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# Media and Reform in the Digital Age: Lessons from the Political Pendulum in Ecuador

## *Medios y reforma en la era digital: Lecciones del péndulo político en Ecuador*

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**Abstract:** Ecuador has experienced significant mass media and communication changes in the last decade and offers a first-hand experience to study media and reform. First, from media captured by the government to media powered by interest groups. Second, due to technological changes from analogic to digital means of communication. Through the lens of media economics, we present two case studies, one in media coverage and other on political stability to derive policy implications in the digital age for the benefit of reform and communication.

**Key Words:** Political Economy of Reform, Political Economy of Media, Digital Age Media, Media Coverage, Political Stability, Media Capture, Media Power, Social Media Protests and Democracy.

**Resumen:** Ecuador ha experimentado cambios significativos en los medios de comunicación y comunicación en la última década y ofrece una experiencia de primera mano para la reforma de los medios. Primero, de los medios captados por el gobierno a los medios impulsados por grupos de interés. En segundo lugar, debido a los cambios tecnológicos de medios de comunicación analógicos a digitales. A través del lente de la economía de los medios, estudiaremos dos temas -cobertura y estabilidad política- en diferentes casos de experiencias de reforma. Obtenemos implicaciones políticas en la era digital en beneficio de la reforma y la comunicación.

**Palabras clave:** Economía política de la reforma, Economía política de los medios, Medios de la era digital, Cobertura mediática, Estabilidad política, Captura mediática, Poder mediático, Protestas en las redes sociales y Democracia.

## I. MEDIA AND POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REFORM

The idea of media influence on politics is not new, in most countries is intimately linked to the origins of mass media and public opinion, Lippmann (1922). The so called independent Forth Estate, acclaimed in the US, can be seriously objected based on historical evidence. For example, Glaeser et al. (2006) argues that is not until de cost reduction in printing technology in the 1920's and the appearance of subscriber's revenue base that media valued reputation of its content production and newspapers abandoned a model dependent on interest groups sponsoring their commercial interests.

With the emergence of radio and TV, in the 1930's, a new level of political influence was suspected. Hitler and Mussolini are infamously remembered for trying to indoctrinate the European society with their propaganda through mass media. Notwithstanding, researchers proved scarce effects of political propaganda during the interwar period, the conclusion of that period's by one of its researchers is: "mass communication far more frequently acted as an agent of reinforcement that as an agent of change" (Strömberg, 2015b: 175).

There has been a *divortium* between the perspective of the economics and communications profession towards the role of the media on politics. Economists tend to see it as "market makers" by means of enhancing political process through information provision. Communicators tend to think in the several caveats that media can produce to information provision. A summary of these views is as follows: "Those who emphasize the positive role of media typically use the reference point of no media. Those who emphasize the negative role do not claim that media cannot play a positive role, just that is not living up to its potential" (Strömberg, 2015b: 174).

In the 1970's the researchers in communication restarted the analysis of media distortions. *Agenda-setting*, the process of selecting what issues to expose citizen, was originally named, McCombs and Shaw (1972). *Priming*, the process of ordering the issues discussion to manipulate audience response, was also started, Iyengar and Kinder (1987). And *framing*, the act of how to contextualize the information also begun, Kahneman and Tversky (1979). There is a large scope for interdisciplinary approach in order to understand the challenges posed by the media in the digital environment that we are entering. The purpose of this paper is to set the stage of this challenges and through the lens of media economics and two case experiences in Ecuador, derive some

policy implications for the benefit of how to improve communication of economic reforms, particularly in developing countries.

### *1. Political economy of reform*

The concept of economic reform is a subject in and of itself. Nevertheless, the relation with communication and media is very critical. Before discussing the interactions between the two topics is worth summarizing the state of the art of the topic. First, there are different theoretical assumptions regarding the models related to policy reform: the normative approach, the positive view of political economy and the “real time” policy process, see Dixit (1996). Second, there have been much historical and economic research since the introduction of the welfare state in most developing countries. In the US in the progressive era and in Europe with the emergence of social democratic governments. In developing countries, albeit after 1950’s, reforms were focused on the macroeconomic stabilization programs and the structural reforms. As a result, a core set of ideas on economic reforms emerged relating to speed, sequencing, complementarities; the scope of reforms: multiplicity, institutional reform; uncertainty: change of the economic system or adjustment to the system, see Rodrik (1996).

Besides the analytical issues, there was a strand of literature related to political issues of reform beginning with the Debt Crisis of 1982 between US and Latin America that advanced the idea of politically viable economic reforms<sup>1</sup>. Although with exceptions, at the beginning the research focused more on theoretical issues related to reforms and less in the idea of the windows of opportunity that politics offers to economics, see Haggard and Kaufman (1992). The new research on economic reforms focuses on the political restrictions that allow a change. Acemoglu and Robinson (2013) discuss the institutional and political restrictions that limit or reverse reform intentions in recent history. Their main contribution is to underline the need to understand the nature of the impact on economic rents of the different agents in a reform to forecast its success.

For our discussion of media and reform we will label the nature of the impact as either *sudden* rent reallocation or *progressive* rent reallocation. An

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1 The Debt Crisis of 1982 is referred to the historic foreign-debt default induced by macroeconomic imbalances in several Latin American countries and the US. See Corbo and Fisher (1995) for further details.

example of the former case is a subsidy elimination reform, for the latter, a financial liberalization reform of the banking sector is a case in place. As the experiences of most developing countries show, the first type of reforms are more prone to violent response due to the immediate change in the status-quo of interest groups, such as Ecuador energy subsidy elimination in 2019<sup>2</sup>. Whereas, the second type of reforms, generate momentum that translate into power of interest groups such that years after, the capacity of the State to respond is seriously dwarfed. The Great Recession in 2008, exposing the world to the potential first depression of the century, can be seen as a result of macroeconomic and financial imbalances or as a result of misbehavior due to lack of regulation and improper incentives. But a more comprehensive approach is to understand reform as derived from the result of financial system (institutions, incentives and participants) resulting after the financial liberalization reforms of the previous decades.

## 2. *Digital Age*

Digital communication maybe thought in terms of binary language issues -one and zeros. And there is an aspect of it that its worth considering such as the host of challenges that artificial intelligence and digital technology poses on communication. Nevertheless, our scope will be more limited. For the purpose of the exposition, we will focus how new media, both traditional and social media, have altered economic reforms or its implementation. The most salient issues of this new environment are explained by the economics effects the digital technology on information, news and journalistic contents received by individuals<sup>3</sup>.

Experiences of how the “digital transformation” of information technologies hit the different media industries reveals a great deal of the heterogeneity of the consequences on specific media industries. To the purpose of this study, we will treat three interrelated topics of this transformation: TV news and streaming; newspapers and the problem of the dual revenue model; and digital media and media coverage. The more seriously affected of the media industries is the newspaper<sup>4</sup>. For example, the Internet made possible to dis-

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2 Section III will discuss this case experience.

3 The process of media convergence and new business models is aptly described by Lotz (2021) from the business perspective.

