



Journalism and Civil Society: Key to Data Journalism in Argentina

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Interaction between the media and the political system is a critical factor in shaping journalism culture (Hallin and Mancini 2007; Mellado et al. 2017). Particular sociopolitical conditions in the recent years explain the scarce initiatives in data journalism in Argentina. As described in the report of Freedom House, the government of President Mauricio Macri, which took power in December of 2015, reversed a long period of secretive and hostile behavior toward the press, started in 2003 with Néstor Kirchner and turned into a pattern during the two periods of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's presidency (Freedom of the Press 2017). A long-delayed Freedom of Information law (FOI) was passed in the Congress in 2016, starting a hard process to improve public access to government documents. The new administration established an official framework for the distribution of state advertising, allocated in the previous years by politicized and arbitrary criteria (Crettaz 2019; Poder Ciudadano 2011). But in

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reverse, the reduction in income for the media, combined with the country's difficult economic situation, affected the financial sustainability of most of the media.

In these circumstances, LNDData (La Nación Data), the renowned unit of *La Nación* newspaper, appeared as the only and rare case of data journalism in Argentina (Borges-Rey et al. 2018). This exception can be explained through many factors related to Argentinean journalism, such as a decreasing tradition of watchdog model (Mancini 2013; Pinto 2008; Waisbord 2013a). No less important is the political culture defined by the secrecy of public data and scanty information access.

In Latin America, persistent obstacles have historically undermined democratic governance and civic accountability, placed not only by journalists but also by citizens, missing opportunities for public information access (Waisbord 2012, 2013a). Government openness and access to information have a limited tradition in the region (Hughes and Lawson 2005), so public data are a precious gemstone in a country with a tradition of secrecy in politics and weak participative culture, mostly reduced to a few local NGOs (ADC Acción por los derechos civiles 2013; Secchi et al. 2017). Political leadership was the main obstacle in the pursuit of the participation of the press in access to public information so journalists need to counteract resistance by searching for alliances with sectors (Bertoni 2011; Botero 2013). Data demands institutional mechanisms of accountability related to an open government transformation with public reliable databases and regulations that guarantee access to information. But the national Law guaranteeing access to public information was not passed until 2016, after a long debate and many failed attempts.

Journalism has a key role in transforming data into reliable and manageable information. However, the availability of files and documents—the first condition for data journalism initiatives—is not common in the country. The index of Argentinean Cities Open Data,¹ based on the Global Open Data Index, evaluates the data availability in eleven regions and it measures whether the access is under an open license, whether it is available online and free of charge, whether it is updated daily, as well as whether it is possible to download the information in an open format. This index estimates that only 25% of 407 sets of 37 jurisdictions can be considered open. The variation goes from three districts at the top that

¹Fundación Conocimiento Abierto, retrieved from <http://ar-cities.survey.okfn.org/>. December 12th 2018.

have all their bases open to three at the bottoms of the list, with less than 11% of their data accessible. In 2012 Argentina joined The Open Government Partnership in order to improve access to public information, but it took three years until the national administration started to launch open data portals. According the information of the international organization in 2018, the country just accomplished 40% of open data.² Figures confirm that transparency and accountability is still a goal, not an assimilated culture feature.

Additionally, some infrastructure barriers delayed the development of citizens' participation. Internet access is outrageously uneven and unequally distributed across the country, so it is sometimes hard for citizens and journalists to monitor public websites or to exchange information. Internet penetration in Argentina increased from 2010 to 2015, when half of the households got access to broad band, but it is far below the average of OECD countries with 85% of penetration.³ In the ranking that measures the speed of mobile download in 123 countries, Argentina is in the 84th place, with 16,36 Mbps of speed, less than the global average of 22.99 MBPS, and in the 73rd place in the broadband ranking, less than the average (47,83 Mbps)⁴.

Another factor that works against data journalism is the historical dependence of the media system on government decisions and financial support. Local political leaders are fond of "quid pro quo" practices at several levels called patrimonialism: "Just as owners and officials engage in mutually beneficial relations, journalists and sources of information, jobs, and advertising similarly maintain close contacts" (Waisbord 2013b, p. 157). Public officials used to control significant resources affecting media economies, as licenses, taxes and subsidies, and chronic discretionism in the distribution of public resources to the media have increased in the last few years (ADC Acción por los derechos civiles 2008; Waisbord 2013c). These circumstances have created a context where there are neither many incentives for media innovation, nor transparency or accountability of public institutions.

