A Post-Pinochet Press Predicament

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January 13, 2008
Introduction

If there was one difference that I noticed writing for a journalism class at Macalester, and writing for El Mercurio de Valparaíso, a paper from Chile’s oldest and largest newspaper enterprise, it was the following: writing articles that my professor at Macalester would accept was more demanding than writing ones that my editor at the Chilean paper would. Why was it, I wondered, that when I approached Carlos Valencia, my editor at El Mercurio, expecting him to challenge my information and guide me into further investigation-- as my Macalester professor would customarily do between edits--did Mr. Valencia accept the draft as it was, though it might have had only one source for information, or was perhaps nothing more than a simple revision of a press release? El Mercurio is the principal paper chain in the country, and these articles would be informing the majority of newspaper readers of two large Chilean cities (Valparaiso and Viña del Mar). Shouldn’t more energy be put in to assuring that they are as accurate and informative as possible?

Chile is a relatively stable country in Latin America, as far as economy and government are concerned, so they ought to invest in ensuring quality journalism in the largest, and most influential paper enterprises of the country: El Mercurio S.A., which owns the paper I worked for, and its competition, COPESA. The purpose of my capstone is to determine why they do not.

I choose to focus on Chile’s press -- as opposed to internet, radio, television or other media sources -- not only because I have personal experience in the field, but also because newspapers, despite a modernizing world and changing technology, remain the most preferable media source for many. I will support this idea with a passage from The
New Media Monopoly, Ben Bagdikian’s investigation into media ownership in the United States. He says:

“The newspaper survives for reasons that have little to do with clever technology. Its endurance depends, in part, precisely on the reader’s need to open with arms outstretched a double page that covers more than 1,000 square inches of columns and stories, 48 inches wide and 22 inches deep. What sounds like a ridiculous expanse of print, is, in fact, an advantage. Each reader’s eye can scan and select from the expanse the one or two stories of interest to that particular reader and do it more rapidly than scrolling even the sharpest presentation on a computer screen” (120).

The practice of getting ones news from a paper persists because of the comfort that comes from tradition and habit.

Improving Chile’s press will advance Chile as a democratic society. According to Kenny McChesney: “Democratic theory posits that society needs journalism to perform three main duties: to act as a rigorous watchdog of the powerful and those who wish to be powerful; to ferret out truth from lies; and to present a wide range of informed positions on key issues” (57). McChesney believes that journalism in the United States fails on all three of its duties, and I believe that Chilean journalism does the same. The on-the-surface and uncontroversial style of journalism which dominates today glazes over problems which exist in Chilean society; thus preventing the recognition and address of the issues. It is essential to find out why this style of journalism persists; to identify the root of the problem, so that a solution can be found.

My capstone proposes the following: The central problem which keeps Chilean journalism at its current level of mediocrity is one of control by the economically powerful. The companies that control the two largest and most influential press chains: El Mercurio S.A. and COPESA, find ways to ensure that their conservative and business-friendly interests are propagated through the news portrayed in the papers. This situation is exacerbated by two factors: poor journalism programs which
do not provide graduates with the skills or confidence they would need to stray from the control of their editors control, (who are following the guidelines of the companies in charge) and a lack of non-conglomerate media outlets to provide outlets which do not answer to economic powers to provide an alternative to the two giants[LS3]. In a case study of one alternate¹ paper, *El Observador*, I will illustrate that such papers are essential element in Chile in order to improve journalism in the country.

I will use the term alternate paper to refer to any newspaper not owned by *El Mercurio* or COPESA.

In this paper I will begin by providing some background on Chile’s recent history, in order to better understand the structure of the media system today and why it exists. I will show why it is that the media system is dominated by two giant enterprises, while alternate media is sparse, despite the fact the alternate media was vibrant in during the years of the dictatorship. I will give reasons for the decline of alternate media in the country in the post dictatorship years, since later, I will talk about how such papers are desperately needed in order to improve Chile’s current media system.

I will then delve into the matter of ‘surface journalism’, discuss the tendency itself as a result of self-censorship, and the ramifications of this type of reporting, leaving readers with little understanding of how news applies to them, and then discuss the factor that causes it: control by economic powers, as opposed to any legislative or political control[LS4].

