Hard Pressed:
The Paraguayan Media and Democratic Transition, 1980s-1990s

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Introduction

[The press] is a gripping and impetuous burst that destroys everything that is not firmly in place. A paper is a man, a citizen and a civilization; it is the past and the present, the criminal and great actions, as well as the need of individuals and governments. The contemporary history, the history of all times, humanity in general, and the measure of a people’s civilization are all part of a newspaper.

- Domingo Faustino Sarmiento

Partway into the broadcast on Radio Ñandutí there was static. And an awful screeching noise. Host and station owner Humberto Rubín had hit too close for the Paraguayan dictator, and his staff had sent a competing signal to drown out Ñandutí’s programming. It was part of normal life for Rubín, who faced such persecution throughout General Alfredo Stroessner’s three-decade regime. Whether they were airing political broadcasts, music or commentary, Ñandutí’s staff could expect constant interference. “‘A mi me llamaban un judío comunista, barbudo tenebroso, de todo,” Rubín explained. “Así fue absolutamente imposible … Fue duro, fue duro. Una larga lucha.” Like other journalists under Paraguay’s Stroessner, Rubín was imprisoned, harassed, and eventually forced to close his station until after the dictator finally fell in the last decade of the twentieth century.

These circumstances underscore the challenges the press faced during Paraguay’s transition to democracy in the early 1990s. Democratic transition is a two-

2 “They called me a communist Jew, a scruffy, sinister man, everything.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author, 26 June 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
3 “It was absolutely impossible … It was hard, it was hard. A long struggle.” Ibid.
step process. Societies must first change the actual institutional structure of their governments, whether by holding elections for the first time or simply granting already-existing institutions the powers they were meant to have. But the second step is often more complicated, because it involves changing the country’s “inner self.”

Political culture and the daily experiences that evolve from it are closely tied to the state’s institutional framework. Societies transitioning to democracy, therefore, must establish individual rights and, in most cases, reshape the way people think about their government. It is in this second phase that a free press can begin to take shape. A most important step a country can take toward democracy is to recognize and embrace freedom of the press in the context of a diverse civil society. One scholar argues there are three criteria for determining whether a press is free: a competitive market, professional ethics and institutional autonomy. But that framework imposes a heavily Westernized philosophy on countries that took vastly different paths to democracy than did the United States and Western Europe. More specifically, it does not allow for some of the unique circumstances the Paraguayan media faced during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Some of those conditions, such as poverty, internal strife and instability, corruption and human rights abuses, had existed since independence and made it difficult for independent media to develop, even early in Paraguayan history. Progressing into the twenty-first century, then, it would be

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7 Ferreira, *Centuries of Silence*, 233.
impossible for a press to grow beyond the structures of its society. As one scholar argues, “Media systems are inextricably linked to the political, economic, cultural and social systems in which they operate.”

In 1989, Paraguayans orchestrated and experienced their first truly democratic election in more than 35 years. The people had never really taken to democracy and their press had never been free, even during times when society enjoyed more liberties, so Paraguayan media found themselves on unfamiliar ground. Professional ethics codes were then, and still are, low priorities for the press, and competition was something that would develop by default more than through a deliberate effort. Only Filgueira’s third criterion, institutional autonomy, ranked high on journalists’ list of concerns as the country dealt with a military coup and transition to democracy. The Paraguayan press fought an uphill battle in those early years of freedom, trying to move out from under the shadow of authoritarianism. Professor Ignacio Telesca says the coup in 1989 brought more freedom, but few deep societal changes: “El inner self of the society was the same,” he said. “Se había un estructura dictatorial que permanecía.” Because media systems are intimately connected to and dependent upon the societies in which they function, Paraguayan journalists would have to work to slowly change their society’s “inner self.” As historian Guido Rodríguez Alcalá explained, in 2009, “Siempre el pasado está en el aire.” As a result, Paraguayans say

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9 “It was a dictatorial structure that persisted.” Telesca. Interview with author.
10 “The past is always in the air.” Guido Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author, 8 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
they still do not have a real democracy and the country polls some of the lowest numbers for support for democracy in Latin America.

The factors that kept Paraguay from a functional representative society during its first 180 years continued to plague the country during its transition to democracy in the early 1990s. Those long-standing challenges and fears manifested themselves in the press’s inability to advocate for transition and propel the country toward openness. Despite the serious efforts of many journalists, the Paraguayan press was not in a position as the *stronato* collapsed to push for change the way a healthy democratic media system is expected to. Twenty years later, the press is still struggling with how to improve and challenge its country to grow democratically and culturally. I argue the press was not a driving force in Paraguay’s democratic transition. Examining the press’ internal mechanisms and processes, especially in regard to processes of self-realization and self-regulation, gets to the question of how (or if) a press system can surpass its country’s civil society during a period of democratic change, thereby leading the charge for further cultural, political and social reforms.

There is not very much scholarly material available on the Paraguayan press, particularly on its role in the country’s transition to democracy. Literature sometimes includes anecdotes or brief discussions of Paraguay in the context of a larger look at Latin American media development, but a focus on the Paraguayan press is not common. Rarer still is material on the press since 1989. While significant time has passed since the Paraguayan military overthrew the dictator, the elaboration of ‘modern’ media — defined by, among other things, guaranteed freedoms,
independence from government institutions and influence, and a code of conduct — has been a slow, arduous, and certainly incomplete process. Scholars have been kept occupied with broad investigations into Paraguayan political change, economic patterns and social development. The transformation in the press, by contrast, has not received much attention. Given the importance of the media in civil society and in the process of democratization, that is an unfortunate oversight. The Paraguayan press can be used as a measure of the country’s overall progress toward democratization and its growing pains are seen clearly mirrored in other social and political contexts. A country’s media system is the outward manifestation of its internal workings, and Paraguay’s press is no exception.

Paraguay’s media evolution has taken a distinctly different path than that of its neighbors. Press development in most of the Southern Cone began during the Liberal Era, approximately 1860 through 1890, when there was an emphasis in most Latin American countries on education, trade and Enlightenment thinking. Newspapers were considered key for societal progress in those regards.11 As countries like Argentina and Uruguay developed foreign markets for their exports, they imported foreign ideas — especially from Great Britain and the United States — on government and freedom of expression. The newspapers in those countries therefore helped lead a shift away from purely political coverage toward a more all-encompassing approach to the news more like the modern mass media.12 Paraguay, meanwhile, was still landlocked and only just beginning to break out of a self-imposed 36-year period of isolation. As a

11 Ferreira, Centuries of Silence, 126.
12 Ibid, 121.
result, while Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Uruguay were importing technology and infrastructure advances that would allow them to set up more modern communication systems, Paraguay had no infrastructure and had gone from total censorship and isolation under Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia to a more accommodating though less effective series of regimes under the López family. The need to prioritize resources put Paraguay behind its neighbors as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay expanded their communication systems with the help of American and British investment. The poorer countries in Latin America, though, suffered not just because their governments could not afford to invest in new media technologies, but also because their people were not in a position to consume media to the same extent as in more highly developed countries. Literacy rates in Paraguay were extremely low at the turn of the century and none but the most affluent citizens could afford a daily newspaper. In contrast, by 1930, Argentina had raised its literacy rate to 50 percent from the 10 percent of the 19th century and the country’s successful trade and increased industrial base allowed for more to be spent on “luxuries” like media. The popularization of the radio gave many more Paraguayans access to some form of mass communication. Radios involved only a small one-time investment and could then receive all the news available. Newspapers, and later television, did not offer the same low-cost access.

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13 Ferreira, Centuries of Silence, 131.
14 Additional readings on the Latin American press include: José Antonio Benítez, Los orígenes del periodismo en nuestra América (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Lumen, 2000); Cole, Communication in Latin America; Filgueira, Prensa y transición democrática; Mark Falcoff and Byron Crites, “(Argentina): The Twentieth Century,”
As I have argued, current work on Paraguay has focused on the demographic and cultural details that have influenced the media, more than on the press and its importance in directing society. Existing scholarship has left several questions unanswered: What was the role of the Paraguayan press in Paraguayan politics and civil society in the twentieth century? What was the role of the Paraguayan press in democratization? Specifically, what were the internal and external dynamics of that role? And what does studying the press at this time tell researchers about democratization process in Paraguay, including roadblocks to and opportunities for democracy?

To answer the aforementioned questions, this thesis employs a variety of sources, ranging from oral history interviews with important figures in the press, to both primary and secondary literature that provide evidentiary and contextual clues as to the role of the press in Paraguayan democratization. Much of the information gathered is inherently subjective, relying in large part on individual perceptions, memories and experiences. This thesis is organized to position those memories and stories in the larger historical context. In doing so, it includes historical analysis, as well as anecdotal evidence. Stories and memories, while they come from a variety of sources, highlight the experiences of two major media outlets: ABC Color, a major daily newspaper based in Asunción; and Radio Ñandutí, a popular radio station also based in the capital. Chapter 1 of the thesis sets out the country’s history since colonial times, outlining the importance of each political turn on the path to twentieth century
dictatorship. Chapter 2 examines the specific history of the Paraguayan press and its evolution toward the freedom it enjoys today. Chapter 3 narrows the focus to the transition period — the press’s first decade of freedom — to explore the media’s journey to define their role in Paraguayan society. Chapter 4 will bring the discussion into the present, evaluating the progress Paraguayan journalists have made in the past 20 years and identifying opportunities for further growth.
Chapter 1: The Backstory

The evolution of Paraguay’s press has been shaped by the country’s political and social development. Paraguay’s history of failed democracy and authoritarian rule made it difficult for the media to adjust to the sudden opening they experienced in 1989. Unlike other countries in the Southern Cone, Paraguay had no precedent for a free press and journalists were therefore confronted with an overwhelming world of possibilities in the last decade of the twentieth century. While the focus of this thesis is on those critical years after the dictator’s fall, the influence historical events and decisions had on that transition cannot be overstated. It is critical to briefly examine Paraguayan history, beginning with early colonization, to understand some of the latent and overt challenges facing Paraguayans, including members of the press, in recent decades.

The colonial period in Paraguay established the foundation for the authoritarianism that would control the country for its first century. The country’s location, size and peaceful native population, along with the way in which it was colonized (by Jesuit missionaries, not conquistadors) conditioned the people to look for strong, decisive leadership.\(^\text{15}\) This early history contributed directly to Paraguay’s later difficulty in establishing a democratic society. In addition, Paraguay has few natural resources compared to its wealthier neighbors and it has no real ports for

\(^\text{15}\) George Pendle, *Paraguay, 3rd Ed* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1967), 9, 10.
trade.\textsuperscript{16} One scholar identifies four long-term impediments to democracy in Paraguay: racism toward the native population, repression of labor, lack of opportunity for social mobility, and highly concentrated wealth.\textsuperscript{17} These hurdles would plague Paraguay into the twenty-first century.

Given the paternalistic structure the Jesuits established and the Guaraní tendency to yield to Spanish settlers and their traditions, dictatorships and the strong central leadership associated with them came naturally to Paraguay. The country reluctantly declared independence in 1811 after a newly independent Argentina threatened to take it over. Paraguay’s first government after declaring independence was a dictatorship that lasted 26 years and managed to create the illusion of improvement while actually preventing any intensive development efforts. Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia is alternately portrayed as a cruel dictator for his attempts to censor and control his people, and a benevolent precursor to modern populism and socialism.\textsuperscript{18} Whichever view on Francia scholars take, they agree on his impact on Paraguayan society. In 1818 Francia closed Paraguay to all outside political contact and most economic trade. The general embargo, during which few people entered or left the country, continued until Francia’s death in 1840.\textsuperscript{19} While this

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item[18] Thomas Whigham and Jerry W. Cooney, \textit{El Paraguay bajo el Dr. Francia} (Paraguay: El Lector, 1996), 141.
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\end{footnotesize}
isolation was part of Paraguay’s attempt to solidify its independence, it set certain elements of society back. Professor Beatriz González de Bosio argues Francia actually stifled cultural growth: “Se suspende un poco la formación educativa de la gente, salvo las primeras letras, y hay un gran control — digamos — de los derechos políticos de lo que pueden hacer los libertades personales.” Francia did succeed at controlling his own people, but he never won international support. The United States, for example, did not recognize Paraguay’s independence until 1852 because Argentina was still claiming ownership of Paraguayan territory. Following Francia, Paraguay experienced a major loss to Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay in the War of the Triple Alliance. The country lost 50 to 60 percent of its total population, and the vast majority of its adult male population. This left farms unused, many women and children in poverty, and the nation unable to truly recover.