4 See Pickard (2019) for an extended discussion of the consequences of digital media, although with a focus in US.

tribute information at negligible costs, so much so that barriers of entry were eliminated to generate “citizen’s journalists” making physical press and newspaper distribution uncompetitive. On the other hand, Google and latter social media offered a targeted channel to sell advertising in a more cost-effective way (you are no longer required to pay to expose a customer to an ad, but only after the customer effectively clicked on a specific publicity). Therefore, the newspaper model that jointly served advertisers and subscribers, was no longer indispensable, hence the idea of double revenue model lost its attractiveness in printed news. If subscribers and advertisers suddenly abandon traditional media, although some had migrated successfully to the Internet or are “Internet native”, this implies a revenue squeeze that restrains financing payrolls of journalists and editors.

The innovations on digital communications have produced a so called “digital transformation”, and although not everything is negative, there are some unexpected consequences in different areas that should be considered. Computational models that try to manipulate individual response through algorithms, legal provisions to secure an- inadequate concept of free speech, technological advances altering social and working conditions, and market power regulations on the competitive leverage that great providers are capable through the network economies are just few examples of what type of challenges we are facing in the digital age, see Tucker et al. (2017).

Even though we limit our scope to media for the sake of economic reforms, there can be unexpected political consequences of this digital transformation even in this restricted analysis. For example, one can think of how differentiated access to media news can affect political ignorance. Also, partisan bias and algorithms can magnify political polarization through social networks. Technology change impacts on cost structure of news providers inducing capture of journalism by interest groups. Finally, obscure interests (mafia, drug cartels and corrupt politicians) can ignite violent political protest that subvert the democratic order<sup>5</sup>. One is left wondering whether this is not a fatal move against democracy.

### *3. Political Pendulum on Ecuador’s Media Sector*

Ecuador offers several experiences worth considering from the point of view of influence of politics on media and vice versa. Almost from the start,

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5 See Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) for a survey of political effects of the Internet and social media.

May 2007, President's Correa popularity was constantly boosted through a state of propaganda. By forcing non-paid national broadcasts through TV and radio -a right existent before 2007 to help to communicate in times of emergency, but never abused in such a systematic way. The strength of the official communication control through the media was such, that whenever official messages were not interfering regular media programming in prime time, every Saturday the president will devote three hours to offer its weakly agenda progress -*sabatinas*- as a sign of accountability to the citizens<sup>6</sup>.

Beginning in 2008, 16 media corporations ended under government control, making the Ecuadorian state the largest media conglomerate in the country: the second largest newspaper in the second largest city (*El Telegrafo*), the largest national TV station (*TC television*) and several other radios, TV and newspapers around the country. For 2012, the largest newspaper of the country, *El Universo*, was indicted with a pecuniary penalty of 80 million (6x times the annual sales of the media) to compensate an op-ed against the President written by their editor. For 2013, a legal reform was passed creating unknown penal infractions ("media lynching"), impose pecuniary sanctions to media, excluding the government media from the new law duties, create a superintendency of communication to impose the sanctions legislated in such a way that the superintendent could act as prosecutor and judge in any cases the official desired<sup>7</sup>.

During Correa's mandate, media and citizens understood the concept of media capture firsthand. Several journalists were prosecuted or fired, and many media went bankrupt for opposing official positions. It is claimed that even in You Tube, a foreign buffet of lawyers was hired to censor any video with damaging images of President Correa on the claim that were inappropriate usage of copyrights of his image (Hurtado, 2021: 35). In 2017, President Lenin Moreno, the candidate of Correa, decided to suspend the superintendency and much of the hostility against the press ceased. This configures what we call the political pendulum of media state, emerging a new era in which, we are driven to the other polar position as shown by our analy-

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6 There were 523 citizen's *sabatinas* -TV and radio broadcasts- for a total of 1547 hours addressed by the president (87%) or any of his several vicepresidents he had during the 10 years he stood in power. (*El Universo*, 2017, May 20).

7 Hurtado (2021: 25) offers a description of media situation during Correa's mandate, he cites that the Interamerican Freedom of Speech Commissioner of the time said regarding Ecuador's legal reforms: "Ecuador has most restrictive legal framework on freedom of speech besides Cuba".

sis of the violent protest of 2019: media capture. Reporters Without Borders<sup>8</sup>, refers to 2017, last year of Correa's mandate, as the reversal of the status quo against media and press. And Freedom House Reports, up until 2017 catalogued Ecuador as *partly free*, and from then on as *free*, mostly due to media freedom related measures discussed above.

In what follows I will try to analyze the economic reform experiences in Ecuador around different topics: media coverage and political stability. I will try to discuss these topics in sequential order in sections 2 and 3 and finally I will try to derive some conclusions and policy implications for the communication of reforms in general. For each specific topic I will review the relevant theoretical and empirical literature, detail the case experiences, and try to elaborate a research strategy to further understand the issue of communication and reforms.

## II. MEDIA COVERAGE

Media coverage or coverage is a topic in which many aspects of media are included: *access to media*, *news provision* and *news consumption*. It basically studies media work on elections and accountability, politicians profiling, policy proposal analysis and policy results (Strömberg, 2015a: 597).

Media is understood as the main provider of information, news, and journalism about political issues. Citizens or voters are understood as agents requiring important information about politics: personal characteristics of politicians, policy proposal and policy effects. Politicians are the actors in government that are elected and decide on the policy choices on behalf of citizens.

### *1. Theoretical and empirical research*

The level of news consumption and the availability of news related to the political issues is conditional on the *access to media* (i.e., radio, tv, newspaper or Internet signal). There have been interesting studies of how access to media affects politics along the introduction of the different medias in the society, through empirical research studies analyzing the policy results during the first time a particular media penetrated an area. For the radio experience in the

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8 Cfr. RSE, 2017, February 17.

early 20's in rural America Stromberg (2004b) or the introduction of TV in 50's in US Gentzkow (2006) or the introduction of the Internet in Falk et al (2014) these experiences represent appropriate situation in which the impact of the news media had clear causal effects on political results. For example, policy response in favor of new radio audiences, lower voters' turn-out and more ample ideological representation respect each of the cited studies.

As for the *news provision*, different studies show that the availability of political information affects the political behavior. In Snyder and Strömberg (2010) press coverage of congress members in the US from areas with specific news provider make more accountable politicians and better-informed voters due to this close provision of news.

Regarding *news consumption* influence in politics is of much importance although complicated to verify in empirical research due to problems of multiple causes: endogeneity, or reverse causality. Nevertheless, there are a couple of interesting experiences that prove the agenda-setting power of media, see for example Eisensee and Strömberg (2007) studies natural disaster around the world and the actual spending of the foreign agency of development of the US is studied. The conclusion is that whenever the disaster was not crowd-out by other national news -news pressure- or an international event - Olympic games- then the USAID is more likely to respond granting assistance. Providing a very creative and controlled situation in which media affects public policy decision, in a canonical case of agenda-setting.