I will talk about how journalism programs in Chile’s schools fail to prepare students to tackle the current structure of business controlled media, by not teaching the

¹ Alternate meaning not owned by the *El Mercurio S.A.* or *Copesa* enterprises
reality of the media world in Chile, and by denying them the confidence to go against rules and regulations for fear of losing their jobs.

I will also address and refute a counter-argument which states that it is not the fault of the business-controlled media structure but that of the journalists themselves in their practice of coleguismo.[LS5]. I will provide a case study of El Observador, a family owned and funded paper which covers the same region as El Mercurio de Valparaíso, yet provides a very different type of journalism; to support my point that papers which are not under the control of business forces will provide Chile with better news.

I will conclude with the idea that Chile’s best option for improving journalism at this time is creating more alternate papers like El Observador, which do not have to answer to economic powers, and can thus provide Chile with thorough, inclusive news.

[LS6]

**Historical Perspective:**

**The Rise of El Mercurio S.A. and COPESA and the Death of All Alternatives**

Chile’s press is technically ‘free’ today, but this was not the case several decades ago during the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. Pinochet’s time in power in Chile was one of great media control and censorship. He quickly developed a reputation for pursuing journalists. Over the course of the dictatorship, forty journalists and communication workers were killed or disappeared, three-hundred were sent into exile, and 1,000 were left unable to find work (Bresnahan, 39). Somehow, though an alternate press culture did manage to exist, even thrive. But this will be discussed later on.

Before Pinochet’s takeover, the media in Chile functioned as the voices of the distinct political parties, providing an outlet to every significant party. In fact, each party
either owned or was closely linked to a newspaper or magazine (Sunkel and Tironi, 167). Upon seizing power with a *golpe de estado* though, one of Pinochet’s first actions was to sever the old ties between media and political parties, selling papers, radio stations and magazines to private firms, or simply transferring them to state control. The principal target for these attacks were principally those media outlets sources supporting the formerly governing left wing party *Unidad Popular*, and eventually the media of the centrist Christian Democrat group was pushed to closure as well (Sunkel and Tironi, 170).

Considering the immediate shut-down of all the traditional political media outlets connected with groups that opposed the dictatorship, how did these manage to address Chileans about the repressive and exclusionary practices of the military government? How did they rally resistance? Academics Guillermo Sunkel and Eugenio Tironi say that although the regime maintained its control over the communications media throughout the 1980s, this control ceased to be the only, or even the principal, dynamic governing the evolution of the communications system, since a dynamic alternate press force existed as well.

Indeed, there emerged a motivated group of opposition media sources over the period of the dictatorship[LS7]. When, in 1983, the dictatorship loosened its grip on publishing of news and opinion magazines\(^2\) (in response to various protests at the time) and these sources were able to establish themselves legally, the readership of these alternate media sources was at its highest number (Sunkel and Tironi, 172). Yet, even while these vibrant alternate media did exist during Pinochet’s dictatorship, they were,

\(^2\) The regime’s constitution of 1980 officially prohibited “establishment, publication, or circulation of news publications” without authorization by the minister of the interior, who was known for systematically denying permission (Sunkel and Tironi 2000: 172)
unfortunately faced with one large obstacle in terms of reaching Chilean audiences. They were unable to compete with the dominant, dictator-back enterprises COPESA in charge of the daily *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio S.A.* in charge of the daily *El Mercurio*. The power that COPESA and *El Mercurio* held did not desist, even with the downfall of the dictatorship, yet the alternate media force soon waned into almost non-existence.

But let us pause for a moment. Based upon the assumption that democracy should be more hospitable towards journalism than a dictatorship, why did the alternate papers decline so significantly when the dictatorship left power?