Modern Paraguay evolved in the process of rebuilding after the War of the Triple Alliance. Political parties took shape, a Liberal government formed around a constitution, and, ironically, Paraguay began one of the most unstable periods in its history. The Colorado Party, which would later come to dominate national politics, was founded in August 1887 by 106 Paraguayan men, but first took control of the

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20 “[Francia] kind of stunted the educational development of the people, except the most elementary instruction and there is a strong control – we say – of political rights and what can be done with personal liberties.” Beatriz Gonzalez de Bosio. Interview with author, 9 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.


Paraguayan government 13 years before becoming an official party.\textsuperscript{23} Various factions of the Colorados governed until 1908 when radical Liberals took control. The Liberal Party had hoped that the Constitution of 1870 would establish a Jeffersonian democracy, but social and economic conditions after the War of the Triple Alliance would not support democracy. According to one scholar, “A dozen years of endemic political anarchy had prevented any real recovery from the war’s devastation.”\textsuperscript{24} The Liberal era lasted only until 1936, when nationalist military movements overthrew the government.\textsuperscript{25} The chaos associated with Paraguay’s preliminary democratic experiment of Liberal governance would make it even more difficult for democracy to take hold.

After their experience in the War of the Triple Alliance and the turmoil of the early twentieth century, Paraguayans were perpetually afraid of descending into chaos. And history had shown that was a real possibility. As one scholar notes, “Whenever Paraguay departed from its authoritarian tradition, internal confrontations, instability and chaos prevailed.”\textsuperscript{26} Between 1900 and General Alfredo Stroessner’s take-over in 1954, Paraguay had 34 presidents; they averaged less than the five-year terms the constitution dictated.\textsuperscript{27} Paraguayans had tried to achieve a democratic society under the Liberal Constitution, but corruption and political infighting kept that from being


\textsuperscript{24} Lewis, \textit{Political Parties and Generations}, 55.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 189.

\textsuperscript{26} Miranda, \textit{The Stroessner Era}, 148.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 148.
possible. One scholar argues that Latin American elites were torn over moving to democracy, and that their internal conflict kept the countries from transitioning in the early 1900s:

“Civilization came to mean democracy, and Latin American elites wanted to be included in the civilized world. Unfortunately, democracy did not work very well, certainly not as well as antipolitics. Democracy, after all, required the tolerance of opposition, placed constraints on executive authority, meant mobilization of the rural and urban poor, and entailed demands for income redistribution.”

Still, other Latin American countries found ways to implement some elements of a democratic society, including a free press, as Marxism gained traction in the region. Karl Marx called the lack of a free press “a serious impediment for the advancement of a democratic movement,” and that philosophy on the importance of independent media found footholds across much of the Southern Cone in the early 1900s. Marxist thought and its press theories, however, never became popular in Paraguay.

It was around the same time, as Latin Americans struggled to define their nation-states, that the United States effectively gave up on them. In the 1920s, the U.S. government decided it simply was not possible to train its southern neighbors in self-governance because the “conditions of ‘poverty, ignorance and distress’ were not conducive to a free and democratic government.” But the real problem was that the very freedoms the country championed among its own people could not simply be

29 Ferreira, *Centuries of Silence*, 160.
adopted in Latin America because they would not represent a grass-roots democratic
effort. As one author explains,

“To accept any First Amendment construct as a manifest media destiny
would be intolerable for a Latin American willing to see balanced and
reciprocal communication relations between the North and the South.
Unless such a First Amendment spirit results from a negotiated
multilateral framework … a free and autonomous Latin American mind
could not possibly accept that type of legal, philosophical and cultural
intrusion.”  

With the United States less directly involved, the Latin Americans — including
Paraguayans — experimented with formal civilian democracy until the end of World
War II. Until the decade after the war, militaries in the region were not willing to be
permanently involved in politics. That would soon change.

For Paraguay, the change came in 1936 after 30 years of Liberal rule. On
February 16, military forces overthrew the democratically elected government. One
scholar characterized the February Revolution as “more than just a change of office
holders. It was the triumph of nationalism.” Interestingly, after one military dictator,
Paraguay returned to elected leadership but chose General José Félix Estigarribia.
Estigarribia set a precedent for Stroessner’s subsequent reign when, on February 14,
1940, he declared a state of emergency and named himself dictator. Only six months
later, Estigarribia would push Paraguay’s fourth constitution to ratification. The new
document stripped the congress of most of its powers and gave the president more

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31 Ferreira, Centuries of Silence, 237.
33 Lewis, Political Parties and Generations, 159.
political and economic control. The Constitution of 1940 also included two provisions that would carry over to the Constitution of 1967 and provide the initial basis for restrictions on the press. Article 79 established the “state of siege” as a method of protecting the constitution and shielding government authorities. In practice, it more often accomplished the latter goal than the former. Decree 181 gave the president sole authority to institute the state of siege. Such language was not uncommon in Latin American constitutions at the time and was often used during times of “national emergency” when dictators felt threatened and sought ways to crack down on opposition.

Latin American militaries, traditionally reluctant to get involved in the volatile politics of their developing countries, started to rethink their roles as World War II ended and a fear of communism began to dominate foreign policy in the United States and the West. As in Paraguay, Latin American militaries decided their intervention was necessary to protect their countries. Although developed countries had hoped professionalization would keep Latin American militaries out of politics, it had the opposite effect:

“Throughout most of the nineteenth century, ‘politics,’ that is, conflict among personalist factions … submerged most of the Latin American nations in bloody civil strife … In much of Latin America, professional military officers concluded that only an end to ‘politics’ and the

34 Mora, Paraguay and the United States, 101.
35 The “state of siege,” unlike a “state of emergency,” was a series of actions taken. South American dictators would often cite a perceived state of emergency — in effect, the perceived attitudes around the country — as the reason a state of siege was necessary.
establishment of long-term military rule could provide the basis for modernization, economic development, and political stability.”

But Latin American militaries weren’t the only ones changed by World War II. The United States again became involved in the region’s politics, essentially supporting any candidate who vowed to be anti-communist. In Paraguay, that meant helping the Colorados win the 1947 civil war. In the years immediately following the civil war, one author states, “The Truman administration did favor political stability, of course, and considered the Colorados as the best placed to ensure Paraguay’s internal peace.” That decision would prove critical to Paraguay for the next 60 years.

From the beginning of his regime, Alfredo Stroessner came to represent stability for Paraguay; it wasn’t until nearly a decade into his rule that Paraguayans started to see what that stability would cost them. Initially, Stroessner, who took control through a military coup, had overwhelming support from Paraguayans and the United States. Paraguayan journalist Francisco Pérez Maricevich said the country thought Stroessner could be the kind of leader Juan Perón had been in Argentina: “Tenía un imágen de un general honesto, de fuerte,” Pérez Maricevich said. When he came to power, Stroessner appeared reserved and mild-mannered and had earned his soldiers’ respect for his courage and professionalism. This first impression meant the general’s political enemies constantly underestimated him. In building his

38 Mora, Paraguay and the United States, 121.
39 “He had the image of being an honest general, of strength.” Francisco Pérez Maricevich. Interview with author, 6 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
government, Stroessner was disciplined, bold and calculating.\textsuperscript{40} While Stroessner’s personality helped him reassure the Paraguayan people, his willingness to accept anti-communist philosophies endeared him to U.S. leaders. As one author notes:

“The Stroessner identified with the West and adopted the U.S. National Security Doctrine that emphasized the use of security and armed forces to counter all internal and external ‘communist threats’ — the lever used by Latin American dictators to suppress all opposition, while ensuring U.S. political and economic support, as a means of extending the life of the regime.”\textsuperscript{41}

The stability such policies ushered into Paraguay granted Stroessner a honeymoon period during which he enjoyed overwhelming popularity. As he settled into the presidency, however, Stroessner’s true nature became apparent.

The Stronista doctrine solidified by the end of the 1950s as the general took control of all aspects of Paraguayan society. Stroessner’s primary goal was to maintain peace and order because stability appealed to his people. As long as Stroessner kept things calm during that first decade, he found support as people saw the government working toward measurable goals. Beneath those efforts, however, was a subtler plan: Stroessner offered “tacit approval of practices that maintained the population in a constant state of fear.”\textsuperscript{42} By the end of his first 10 years in office, Stroessner dominated every element of Paraguayan life. Writer and historian Guido Rodríguez Alcalá said the dictator controlled even the most mundane of details, from currency to the weather: “Oficialmente, el dólar se mantenía estable. Eso es lo que decía aquí –

\textsuperscript{40} Mora, \textit{Paraguay and the United States}, 126.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid, 129.
\textsuperscript{42} Miranda, \textit{The Stroessner Era}, 66.
moneda estable,” he said. “Y en el verano, la temperatura no podía pasar más de 35 grados, creo, porque si no, no había el turismo. Había una línea.” But Paraguayans accepted that line. Society either absorbed Stroessner’s propaganda or ignored it, but its effects can still be seen today, according to one scholar: “So effective was [the Colorado] propaganda that even today no amount of empirical evidence to the contrary seems able to shake it from the popular consciousness.” The Stronista doctrine did not go over as well internationally. At the time of its 1958 election, Paraguay was the only country in South America with a dictatorship. It became increasingly isolated and occasionally the international press criticized Stroessner for his actions against dissidents. The dictator responded to such pressure by putting additional measures in place to give the appearance of democratic government, such as allowing approved opposition candidates to run in national elections. For the most part, however, even those token changes did not reach to the country’s media.

Stroessner amended the constitution in 1967 to allow for his continuous re-election, and did allow for some opposition participation in that drafting. Gloria Rubín, whose family owns Radio Ñandutí and who worked for the station during the stronato, said that process brought a brief moment of hope. “En ese momento también nosotros — la gente que estábamos en la prensa — creímos que el Paraguay se iba por

43 “Officially, the dollar was stable. That’s what was said here – ‘stable currency.’ ” Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
44 “In the summer, the temperature couldn’t go above 35 degrees [Celsius], because if it did, there wouldn’t be any tourism. There was a line.” Ibid.
45 Lewis, Political Parties and Generations, 146.
46 Mora, Paraguay and the United States, 146.
un democracia,” she said. “[Pero] comienza otra vez en la censura, la censura previa, e la violación de los derechos humanos, y comienza ya la persecución.” Stroessner had reached a new level of dominance by 1967, boasting control over every element of the Colorado Party. With the constitution changed to allow re-election, Stroessner won five elections between 1968 and 1988. His margins of victory rose steadily from 52 percent to 83 percent through 1983, but fell slightly to 82 percent the year before he was overthrown. Those elections did include opposition candidates, but those people had to come from government-approved parties. The practice allowed Stroessner to claim he ran a truly democratic society as pressures increased from the United States and his reforming neighbors. It was widely understood, though, that the Colorado Party was fixing election outcomes.