There is one line of research regarding coverage that is of interest for us, particularly amid the digital age. In Olken (2009) the impact of radio and TV signal availability on social capital of different villages of the region of Java, Indonesia. The results suggest that due to topographical differences within villages the actual availability of TV channels or the minutes devoted to media consumption reduces the level of participation in social interactions, hence affecting social capital. The idea behind the problem of access to media is also what we find interesting to study for the Ecuadorian case discussed below<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Case experience: Esmeraldas and Manabi electoral results

One can think of an electoral campaign to win an incumbent candidate as a particular kind of reform proposal. At least in a sense that some politician

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9 For a review of journalism in the digital era in Ecuador see Odriozola-Chené (2016) and Odriozola-Chené y Rodrigo-Mendizábal (2017).



wants to win an election to implement a different government plan. That is what occurred in the presidential elections of Ecuador in 2017 and 2021, the same opposition candidate run against the same incumbent party.

In 2017, the incumbent president was Rafael Correa, and wanted to maintain the party's dominance in government by proposing his former vice-president as presidential candidate for that year: Lenin Moreno. Due to legal restrictions on reelections, Correa was banned as candidate, but he campaigned for Moreno with the political support of his party. Guillermo Lasso was the opposition candidate and lost the elections in second round for a tight margin, 49% to 51%.

One year before the election Ecuador suffered a major earthquake in the provinces of Esmeraldas and Manabi. It was catalogued 6.5 in the Richter scale, with an estimated death toll of 600+ persons, destroying houses and infrastructure along the way. Due to the lack of fiscal resources, President Correa proposed a transitory tax reform on the rest of the country to finance the reconstruction and assistance of the earthquake effects -an estimated 1% of GDP bill. In 2017, contrary to the political offerings after the natural disaster, none of the reconstruction was finished and key infrastructure was not even contracted, roads and hospitals remained destroyed in the cities of earthquake's epicenters. As mentioned, Correa's party won the election by a tight margin mainly attributed to the results obtained in the provinces were the earthquake hit.

For the 2021 elections, again the main reconstruction projects continued delayed and even more, it was proved that the roads projects and the hospitals in Manabi were plagued with corruption and open embezzlement (Hurtado, 2021: 54). Nevertheless, the effect of public expenditure in the region made a huge impact in employment and economic growth that benefited the incumbent government electoral results in those areas.

In this occasion, Correa's candidate lost by a thin margin 48% to 52% to the same opposition candidate that run in the previous election. Again, the results in Manabi were significantly different from the rest of the country, almost securing his candidate the presidency. The table below shows the presidential elections results mentioned for the country, the province of Manabi and the rest of provinces. Atypical results of Manabi gave the presidency to Correa's party in 2017 and, although losing, halved the national difference from 10 to 5 percentage points in the 2021 election.

Table 1. Second Round Presidential Results in 2021 and 2017

	2021 Elections			2017 Elections		
	National	Manabi	Rest	National	Manabi	Rest
Incumbent	47.64%	66.1%	45.51%	51.16%	66.83%	49.47%
Lasso	52.36%	33.1%	54.48%	48.84%	33.17%	50.53%
Turn-out	82.62%	85.87%		82.92%	87.53%	
Voters	10.9 mill	1.1 mill	9.8 mill	10.6 mill	1.0 mill	9.6 mill

Results provided by National Electoral Authority (CNE). Turn-out includes all voters, null and blanks, compared to eligible voters.

The research question resulting from this experience that we want to refer is to explain how electoral in Manabí were due to the lack of media coverage. The suspicion is that given the inability to fulfill the promises of reconstruction in 2016, the incumbent party won due to the lack of accountability that the absence of media coverage produced. For 2021, even after showing evident cases of generalized corruption behind the promise of reconstruction in the provinces hit by the earthquake, the incumbent candidate had almost no adverse effect in election results in those areas. Several possible explanations may be proposed. First, there is a political loyalty to Correa’s party in the province of Manabí. Second, there was a serious problem of electoral fraud specifically in Manabi. We will try to explain how the lack of media access can explain some of the peculiar electoral results.

### 3. Empirical framework

The following ideas are part of a broader research project, the casual results are subject to further robustness tests to validate findings. Nevertheless, they represent a particularly interesting result for the impact of media coverage on politics in this changing media consumption habits of the digital age for Ecuador. We study the electoral results around the country, at electoral district level, and relate it to the level of signal coverage of radio and TV to find a causal relation.

The settings are the second-round presidential elections throughout the electoral districts, *juntas electorales*, within the 221 municipalities, *cantones*, that include all the provinces around the country both in 2017 and 2021. We identify the number of radio and TV channels serving each municipality to analyze specific media markets around the country.

We assume that a higher level of media signal, affects the votes of Correa's candidate, with the following equation:

$$(1) \text{ VOTES} = \alpha + \beta \text{ SIGNAL} + \gamma \text{ CONTROLS} + \varepsilon$$

The theoretical mechanism been assumed is that the capture in Correa's Presidency biased propaganda in favor of incumbent government and traduced in higher votes where there was higher level signal. We control for geographic variables, such as altitude from sea-level, distance from the media markets, coastal regions; political variables, such as voting turn-out, affiliations to incumbent party, and having earthquake; socio-economic variables, such as income level, education and poverty.

The identification strategy is like Olken (2009) where instead of media consumption the focus is on medial signal, but divide the effect of media signal in two, the direct effect of the intensity of the reception -SIGNAL variable- and the indirect effect through and ideal variable that estimate the theoretical level of signal intensity if there were no topographic interferences between the transmitter and receptors -FREE variable-<sup>10</sup>. The idea behind this distinction in variables is that in an estimation with these two variables the coefficient of FREE will control the effect on political results from a variable less likely to be affected by other concerns not related with the media coverage (i.e. geographical obstacles are exogenous to political or economic influence), hence more likely to be interpreted as causal effect on political results. Consequently, the regression to estimate is:

$$(2) \text{ VOTES} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{ SIGNAL} + \beta_2 \text{ FREE} + \gamma \text{ CONTROLS} + \varepsilon$$

Finally, as we study the results for the 2017 and 2021 elections, in order to correct for any omitted variable problem. The idea behind this strategy is to recognize that in 2018, there was a regime change, in terms of the accusations against former president Correa. So, if we doubted that the other channels that explain our results of 2017 were a variable of political nature omitted from our specification, obviously it must have lessened its effects effect in 2021, once Correa's party repudiated its former candidate Lenin while hol-

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10 There are several models to predict signal level of electromagnetic waves, we use the Irregular Terrain Model (ITM) due to its availability to be applied in geo-referenced maps and also because it has been proved very effective predictor for actual signal as mentioned in Olken (2009: 26).

ding the presidential office. Therefore, any results obtained, perduring in 2021 should show the actual strength of the media influence in political results. The fully fledged regression to estimate is:

$$(3) \text{VOTES}_{dmp} = \alpha_p + \beta_1 \text{SIGNAL}_{mp} + \beta_2 \text{FREE}_{mp} + \gamma \text{CONTROLS} + \varepsilon_{dmp}$$

where d represents an electoral district, m represents a municipality, and p a province. VOTES is votes share in the second round of presidential elections in favor of the opposing candidate (Lasso),  $\alpha_p$  is a province fixed effect, SIGNAL is the level of signal predicted by the ITM model (TV and radio), and FREE is the level of signal assuming there is no topographic interference as discussed above (TV and radio). Finally, there is a set of control variables already mentioned.