My research shows that the decrease in alternative media outlets in the years following the dictatorship was due to a combination of factors which I will cover now. *El Mercurio* and COPES, meanwhile, remained strong, thanks to aid from the Chilean government who intended to continue to use these papers as a voice for the Pinochet implemented neo-liberal economy, which was still supported by the *Concertacion*, the new democratic government. [LS8]

**The Decline in Alternate Papers**

The factors which I will discuss as those which led to a decline of alternate newspapers I borrow from a list provided by Ken Leon-Dermota, a scholar who studied journalism in Chile, and then spent time researching the country’s press over the past decade. His book, *And Well Tied Down: Chile’s Press Under Democracy*, looks at precisely the topic I set out to conquer with my thesis; the lack of quality journalism in Chile’s press today, and the cause thereof. The reasons I provide are important because I will later argue that one factor that could significantly improve the journalism in Chile is
an increase in such alternate papers, an idea also proposed by Leon-Dermota. A better understanding to why these media no longer exist may be useful in proposing ways to help them rejuvenate. The list of reasons for their decline, as borrowed from Leon-Dermota, is as follows: the end of foreign subsidies, journalistic fatigue, the fact that the “other disappeared” did not de-politicize themselves, the government-in-waiting, loss of readership, loss of bête noir, the Concertacion’s conspiracy of silence, the Concertacion’s non-policy, Capital strike, no business sense, the market economy, and the lopsided playing field (27). Explanations will follow.

When Pinochet left power, an ‘arrival of democracy’ meant that foreign patrons no longer saw it necessary to help the opposition forces since their main catalyst was no longer an issue. The support of such patrons “made all the difference for the publication and its journalists” according to Leon-Dermota. Indeed, in Kristen Sorensen’s 2003 dissertation Chilean Media and Discourses of Human Rights, she quotes Chilean former newspaper and magazine editor and professor of journalism Abraham Santibañez from a personal interview in which he said that his former alternate paper, Hoy, could not survive after the dictatorship with the funding of ads alone. They depended on the funding of international groups, whose support disappeared after the dictatorship.

A certain ‘journalistic fatigue’ came about as a result of low pay and few benefits, and also the extreme repression under Pinochet, which led many journalists to switch to jobs at larger papers, or stop their careers altogether (32).

The opposition publications which existed during the dictatorship, or what Leon-Dermota refers to as ‘the other disappeared’, defined themselves as the non-El Mercurio,
because they took the role of giving double coverage to any topic that *El Mercurio* ignored. With the arrival of democracy, these magazines no longer had the captive audiences, presumably since they believed that the mainstream media would have to start providing more inclusive coverage (this was not necessarily the case, as I will soon discuss).

The left wing of government, which was denied any coverage at all during the dictatorship, or what Leon-Dermota refers to as the ‘government in waiting’, upon regaining agency in the media preferred to get their ideas and faces in print in the larger, more influential papers, such as *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*. As *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* began to include coverage of leftist politicians, many readers no longer felt the need to turn to alternate sources, and thus occurred the ‘loss of readership’, the next factor on Leon-Dermota’s list.

Without a dictatorship to rally against, alternate media no longer had a concrete common force to oppose, and thus occurred the ‘loss of bête-noir’. Indeed, in Santibañez’s interview (Sorensen, 218), he stated that the decline in the urgency for a press that demanded a return to democracy was a significant factor that contributed to the decline of the alternative press outlets.

The *Concertacion*’s so-called conspiracy of silence occurred once the dictatorship ended, when the alternate media *should* have had the ability to incriminate Pinochet for human rights violations and corruption, but instead the *Concertacion* (a coalition of leftist groups), the new government in power, inhibited such actions. The newfound peace in Chile was a fragile one balanced on a deal made between the military and the *Concertacion*, and the *Concertacion* did not want to endanger it.
What Leon-Dermota refers to as ‘the Concertacion’s non-policy’, was the Concertacion’s policy to not subsidize any papers\cite{LS13}; though the two largest paper companies, *El Mercurio S.A.* and COPESA already thrived on subsidies which keep them powerful to this day, so essentially the Concertacion was denying subsidies only to alternate papers.

‘The capital strike’, as explained by Leon-Dermota was the refusal of the formally pro-Pinochet business community advertisers to publish in the alternate media sources. Leon-Dermota quotes Emilio Filippi, former editor in chief of *Ercilla*, the first alternate publication allowed after the dictatorship came into power: “Chilean companies and businessmen aren’t interested in democracy – nothing that could cost them money. Democracy means free unions and people demanding things (36).”