Paraguayans view Stroessner’s final fall as more a family squabble than a full-fledged coup d’état. Still, external pressure played a role in Stroessner’s vulnerability. Beginning with President Jimmy Carter, the United States took a more aggressive stance against the South American dictators and “immediately began criticizing the stronato.” This marked a dangerous change for Stroessner, as the U.S. had long provided him the cover he needed in the international community in return for his anti-communist stances. Gradually, partly because of outside pressures and partly due to

47 “At that moment we – the journalists – believed that Paraguay was moving toward democracy.” Gloria Rubín. Interview with author, 25 June 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
48 “But the censorship began again, the prior censorship, and the violation of human rights, and the persecution started again.” Ibid.
49 Miguelángel Delvalle Castillo, Así fue el Golpe del 2 y 3 de febrero (Asunción: Talleres Gráficos “San Nicolas”), 73.
50 ABC Color, 1 May 1989, p. 2.
51 Mora, Paraguay and the United States, 198.
internal shifts, Paraguay’s neighbors in the Southern Cone transitioned back to democracy. Stroessner, therefore, found himself further isolated and at risk. One scholar argues:

“As more of Paraguay’s neighbors became democratic and U.S. tolerance for Paraguay’s lack of political liberalization ebbed, Stroessner’s ability to shield his regime was undermined by the very international system that had so long protected it. In other words, Paraguay was dragged willy-nilly from its isolation and placed on the bench of the accused by its democratic neighbors and a less indulgent United States.”

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U.S. impatience finally reached its limits in the late 1980s. When dealings with Stroessner failed, the U.S. threw its support behind General Andrés Rodríguez. But Rodríguez was a risky investment for the United States. He was not only one of Stroessner’s closest allies, but the two were family — Rodríguez’s daughter was married to Stroessner’s son. The Americans, then, had to be careful, as one writer explains: “Los norteamericanos, mundialmente famosos por su pragmatismo, le plantean [a Rodríguez]: ‘Nosotros te blanqueamos, pero a cambiar vos tenés que hacer eso, pese a que Stroessner sea tu consuegro.’”

53 Rodríguez was on his own for orchestrating the coup.

The internal political situation had deteriorated by 1989. The Colorado Party was sharply divided about succession planning for a sickly Stroessner and that tension was creating insecurity in state institutions. As a result, the military was again forced

52 Mora, Paraguay and the United States, 209.
53 “The North Americans, famous worldwide for their pragmatism, posed the idea [to Rodríguez]: ‘We’ll support you, but you are going to have to make the changes, even though Stroessner is your daughter’s father in law.” Roberto Paredes and Liz Varela, Los Carlos: La crisis Terminal del Stronismo; La novela de Rodríguez (Asunción: QR Producciones Gráficas, 1999), 15.
to move explicitly into politics to stabilize the country. Luis María Argaña, who would later run for president, warned Rodríguez in December 1988 that the true difficulty after a coup would not be in settling the country: “Manejar el país no va a ser tan difícil como manejar el partido,” he told the general. But Rodríguez had come to view his role as part of the historical mission of Latin American militaries. One scholar describes it as “the defense and salvation of the nation’s traditions and its permanent values. They are the ‘last bulwark of nationality.’ In this mission the armed forces find a fixed moral rationale for drastic defensive measures against the patria’s enemies.” In Rodríguez’s mind, therefore, there were only three options for Paraguay in 1989: a military coup, a civil war worse than it had experienced in 1947, or Stroessner’s voluntary resignation and a peaceful transition to a new government. The general concluded the first choice was the only viable option: “Tuvo que hacerse porque había una descomposición social, económica, cultural y moral del pueblo paraguayo,” he said later.

Constant rumors of a coup had existed since the 1960s, so Paraguayans paid little attention as word started to circulate in late 1988 that the military was planning an uprising. Still, one writer remembers, “En los mercados, oficinas gubernamentales, corrillos políticos u otros mentideros públicos, los rumores acerca de la posibilidad de

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54 “Managing the country won’t be as difficult as managing the party.” Paredes, *Los Carlos*, 31.
56 “He had to do it because there was a social, economic, cultural and moral breakdown of the Paraguayan people.” Delvalle Castillo, *Así fue el golpe*, 82.
un autogolpe o golpe military se hicieron constantes.”

Average Paraguayans were not alone in ignoring such rumors. Stroessner himself dismissed the warnings he got, even from some of his closest confidantes. Leandro Prieto Yegros, a friend of Stroessner’s who declined to participate in the overthrow, tried to warn the president about a week before the coup:


Among the hardest things for Stroessner and others to contemplate was that the coup would come from within the state. People assumed the dictator would die naturally and the party would determine succession at that point. Although support had generally shifted away from Stroessner, there was still a fear of chaos that prevented a popular revolution. Most prevalent was a fear of repeating the 1947 civil war, which had torn the country apart and led it to a series of military dictators before Stroessner. But when it happened, the coup was quick and relatively efficient. Initial estimates were of around 170 deaths, although official counts never exceeded 31.

Witnesses describe two extremes. One noted “un chorro de sangre humana corre en

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57 “In the markets, government offices, political corridors and other public areas, the rumors about the possibility of an internal coup or a military coup were constant.”

58 “On January 23, 1989, I met with Alfredo Stroessner in his office. In greeting, I told him, ‘I’ve come to say goodbye, Mr. President.’ ‘Where are you going, doctor?’ he asked me. ‘Nowhere, Mr. President. You are the one that is going to be overthrown.’ ‘But no, Prieto!’ he said to me, very sure.” Alfredo Boccia Paz, ¿Qué hacía aquella noche? (Asunción: Servilibro, 2008), 219.

59 Ibid, 176.

60 Hermes Ramos. Interview with author, 8 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
torrente la calle Cerro Corá.⁶¹ But others focused on what had been accomplished. Alcibiades Gonzalez Delvalle, a prominent newspaper reporter during and after Stroessner, recalled, “Era una pura fiesta. Abrazos, cánticos, lágrimas … Una nueva alegría llenó mis venas.”⁶² The country would have much to do, however, before real democracy and a free press took root.

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⁶¹ “A stream of human blood ran in a torrent through the Cerro Corá Street.” Delvalle Castillo, Así fue el Golpe, 102.
⁶² “It was a pure party. Hugs, songs, tears … A new happiness filled my veins.” Boccia Paz, ¿Qué hacía aquella noche?, 22-23.
Chapter 2: A Press Oppressed: Media Under Authoritarianism

In evaluating media evolution, it is critical to look not just at whether there was media at a given moment, but also how they were used in the country’s early stages of existence. Progress includes the way media are used and absorbed in society, not just the introduction of new technology.63 A typical example, Paraguay was the first South American country with a printing press — a Jesuit-owned machine that arrived around 1700 and used exclusively for religious publications. But in a setback that would become characteristic of the Paraguayan media as well as the country’s political scene, Paraguay was the last country in South America to have a newspaper.64 In Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, newspapers developed as tools of independence movements; such was not the case in Paraguay where there was no real independence movement and newspapers that did appear before the mid-1800s were foreign run.65 It was not until 1855, under an independent Paraguay’s second president, that the government formally established citizens’ rights to publish their ideas and opinions. President Carlos Antonio López set an important precedent, however, by enumerating several limitations on expression and seven categories of expression crimes at the same time he declared the freedom to publish.66 Paraguayan journalists finally had permission to practice, but the government severely restricted their opportunity for expansion.

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63 Ferreira, Centuries of Silence, 227.
64 Benítez, Los orígenes del periodismo en nuestra América, 107, 138.
65 Beatriz Gonzalez de Bosio, Periodismo escrito paraguayo 1845-2001: De la afición a la profesión (Asunción, Paraguay: Intercontinental Editora, 2008), 89.
66 Ibid, 97.
As the first President López assumed power as Paraguay’s leader, he received inspiration for his media policies from a conflict to the North. One scholar notes that through the Mexican-American War, “emerging Latin American nations began to learn that communication infrastructures, including the press, had to serve fundamental government interests, such as state security and national sovereignty.” López took the lesson to heart, starting Paraguay’s first newspaper, *El Paraguayo Independiente*, as an official press outlet. The government-edited paper, which published from late-April 1845 until mid-September 1852, appeared weekly and attempted to win recognition of Paraguayan sovereignty from the country’s more powerful neighbors and from the United States. Several other newspapers appeared in the following decade, but continued to be propaganda organs for the government.

As with all other aspects of Paraguayan society, the War of the Triple Alliance — in which Paraguay fought a unified Argentine-Brazilian-Uruguayan force from 1864 to 1870 — had a tremendous and adverse impact on the country’s press. During the war, Paraguay’s newspapers remained loyal to their new president, López’s son, Francisco Solano López; outlets sent correspondents to the front lines for coverage that was “popular and direct.” From a government perspective, war did allow for Paraguay to expand its telegraph infrastructure, but it also led to tighter content restrictions and increased technology and network exclusivity. More importantly, though, in terms of long-term impact on media, the end of the war and total defeat saw

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67 Ferreira, *Centuries of Silence*, 104.  
68 Bosio, *Periodismo escrito paraguayo*, 82.  
69 Ibid, 90.
the end of Paraguayan newspapers for several years. The war had decimated Paraguay’s population: more than half the country’s citizens had died and only 13 percent of the remaining population was adult men.\textsuperscript{70} When the disruption caused local media outlets to disappear, Argentine and Brazilian publishers began distributing their newspapers in Paraguay instead.\textsuperscript{71} The press would be yet another element of the Paraguayan society that would need total rebuilding in the years after Marshal López’s loss.

Meanwhile, Latin American journalists had struggled since independence to gain the respect and status of a professional class. The press in Paraguay was no exception, as it tried to re-establish itself after the War of the Triple Alliance. The Liberal Constitution of 1870 specifically allowed for an “unrestricted free press,” but, offering further proof of the importance of a stable society to a strong media presence, the war’s lingering effect on the country’s population, government and culture proved the Constitution’s promises to be empty. A journalist and history professor argues: “La situación de agitación y anarquía que vivió el Paraguay en ese primer momento de Pos-Guerra, empañó esta intención de brindar el libre ejercicio de las libertades públicas.”\textsuperscript{72} The 1870 Constitution did allow partisan publications to appear, but they were often short-lived.

\textsuperscript{70} Pendle, \textit{Paraguay}, 3rd Ed., 22.
\textsuperscript{71} Ferreira, \textit{Centuries of Silence}, 104, 109.
\textsuperscript{72} “The situation of agitation and anarchy in which Paraguay lived in immediately after the war fogged up this intent to provide the free exercise of public liberties.” Bosio, \textit{Periodismo escrito paraguayo}, 101.
Paraguay’s journalism education started in 1893 with the Facultad de Notarios y Escrivhanos Públicos. That was the closest Paraguayans got to true journalism training until formal separate programs were established in the early 1930s. By considering that institution the school for aspiring journalists, the country simultaneously promoted the profession — by placing it in league with crucial public servants — and diminished its individual value. These represented similar problems other Latin American countries faced in establishing journalism programs, particularly the need to work within the constraints of conflicting media values. Latin America, with its strong religious and patriotic traditions, has difficulty balancing freedom of the press with what it sees as press responsibility to society. Paraguay and its neighbors also debate the role of secular versus religious values in journalism.73 This made it difficult for the press to become an independent and professional entity. As Bosio indicates, “En Latinoamérca la profesionalización periodística fue posterior. El derecho a la información fue muy reprimido en Latinoamérica durante los gobiernos autoritarios que se dieron en el siglo 20.”74 Today, those conflicts remain a problem for Paraguayan journalism schools, which are generally not regarded particularly highly in the country, even among journalists and professors.