Table 2. Effects of Media Coverage on Second-Round Presidential Elections

	Share of votes to Lasso	
	2017	2021
Average radio signal strength	0.0009181* (0.0005191)	0.0006258 (0.0006214)
Average radio <i>free</i> signal strength	0.0015026 (0.0011253)	0.0029922** (0.0013471)
Average TV signal strength	-0.0009952** (0.0004621)	-0.001027* (0.0005532)
Average TV <i>free</i> signal strength	0.0014275* (0.0007724)	0.0007302 (0.0009246)
Number of observations	221	221
F-test of average signal strength	14.07	17.65

Notes. All specifications include fixed effects by province. Standard errors are in parenthesis. \*\*\* Significant at the 1 % level, \*\* Significant at the 5% level and \*Significant at the 10% level

Our empirical framework is thought to understand the influence of media coverage on electoral results, Table 2 show some preliminary results. First, the level of influence on electoral results lessens its effects in the 2021 elections, perhaps validating the hypothesis of lesser media capture after President More betrayed President Correa immediately after winning the elections. Also, there seems to be a particular negative effect of TV signal strength on electoral results against the opposing candidate in 2017 even after controlling for the topographic interferences around the signal between transmitters and receptors. It also seems, as the radio signal coverage is not particularly relevant for our results.

In the end we hope to find that coverage have been a major factor in explaining differences throughout the last two elections. Nevertheless, these are only proximate causes, we find some evidence of coverage on elections in the first election studied in favor of the incumbent candidate. Perhaps we should study more specific influence of the TV effects on politics. In 2010 Correa took control of the major TC Televisión and started a propaganda project: *Revolucion Ciudadana*, were intense public broadcasts -sabatinas and other national addresses-, biased programming in favor of the incumbent regime (Bastidas, 2019). The mechanism thought is like the documented for the US with FOX News influencing for Republican votes, DellaVigna and Kaplan (2007), were the introduction of Fox News channel in the cable providers beginning in 2000 convinced 3 to 28% of the persons to vote republican in the towns studied.

The mechanism that operates through coverage are extensively studied in psychological and educational literature where the early exposure to entertainment TV reduces the level of cognitive abilities (Durante et al. 2019) and civic engagement Olken (2009). These and other specific mechanisms must be further analyzed for the case in Ecuador to rightly understand the channel of media consumption on politics. This case experience presents an opportunity to continue research on media coverage and its impact on political influence.

### III. POLITICAL STABILITY

The digital age has fostered social and political movements due to lowering barriers of entry: lesser need to depend on heavy organized structures, ability to lift funds easily -through Internet or cryptocurrencies-, immediacy of communication through social networks, among others. Nevertheless, in some cases this has facilitated political activities that have affected political stability.

The 2011 *Arab Spring*<sup>11</sup> started the digital era's impact on political protests diffusion, both through better coordination and later better spread of the voice of the discontents. One could argue that the 2019 Chilean terrorist's attacks to the subway that ended in the greatest political chasm around a new constitution is another significant success of political protesting out of a numerous listing of events of this nature around the world. But, instead of progressive or democratic intentions, there seems to be a more anarchic nature in their objectives and therefore can be understood as promoting political instability into otherwise democratic regimes. Another case of same nature is the Ecuadorian fossil-fuel subsidy protests of 2019 promoted by the indigenous movement<sup>12</sup>.

We will try to understand how political movements may promote chaos in the digital age, transforming social networks in the new Molotov bombs of social protests. In what follows, we will review the literature in order to focus on our case experience and then proceed to describe researcher's empirical strategies to deal with these issues.

#### *1. Theoretical and empirical literature*

The literature around of political stability could be framed in the context of non-democratic practices in general. Following Stömberg (2015b),

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11 The Arab Spring started with the self-immolation of a local seller in Tunisia amazed by corruption of the police prohibiting to sell his fruits in December 2010, ended in the government overthrown that turned in to a democratic regime. Suddenly, in January 2011, extended to Egypt, which deposed its dictatorship and spread to several other countries in the region: Libya, Yemen and Bahrein. In retrospective, is seen as the start of a process of anti-government protests fostered by social media like Twitter and Facebook.

12 One can also cite the cases of the French *yellow vests*, the Iranian protests, the Taiwan protests but there seem to be legitimate reasons to consider them a different type of motivations, which does not allow us to label them as anarchic. In Ecuador the main press commented about the real intentions of protestors: "The assault intentions to the Comptroller General's buildings left no doubt of the real motives of the protests". (Expreso, 2019, October 13).

one can think that within this idea there are a list of areas to consider: *pogroms and genocides*, *monitoring*, and *political stability*.

The economic idea behind *pogroms and genocide* is how to spell the media influence to assist obnoxious or bad government policies. Here the comparison is not so much of the ability to persuade, as was mentioned in the first section, propaganda didn't prove successful during the totalitarian experiments of Europe. The idea is how can the media participation alter the results of such type of aberrant policy intentions. For example, if a government openly proposes a criminal activity the consequences of such act will depend heavily on the potential results of the citizens being incited to act. The hope is that if the incitation prospers and most of the country responds favorably, then the possibility of a kick-back on government stability from the promotion of violence is significantly reduced. This configures a situation in which the role of the media is critical to determine alternatives potential result, hence we say there is complementarity between the act and the potential result through the media ability to influence citizen's participation. A symbolic empirical study of this nature is Yanagizawa-Drott (2014) on Rwanda's a genocide. The author showed how state-promoted mass violence against their own citizens (an estimated 1 million death toll) occurred more frequently in villages receiving the official broadcasts radios encouraging violence against their fellows.

Regarding *monitoring*, the idea of media freedom is apparently contradictory to authoritarian governments. Nevertheless, some dictatorships show relatively free press environments comparable to that of European countries. Lorentzen (2014) refers to this idea as strategic censorship, where governments confront a trade-off between political stability and policy implementation. For example, free press can exert pressure against lower-level bureaucracy to avoid corruption and secure higher levels of policy efficiency at that level. Obviously, the cost is that citizen's discontent with the news revealed can destabilize governments. In the same chain of reasoning, Egorov et al. (2009) conducts an empirical investigation of dictatorships showing that the value of monitoring depends on the level of natural resources. Oil-poor countries tend to allow more free press than oil-rich ones. The idea is that oil-rich countries tend to suffer more from scrutinizing press by watchdog journalism denouncing corruption, because the trade-off is inclined against policy implementation by the so-called *resource curse*, and therefore are less likely to allow free-press.

