially appears to be competition may reflect only inter-elite battles within an oligarchic system undergoing change. The dream of the media as a democratizing force thus crashes against a larger system.