The alternate papers which existed during the dictatorship, while they may have had quality journalism, were not run by people with experience in business, they were run by journalists. This is what Leon-Dermota calls the ‘no business sense’ situation, and it led to some critically erroneous business decisions by the alternate papers.

‘The market economy’ was originally associated directly with Pinochet, who had implemented it, and the alternate press force had been a loud voice of opposition to it. When the new leftist government came to power, though, and continued to support and implement it’s policies, it took the alternate press somewhat by surprise, and they were no longer sure who to rally for (37). \cite{LS14}

Pinochet left a ‘lopsided playing field’ legacy, since be ensured that the two major paper enterprises, *El Mercurio S.A* and COPESA were: “well positioned, retooled, and with a loyal clientele” (36). Here Leon-Dermota provides the quote after which he
has entitled his comprehensive research project: “As Spanish dictator General Francisco Franco began to age, he wanted things ‘tied down—and well tied down—meaning that he wanted to avoid a return to democracy after his death . . .”’. One can certainly see the comparison with Pinochet, who armed the two large pro-dictatorship enterprises with “new offices, press rooms, computers, and trucks courtesy of the government.” (39)

For the said reasons, alternate media source in Chile declined as El Mercurio S.A. and Copesa and the newspapers they ran stayed strong. So what was the effect on journalism in Chile? How well did El Mercurio and Copesa’s papers handle journalism after the return to democracy, and how did the remaining or newly formed alternate papers cope?

**The Persistance of ‘Surface Journalism’**

Leon-Dermota, in his introduction, echoes the same thoughts I had during my interning experience at El Mercurio when he states the following: “As I assembled files of various news clippings from today’s newspapers, patterns began to emerge: there is no investigative journalism in Chile; there are virtually no dissenting opinions about the state of the economy; no periodical does an ongoing analysis of Chile’s controversial health or pension systems; native people, workers, and the poor are portrayed as rabble when they are portrayed at all . . . the news is devoid of analysis, walk-ups, think pieces, backround, and commentary.” [LS15] In the pages that follow, Leon-Dermota examines the causes of the phenomenon of ‘surface-journalism’.
Economic, Not Political Pressures

One conclusion he reaches is that it is the economy, as opposed to legislation or other forces, that is restricting thorough investigative research for Chilean news articles. He states: “The most significant obstacle to a free and open press in Chile is not the law, which is indeed restrictive, but the concentration of ownership on one extreme of the political spectrum and the willingness of the owners to use those media to propagate their narrow views” (xi).

Indeed, in my interviews with journalists from both El Mercurio and El Observador I asked if any laws burdened them in their research. My responses were consistent. Chilean journalists feel very little legislative pressure influencing what they choose to write or report, regardless or whether such legislation is actually in existence. The only obstacles that were mentioned were economic ones. [LS16]

Osvaldo Alvarez, a journalist for El Mercurio, was reluctant to mention any barriers to freedom of expression in Chile’s press, insisting that only the editorial line of each paper will dictate what can and cannot be published. When pressured though, he did mention that, “The only thing that might prevent freedom of expression is, what you could call, economic factors. Like, a paper might give more or less coverage on a certain topic. Like, if there is a commercial interest -- and I’m not talking just about El Mercurio,” he interjected “-- that information will be smaller, but that doesn’t mean it won’t come out. They will publish it anyway; the only thing that changes is the emphasis.”

Indeed, Ernesto Curti, editor of El Mercurio de Valparaiso’s webpage, stated that the powerful economic groups the principal obstacle to freedom of speech in Chile.
“Through their financing of the papers, they impose a certain price for their support of the press,” he said.

The factor, then, that is keeping Chilean journalism at its current level of mediocrity, are economic pressures; the funders and the advertisers, which influence the information editors choose to emphasize, and eventually, through practice and habit, the sources that journalists use, and the manner in which they research and write an article.