Finally, *political stability* relates to the topic of how media sources and technology can affect a government stability through political protest. There are different reasons that could produce a political protest, and there are several objectives of such protests. For example, many have mobilized citizens deposing non-democratic governments, as the color revolutions in former soviet nations<sup>13</sup>. But there are also several uprisings with more anarchic intentions<sup>14</sup>, consequently it's not clear that having a more protest-prone environment implies better political outcomes. We will try to focus on the key role played by media sources and technologies regarding social protests. In Edmond (2013) there is an impact on regime stability depending on the economies of scale of media control. The idea is how the complementarity between protestors can generate equilibria either in favor of the status quo or a regime change, depending on whether one participant expects others to participate and worth the risk of protesting. Social media is understood as a mechanism to facilitate a political protest.

Previous information technologies: newspaper, radio or TV have also posed a threat to governments and were easily restricted due to economies of scale of control, mostly due to their centralized origins in few players. YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, or WhatsApp are new technologies of information from decentralized origins -many originators of information-, therefore initially hard to control. Nevertheless, whenever the cost of limiting the infrastructure of these technologies is not a concern, like in China, the ability to censor the social media changes. For example, prohibiting the use of certain outlets, or even limiting the service of Internet providers. In the end, the problem rests on this ability of the government to exert control, that although new, is not but another generation in a long list that governments have been successfully controlling whenever the economies of scale on control appears<sup>15</sup>. The trade-off between control in the digital media, although technologically different, in the end is a problem of the right to free speech.

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13 Yugoslavia 2000, Georgia 2003, Ukraine 2004 and Kyrgyzstan 2005.

14 Colombia, Ecuador and Chile in 2019 or US in 2021.

15 This is not to say that new technologies can't be used to exert even more censorship and propaganda as with the idea of "surveillance state">>.



## 2. Case experience: Ecuador's Energy Subsidy Protests Vandalizing the Comptroller General's Buildings?

Due to a long tradition started in the 70s, since the country begun its oil exports, Ecuadorian governments have subsidized energy, particularly gasoline, diesel, electricity, and gas. Unconsciously at that time, they created a culture of dependence to a subsidized fossil-fuel input that incrementally turned to be one of the largest items in the national budget after debt service. Also, this behavior produced the single most sensible reform of the latest economic history of the country. Whenever the price of oil -WTI- reaches \$80/barrel, the fossil-fuel subsidy amounted to near 5% of GDP or 15% of national budget (2% and 8% respectively when prices average \$40/barrel). Even worst, studies of the spending structure show that 75% didn't reached poor people, with the aggravating factor that the untargeted portion was used to smuggle the derivatives to Peru and Colombia, or used as input in the drug processing, and in energy polluting activities in national industries<sup>16</sup>. Conforming a text case example of an inefficient and regressive economic policy.

It is fair to mention that there have been no government that didn't try many policy reforms with unsuccessful results almost since the subsidy inception<sup>17</sup>. Part of the reason obeys to the political economy of reforms of *sudden rent reallocation* mentioned in the first section. In any case, the policy intentions always ended in the reversion of the initial proposal after political discontent appeared as a political protest usually coordinated by the transportation sector. Not surprisingly, that also happened in the case experience referred in this section, with the aggravating fact of foreign manipulation of political protestors.

The first day of October 2019, the Ecuadorian government announced the decision to liberate the price of diesel and gasoline -National Decree 883-. The subsidy consisted in fixing the price of gasoline and diesel throughout time, half of the international reference price in regular times. And protestors requested the immediate reversal of the reform, hence the return to the previous fixed price. To compensate the subsidy elimination, the government planned to increase transfers to most vulnerable citizens through the already existent *poverty transfers*. As usual, the protest of the transportation sector or-

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16 IMF (2021).

17 As early as Debt Crisis of 1982, Ecuadorian macroeconomic stabilization programs required the revision of the subsidy as a policy option to recover fiscal sustainability.

ganized a strike for the next day and for Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> the government declared state of emergency to control political protests. On Friday 4<sup>th</sup>, the government reached an agreement to stop the strike on public transportation, by committing to rise the public transportation ticket on average 10 cents. On surface this appeared a reform success, the government didn't retract from the National Decree 883, lifting the prices of gasoline and diesel<sup>18</sup>. Although the syndicates of transportation reached an agreement, the indigenous movement started a manifestation, that suddenly derived in violent protests that ended in the assault of the capital with the intentions to overthrow the President.

The reason that may have ignited the protests of the indigenous movement are several, but the consequences are disproportional to the causes and don't justify the idea that social media improvements on coordination and diffusion of social protests are always socially beneficial. First, there was no clear communication strategy of the subsidy elimination reform from the government. Amid negotiation with the transportation syndicates, the Minister of Finance declared that: "the subsidy elimination was going to persevere no matter what"<sup>19</sup>. This strong message triggered a belligerent activity in the indigenous movement that organized a march from the highlands to the capital. At the same time, the social media campaign with fake news hit on target with a message of xenophobic nature<sup>20</sup>. The fake news was that the price increase of gasoline will serve to finance the more than 500,000 thousand of illegal Venezuelan immigrants that were hovering around the streets all around the country. That message clinched into the indigenous population of the highlands and went viral. Suddenly the expectations of participation hiked due to the need of reversing the alleged inflexible position and appealing to a nationalistic sentiment.

Extremism entered the scene; the last days of the protests turn-out to be the most violent. The Minister of Interior refer more than 400 police or military personnel were kidnapped, 8 protestors dead, several radio and TV stations vandalized, an oil pipeline and the water supply of a major city attacked, and several private agribusiness facilities destroyed (milk producers and flower plantations near the capital).

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18 From the fiscal perspective this amounted to a reduction of the reform from a 2 billion bill to a 1.8 million bill (approximately 2% of GDP to 1.8% of GDP).

19 See La Posta, 2019, October 3. El subsidio se va porque se va.

20 An army of 6000 trolls have been traced around the country and around the world: Venezuela, Mexico, Spain, Bolivia, Argentina, Nicaragua, and Colombia, see Rivadeneira y Romo, 2020.

Figure 1. Timeline of Events, October 1-13 of 2019

Number of fake news clarified by gov:		294	387	356	438	
	*Reform Announcement	*Tranportation strike starts	*Localized lootings *State of emergency begins	*Indigenous protests start marching from highlands	*Transportation strike ends	Marching...
	1	2	3	4	5	6
583	1032	1879	2176	3106	3692	2481
Marching...	*Indigenous protests arrive at Quito	*First protestor dies *Curfew starts	*Kidnap of 27 journalists and 10 police officers	*Several governors offices take over	*TV stations fired *National Comptroller fired	*Protests end *Curfew ends
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Most violent protest days driven by the alleged killing of a protestor.						

Suddenly, the nation was polarized. The “liberating technology” had helped organize on-line and off-line physical and violent protest in a matter of hours. The great majority of the country didn’t understood the virality and violence of the protest that took a confrontational position. The indigenous movement<sup>21</sup> camped in a national plaza, *Casa de la Cultura*, and the day after the first protestor died, allegedly by the police shootings, they kidnapped 27 journalists and 10 police officers. Figure 1 shows a timeline of the main events and correlates it with the timing of fake news campaign. During the days of the protests the Ministry of Interior had to issue 20,000 statements clarifying the 7654 fake news messages being replied around Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp complicating the state of emergency that for the last 5 days demanded a curfew in the capital (Ribadeneira y Romo, 2020: 114).