With the country still trying to function under the Liberal Constitution, the first half of the twentieth century marked the start of a highly unstable period for Paraguay, and the tumultuous political and economic ups and downs were mirrored in the press’

73 Ferreira, Centuries of Silence, 194.
74 “In Latin America, journalistic professionalization came later. The right to information was very repressed in Latin America during the authoritarian governments of the twentieth century.” Bosio, Periodismo escrito paraguayo, 37.
own experience. One scholar blamed the chaos for fluctuation in media outlets at the time: “La prensa refleja y sufre esta serie de convulsiones sociales con la aparición y desaparición de medios periodísticos.”75 Still, the uncertainty at the turn of the century brought a much more critical press, with better coverage and stronger editorializing. Newspapers also spent more time explaining and illuminating the country’s largest problems, encouraging debate among its citizens. One of the more prominent examples, *La Patria*, provided constant criticism and often accused the government of civil rights violations.76 Such publications, while allowed during the Liberal Era, would soon find themselves censored, edited or closed as the country headed toward civil war and Colorado rule.

As the Liberal Era ended it was difficult for Paraguayans even to get basic information. Much of that was due to a lack of overarching national media: “Since there were no radios, asuceños received their news about national or foreign affairs from one of several partisan newspapers” during the 1920s.77 This again reflects the importance of having media not just present, but available. Partisan newspapers were better than no outlets, but they, too, would soon come under fire. In 1936, the minister of the interior used Decree Law 152 to close all independent newspapers.78 Ironically, in the decade before Stroessner rose to power, it was the Colorados who fought such

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75 “By way of the appearance and disappearance of journalistic mediums, the press reflects and suffers from that series of social convulsions.” Ilde Silvero, *Una historia sin fin: La lucha por la libertad de prensa en el Paraguay* (Asunción: Ilde Silvero, 2001), 16.
77 Lewis, *Political Parties and Generations*, 123.
78 Ibid, 165.
moves and championed press freedoms. José Félix Estigarribia, the Liberal who won the Paraguayan presidency in 1939, hoped to include Colorados in his government. The party demanded that to earn its help, Estigarribia was to lift the state of siege, allowing for a free press and hold new — fair — elections. Negotiations ended when the government closed the Colorado newspaper *Patria* after student protests.\(^{79}\) That break ushered in several difficult years for Paraguayan journalists. In 1941, President Higinio Morínigo established the National Department for Press and Propaganda, which was meant to centralize and coordinate propaganda, coordinate tourism, and control theater, movies, sports, literature and media. DENAPRO had the right to review and censure anything published in any news outlet, and newspapers that refused to comply were forced to sell to more sympathetic publishers.\(^{80}\) Morínigo’s repression lasted only until July 1946, when the press got a six-month reprieve — what they term the “primavera democrática.”\(^{81}\) During the Civil War of 1946-47, there seemed to be a movement for a freer press, but mobs attacked newspaper offices and employees, assuring that after the war, only the victors would have free speech rights. Though this was a grassroots movement against the press, Stroessner and those who preceded him would pick up on the momentum. A coup in January 1947 brought civil war and violent repression of the press.

When he finally rose to power several years later, Stroessner moved quickly to take control of the thoughts and opinions expressed, as well as the news covered, in

\(^{79}\) Ibid, 176-177.
\(^{80}\) Bosio, *Periodismo escrito paraguayo*, 207.
\(^{81}\) Ibid, 19.
his country. Although the Constitution of 1940 already gave the president extensive authority to regulate speech and publications, Stroessner began adding restrictions almost immediately after he took office and then amended the Constitution in 1967. Beginning in 1955 with Laws 323 and 294, the Stroessner regime forbade the criticism of public officials and the questioning of the government’s legitimacy.\(^8\) After formally imposing a near-constant state of siege through Article 79 of the 1967 Constitution, Stroessner issued Decree No. 5904 in 1969, which made it a crime to “cause unrest” during a state of siege. The final and broadest limit the _stronato_ placed on its citizens’ expression came in 1970 with the passage of Law 209, “to protect the public peace.” Law 209 forbade the fomenting of unrest between classes or among Paraguayans in general.\(^8\) That became the catch-all justification for arrests — especially of journalists — during Stroessner’s rule. It took several years before Paraguayans began to question the restrictions Stroessner imposed, and it took even longer for active counter movements to surface. The dictator’s restrictions, while harsh, had brought an end to the chaos of civil war, and Stroessner’s political instincts, which led him to call his 1967 constitutional changes “reforms,” kept Paraguayans hoping for better. “It is important to note, however, that despite these ‘reforms,’ the Stroessner regime’s physical and legal repressive machinery was kept in tact. Not only was the state of siege maintained, but many dissenters continued to suffer from internal and external exile.”\(^8\) Even those elements of the Constitution that seemed

\(^8\) Silvero, _Una historia sin fin_, 45.  
\(^8\) Silvero, _Una historia sin fin_, 46.  
\(^8\) Mora, _Paraguay and the United States_, 171.
intended to ensure press freedoms — Articles 71, 72 and 73 — proved to be nothing more than further weapons for Stroessner to use against journalists: “Estos artículos constitucionales fueron los más sistemáticamente violados, porque eran los que favorecían su conducta delictiva y represiva, pero en general ningún artículo se salvo de la violación.” As the constitutional violations grew more apparent, it became more difficult for average Paraguayans to ignore the impact those limitations were having on their lives.

The country grew divided about the further restrictions Stroessner was imposing, and academic communities dominated the opposition. Students secretly printed and distributed bulletins and newspapers that railed against the dictator, but the ideas never gained traction on a larger scale. Stroessner’s propaganda was effective and his strategic targeting of certain members of the opposition was enough to send a clear message. One scholar argues, “Although fear for one own’s [sic] personal security was not prevalent throughout the entire population, the Paraguayan people became hesitant about their own thinking, their own values and their freedom of thought and speech.” Paraguayans remained torn about Stroessner’s tactics throughout his rule, and one journalist described his country’s experience during that time as a civil war that lasted 30 years. With the journalism community unable to convince itself, let alone a majority of its countrymen, of the danger of the dictator’s

85 “These constitutional articles were the most systematically violated, because they were the ones that suited their criminal and repressive conduct, but in general, no article was safe from violation.” Delvalle Castillo, Así fue el Golpe, 57.
86 Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 22.
87 Miranda, The Stroessner Era, 66.
88 Pérez Maricevich. Interview with author.
actions, it would have been nearly impossible for Stroessner to fall to a popular movement.

While the opposition struggled to unite, Stroessner took the next step in controlling the media: the government began to involve itself directly in the day-to-day operations of newspapers and other outlets. “The commercial development and structure of [media] cannot be understood […] particularly in Paraguay] without addressing the close relations between governments and media owners.”

89 Patria, the daily newspaper of the Colorados, proclaimed its allegiance to the party directly in its motto, while other papers simply declined to editorialize about anything to avoid upsetting the dictator. Bosio explained, “La Tribuna, que fue … la prensa nacional de alguna manera … casi no tiene opinión. De alguna manera cuenta más o menos las cosas que pasan pero no tiene editoriales.”

90 Such editorial decisions ensured Stroessner’s favor and he used such media to spy on his own ministers. Rodríguez Alcalá said Stroessner “usaba también a la prensa para atacar, y para saber que pasaba en la administración pública.”

91 Through government-run media, Stroessner could monitor what members of his government were doing, and often used that information as blackmail to keep those employees under his control. Such tactics began early in the stronato and would continue until the leader’s fall in 1989. Meanwhile, Stroessner’s

89 Ferreira, Centuries of Silence, 181.
90 “La Tribuna, which was … the national press in some form … almost didn’t have an opinion. In one sense it reported more or less what happened, but didn’t have editorials.” Bosio. Interview with author.
91 “[Stroessner] also used the press to attack, and to know what was going on in public administration.” Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
surveillance of his own men was consistent with his constant monitoring of all his citizens.

Although some outspoken Paraguayans were starting to question Stroessner during his first decade in office, the press still avoided controversial topics — including the blatant human rights abuses Stroessner and his party were perpetrating — out of fear of retaliation. In the early 1970s, as human rights awareness grew around the world, Stroessner intensified his campaign against journalists. The Paraguayan media continued to avoid the subject, but it was catching on in more international sources. Stroessner, though, still enjoyed the support of the United States, largely because of the way he presented his regime. In 1977, Stroessner declared that Paraguay shared with the United States “the ideals of justice, peace, rights and liberty so that the world in which we live in can be more secure and have a [sic] more collective and individual guarantees.” Stroessner made that comment as U.S. President Jimmy Carter began to pressure Paraguay to improve its human rights record.

Combined with growing international pressure, the independent news outlets that took hold in the 1970s in Paraguay proved to be particularly problematic for Stroessner. Allowing them to function threatened his position internally, but closing them risked his international support. Most prominent among those publications was *ABC Color*, which ushered in a new era of Paraguayan journalism with its start in 1967. *ABC* introduced the tabloid size and, as its name suggests, the use of off-set

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93 Ibid, 132.
color. Not only did the paper look different — with its use of large graphics and dominant photos — but it also operated differently, focusing on local news and implementing a basic ethical code. Before ABC, journalists in Paraguay often worked more than one job because of low salaries. They were therefore susceptible to bribes, a phenomenon ABC Publisher Aldo Zuccolillo was determined to avoid with his newspaper. Zuccolillo paid his journalists enough to make that their only job and insisted against any improper connection with the government. Still, to get permission from Stroessner to publish, Zuccolillo had to appear loyal: “El Sr. Zuccolillo dice, ‘Un gran periódico para un gran gobierno.’ Y después, toma la postura opositora.” To this day, ABC’s motto states that it is a newspaper “con fe en la patria.” ABC quickly became recognized as the independent voice in the Paraguayan press, status that put all of its employees at risk. “Nunca hubo prensa independiente en el Paraguay y nosotros queríamos hacer un periodismo independiente,” Zuccolillo said in an interview 42 years after opening ABC. “Teníamos mucho miedo … pero publicábamos.” ABC presented Stroessner with further problems just as his international allies were beginning to distance themselves from the dictator.

Stroessner had to balance domestic and international pressures to manage the new media presence.

94 Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 20.
95 “Mr. Zuccolillo said, ‘A great newspaper for a great government.’ And then he took an opposing position.” Bosio. Interview with author.
96 “With faith in the fatherland.”
97 “There had never been an independent press in Paraguay and we wanted to create independent journalism.” Aldo Zuccolillo. Interview with author, 16 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
98 “We were very afraid … but we published.” Ibid.
“La prensa significó para el régimen un problema particularmente espinoso, ya que los adversarios le surgían de los sectores más inesperados, como ser la Conferencia Episcopal Paraguaya (Comunidad) o el secto empresarial (diarios ABC y Última Hora). Las clausuras de muchos de estos medios tuvieron pronto repercusión internacional, lo que contribuyó a erosionar un sistema que lentamente se iba volviendo anacrónico.”