### Two Takes on Self Censorship

Yet even in interviews, the economic powers that be a not a major complaint. Journalists are not facing direct interaction with these powers, and thus do not cite them as a force which inhibits their expression as writers. My former editor Carlos Valencia, for example, said that the editorial line is the one and only force that dictates what one publish. As an example of the type of thing prohibited by the editorial line, he cited ‘rude comments’ (groserias), saying “I don’t really see how this prevents freedom of expression.” Of course it doesn’t. The editorial line does not directly tell journalists they can not pursue in-depth, provocative pieces. But something does. Chilean journalist’s writing is being controlled by economic powers, though in a more indirect way than directly through the editorial line.

What is occurring is a great amount of self censorship. There are two factors which explain the amount of self-censorship which is happening, one which stems from control by economic powers and the other from a psychological effect. I will argue that the reason which occurs due to control by economic powers is more influential.
The first reason is more straightforward. The simple fact that journalists and editors, over time, learn what kind of information they should include in their reports, based on what the power that be will, or will not accept. Mario Parada, an editor from the El Mercurio enterprise’s largest and most widely read paper: *El Mercurio de Santiago*, says: “You get to know what’s most important to the paper.”[LS19]

The second reason is a psychological one. Sorensen quotes Brazilian journalist Zuenir Ventura who describes Brazil in the post-dictatorship years:

In 1978 the country was still living under what was called the ‘residual’ authoritarianism – the brunt of the unhealthy legacy of the dictatorship—and this involved the heavy burden of fear and impulses of self-censorship. Censorship had already been officially eliminated from pressrooms, theatres, films, etc. But it had left something behind that, from my point of view as a journalist, was perhaps more pernicious than censorship itself. We had internalized all the paranoia and all the censorship. You did not need to have anyone beside you to inhibit you or repress you... and this lasted a long time. For a long time we lived with this ghost, this shadow, this thing that hovered above us when it was time to speak (195).

Yes, I believe that it is very likely that certain residual fears remain in the minds of Chilean journalists. Particularly considering that fact that anyone who has ever traveled to Chile knows that infrequency with which the former dictator’s name is spoken.

Perhaps this is the case in any country in the years following a violent regime. And yet it is inevitable that with time these fears will fade. And so, I propose that the stronger force which is influencing self-censorship among Chilean journalists today is the first; that which is the result of what the economic powers that be demand. As Sorensen articulated in her 2003 dissertation: “As Chile moves further away from the years of the dictatorship, and as Pinochet grows more frail and likely to be prosecuted, the censorial and self-censorial pressures are loosening as well, albeit gradually. At the same time, certain types of censorial and self-censorial pressures are not loosening—specifically those imposed through a capitalist media system” (195).
Authority Is All You Need:
Encouragement to Take the Easy Way Out

What information are journalists excluding when they self-censor? Working class issues. Business leaders and government authorities are frequently the only sources used and whose opinions are quoted in articles.

Mario Parada, editor from *El Mercurio* quoted in the previous section, elaborates upon what kind of information he has learned to include in reports. “I can figure that the opinion of CUT [a workers organization] is not what’s important, it’s the president of the manufacturer’s association whose opinion is important.” Journalist’s become accustomed to what kind of people the editors will want opinions from. In this way, they are trained to give stories from a particular perspective, emphasizing the business perspective and not bothering to get opinions from anyone else who is affected by the issue.

So essentially, the lack of investigative journalism in Chile’s two large papers is the result of relying on the easy task of finding opinions of authorities, which are those considered the most important on any given issue, and going no further to see how the issue affects workers and regular people. Indeed, according to University of Chile professors Rafael Otano and Guillermo Sunkel, journalists are usually encouraged to take the easy way out by writing articles with only one source –usually a government official; and never being encouraged to find opposing opinions.

There is nothing wrong with getting the opinion of authority, of course. It is lack of other perspectives which leads to incomplete journalism. Ben H. Bagdikian, author of *The New Media Monopoly*, which investigates media ownership in the United States,
talks about this same trend of dependence on authority as it occurs in the US, and the negative ramifications.