²Data from <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/countries/argentina>. March 21, 2019.

³"Estado de la banda ancha en América Latina y el Caribe 2016", CEPAL, German Cooperation.

⁴Speedtest Global Index, August 2018.

JOURNALISM FAR FROM DATA

The absence of reliable statistics and public data along with technology barriers reinforce a poor tradition of precision journalism based on statistical methods and social sciences tools (Crucianelli 2013; Meyer 2002). Argentine journalism has always been reluctant with classical norms of objectivity and facticity dutifully observed by reporters across newsrooms in Western democracies (Amado and Waisbord 2015).

Two periods in Argentinean journalism could be recognized in recent democracy. A first boost in 1983, when the country enthusiastically recovered democratic institutions after a long period of military regime, when some reportages about government corruption were given recognition worldwide. Watchdog journalism lived a golden moment during that period (Waisbord 2000). In those years, “watchdog journalism was becoming mainstream in a country that just a decade before had been mired in an especially brutal military regime, where state-sponsored terrorism was viewed as a legitimate means to stifle expression” (Pinto 2008). However, it finished suddenly: the economic and institutional crisis in 2001 and a presidential transition marked the beginning of another phase in the Argentinean journalism realm. The populist government in office from 2003 to 2015 built a system of propaganda and restriction to freedom of information, in the shape of absence of press conferences, of limitations to access to officials as regular news sources and of lack of laws that guarantee access to public information (De la Torre 2013; Kitzberger 2009; Waisbord 2013c). These procedural influences as a way to access information, media laws and regulations, and availability of news-gathering resources were the most mentioned issues as critical matters according to a national study (Amado and Waisbord 2018). Journalistic conditions for innovative reporting were constricted by weak professionalization and lack of resources in newsrooms. Spaces for autonomous reporting were closed, not only because media economic and political environments were shaken by crisis, but also because newsrooms were influenced by the particular interests of the media organization (Pinto 2008) and by external pressures of financial and information subsidies (Amado 2015).

These circumstances damaged even more the fragile conditions of Argentinean journalism, which entailed more working hours, less time to research stories and a lack of professional protection, such as collective codes and legal forms to safeguard journalists from pressures, both internal (media owners) and external (advertisers and political officers) (Amado

and Waisbord 2015). These factors undermine trust in institutions (Berganza Conde et al. 2016; Tejkalová et al. 2017), which are the main sources in national newspapers (Rotelli 2018).

In this context, watchdog journalism in general and data journalism in particular were exceptional in the Argentinean media landscape. Data journalism analyzes bases with the collaboration of computer assisted programs and presents them with multimedia resources and infographics in order to make them clearer and more attractive for the public (Borges-Rey 2016; Chaparro Domínguez 2014). Data journalism takes methods from precision journalism (Meyer 2002), opinion polls, official statistics and sociological reports as well as informatics tools from computer science (Coddington 2015; Fink and Anderson 2015). This variety of empirical journalism has more than 50 years of tradition in North America and it could have an enormous potential in Latin America (Borges-Rey et al. 2018) once some structural obstacles are overcome (Lewis 2015).

The quality of statistics in the news depends on the ability of journalists to verify data (Anderson 2018), which was difficult in a context where the demographic data were factually inaccessible from 2007 to 2016, when the intervention of the national administration in the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INDEC in Spanish) resulted in the distortion of key figures such as statistics of employment, poverty and inflation, in order to play down the social crisis.⁵ As such data was not analyzed in technical reports nor in academic research, it was unlikely to be used by journalists. Reporters are not keen on quantitative analysis (Nguyen and Lugo-Ocando 2016) in general, but Argentinean journalists are even less prepared in as much as journalism education in Argentine universities does not provide much statistical training (Gobbi and Betti 2013).