The Stroessner regime found itself unable to arbitrarily close publications without facing international backlash, but it could punish media outlets found to be breaking Laws 209 and 294. Humberto Rubín, for example, whose family continues to run Radio Ñandutí in Asunción, was arrested several times during the stronato. “Vamos a ver que a veces la ley, aplicado como te dije con un juez, entonces yo no sabía qué hacer,” he said. Stroessner adapted, though, and developed “intelligent” forms of repression, the most common of which was to imprison journalists “por orden superior.” Under such an order, the government was not required to further justify the arrest, provide information about where and for how long the person would be held, or conduct a trial. There were no habeas corpus rights in Stroessner’s Paraguay until eventually, the dictator yielded to international pressure to provide trials to people arrested under Law 209. Other forms of repression were more indirect. Stroessner simply ignored attacks on the press and refused to prosecute public,

99 “The press represented for the regime a particularly thorny problem. Already opposition had risen from the most unexpected sectors, like the Episcopal Conference of Paraguay (Comunidad) or the business sector (newspapers ABC and Última Hora). The closure of many of media outlets had prompt international repercussions, which contributed to eroding a system that was slowly becoming anachronistic.” Bosio, Periodismo escrito paraguayo, 219.
100 “We were going to see that sometimes the law, applied, like I said, by a judge, then I didn’t know what to do.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
101 “By superior order.”
102 Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 36.
political or military figures for their actions against the media. Taking a cue from their leader, judges ignored assaults and robberies committed against journalists, and the frequent destruction of news outlets’ property.103 Outside of legal methods of censorship, Stroessner came to place government agents at each newspaper to review content before it was printed. Some outlets did rebel by running blank space with a note, “Espacio prohibido por la censura,”104 but Stroessner had accomplished his goal. Meanwhile, pyragüés, police informants, would notify authorities about outlets planning to open so the interior minister could block them.105 While print publications dealt with prior restraint, radio — particularly Ñandutí — faced even more evident interference, making it “impossible to work.”106 The government would run a radio signal on Ñandutí’s frequency:

“Donde yo decía o cualquier de mi gente decía algo que no le gustaba el gobierno, prestaba el botón y entraba un ruido que era otra radio metida en la misma frecuencia que ‘Hmmm.’ Podía durar 10 minutos; podía durar un día entero. Dependía del humor que tenía. A veces hablábamos con el interferidor porque yo le preguntaba, ‘Te gusta esta música?’ Decía una broma, verdad? Y se callaba y [tocaba] la música de protesta y ‘Eeeeee.’ Ahora me río pero era trágico.”107

103 Ibid, 42.
104 “Space prohibited by censorship.”
105 Ibid, 32-33.
106 Gloria Rubín. Interview with author.
107 “Where I said or one of my people said something that the government didn’t like, he pressed a button and started a noise that was another radio on the same frequency that went ‘Hmmm.’ It could have lasted 10 minutes; it could have lasted an entire day. It depended on his mood. Sometimes we talked with the interrupter because I asked him, ‘Do you like this music?’ It was a joke, right? And it got quiet and played protest music and ‘Eeeeee.’ Now I laugh, but it was tragic.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
When outlets like Ñandutí and *ABC* continued to fight the government intrusion, Stroessner targeted their advertising dollars. As Rubín explained, if a company advertised with Ñandutí, its next visit from inspectors would turn up a problem with its merchandise. The business would essentially be shut down until it stopped supporting the offending outlet. “Levantaron la publicidad en Radio Ñandutí, su [producto] andaba perfectamente. Podía vender.”

Journalists said later that there was nothing they could do to fight Stroessner’s repression.

The late 1970s saw power shift temporary from Stroessner to the press that challenged him. The slight opening allowed for some publications to push more forcefully on human rights abuses:

> “Entre 1978 y los principios años ’80, el periodismo paraguayo vive una época de oro: la fuerte competencia entre los distintos diarios, la relativa abundancia económica … y la también relativa ‘apertura democrática’ tolerada por el goberno dictatorial del Gral. Strossner, así como una mayor capacitación profesional y conciencia ética de los propios periodistas, dieron pie al surgimiento de un periodismo moderno, ágil, crítico e investigativo, como nunca antes en toda la historia de la prensa nacional.”

Gradually, though, publications, especially those of the Catholic Church, began making more noise about human rights abuses. The Committee of Churches for Emergency Aid was the most active organization working to protect human rights.

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108 “Once companies took their advertisements off Radio Ñandutí, their [product] was perfectly fine. They could sell it.” Ibid.

109 “Between 1978 and the early 1980s, Paraguayan journalism lived in a golden age: the strong competition between outlets, the relative economic abundance … and the also relative ‘democratic opening’ tolerated by the dictatorial government of Gen. Strossner, and the journalists’ better professional training and ethical conscience, gave rise to the surge of a modern journalism, lively, critical and investigative, like never before in all the history of the national press.” Silvero, *Una historia sin fin*, 22.
during the *tronato*. Clergy throughout the country called for national moments of silence and, by the late 1980s, were leading marches to protest the way Stroessner’s government treated the Church.\footnote{Delvalle Castillo, *Así fue el Golpe*, 67, 69.} The dictator had begun pressuring Church officials — including the Pope — to remove oppositional priests from their posts. When the Church was unresponsive, Stroessner resorted to harsher techniques to silence the increasingly vocal opposition. Toward the end of his regime, Stroessner “became more and more hostile to journalists and media organizations who were reporting the deteriorating social and economic conditions.”\footnote{Miranda, *The Stroessner Era*, 134.} The dictator became more paranoid, and therefore more immediately responsive, to internal and international media reports about his regime.

Stroessner’s final crackdown against the Paraguayan press corresponded to increased international attention on Paraguay, and open censorship of their colleagues proved just the incentive international journalists needed to dig into Stroessner’s regime. International media started paying more attention to Paraguay as more and more Latin American governments transitioned to democracy and Stroessner remained the only dictator in South America. Paraguayan leaders grew frantic and tried to get U.S. officials to intervene with their own media and that of Argentina and Uruguay, which were particularly critical. The United States declined to interfere, suggesting through their ambassador that “Paraguayan government officials acquire a thicker skin against criticisms from the press.”\footnote{Mora, *Paraguay and the United States*, 147.} Most important in moving support away from
Stroessner was the American media’s sudden interest in Paraguay. The dictator’s constant harassment of journalists and his high-profile fight to protect Nazi war criminal Josef Mengele attracted U.S. reporters beginning in 1984. Between May 1984 and September 1985, more there would be more articles on Paraguay published in U.S. outlets than in the past 30 years combined. The New York Times and CBS’s news magazine “60 Minutes” gained particular attention in South America. The Times’s September 1984 piece “A Republic of Fear” was translated and republished across Latin American and smuggled into Paraguay. But a “60 Minutes” segment in January of 1986 may have been the final blow to Stroessner; it led to a “siege mentality” in the regime that lasted until Stroessner’s fall.\(^{113}\) That panic that began in 1984 would prove to have particularly harmful consequences for the Paraguayan press.

Stroessner, growing paranoid as his regime began to crumble, lashed out against major media outlets and their owners. Zuccolillo was arrested in July 1983 and detained for 12 days. He was rearrested on March 16, 1984, and then placed on house arrest for five days later that month.\(^{114}\) The last series of arrests coincided with Stroessner’s decision to finally close ABC, claiming it infringed on Article 71 of the Constitution, which prohibited “preach[ing] hatred between Paraguayans,” and that it “promoted confusion within public opinion,” thereby jeopardizing the country’s stability. “The decision [to close ABC] was a turning point in Stroessner’s effort to maintain his grip in the midst of a deepening political and economic crisis.”\(^{115}\) The

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\(^{113}\) Ibid, 210-212.
\(^{114}\) ABC Color, 28 December 1992.
\(^{115}\) Miranda, The Stroessner Era, 135.
effect the closure would have on his regime was not immediately clear, but that move only served to further unite international press against Paraguay’s government. In fact, the U.S. ambassador at the time, Arthur Davis, responded to Stroessner’s move against ABC by canceling U.S. involvement in the May 15 Independence Day parade, an action Davis said “caused a greater reaction than any other thing we’ve done in Paraguay.” As international groups rallied to his support, Zuccolillo and the staff he could afford to pay continued working, even when that meant just keeping the newsroom clean. “Sabíamos que un día, se iba a terminar la dictadura,” he said. When ABC did reopen five years later, the staff wrote that it had been closed for defending freedom.

Print media was not Stroessner’s only target, though. Radio Ñandutí was closed for a month during the summer of 1983 for “systematically disturbing the public peace” and “creating social chaos.” In 1986, 100 people, including government officials, broke windows and equipment at the radio station, and in January of 1987, with barely enough money to continue to operate, Ñandutí decided to close for 90 days. Ñandutí — and particularly its leading voice, Humberto Rubín — were favorite targets for Stroessner. Rubín was detained incommunicado for 34 hours “por orden superior” in December 1985, and in February 1987 they used the same excuse to confiscate his passport. “Yo fui impreso no sé cuantas veces de comisaría,

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116 Mora, Paraguay and the United States, 209.
117 “We knew that one day, the dictatorship would end.” Zuccolillo. Interview with author.
departamento de investigación, y nunca sabía porque,” Rubín said. “Siempre venía alguien y me decía, ‘Quería hablar con Usted,’ y ahí me detenía … Era una rutina ya.” The journalist’s luck would change suddenly in early February 1989.

On the same day loyal newspapers reported on the extraordinary devotion Paraguayans felt to Stroessner, his own men forced him into exile. Up until the end of the stronato, Patria continued promoting Stroessner as the savior of the Paraguayan people. One day before the coup, in an editorial “Sangre Colorada,” the paper called Stroessner invincible. “Aquí no existe un solo dirigente que pueda presumir de ser superior al Presidente Stroessner,” it wrote. Not 24 hours later, one of the dictator’s own generals would prove Patria wrong and a collective cry would rise from citizens and journalists in Paraguay: “Que lindo, lindo, lindo; que lindo, lindo es. Estamos todos juntos y Stroessner ya se fue!” General Andrés Rodríguez wasted little time reinstating media his predecessor had closed. Humberto and Gloria Rubín received a call February 3 from the new president giving them permission to reopen. ABC and other targeted outlets got similar messages in the days immediately following the coup.

119 “I was imprisoned I don’t know how many times at the police station, the department of investigation, and never knew why.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
120 “Someone would always come and tell me, ‘I want to talk to you,’ and then would detain me. It became routine.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
121 “Here there is not one leader who could presume to be above President Stroessner.” Patria, 1 February 1989.
122 “How beautiful, beautiful, beautiful; how beautiful, how beautiful it is. We're all together and Stroessner has gone.” Boccia Paz, ¿Qué hacías aquella noche?, 109.
123 Gloria Rubín. Interview with author.
Chapter 3: Democratization and the Challenges of Freedom

The newspaper *ABC Color* reopened five years to the day after Stroessner closed it, housed in the same newsroom in the center of Asunción where it began in 1967. The paper remained staunchly patriotic despite its troubles with the former government, but published a letter to its readers that first morning back, renewing its pledge of independent journalism and moving to put the *stronato* legacy behind it. The note, along with an editorial inside the paper, proclaimed the importance of a free press to a true democracy and criticized Stroessner’s repressive tactics. But *ABC* was also frank about its role in ending Stroessner’s regime: it had been quiet. Indeed, the Paraguayan media had been largely silent on that front, providing little to any impulse for reform.

Although the media rejoiced at Stroessner’s fall, by all accounts the press was not actively involved in encouraging or furthering a revolt or coup. Realistically, media were not in a position to fight the status quo during the dictatorship, largely because Stroessner had repressed civil society. In addition to formal restrictions on the press, self-censorship was common and threats against news outlets and their employees continued leading up to the coup and throughout the transition. The press never had the opportunity to experiment with freedom in the years before the coup and as a result, it would have been nearly impossible for the media to truly participate in a movement for democracy. As one scholar points out, “En Argentina y Paraguay, no hubo ningún tipo significativo de presión democratizadora por parte de la prensa durante el período de apertura. En ambos casos, no existió un período de liberalización
previo a la caída del régimen.” The Paraguayan press was in a unique position in South America; the people did not turn to it for guidance on reform. The coup resulted from an internal struggle more than external pressure, which left little place for the press. “La prensa no toma ningún papel en el golpe de estado,” explained Ignacio Telesca, a philosophy professor at the Universidad Católica in Asunción. “Así no fue un golpe de estado. Fue un golpe de familia.” Humberto Rubín argued it was simply the Paraguayans’ resigned nature that kept them from a popular uprising. While the media’s lack of involvement is at least partly attributable to the nature of the coup, it is clear there was also some uncertainty about what role the press should play in governmental reform: “La institucionalización democrática en Paraguay … encuentra a la prensa, como a otras experiencias sociales, en plena búsqueda del papel que debe o quiere cumplir en este proceso.” This struggle for self-definition made it difficult for the Paraguayan press to be active in ending the dictatorship, but positioned it for real growth once Stroessner fell.