“The daily printed and broadcast news on which most Americans depend has always selected as its basic sources the titled leaders of the corporate and political world. These sources are legitimate elements in the news since these leaders make decisions that have a major influence on the country and on the world. But in a democracy more is needed. There is another side to national realities. It is the news and views of organizations whose serious studies document urgent needs of the middle class and the poor and of tax-supported basic institutions like the public schools” (x).

The United States, like Chile, has the habit of providing incomplete stories, with only the perspective of those who implement policy, and not those who are affected by it.

Leon-Dermota visited El Diario Austral de Valdivia, a paper belonging to the El Mercurio S.A. chain, located in a northern Chilean city, and reported the following: “At the morning news meeting, reporters did not bounce ideas off of the managing editor, nor did the managing editor challenge them with ways to look for tension or controversy in their stories, to find an interesting angle, or just to dig a little deeper. The managing editor noted story ideas, and reminded writers to use a spell checker.” Leon-Dermota’s observance of this trend is reminiscent of my own experience when bringing an idea to an editor in El Mercurio, in which my editor accepted my bland drafts as they were for publishing, without encouraging further work.

The result of this trend are articles that do not answer the inevitable question of readers: how will this news affect me?

Online Mercurio editor Paulo Ramirez provides an example, saying that reporters will, for example, simply report that there will be a two percent rise in health care costs but that they do not mediate a discussion of how a two percent rise in health care costs will affect individuals
Indeed, *El Mercurio*’s newswriter Oswaldo Alvarez, when asked how he would cover a story about a proposed law to give pregnant women more paid leave from work said that he would first consult the internet to check the progress of the law, next check in with a government official to see who was leading the initiative, and then would consult the ministries of women’s services and of employment. As an afterthought, he added, “If there was time, I would ask pregnant women their opinion on the law.” The sources listed by Alvarez are those of government and policymaking. He would only ask the people who the law would actually affect if time permitted, because for him, the authority’s opinion is the only which is essential to the article.

Sorensen compared *El Mercurio* to the *The New York Times*, calling it “a prestigious paper that portrays itself as more serious and assumes a more educated and elite readership than its commercial competition [the competition being *La Tercera]*.”

And undoubtedly this is how much of Chile’s paper sees the paper, since it is a traditional news source (the oldest Spanish language paper still in print) and aims itself at the political elites. And yet serious discrepancies exist between the reporting of *The New York Times* and that of *El Mercurio*, as well as that of COPESA’s papers. According to Leon-Dermota:

> As of this writing, the New York Times magazine is concerned with workers displaced by globalization. How do Chilean papers stack up? During a year-long study period, August 1999-August 2000, Chile’s newspapers of the duopoly completely ignored the topics of displaced workers, sweatshops, health, retirement, public education, the concentration of wealth, and social welfare systems as they affect working people[LS20].

But journalists, despite encouragement from editors to take the easy way out, could still be inspired from time to time to pursue more in depth pieces on their own, right? That does not seem to be the case. My next section will illustrate how journalism school does
not arm graduates with the confidence and skills to stray from their editor’s control and pursue in depth investigations on their own.

**Shortcomings in Schooling**

Leon-Dermota lists the reasons that Chilean universities consistently fail to produce confident, skilled journalists. For one, professors do not distinguish between *standards* --which are what set the bar for quality journalism-- and *ethics* --the limitation on becoming too enthusiastic in your pursuit of knowledge. Because ethics and ‘responsibility’ are what is emphasized, the standards needed to achieve higher levels of journalistic excellence are often not learned. What’s more, graduates face a bleak job market, and the necessity to teach quality investigative journalism is not always very applicable. Of the 800 students who graduate from Journalism schools each year, only 50 to 100 jobs await, and so most students wind up in public relations jobs. Finally, private universities do not teach media ownership as a significant factor in the practice of journalism in Chile, so students do not enter their careers with a clear understanding of the reality of the media environment in Chile, and thus how to maneuver themselves in it.

As a result of poor schooling and preparation, journalists are not confident in their writing skills and do not have an internalized set of journalistic standards so that they can be confident enough to defy certain regulations in their papers with the comfort that they can count on being able to find another job, if dismissed for their rebellious behavior.
Stuck on Regulations

Chilean journalists fell insecure in their jobs, and the result is the following: due to their desire to stick to regulations they do not put news into context in a compulsive tendency to portray themselves as objective.