Many of the acclaimed participants when interviewed declared been forced to march against the government in Quito against the threats of a surveillance organization. The political party and the traditional leaders of the indigenous organization claim that the protests were infiltrated by violent

21 The indigenous movement in Ecuador started its political participation with their first demonstration in the early 90s and has usually been associated with massive protests after long a protracted negotiation with their bases and leaders complaining to the incumbent governments. (Hurtado, 2020: 70). During President Correa’s 10-year mandate they were seriously repressed and were banned of any social protests. Nevertheless, in 2019 they were suddenly mobilized into a violent protest in a matter of days with the collaboration of the same movement that deterred their participation in the previous years.

movements, and they renegaded of their deeds<sup>22</sup>. In any case, during the most dramatic days of the violent manifestation, when tenths of military and police officers were kidnapped, it appeared clear that the intentions were not only to reverse the Decree 883 but to overthrow the government; but to justify and otherwise untenable political positions. At the peak of the protest, the objective of vandalism was the Offices of the Comptroller General. Security investigations later explained that the fire started precisely on the floors devoted to the archives of corruption investigations (Rivadeneira y Romo, 2020: 42).

Here we were preceding the first Latin American protest of the digital era with a violent movement trying to overthrow a government that was planning to recover from its fiscal imbalance by means of targeting the expensive gasoline subsidy out of the hands of smugglers, drug-dealers and mostly rich citizens to adequately focus the benefits of fiscal expenditure to poor people. Nevertheless, although is true that Ecuador lacked the security, intelligence and operating capacity to adequately control such a numerous protest<sup>23</sup>, the protest was a façade to justify terrorist attacks and commit politically motivated crimes<sup>24</sup>. So much for the liberating technologies. On-line: viral news, extremism, fake news and echo chambers were coming from the low barriers of entry in social media; off-line: direct participation, organized crime and violent protestors were all to the service of otherwise immoral political objectives.

In the following section we will refer several examples of how to use new technics to better understand social media role in protests. First, the use of causal inferences through regression analysis carefully identifying causal relations in data. Second, machine learning techniques to adequately utilize big data in real time to develop indicators to help predict behaviors from the data. And finally, trough randomized controlled treatments exploiting semi controlled experiments through social media to verify influence of information contents.

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22 Amid the protest, a historic leader of the indigenous movement, Salvador Quishpe, accused the leaders of the protests and claimed that the movement was co-opted by unknown participants and financiers that were behind the violent vanguards (Expreso, 2017, October 13).

23 In the peak of Quito's assault the protestor reached 85,000 persons in a city of 3 million. Compare this to 100,000 thousand in 2011 out of 12 million in Moscow, or 200,000 thousand in 2011 out of 10 million in El Cairo to quantify the relative size of Quito's protests.

24 Afterwards, one of the leaders of the protests, Leonidas Iza, self-incriminated stated: "The light at the end of the tunnel comes from the assertion, believed, searched and unavoidable: indoamerican communism or barbarism". [*La luz al final del túnel, proviene de la afirmación creída, buscada e impostergable: comunismo indoamericano o barbarie*]. (Cfr. Iza et al., 2021: 316).

3. *Empirical validation strategies: A toolkit of technics for Social Media and Protests*

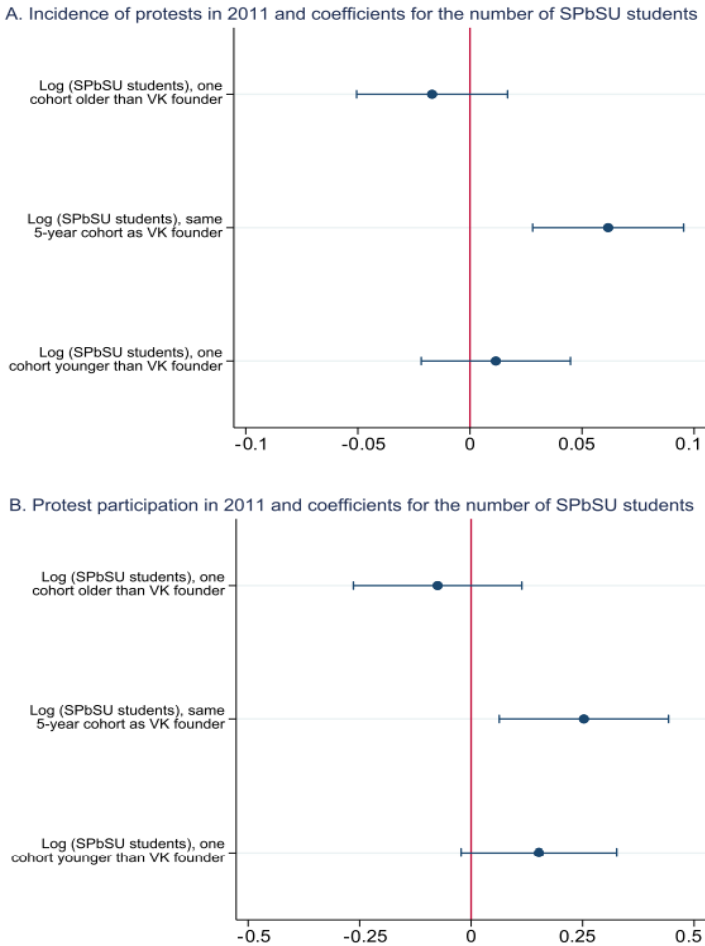
First, to study political protests through social media one must define influence, either as the *level of participation*, the *polarization of the protestors*, the ability to *alter political beliefs* (acceptance of the obnoxious or xenophobic ideals) or *fail to understand the truth behind manipulation*.

As for the *level of participation* we will try to understand the relation between the number of protestors and the number of users circulating messages in social media. Alternatively, one can use the density of their networks (the number of users receiving and the location in the network of the protestors). Obviously, this simple identification strategy suffers from several problems: one can think that because there is social protest is that there is so much activity in social media (i.e. reverse causality), even more seriously, the real problem is not related to social protest or fake news but both are explained by a serious political problem causing the two phenomena (i.e. endogeneity problem). The strategy to avoid this problem is to find a good instrument to relate to the activity in social media that can assert a causal relation reasonably independent of the level of participation in political protests (i.e. exogenous source of variation). For example, in the Russian parliamentary elections of 2011 there were serious doubt of fraud. Discontent against the regime started in various cities in the weekend after the elections. Enikolopov et al. (2020) claimed the use of an instrument, instead of the number of users of social media alone, to overcome the problem of reverse causality, proving that the penetration of social media caused higher level of participation in protests. The instrument was the level of penetration of social media in the city of origin of the classmates of the founder of the Russian equivalent of Facebook, VKontakte (VK), subscribed years before the incident studied. In that way, they proved that penetration of VK increased the probability of protesting and increased the number of protestors by 20% with an exogenous variable that was predefined before the date of protests<sup>25</sup>. See Figure 2.