Most Paraguayan media outlets worked through the night of February 2-3, 1989, to keep citizens informed about the progress of the coup and the status of Stroessner’s government. As the army attacked the presidential palace, radio became

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124 “In Argentina and Paraguay there was no significant pressure for democratization by the press during the transition. In both cases, there was not a period of liberalization before the fall of the authoritarian regimes.” Filgueira, *Prensa y transición democrática*, 29.
125 “The press played no role in the coup.” Telesca. Interview with author.
126 “This was not a coup d’etat. It was a ‘family’ coup.” Ibid.
127 Humberto Rubin. Interview with author.
128 “The institutionalization of democracy in Paraguay … found the press, like other social experiences, in search of the role that it should or wanted to play in this process.” Filgueria *Prensa y transición democrática*, 39.
the most important medium for communication. Outlets were transmitting news
directly from the scene, and witnesses were calling radio stations to connect with their
families and communicate that they were alive. The ultimate goal in those early hours
of chaos was to keep the public calm. Once the fighting was over and Stroessner
was in military custody, one Colorado radio station broadcast — and the next day’s
newspapers published — a series of declarations from the victorious General
Rodríguez. The new president told Paraguayans that he had led the coup to defend the
dignity and honor of the armed forces and the Catholic Church, unify the Colorado
Party, begin democratization in Paraguay and renew a respect for human rights in the
country. “Estamos defendiendo una causa noble y justa que redundará en beneficio de
nuestro heroico y noble pueblo paraguayo,” Rodríguez said. Francisco Pérez
Maricevich, who spent the early part of the tronato writing about human rights
abuses for the Catholic Church’s Comunidad, said the night of the coup was a singular
moment in Paraguayan history: “Esa experiencia de fraternidad … nunca he visto otra
vez.” Such camaraderie is evident in all accounts of that night, even as getting
specific details would grow more difficult.

Paraguayan news outlets tried desperately to get information immediately after
the coup, both for their audiences in the country and for the international press that
continued to push for more facts. Most speculation in the early days of the Rodríguez

129 Boccia Paz, ¿Qué hacías aquella noche?, 53.
130 “We are defending a noble and just cause that will benefit our heroic and noble
131 “That experience of brotherhood … I’ve never seen again.” Pérez Maricevich. Interview with author.
administration focused on the number of casualties during the coup. The media could not get confirmed death counts from the new government, but estimated that around 100 people had died at the Escolta Presidencial, between 20 and 40 at military headquarters and fewer than 20 at the Palacio de Gobierno. There were six or seven reported civilian deaths. But official accounts were much lower: “Ahora les puedo asegurar que el numero de muertos no pasa de 30. Heridos hay entre 50 y 60, aproximadamente,” Interior Minister Orlando Machuca Vargas reported. In addition to 29 military deaths, he acknowledged the loss of two civilians. The country did not see truer casualty counts until May 2009 when a widow from the coup published her memoir of that February night. Gladys Dávalos’ husband was the only officer in Rodríguez’s forces to die in the coup, and along with more accurate statistics on injuries and deaths, Dávalos’ book made public the fact that her husband was killed by friendly fire. International media clamored as much for these sorts of statistics as the Paraguayan press, often turning to their local colleagues for help. An article published in Noticias the morning following the coup described its reporters’ difficulty getting solid information:

“Fue difícil satisfacer todas las preguntas que hacían los colegas porque el panorama en Asunción era confuso y lo único que se tenía era la proclama del Gral. Andrés Rodríguez que se reiteraba a cada momento por radio Primero de Marzo. A pesar de las tentativas de consulta que realizamos toda la noche con autoridades nacionales y voceros

133 “I can now assure you that the number of deaths is not higher than 30. There are between 50 and 60 wounded, approximately.” Delvalle Castillo, Así fue el Golpe, 126-127.
Almost every Paraguayan media outlet faced such pressures February 3 and the coup received extensive international media coverage. One newspaper was noticeably absent that next morning, however. *Patria*, the loyal Colorado daily that had been mandatory reading for every government employee under Stroessner, skipped publishing the morning Stroessner fell. The newspaper’s offices were located next door to Colorado Party headquarters and party leaders were occupied. With its news reporters unable to get to work and its editorial writers busy building a new government, *Patria* could not publish the morning after the coup. That silence put *Patria* behind other outlets, a lag the newspaper never recovered from in its coup coverage; it remained a day late on all reports about Stroessner’s fall and the new Rodríguez government.

The first signs of change after Stroessner came from within the media as each outlet staked out a position on the end of the *stronato* and tried to establish its place in the new media system. Editorial responses to the coup were predictable based on the

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135 “It was difficult to satisfy all the questions that came from our colleagues because the situation in Asunción was confusing and the only thing that we had was the proclamation from General Andrés Rodríguez, which was running continuously on Radio Primero de Marzo. In spite of our attempts to communicate that night with national authorities and government spokespeople, no one was ‘available’ to give us information … We focused our effort to know what was happening in our country through numerous international news agencies … that flooded the phones in editorial offices and the newsrooms of newspapers and radio stations of our capital.” *Noticias*, 3 February 1989, 6.

136 Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
outlet, and it is particularly interesting to note the contrast between the Noticias editorial that ran February 4 and Patria’s from February 5. The former said the country was beginning a new and historic era and called on the people to rely on their spirit to lead Paraguay through serious changes to reform the economy and social/institutional structure. Patria, on the other hand, simply assured Paraguayans that their Colorado tradition — as established in 1887 — should serve as their inspiration moving forward. While Noticias and ABC were critical of Stroessner and open about his government’s repression, Patria focused more on exactly what Rodríguez was doing than on why the coup had happened. World press reactions, however, were unanimously positive and received their own coverage in Paraguayan media. It took only a few days after Stroessner fell for each newspaper to establish its tone for the first few years of the transition.

Several publications, however, saw their roles change almost immediately and most could not survive the shift. Sendero and Patria are particularly clear examples; the first had accomplished its goals, the second had become obsolete. Sendero came about after Stroessner shut down Comunidad and the new publication continued the Catholic Church’s weekly analysis and coverage of human rights abuses. During much of the stronato, Sendero was the only overtly critical voice against the government. As one scholar notes, that became less necessary after Stroessner fell:

“Durante los últimos años de la dictadura, el periódico había cobrado una gran importancia por ser casi el único que publicaba informaciones y opiniones de sectores políticos y sociales opositores del régimen. Con la caída de la dictadura, se reabrieron los diarios, semanarios y revistas.

137 Noticias, 5 February 1989, 6.
Sendero had served its purpose and closed shortly after the coup. Patria, however, struggled to survive, admitting that even it, the voice of the Colorado Party, could not avoid covering the implications of Rodríguez’s movement.\(^{139}\) The newspaper moved toward more international coverage (it examined Italian drinking habits and divorce’s impact on the American economy while Noticias was delving into Rodríguez’s cabinet appointments) and soon changed its top leadership in an attempt to adapt. On February 5, Noticias noted the shift, writing “su contenido es totalmente diferente a otros artículos y editoriales. Se informó que una nueva etapa, con otra óptica, se iniciará en el referido vocero del Partido Colorado.”\(^{140}\) In contrast to Sendero, which simply faded quietly from the media landscape in Paraguay, Patria died slowly and publicly. Stroessner had always required public employees to subscribe to the newspaper, with the cost coming directly from their wages. Without that support, Patria could not continue to publish. Silvero argues:

“Acostumbrado, durante décadas, a financiarse económicamente con los avisos publicitarios de las instituciones estatales y con el descuento obligatorio de la suscripción a costa de los sueldos de los empleados

\(^{138}\) “During the final years of the dictatorship, the periodical had achieved great importance for being almost the only thing that published news and opinion from political and social sectors that opposed the regime. With the dictatorship’s fall, newspapers, weeklies, and magazines that had been closed reopened and the market saw a notable increase in journalistic offerings, each of which was more and more critical and inquisitive.” Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 50.

\(^{139}\) Patria, 4 February 1989, 7.

\(^{140}\) “Its content is totally different from other articles and editorials. It was said that a new era, with a new view, would begin in the so-called voice of the Colorado Party.” Noticias, 5 February 1989, 9.
Públicos, indefectiblemente los nuevos tiempos significaron su muerte lenta.”

Patria’s continued support for Stroessner’s unpopular political views proved the final blow to the newspaper, drying up its advertising and readership.

Specifics of the coup aside, Rodríguez moved quickly to change the government’s position on freedom of the press and granted media more access to certain aspects of government work. The new president acted early to show he understood Filgueira’s two-step transition process and was serious about establishing a free press in Paraguay. Although some threats continued against journalists, Rodríguez released those writers the government was still holding. Still, Paraguayan media were wary. Humberto Rubin wrote in an essay published in 2008 that, “con el nuevo gobierno, no había seguridad de que nos dejaron emitir. Los primeros días eran de mucha incertidumbre.” But according to several journalists, Rodríguez was true to his word. Felix Lugo, now a columnist with ABC, said the press had almost total freedom initially after Stroessner’s fall: “Venimos de una dictadura con todo regulado … y de allí caímos al otro extremo.”

This newfound freedom, however, caused many Paraguayan media outlets to become sensationalistic and operate more like

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141 “Accustomed, over decades, to financing itself with advertisements from state institutions and with the obligatory deduction of the subscription cost from the salaries of public employees, it was inevitable that the new times meant a slow death for Patria.” Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 49.
142 Ibid, 51.
143 “With the new government, there was no assurance that they would permit us to broadcast. The early days were very uncertain.” Boccia Paz, ¿Qué hacías aquella noche?, 239.
144 “We came from a dictatorship with everything regulated … and from there we fell into the other extreme.” Felix Lugo. Interview with author, 15 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
tabloids, publishing rumors and exercising little self-restraint. Zuccolillo had a simple explanation: “Y entonces, que representa este cambio para Paraguay? La misma sensación a tomar un niño a Toys ’R’ Us.” The transition also marked a period of increased media consumption and interest in the functioning of media in Paraguay.

Demand for televisions and radios went up in the years immediately after Stroessner’s fall, while university journalism education programs expanded dramatically from two options during the dictatorship to more than 10 currently. Rodríguez could not — and did not — eliminate all of the conditions keeping the Paraguayan press from total freedom, but the immediate opening was crucial for the media to begin exploring their potential for producing serious critical and investigatory work.

In a major development for Paraguayan media, ABC returned full-force exactly five years after it had been forced to close. Its editorial pages advocated strongly for democracy and its news pages pushed for investigations and transparency about the stronato. Lifting the ban on ABC Color was one of Rodríguez’s first acts as president. The paper’s first issue back was 64 pages, mostly of political news coverage and several editorials about the importance of a free press. On its first page, ABC ran a note to its readers, promising its commitment to independent journalism had not faded:

“Por 1,824 días nos forzaron a dejar de servirle … Hoy, cual aterradora pesadilla, esas tristes páginas de nuestra historia quedaron atrás, y nos llega de nuevo la misión de todos los días. Podemos asegurarle que esa

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145 “So, then, what did this change represent for Paraguay? The same feeling as taking a child to Toys ’R’ Us.” Zuccolillo. Interview with author.
147 Cole. Communication in Latin America, 4.
Picking up that theme in commentary inside the paper, ABC’s editorial writers urged Paraguayans to look forward and move toward being a less isolated society. In coverage throughout the spring of 1989, ABC provided comparable levels of coverage of current political events to the other daily outlets, but also spent a lot of time looking into abuses perpetrated during the stronato and the investigations surrounding allegations of human rights abuses and official corruption. In early May 1989, during the first open elections in Paraguay in 35 years, ABC had extensive coverage of election irregularities, allegations brought against the government and the Colorado Party, as well as comments from official observers. Rodríguez eventually admitted “unintentional” irregularities, breaking with Stroessner’s tradition of insisting all Paraguayan elections were free and fair. ABC’s aggressive reporting, and the fact that other media outlets were settling into a more investigatory role, likely impacted the government’s handling of that election.