Leon-Dermota, at *El Diario Austral de Valdivia*, reported the he was unable to convince journalists of the benefit of including background material in order to put their articles in the context of recent events. The writers believed that if their articles went beyond a simple description of the most immediate details of the events, their article was liable to be criticized by the public, the news maker, and the editor as not being objective.

Leon-Dermota wanted to find out why, and he reports the following: “I caught reporters after [a] meeting to ask them why they didn’t investigate or find other ways to interject tension into their stories. They said that they assumed that *El Diario Austral de Valdivia*’s editorial policy was that of *El Mercurio* in Santiago . . . The reporters each said in a different way that if they published a controversial article that came to the attention of *El Mercurio* in Santiago, that would be the end of their young careers.”

This situation is not unique to Chile. According to Kenny McChesney, author of *The Problem of the Media*, an investigation of US media politics, a refusal to put news into context, or what he refers to as a reliance on ‘news hooks’ (an event justifies news coverage, a situation does not) paired with a dependence on official sources (as both Bagdikian and Leon-Dermota describe above) are what make journalism de-politicized, meaningless, bland. “[J]ournalism, which in theory should inspire political involvement, strips politics of their meaning, and promotes a broad de-politicization” (72).
Carlos Valencia, chief editor of *El Mercurio* de Valparaiso gave his opinion on the matter as follows: “I don’t think it is a journalist’s objective is to cause controversy, but rather to give them relevant and important facts.” For Valencia, that which is relevant and important comes from some voice of authority. After three months of seeing his edits of my work, I can guarantee it.

**The Coleguismo Perspective**

Eduardo Arriagada, who runs the mass communications department at the *Universidad Catolica*, a Chilean University, agrees that the law is not the most significant challenge to freedom of expression faced by journalists. But he does not blame the media owners. Rather, he blames the journalists themselves and their recurrent practice of *coleguismo*. *Coleguismo* occurs when journalists form relationships with coworkers, and use one another to lessen the workload; so that, say, one reporter records an interview and shares the tape afterwards. Or, one reporter with a scoop may share it with a friend at a competing paper, so no one has an exclusive story. According to Arriagada, the sharing of information, particularly between papers, is the cause of poor journalism in Chile.

But I disagree with this point. The mere fact that journalists are permitted to share sources and information in this way is not their fault, it is the lack of infrastructure in the press. The word “*coleguismo*” does not exist in English because the practice is prohibited in English speaking papers. Chilean papers need to enforce stricter standards in terms of the practice of *coleguismo*. 
In addition, regardless of whether papers are sharing information, the papers that will be the most influential over the majority of the Chilean population, whether or not other papers have the same story.

**Case Study: El Observador** [LS23]

Leon-Dermota uses the sports pages of Chile’s large papers to illustrate the fact that, were it not for the self-interest of media owners, journalism in Chile could be much improved, saying: “. . . a brand of journalism that is not so strictly vetted for economic, moral, or political content is sports. A quick look reveals depth, analysis, and commentary where appropriate; making the case that Chileans journalists can do the job if permitted.”

I have another such example of a place where ownership has less influence, and thus journalism is better: in *El Observador*, a small paper which covers the same region as *El Mercurio de Valparaiso*. *El Observador* was established 38 years ago and is a familial enterprise, much like Chile’s two conglomerates, but in contrast to them, their size and relatively smaller influence keeps companies from investing strongly in control of the content of the papers. Editor Leo Riquelme, when asked what factors distinguish his paper from *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, said that his paper tries to focus less on elite concerns, and more on things that affect the people of the region. He provides the example of environmental concerns, saying: “We have been concerned with the installation of electrical centers in the region. We believe that the area can not tolerate any more contamination. So in contrast to the authorities or other media that adopt neutral positions, or say that what is most important is development in the country; we
say that what is important are the people. Another example is the position that [our]
paper takes on the installation of electric antennas for cell phones. You have to be
vigilant about these things. As long as there are no studies to assure us that the antennas
do not have a negative affect on the community, we need to concern ourselves with the
matter.”