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25 The exogenous source of variation is the penetration of VK in the cities of origin of the classmates of VK founder, that were only members due to invitation by former members and were users prior to the date of protests. See Enikolopov et al., 2020: 1480-1481.

Figure 2. Effects of VK Penetration on Political Outcomes



Source: Enikolopov et al. (2020)

A similar exercise can be replicated in Ecuador for the case of comparison of the participation on several days of the protests controlling for the users already belonging to the indigenous movement before 2019. Data could prove the assertion that most of the protestors ended being infiltrated to the movement by showing that user accounts do not belong to the movement or do not reside in the highlands.

With regards to the *polarization of protestors* after receiving a certain type of message, the idea seems more complicated to prove, albeit the correlation

presence is undeniable. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to doubt that the hike of gas price triggered such a violent manifestation. To give context, gasoline is not needed in agricultural activities in the highlands nor there is a public transport to pay either, so the consequences of the reform were secondary. Villa-Cox et al. (2021) classified 20 million tweets during the 2019 protests in Latin America depending on user's stance<sup>26</sup>. Using machine learning they classified users depending on hashtags endorsed or retweets of determinate partisan political leaders. In the end, the users were grouped as either pro or anti-government. The ego-networks show two graphs (Figure 3, A and B) in the first the stance of users show the level of polarization and in the second the level of support of Venezuelan government during the protest. Obviously, the last reference is evidence of the foreign influence in the Ecuadorian protests of 2019<sup>27</sup>.

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26 User stance was defined for users that tweeted more than 10 times, and either used a hashtag or retweeted any of the political leader's pro or against the protest. (Cfr. Villa-Cox et al., 2021:3).

27 Moreover, surveys refer the low penetration of Twitter in Ecuador vis-a-vis Facebook or WhatsApp, therefore the most likely reason that tweets reflected the users' position in both Ecuadorian violent protests and Venezuelan government is that they were not the actual protestors but foreign participants.



Figure 3. Ego Network Stance on Ecuador´s Protests (A) and Venezuelan Affiliation (B)

Figure 3.1. User Stance

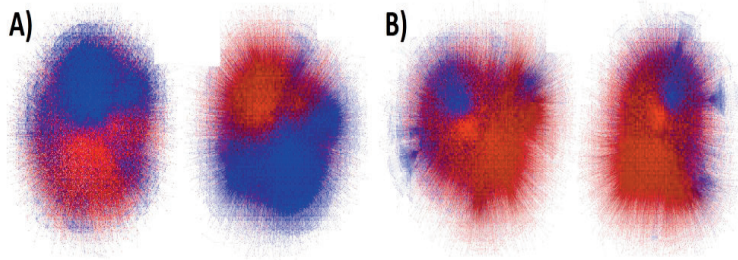


Figure 1: User by User response network for A) Bolivia and B) Ecuador. For each panel, the left figure shows the ego-networks of labeled users, including inconsistent users, while the right figure considers consistently labeled users. Users with consistent stances against government are colored red, pro users are colored blue and inconsistent users are colored white.

Figure 3.2. Position on Venezuelan Government of Users

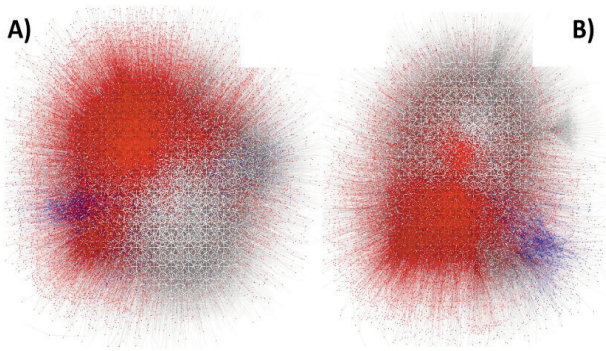


Figure 2: User by User response network of consistently labeled users for A) Bolivia and B) Ecuador. Nodes are colored red if they support the Venezuelan government, blue if they were against and white if no label is assigned based on the methodology described.

Source: Villa-Cox et al. (2020)

For the case of *altering political beliefs*, obnoxious or xenophobic ideals, it could be possible to test through the reconstruction of some messages intended as “test balloons” during the protests. Several political actors tried to engage in the protest to gain political notoriety but were downplayed or expelled rapidly<sup>28</sup>. If one is capable to show that whenever a message from a certain user, influencer or politician, endorsing the protest was replied (liked

<sup>28</sup> See Iza et al., 2020: 95.



or retweeted) but latter banned or deleted (either by the user or the platform provider) and then there is a change in the behavior of protestors then there must be the case that the social media user is critical in influencing the political conduct of the citizen or protestor<sup>29</sup>. This is not a proof of the power of social media but the power of influence of certain political actor, hence the word influencer. The idea here is to test the recurrence in social media of supporting otherwise obnoxious policies (i.e. hate speech). Something similar, although it was an actual controlled experiment for a good purpose, was tried in vaccination campaigns in Indonesia with the help of media influencers hired by the government (see Figure 4). In that case, Alatas et al. (2019) proved that when an influencer replied to a campaign in comparison to when they generate the message the number of kids arriving to the hospital facility to vaccinate increased accruing important role to celebrity endorsement instead of only retweets of government messages in favor of the program.

Figure 4. Experimental Design on Twitter Vaccination Campaign in Indonesia

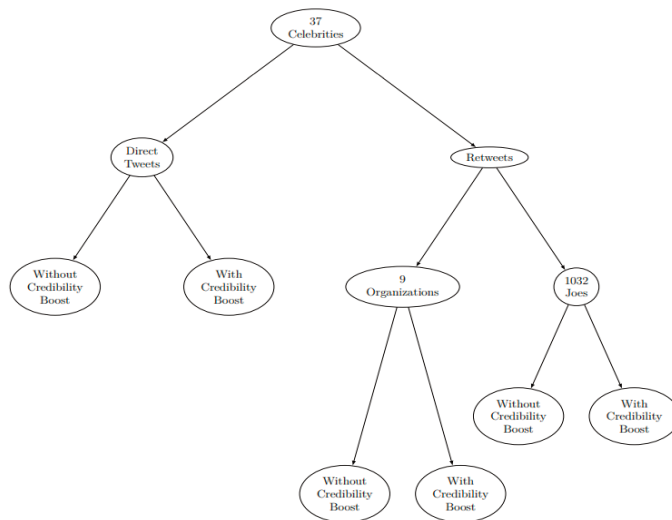


FIGURE 1. Experimental Design Schematic: Conditional on style, formal or casual, a half of the celebrity's tweets are assigned to direct and the other half are assigned to be retweeted. A subset of tweets (those that are not deemed sensitive by the government) are randomly assigned to be with or without credibility boost. The retweets are either conducted by an organization, with probability 1/3, or a Joe with probability 2/3.