DATA JOURNALISM AS AN EXCEPTION

Over the last few years, LNDData has been recognized for many innovative contributions to digital journalism. This unit, created around 2010, is part of a traditional newspaper, *La Nación*, which was the second Argentinean newspaper founded in 1870, and the first Argentinean newspaper to

⁵“Argentina’s economy: Lies and Argentine statistics”, *The Economist*, April 20th 2011, retrieved from <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2011/04/20/lies-and-argentine-statistics>

launch an Internet website in the country. La Nación Data (LNData)⁶ is a data journalism unit created to develop special reports with interactive visualization of data. Two senior journalists, who were part of *La Nación* web team in 1995, were the heads of this initiative. The initial team, formed by three journalists interested in new technologies, was trained in innovative academic centers in the United States. By 2018, the team was formed by seven journalists and three designers. Their first landmark was in 2010, when the outlet received a disk containing 26,000 mails from an important public official.⁷

This investigation was a turning point for the newspaper, considered since that moment a powerhouse of Latin American data journalism. The initiative of *La Nación* has been consolidated with industry recognitions. In the Global Editors Data Journalism Awards, it received four out of ten prizes given to Latin American data journalism teams, out of a total number of 53 awards given to different data journalism initiatives in different countries during the period 2013–2017 (Borges-Rey 2016). This background gained *La Nación* a leading role in The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists⁸: four of the eight Argentinean journalists working in the global network that investigates the Panama Papers and Paradise Papers work for *La Nación*.⁹

Adding to the prestige among colleagues and professional associations, the newspaper gets the recognition of citizens for its contribution to the open data culture and participatory journalism. This positioning gained the newspaper the privilege of being selected as recipient of the most important leak in Argentine history, namely the notebooks with detailed annotations of illegal practices, registered by a personal assistant of the Minister of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services in Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's administration (2007–2011; 2011–2015). The

⁶All the data reports are accessible in <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/data>

⁷Natalia Mazotte, "How the Argentinean daily La Nación became a data journalism powerhouse in Latin America", Nieman Lab, April 20th 2017, retrieved from <http://www.niemanlab.org/2017/04/how-the-Argentinean-daily-la-nacion-became-a-data-journalism-powerhouse-in-latin-america/>

⁸The Paradise Papers Argentinean team was comprised by Emilia Delfino (Diario Perfil); Hugo Alconada Mon, Maia Jastreblansky, Iván Ruiz, Ricardo Brom (Diario La Nación); Mariel Fitz Patrick (América TV) y Sandra Crucianelli (Solo Local, Bahía Blanca), retrieved from <https://argentinapapers.wordpress.com>. Panamá Papers is global journalistic investigation about offshore finance industry. More info in: <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/>

⁹ICIJ, <https://www.icij.org/journalists/>

newspaper investigation unit worked together with the public attorney during the process. It was after the beginning of the prosecution when LNData launched a website with facsimile and textual versions of the eight notebooks, under the title “Los cuadernos de las coimas” (The Bribe Notebooks).¹⁰

Strategic alliances between LNData and universities and NGOs since 2013 resulted in a crowdsourcing platform to promote citizen participation and the creation of open datasets. The Senate expenses that were monitored comprehended a period of seven years, 11 provinces, 45,000 documents in PDF format and two investigations of 40,000 audios during two years. This project involved more than 1000 volunteers and alliances with local NGOs such as Poder Ciudadano, Fundación Directorio Legislativo, CIPPEC, Infocudadana, Asociación Civil por la Igualdad y la Justicia and HackHackers. They also organized training seminars and hackathons with the assistance of professors and students from many universities (Universidad Austral, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Universidad Católica Argentina, Colegio Universitario de Periodismo de Córdoba) and a Master’s program that the newspaper coordinates with Universidad Torcuato Di Tella).¹¹

The case of LNData shows how structural and professional restrictions for Argentinean journalism in developing data journalism could be solved by thinking beyond journalism. The key factor is the cooperation from civil society organizations and universities. It is infrequent and impressive to confirm the enthusiasm in civic marathons with more than 1000 citizens helping to analyze public documents.¹² The initiative not only gives prestige to the media but also connects journalism with public interest (Broersma and Peters 2013). In addition, it educates citizens in monitoring common issues and official sources (Mutsvairo 2016; Thurman 2018).

¹⁰Special report “Los cuadernos de las coimas”, retrieved from <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/los-cuadernos-de-las-coimas-t65192>As a result of the coordination with courts, the confessions and documentary proofs determined the prosecution of company executives and former public officials, including former president of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

¹¹Institutional collaboration and inter-institutional projects are widely explained in <http://blogs.lanacion.com.ar/data/universidades/>

¹²<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/politica/el-control-como-experiencia-ciudadana-nid1837674>

BUILDING DATA WITH CITIZENS

As civic organizations have led the initiatives to monitor and analyze public information historically in Argentina, they were strategic allies for the LNDData to identify and process alternative data. In this aim, journalism is challenged to interact with other actors, different from the active sources that offer information in the traditional time and form that journalism needs and demands. That is to say, while journalists tend to focus on official announcements in social media (Amado and Tarullo 2015), many NGOs find novelties in bureaucratic information that the political power would prefer to keep unknown.