Leo made sure to clarify that *El Observador’s* coverage of environmental issues was
not because, as he put it they are “a Green paper”. “We aren’t a Taliban for the
environment,” he said, chuckling. “We just want to take care of people and the region
they live in. Our region is particularly beautiful.”

Looking back on my personal experience working for the paper, I can also distinguish
between working for *El Observador* and *El Mercurio*. I remember writing a story about
the legalization of the over the counter sale of the “morning-after pill” in Chile, which
involved accompanying Vivian, a fellow reporter, of an entire day of walking from
pharmacy to pharmacy, trying to find one that would actually sell us a pill (we were not
successful), and then asking the pharmacists for their opinion on the matter. *El Mercurio*,
I feel, would have approached this story in a different way.

Using the earlier example taken from Osvaldo on his hypothetical coverage of a story
about a law for paid leave for pregnant women, the paper would probably consult
government officials about the law, to get an “authoritative opinion” and then maybe, if
they had time, would ask some pharmacists or women about their opinion on the matter.
*El Mercurio* would concern itself primarily with the authoritative statement on the law,
while *El Observador* focuses on what people would actually care about: whether or not
the pill is actually accessible to them, despite the law permitting it.
Leo describes the reasons that *El Observador* reports the way it does: “It’s because we have a paper that is locally dedicated. It’s not as though we passed over the region in an airplane and got out news from above, we do journalism from down here, from within the region we are in. There is a lot of investigation. With each theme we investigate more deeply. And finally, we create our own list of stories. We investigate and find our own stories, so a lot of other papers don’t have them. It’s a very local paper.”

Remember how Osvaldo Alvarez described the way he would report on a law giving more paid-leave to pregnant women? Here is Leo Riquelme’s response to the same inquiry: “First I would check the laws that currently exist for pregnant women and see if they actually are put into effect. I would look at international statistics about similar laws in other countries to compare, I would speak to mothers and pregnant people, with fathers associations, with company associations, a non-governmental organization that might exist in relation to the law, and the government organization tied to the themes of women and the family.” For Riquelme, asking the people that this law will effect is a necessity for a report on the topic, as are ensuring that the passage of such law will have an effect and seeing what that effect will be.

*El Observador* is what Bagdikian would refer to as one of the US’s “papers of the left.”. Such papers, according to Bagdikian, are those that include, “[i]deas, views and proposed programs that go beyond those of established power centers (xî)”.

Lack of Alternatives to the Conglomerates

So, with so-called ‘papers of the left’ like *El Observador*, shouldn’t Chile have all the investigative and in-depth journalism in need? Unfortunately papers independent from the two conglomerates such as *El Observador* are few and far-between. Riquelme says: Our region is lucky to have an alternative to the conglomerates. There are only ten total that exist that do not belong to the *El Mercurio* or COPESA.” Some think that there are less. Carlos Valencia, when asked in an email what newspapers existed in his region other than *El Mercurio* responded simply “none”.

“In Chile, there are only two visions of the world”, said Riquelme. “And they are very similar.”

Conclusion

While Chile’s newsstands may contain a wide array of well-printed newspapers, do not be deceived. The stories within are bland, lacking any context or opinions outside of those perceived as ‘the authority.’ This is because the majority of those papers are owned by the same two companies -- *El Mercurio S.A.* and COPESA -- and those two companies have to answer to the needs of large economic groups fund them with advertizing. Editors know what will be acceptable to those groups, and indoctrinate journalists with a certain style that eliminates the opinions of those who the policy will effect, emphasizing only the policy makers. Journalists do not sway from their editor’s directions because poor schooling hasn’t given them the confidence to take their own road, nor the knowledge of what *good* journalism really is. There is hope for Chile though, and it can be seen in smaller, family owned papers like *El Observador*, whose
journalists do thorough investigative stories which actually get published, since there is no fear of offending some powerful economic group. What Chile needs is to allow for more papers like El Observador, (perhaps through subsidies so they do not have to depend on advertisers and their inevitable control). With such papers, Chile could provide better news, and Chileans could be better informed about how they can improve their own lives, and make their country a better place.