Source: Alatas et al. (2019)

29 Rafael Correa is known to have tweeted the endorsement y 9th of October, although deleted it a couple of hours later.

## IV. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

*1. Media coverage*

Media coverage seems to matter for political results. Although public provision of news has tended to be the preferred mechanism to explode partisan bias in most authoritarian governments, there is an additional channel, the **persistent effect of capture** over the persuasion of voters. Nevertheless, the importance of information as a public good, does not entitle us to argue against the of public provision that increase media coverage. Rather requires the awareness to subtlety of the mechanisms on public opinion formation and civic engagement. Ecuador's experience with elections is a case experience showing the importance of these issues.

Media capture and media power are two types of distorted extremes of control from government and interest groups respectively. Consequently, securing an independent media is no easy task, but knowing the media consumption habits and how can they affect political preferences requires analysis. Perhaps, related to the digital age, the changing of habits that digital transformation may have induced voting, begs asking how our citizens are behaving on relation of consumption of news media and media in general and what are going to be its consequences over future political preference formation. To that objective, we must study the **pedagogical and psychological impact of media (off-line and on-line) consumption** in terms of quantity, contents to future **cognitive skills and civic engagement**. Ecuador's case discussed was in the verge of the trend of usage of digital media in rural population, prospects of the effect of the regime change should be suspected.

Due to technological innovation media offers are adapting and will continue to adapt in the future. In the meantime, traditional estimates of the demand for TV, radio, newspaper, Internet media (on-line and social media) must be user-centered not media centered. That is, although is complicated to measure some of the new technologies from the perspective of the supply, from a demand perspective, **user-centered perspective** can get a better sense of the time and channels the consumers use of different media<sup>30</sup>. Represent-

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30 For example, is hard to know the number of actual consumers of radio or TV news, although on Internet is possible to know users and time consumed. Nevertheless, survey of media consumption that reveal number of hours per day, type of media, type of content consumed are more accurate to understand the habits of consumers than statistics of subscribers of any specific media among the many ones that each person consumes in a single day. See Kennedy and Prat, 2019.

tative survey of media consumption habits is the best tool to know the effective level of penetration of media in general.

## *2. Political stability*

Democratic societies aren't in a leveled playing field, autocratic regimes can hire troll centers to start propaganda, use arbitrarily the laws to their convenience or arrest anybody that thinks in a controversial way. But this has always been the case, one can think of the digital age as a transformation for communication were social media and political protests initially helped free societies as with the Arab Spring in 2011, then also helped reverse this trend with an autocratic bias as with Russia, Venezuela and even US; and finally assist antisystem groups as in Ecuador and Chile in 2019. Therefore, **social media is not inherently antidemocratic**, if anything it can be said that allows participation to marginalized groups excluded by traditional media.

The role of identifying bots and trolls in content generation and affect political instability, the ability to distinguish between news and *fake news* regarding partisan bias, the sustainability of media business models after the technological transformation to avoid media capture by the state or interest groups, and the changing dynamics of news consumption habits to adequately inform citizens must be adequately pondered by citizens ahead of politicians. Artificial intelligence and nudging are particularly attractive to assist in the process of solving this challenge. We must dig into indicators derived from these technologies to the benefit of users, and to democratic governments, as one of the potential examples of how to manage **data and behavioral science as new instruments** provided by the digital age.

Regulatory proposals can be seen from both a normative and positive perspective. Normative is always terrain for the political action. Nevertheless, the idea of how the results of specific regulation can finally affect the results of media is a matter of positive study, and this cannot be underplayed in a democratic and free environment. In this line of reasoning, a better regulation is one that consider the potential results of its intervention. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable that **regulation** try to adequately consider imposing limits to digital technology recognizing **algorithms** that tend to exploit political polarization, xenophobic discourse or diffusion of fake news that produce externalities that affect the common good of news provision and social interaction. It's also true that regulation can result, or even worsen, equilibria as some the authoritarian experiences deriving in a surveillance state suggest.

Social media improves the collective action problems for political protests. This has proven potentially negative once the movement is infiltrated by illegitimate political groups as the case of Ecuadorian experience in 2019 shows. Anarchism, terrorism, drug-dealing and violent gangs can advance their objectives by infiltrating otherwise reasonable political discontent of citizens. Therefore, instead of discussing the idea of how to censor the social media in general or in regular times, we must consider specific measures to implement in exceptional conditions. Governments traditionally have declared a state of emergency in insurgency or catastrophes. We suggest considering on-line protests in a similar logic, when its counterpart in the off-line world derails, we should consider an intervention like the **suspension of withdrawals of deposits** to avoid the contagion of a bank panic in a liquidity crisis. We ought to think of how to limit the use of social media during such an emergency: the coordination with the companies providing the social media, the restriction to the infrastructure supporting the Internet, the responsibility and sanction over users and so on.

Finally, it seems that an overreaction against social media underestimate the role of users. Both politicians and citizens can help assist to improve the equilibria. New generations appear to be less open to forward or replicate fake news than older ones, probably because they are native to the digital age. Also, good leadership helps contain political instability, Ecuadorian experience show how a right balance of tolerance and control helped containing the diffusion of the protests, also an adequate change in the communication anchor of the government during the crisis of the indigenous movement of 2019 and later in the coronavirus crisis of 2020 in Guayaquil. The vice-president's **leadership skills** helped contain both crises. This parallels the example of Vladimir Zelensky in Ukraine, on how to lead the government against the invasion of an authoritarian regime that apparently would have smashed the country otherwise. Therefore, there is much role to play for political leaders in these exceptional times of acute violent protests or war, precisely using social media.

### *3. Looking back and looking forward: history and morals*

Media effects on political elections is not new and can be used to complement the case experience of media coverage discussed. On-line media has shown its potential to disrupt traditional assumptions regarding voting behavior. Cambridge Analytica alleged impact in 2016 US elections and Brexit campaign are a case in place. In general, the effect of coverage on political re-

sults can be dimmed on politicians' selfish intentions. Nevertheless, since its inception in Athens, democracy has been a rare experiment, hard to sustain, and unpromising experiences do not cease to appear. The problem with this point of view is that in the digital age, as has always been the case, the **personal responsibility** to sustain such a system is from the citizen that sacrifices its personal interest on behalf of the common good. Some may have thought that in the digital age, there was no further need for off-line political responsibilities and therefore commitment to civic engagement may disappear. That is a mirage. Democracy is a sacrificial good, and cannot be overwritten by a click, the responsibility lies with its citizens, and this cannot be overstated.

To be sure there is no way to escape from the political stability risk inherent in a democratic society such like the case of violent protests of Ecuador in 2019. We cannot let the challenge posed, to media and politics, by the digital age to let us forget the idea that the base of a healthy democracy hinges in the recognition of **free and equal individuals**. This too cannot be overstated, we must remind that protestors are not mobs that delete the rights of other citizens, if anything, the family's role in the proper formation of the new citizens of the digital age has increased. This time is not very different from the political experiences for the societies of the radio and TV of totalitarian experiments of Hitler and Stalin or even the printing press of Gutenberg. Democracy is not the problem, is the restriction, and let's not lose the focus where the problem lies.

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# RECENSIONES