While Rodríguez could accomplish some change in the short-term, it would take much more to really make a democratic transition happen. One scholar outlines

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148 “For 1,824 days they forced us to stop serving you … Today, after this terrifying nightmare, these sad pages of our history are left behind, and once again we arrive at the same daily mission. We can assure you that this difficult experience has not damaged our enthusiasm nor has it diminished our strength … We are resuming our job, ready to work, undeterred, in the fascinating work of building a Paraguay that improves every day.” ABC Color, 22 march 1989, 1.
149 Ibid, 12.
five elements to consider in analyzing a media transition. First he suggests identifying the general character or goal of the move, which in Paraguay’s case was democratization. The media must then find common ground between the average citizens and elites, lay out concrete ways to be more open, and contribute to the formation of political parties — or additional political parties — while minimizing trauma to the established political and economic systems.\(^\text{151}\) For the Paraguayan press, as the author notes, those stages were particularly difficult: “[En Paraguay] la tarea de construir una nueva institucionalidad democrática, fue, en la práctica, equivalente a una empresa de carácter fundacional.”\(^\text{152}\) While democratization was an easy objective to identify, bringing together the stratified Paraguayan population, where the elites had largely supported the stronato and favored a more restrictive society, would prove much more difficult. \(ABC\) columnist Lugo said in a 2009 interview that people were not sure how to move forward: “La gente … quería cambiar, pero nadie sabe cual cambiar.”\(^\text{153}\) The Paraguayan press was in a particularly difficult position, then, because it was forced to simultaneously redefine itself \textit{and} rise to lead its society through a transition to democracy. “En la dictadura, la prensa hacía un papel más de crítica … casi de barricada frente la dictadura,”\(^\text{154}\) journalism professor and radio

\(^{151}\) Filgueira, \textit{Prensa y transición democrática}, 28.
\(^{152}\) “[In Paraguay] the work of building a new democratic institutionalism was, in practice, the same as starting a business from scratch.” Ibid, 16.
\(^{153}\) “The people wanted to change, but nobody knew what kind of change.” Lugo. Interview with author.
\(^{154}\) “Under the dictatorship, the press had a more critical role … almost like a barricade in front of the dictator.” Costa. Interview with author.
journalist Pepe Costa said. “En la transición, ese rol fue insuficiente. Tiene que ser una prensa más de propuesta.”  

One of the biggest achievements for the post-Stroessner press was to begin practicing investigative journalism — something possible only with at least some degree of press freedom. There were two key topics for investigative journalists to explore in the first five years after Stroessner’s fall: corruption (past and current) and human rights abuses. At least to begin with, the opening of the Terror Archives provided the most visible and public impetus for coverage. The archives contained detention records and other evidence of Stroessner’s participation in the Southern Cone’s coordinated effort to control, isolate, torture and “disappear” dissidents. As one scholar wrote, details about Paraguay’s participation in Operación Condor and other Stroessner-era abuses not only informed the country’s people, but embarrassed them: “Los relatos de torturas y otros vejamientos inhumanos, impactaron profundamente a la opinión pública. Nunca fue tan desgraciada la sociedad paraguaya al verse en ese terrorífico espejo de testimonios escritos y vivientes reflejada paso a paso a lo largo de su cautiverio.” In light of some investigative work and the release of these documents from Stroessner’s government, the Paraguayan people began

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155 “In the transition, that role was insufficient. It had to be a more proactive press.” Ibid.
156 Operación Condor was a campaign of political oppression by governments across the Southern Cone that involved intelligence operations and assassinations in the mid-1970s. Gladis Meilinger Sannemann, Paraguay en el Operativo Condor (Asunción: RP Ediciones, 1989).
157 “The stories of torture and other inhumane acts had a profound impact on public opinion. Paraguayan society had never been so disgraced to see, in that horrific mirror of written and living testimony, the step-by-step reflection of its long captivity.” Delvalle Castillo, Así fue el Golpe, 66.
placing more faith in media. In a poll during the transition, Paraguayans were asked to rank institutions they believed had the most credibility. The media was second only to the Catholic Church, according to Última Hora editor Oscar Ayala.\footnote{Oscar Ayala. Interview with author, 29 June 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.} Disparate information from my general readings of the transitional press makes Ayala’s argument plausible. That there was any faith in the mainstream press shows the importance the investigative work played in perception of a formerly loyal and obedient media system.

Despite improvements, some readers (and journalists) weren’t satisfied with either the level of investigative work or the results of it. Hermes Ramos Dávalos, whose father was the only officer in Rodríguez’s forces to die in the coup, said he is not satisfied with the level of investigative work the Paraguayan press has done since 1989. “Lo que pasa acá es que no hay un ambiente de investigación,”\footnote{“What happens here is that there isn’t an atmosphere of investigation.” Ramos. Interview with author.} he said. Journalists attribute this dissatisfaction more to readers growing tired of hearing the same corruption stories for so long without seeing any progress. “Es como que la gente haya adquirido anticuerpo,”\footnote{“It’s as if the people had become immune.” Ayala. Interview with author.} Ayala said:

> “Fue tantas y tantas las denuncias por corrupción … Yo creo que la prensa paraguaya cumplió bien en su misión en ese sentido. Y fallaron las instituciones … Yo creo que la prensa sí haciendo un muy buen trabajo en materia de denuncias y de ser poco voceros de los diferentes sectores, y no hay respuestas de las instituciones. Eso también contribuye a que vayamos perdiendo un poco de credibilidad y que vayamos perdiendo esa importancia que teníamos antes.”\footnote{“There were so many formal complaints of corruption … I think that the Paraguayan press fulfilled its mission well in that sense. And the institutions failed …}
Other journalists echoed Ayala’s exasperation at the lack of action taken against corruption once media made it public, and said it was likely that unresponsiveness has given people the impression the press is ineffective. Humberto and Gloria Rubín said corruption no longer surprises anyone in Paraguay — it is no longer news — and that because it was often the same officials accused in the 1990s as were guilty under Stroessner, it was impossible to make progress against them. “Por más que la prensa critique: ‘Esto está mal. Esto es roba. Esto es contrabando …’ No sirve para nada.”

The journalists, however discouraged they sound, said they continued to publish and broadcast stories about government corruption all through the transition and into the twenty-first century.

Some of those efforts were rewarded in 1992 when the newly approved constitution recognized press freedoms explicitly. The Constitution of 1992 was more forceful in guaranteeing freedoms of speech and of the press than any previous Paraguayan law, but it was the change in enforcement that made it effective. The new constitution has six articles addressing free expression and media rights. Beginning with Article 26, Chapter 2 of the constitution established completely unrestricted freedom of expression and of the press. It promised to every person, not just to journalists, the right to produce and disseminate any information they chose, without

I think that the press did a very good job in terms of formal complaints and of providing a voice for different sectors, and there was no response from the institutions. This also contributes to our losing a bit of credibility and losing that importance we used to have in society.” Ibid.

162 “The press critiqued them so often: ‘This is bad. This is theft. This is illegal … ’ It didn’t accomplish anything.” Gloria Rubin. Interview with author.

163 Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 60.
censorship. The next article provides for several protections, the most important of which being the determination that journalists work in the public interest and therefore the government cannot close or suspend their outlets. Article 27 did, however, also allow the government to play a larger role in protecting publications aimed at children, women and the illiterate. While there were other articles aimed at freedom of expression, Article 29 — recognizing the freedom to practice journalism as a profession — was perhaps the most unusual and noteworthy. As in most countries with a free press, Article 29 granted columnists and editorialists the right to print any opinion they chose. It also formally granted copyright control of written and photographic work to the journalist. But in one of the only cases of the Paraguayan press receiving a right earlier than most free media systems, Article 29 established what is effectively a shield law, whereby journalists need not reveal their sources:

“Los periodistas de los medios masivos de comunicación social en cumplimiento de sus funciones, no serán obligados a actuar contra los dictados de su conciencia ni a revelar sus fuentes de información.”

While much of the Constitution of 1992 marked real progress for the Paraguayan press, it also left in place certain practices Stroessner had started. Newspapers were still to be required to set aside 3 percent of their space for political ads during the 10 days before an election. Those ads ran at no

Overall, however, the Constitution of 1992 was firm in its support for a democratic society and reflected that in its treatment of the media.

Paraguay’s first real experiment with democracy since the Liberal Era came in 1993 as Rodríguez prepared to turn over power and the press began to wonder whether his philosophy on media would carry through to the next administration. Author and historian Guido Rodríguez Alcalá said elections were one element of democracy that took longer for Paraguay to iron out. “Después de la caída de Stroessner, lo que se decidió fue gran libertades pero controlar las elecciones,” Rodríguez Alcalá said in an interview 20 years after Stroessner fell. “[Había elecciones] libres pero no tan limpias.” This governmental shortcoming, however, did not carry over into the mainstream media; Paraguayan newspapers and radio stations covered the primary election in late 1992 and the election of 1993 extensively. The primary election that year was more closely watched than the general, largely because of accusations of internal political maneuvering in the Colorado Party. Leading into the sharply divided December primary, ABC Color published an editorial urging voters and party leaders to refrain from violence, which the paper termed “incompatible” with democracy: “Si yo no respeto la libertad de los demás para pensar y expresarse, mal puedo pretender — salvo que aspire al despotismo — que se respete mi propio derecho de pensar y de

165 Silvero, Una historia sin fin, 72.
166 “After Stroessner’s fall, it was decided that there would be great freedom but controlled elections.” Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
167 “There were free elections, but not very clean ones.” Ibid.
expresión.” It was not violence, but rather Colorado infighting that would threaten Paraguay’s initial democratic effort. The 1992 primary brought a dramatic political showdown between Luis María Argaña and Juan Carlos Wasmosy. Based on voter polls and initial ballot counts, Argaña was the people’s favorite, but President Rodríguez favored Wasmosy. When early numbers indicated Argaña would win the election, electricity was mysteriously cut from ballot-counting locations and the blackout lasted months while Wasmosy manufactured votes.\textsuperscript{169} \textit{ABC} ran a 48-page special supplement on the primary on December 28, 1992, and continued covering the recount until Wasmosy was eventually ruled the winner of the primary election. The intense coverage his primary race had garnered in the Paraguayan media left Wasmosy bitter and would impact the role the press could play during the rest of the election cycle that year and into the Wasmosy administration. Six days before the general election, \textit{ABC} reported Wasmosy lashing out at the commercial press for the way in which it was representing information about the election. According to \textit{ABC}, the candidate did not mention any outlet in particular.\textsuperscript{170} Mainstream media responded to Wasmosy’s attacks by focusing their pre-election coverage on fairness, including reporting the archbishop’s announcement that it was a sin to buy or sell votes, and accusations that the Colorado Party was interfering with international election

\textsuperscript{168} “If I don’t respect the freedom of others to think and express themselves, I can’t pretend – unless I aspire to despotism – that there will be respect for my right to thought and expression.” \textit{ABC Color}, 15 December 1991.

\textsuperscript{169} Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.

\textsuperscript{170} \textit{ABC Color}, 3 May 1992, 9.
observers in the days leading up to the election.\textsuperscript{171} Journalists viewed the question of how the election was conducted as more important than who won.