As journalism remains focused on the urgency of the media and limited by government restrictions, the civil society drives long-term initiatives to make public data accessible. In 2009, Poder Ciudadano Foundation¹³ promoted the first database for sharing information on elections in a graphic and accessible way, resulting in a website called dineroypolitica.org and the project “La ruta electoral” (The elections road).¹⁴ This initiative, based on an open source application, allows citizens to visualize financial reports and electoral data in dynamic presentations. The NGO also provided information on the elections in 2007 and 2009 and LNDData contributed with data from the elections in 2011 for an international hackathon of an interdisciplinary professional team.

Poder Ciudadano also led the investigation on distribution of state advertising, a key factor of influence in the relationship between government and the media (Freedom of the Press 2017; Waisbord 2013c). The analysis of the distribution of state advertising during the period 2000–2017 shows that the amount per capita of state advertising investment has increased steadily (Crettaz 2019). Since 2007, it has never been under US\$ 3, a higher figure than the average per capita in the United States (US\$ 2.63), México (US\$ 2.22) and Canada (US\$ 2.70). During electoral periods, the amount has been higher: in 2014, before the general elections, the figure reached US\$ 7.5. This comparison could explain the weight of financial influences on the media system and the restrictions for journalism to monitor this issue in particular, and the government in gen-

¹³Poder Ciudadano is a non-profit and a non-partisan organization. It is Argentine chapter of Transparency International. Retrieved from <http://poderciudadano.org/quienes-somos/>

¹⁴“Nuevo sitio para ver los gastos de campaña”, La Nación Newspaper, December 4th 2014, retrieved from “<https://www.lanacion.com.ar/1749308-nuevo-sitio-para-ver-los-gastos-de-campa%C3%B1a>”

eral, especially when the latter is one of the main advertisers in the country (Poder Ciudadano 2011).

The organization promoted the requisition of the Cabinet Central Office in order to obtain budgets of government propaganda, based on a former decree (1172/2003) that endorses the access to information of presidential institutes. In 2008, the NGO obtained the information in digital format, which was classified and organized in different categories: the contractor organism, the booking destination, the amount of money, objectives of the advertisement and the media code, according to the provider's database. However, when the information showed an alarming growth of the government expenses in propaganda and arbitrariness of distribution of the expenditures, the Office delayed the delivery of information (Pavese 2015). In addition, eventual data was provided in paper copies or image formats (PDF files).¹⁵

Only in 2016 did the National Registry of Official Advertising Providers start to publish national government public official advertising expenditures every six months. The reports include information details in digital format, such as entry, organism and contracted media.¹⁶ Nevertheless, this data has to be processed, analyzed and presented to the citizenship so that the society can understand why it is necessary and relevant to allot public money to official advertising. Even though transformations begin with public policies of open government, this is not enough. It still proves difficult to access this data in other provincial and local jurisdictions.

Another example of successful cooperation between civil society and journalism as a path to overcome difficulties and to achieve public impact is the research of Directorio Legislativo Foundation.¹⁷ In 2018 the organization asked for information about controversial but legal practices of parliament representatives. They usually exchange their assigned plane tickets for the equivalent amount in cash. Although this is an institutionalized practice, the report encouraged a public debate about the legitimacy of

¹⁵The site <http://www.publicidadoficial.org.ar> has information about ad investments that the national government, some provinces and some municipalities did since 2000 to 2014.

¹⁶In the National Registry of Official Advertising Providers (RENAPO) website the information about official advertising expenses is available. More info in: <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/jefatura/pautaoficial>

¹⁷Directorio Legislativo is a nonpartisan organization that promotes the strengthening of legislatures and the consolidation of democratic systems in Latin America through dialogue, transparency and access to public information. Retrieved from <https://directoriolegislativo.org/quienes-somos/>

these practices, which represent up to 44% of increment in the legislators' salaries. The report was published in mainstream outlets; however, the majority of these did not publish the information with an open data spirit.¹⁸ The Chamber of Deputies did not reply to the demands for access to public information that Infobae made along with other outlets and different nonprofit organizations. Finally, Directorio Legislativo received the official detail of the tickets that representatives exchanged for cash in 2015, 2016 and 2017. The most relevant information about this affair is published in an exclusive report on the site of the foundation.¹⁹ Digital media Infobae and Chequeado published this data as “exclusive information”.²⁰

Exclusivity, mentioned in both reports, confirms that media prioritizes market and commercial competition over citizens' interest and public information criteria. In Argentina, the media usually demands scoops and exclusivity as a condition for publishing information and civic organizations accept the condition in order to promote their work in mainstream media. Information tends to be media-exclusive: different media follow this principle in order to justify the cost and expenses of a specialized unit for data journalism. However, public information should not be exclusive since it is a right of the whole society. And this is a key point to discuss in this kind of data journalism with civic collaboration.

CONCLUSIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE DATA JOURNALISM

Alliances between citizens and journalists for the development of investigations based on public data could be a solution for the transformations that journalism is going through. A journalist cannot be just a newsmaker but must also be an information interpreter. LNDData has been able to understand this challenge, creating an initiative in association with NGOs,

¹⁸ Directorio Legislativo (2018), “El control de canje de pasajes de los diputados: qué es y cómo se usa”, retrieved from <http://directoriolegislativo.org/blog/2018/03/26/el-control-del-canje-de-pasajes-de-los-diputados-que-es-el-canje-y-como-se-usa/>

¹⁹ Leonardo Míndez, “Exclusivo: cuánto dinero se llevó cada diputado por canje de pasajes en 2017”, March 25th 2018, retrieved from <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2018/03/25/festival-de-canje-de-pasajes-en-diputados-carro-robotti-y-garre-en-el-podio-de-2017/>

²⁰ Martín Slipeczuk y Lucía Martínez, “Canje de pasajes en el Senado: entre 2010 y 2015 se canjearon más de \$34 millones”, Chequeado, April 6th 2018. <https://chequeado.com/proyectos/datochq/> [accessed 2/9/2019].

universities and citizens. Although in 2014 other data journalism enterprises were launched in Argentina supported by international funding, none of them have been able to rise to the challenge, performing the way this kind of journalism promotes.²¹

Data journalism is one of the prominent formats of digital media that enables new formats, “from deep engagement with readers over joint fact-checking work to cross-national collaborative investigative reporting” (Kleis Nielsen and Selva 2018). Moreover, digital media are a key factor in inspiring initiatives in journalism associated to other information producers, such as think tanks, civic organizations and grass root mobilizations (Mutsvairo 2016).

Nowadays, when power resides in knowledge rather than information—as philosopher Francis Bacon said—journalism could lead this transformation. However, it is important to take into account that “the particular role of data in journalism—as well as interrelated notions of algorithms, computer code, and programming in the context of news—is only beginning to receive major attention in the scholarly and professional discourse” (Lewis 2015, p. 322).

LNData has shown that it is possible to overcome various obstacles, both structural and organizational. Firstly, they succeeded in accessing public information, even before the Public Information Access Law was passed in 2016. At that moment, the team was able to work in association with NGOs, the ones that could access sensitive information (ADC Acción por los derechos civiles 2013; Secchi et al. 2017). Secondly, citizens as part of the LNData initiative, give transparency and accuracy to the project (Lewis 2015). The data unit has invited citizens to participate actively in their projects and the team of journalists has been successful in the assignment: their readers have been part of many awarded reports, by checking and verifying public information. The association with academic centers has also been substantial in LNData: journalism students and professors have contributed to the project by organizing seminars and virtual “data days”, hackathons and civic marathons. These events have been indispensable in promoting civic participation and involvement, focusing on small data as well as in big data.

²¹Mariano Blejman, “Lessons learned from building data journalism teams in Latin America”, October 2015, retrieved from <https://ijnet.org/en/story/lessons-learned-building-data-journalism-teams-latin-america>

Latin American journalism has to find its own way of data journalism showing the media that analytics could be used to detect social concerns and interests, rather than traffic measures. As the collaborative projects of LNDATA confirmed, social intelligence, as well artificial intelligence, can be used for processing great amounts of information with creativity and perspicacity. Thus, this big data could become a guide for a better understanding of the information necessities of citizenship.

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