As the press warned before the voting on May 9, there were reports of serious irregularities at polling stations across the country on election day, including party officials buying citizen’s identification cards for the day to keep them from casting a vote for one of the other parties. Paraguayans (still) must show photo identification at the polls to vote, and voting is compulsory, but poorer members of the population — particularly in rural areas — are often willing to sell their identification for a day so someone else can vote for them. A team of international election observers, led by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, documented such irregularities in a report the day after the election, and added that they had witnessed the Colorado Party intimidating voters as well as government interference with independent vote counts.\textsuperscript{172} In addition to interfering with voters, Colorados made it nearly impossible for members of the media to operate in certain locations. \textit{ABC} reported, “Numerosos periodistas se vieron imposibilitados de aceder a distintos lugares de votación y en muchos casos fueron echados a los recintos públicos.”\textsuperscript{173} Journalists were threatened with prison and prevented from filing stories in some instances.\textsuperscript{174} Carter’s team also noted attacks against the press, including an early-morning incident during which Channel 13, a

\textsuperscript{171} \textit{ABC Color}, 8 May 1992.
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{May 9, 1993 Report on Elections in Paraguay} (Atlanta: The Carter Center of Emory University, 1993), 3.
\textsuperscript{173} “Many journalists found it impossible to get to specific polling locations and, in many cases, they were kept from public spaces.” \textit{ABC Color}, 10 May 1992, 10.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
television and radio station, was attacked with a grenade and automatic rifle fire.\textsuperscript{175}

“We trust that this attempt to intimidate the vigorous Paraguayan press will fail,” the observers wrote in their report.\textsuperscript{176} Some members of the press, however, worried that it could mean the end of the young democracy. One \textit{ABC} columnist wrote on May 10 that the election had been Paraguay’s first and last attempt at democratic elections:

\begin{quote}
“Se hizo todo lo posible porque nuestro primer paso hacia la democracia fuese el último … Mientras la mayoría del pueblo paraguayo procuraba limpiar el nombre patrio, [unos] militares y [unos] magistrados, apoyados o estimulados por los políticos pequeños de siempre, hacían que la comunidad internacional nos mire nuevamente como una República accesoria, insignificante.”\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

The election satisfied the international community, though. The United States, Germany and Nicaragua recognized Wasmosy as the country’s new president on May 25, which coincided with an official decision by election officials within Paraguay.

As the 1993 election and Wasmosy’s attitude toward the press showed, formal changes like the Constitution of 1992 and Rodríguez’s pledge to support press freedoms could not solve all of the problems Paraguayan journalists faced after Stroessner. Throughout the 1990s, therefore, they worked to become more respected as professionals because despite early moves toward a freer press in Paraguay, journalists continued to face threats, violence and harmful judicial decisions. The

\textsuperscript{176} \textit{May 9, 1993 Report on Elections in Paraguay}, 4.
\textsuperscript{177} “We did everything possible because our first attempt at democracy was the last … While the majority of Paraguayans tried to restore the [damaged] image of the fatherland, [some] members of the military and some judges, supported or spurred on by the little politicians of always, ensured that the international community views us again like an incidental republic, insignificant.” \textit{ABC Color}, 10 May 1992, 4.
violence, aggression and persecution increased in 1993. Professor Telesca explained that the key difference for media between the Wasmosy government and Stroessner’s regime was that the pressure did not come directly from the government. “No había censura en la prensa,” Telesca said. “Sí, había ataques a la prensa, pero no del estado.” Other writers, though, said the government was not entirely uninvolved. Rodríguez Alcalá said there were certainly coordinated efforts to intimidate the press, especially once groups began assassinating journalists. “En todos casos, el gobierno lo hizo lo que, ‘Look the other side,’ ” Rodríguez Alcalá explained, adding that such problems are much less common now, although journalists still lack real legal protection. In fact, no journalist had ever been assassinated doing his job in Paraguay until the transition, when Santiago Leguizamón was killed in Pedro Juan Caballero on the border with Brazil in April 1991. One scholar lamented the irony of democratization bringing a more violent form of press repression:

> “Hasta parecía una burla trágica del destino: tenían que llegar los tiempos democráticos al Paraguay para que un periodista fuese brutalmente asesinado en la vía pública, con la expresa intención de dar una lección a toda la prensa nacional por parte de los grupos delictivos organizados.”

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178 Silvero, *Una historia sin fin*, 64.
179 “There was no censorship in the press.” Telesca. Interview with author.
180 “Yes, there were attacks against the press, but not from the state.” Ibid.
181 “In all those cases, the government kind of, ‘Look the other side.’ ” Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
182 “It even seemed to be destiny’s tragic mockery: democracy had to come to Paraguay before a journalist was brutally assassinated in public, with the expressed intent of sending a message to all the national press on behalf of organized crime.” Silvero, *Una historia sin fin*, 56.
As of 2008, the Inter-American Press Association was still pushing Paraguayan leaders to investigate Leguizamón’s unsolved murder.

Journalists had a difficult 1993, but 1994 proved a turning point as attitudes toward media changed throughout the region. Paraguay’s literacy rate had hit 90 percent and there were five daily newspapers.\(^{183}\) The biggest development, though, benefited not just Paraguayan journalists but also their colleagues across Latin America, pulling their countries into an agreement that recognized press freedoms. The Treaty of Chapultepec was a 10-point document meant to “reinforce free speech and free press throughout the Western Hemisphere” and came about through a major lobbying effort on the part of the IAPA.\(^{184}\) In another step toward being a more professional industry, Paraguayan journalists — through the Sindicato de Periodistas Paraguayos and the Universidad Católica — adopted a code of ethics that same year.\(^{185}\) But despite the code’s relatively long existence, current journalists say it has little to no impact on how they do their jobs, largely because they do not view the SPP as wielding any real power.\(^{186}\) Most journalists say that during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, self-regulation for individual writers and editors has been more important than an overarching ethical code. “Creo que sí, efectivamente hay

\(^{184}\) Ibid, 54.
\(^{185}\) Silvero, *Una historia sin fin*, 71.
\(^{186}\) As we will see, the code of ethics attempted to draw firm distinctions between opinion pieces and news coverage and establish a profession independent of bribes, among other things.
The end of the twentieth century was a hard time for Paraguayan journalists. Despite some favorable judicial decisions, political volatility threatened to disrupt the young democracy. The Constitution of 1992 had drawn a clear line between the military and political worlds, prohibiting military officers from endorsing candidates or running for office. In 1996, General Lino Oviedo, who had played a role in Wasmosy’s rigged primary victory four years earlier, made a dramatic move into politics. He and his supporters attempted a coup and found themselves in negotiations with the government. This threat to the legitimacy of the Wasmosy administration was also a direct challenge to democracy in Paraguay and, by extension, to freedom of the press. During the subsequent political negotiations, journalists were attacked and radio and television signals were interrupted. Such targeted intimidation persisted even after Oviedo was arrested in April. The troubles continued for Paraguayan journalists in 1997, even after a judge ruled editorials were protected speech and could not be censored. That year there was an “extraordinary quantity” of lawsuits filed against journalists. This back and forth continued into 1998 when investigative reporters in Paraguay who uncovered illegal activity first won protection from defamation charges.

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187 “I think that yes, effectively there is corruption in the profession.” Ayala. Interview with author.
188 “But there is also the powerful work of some outlets and some journalists in denouncing corrupt deeds.” Ibid.
189 Silvero, *Una historia sin fin*, 75-76.
190 Ibid, 78.
Such a victory, though, was seriously overshadowed by events in August. One day after Raúl Cubas became president, he closed the Palacio del Gobierno to reporters. In response, journalists held a sit-in outside the Palacio, winning re-entry four days later.\(^{191}\) That showdown led to an undeclared war between politicians and the press, and among media outlets, in 1999. Unfortunately for Paraguayan society, it corresponded to a period of severe political instability. Vice President Argaña was assassinated on March 23, 1999, and President Cubas resigned five days later after seven kids protesting Argaña’s murder, which was thought to be tied to Oviedo, were killed. During the turmoil, \textit{ABC Color} was a special target and several radio and television stations experienced interference.\(^{192}\) All of that tension led to a failed coup attempt — again an Oviedo effort — in 2000, and a shaky entrance to the twenty-first century for Paraguayan journalists. Many reporters and editors in the country said that looking back, they could not be sure whether the press had changed society during the 1990s — through investigations and a developing sense of self, or whether society changed the press — through a halting movement toward true democracy. “Yo creo que se tiende más a que la sociedad cambió a la prensa,”\(^{193}\) Ayala decided, immediately questioning himself. “Bueno, pero existen bolsones que se resisten a cerrar rastrados por la sociedad.”\(^{194}\)

\(^{191}\) Ibid, 81.
\(^{192}\) Silvero, \textit{Una historia sin fin}, 84-86.
\(^{193}\) “I think it’s more that society changed the press.” Ayala. Interview with author.
\(^{194}\) “Well, but there are pockets that resist being dragged along by society.” Ibid.
Chapter 4: Transitions: Journalists in a Brave New(s) World

Shaking the Colorado mentality has been difficult and the Paraguayan press and society are still transitioning away from Stroessner’s legacy. It is partly because of this entrenched system that Ayala and others struggle to define the driving force in Paraguay’s movement toward democracy. While the press was eager enough for democratic change (or at least willing to accept it once it came), true reform required commitment from the people. As one columnist put it shortly after the coup, “Los nuevos aires que se respiran traen consigo también un desafío. La libertad se nos aproxima no solo como el ejercicio de un derecho asentado en la Constitución, sino también como un gran compromiso que debe arraigarse en lo más profundo de nuestras conciencias.”195 Because there is very little ideological difference between the major political parties in Paraguay, it has been hard to break people’s routine of voting for Colorados. Voters are left to choose between a party that they feel dependent upon and a party they feel no loyalty to. Colorados were notorious for their patronage practices. Party leaders would give citizens food, gifts and money in return for votes, and many Paraguayans were reluctant to move away from backing the party that had supported them for so long. Patronage systems, therefore, created a sense of political apathy as ideological differences were eclipsed by other connections. Less informed voters are unaware of their potential political clout and what they could gain by

195 “The new breathed air brings with it a challenge. The freedom that comes to us not only in the exercise of a right established in the Constitution, but is also a great promise that needs to take root most profoundly in our consciousness.” Noticias, 5 February 1989, 14.
changing parties. As a result, “ingrained interpersonal dependency continues to define the nature of politics.”

One author, quoting Simón Bolívar, worries Paraguay fits the mold of “un pueblo ignorante” functioning as “un instrumento ciego de su propia destrucción.” It is not ignorance but the political culture, however, that keeps Paraguayans enmeshed in the comfort and familiarity of the Colorado Party. Zuccolillo and his colleagues seem to more properly identify inertia, rather than ignorance, as the biggest roadblock to democratization in Paraguay.

While Colorado legacies linger in the political world, there have been changes in the way people think about government and the press. Gloria Rubín, formerly with Radio Ñandutí and now the secretary of women’s affairs for a non-Colorado government, said Paraguay is still in the beginning stages of its transition and that she sees hope in the media: “Una verdadera transición aún no se ha hecho en Paraguay. El cambio es muy difícil,” she explained. “[Pero] siempre la prensa libre tiene que ser la contrapoder … Funcionó; funciona.”

Scholars and journalists agree with Rubín and argue that Colorado rule had led elements of Paraguayan society to fail. The public education system, for example, is generally considered very weak. In an interview, Professor Beatriz Bosio said the media works, but “es el sistema lo que no está funcionando … Los gobiernos Colorados llevaron al estado que se encuentra hoy

\[196\] Miranda, *The Stroessner Era*, 16.
\[197\] “An ignorant people.”
\[199\] “A true transition still hasn’t happened in Paraguay. Change is very difficult.” Gloria Rubín. Interview with author.
\[200\] “[But] a free press always has to be the counter-power … It worked before; it works now.” Ibid.
en Paraguay.”201 But there is hope. In 2008, 55 years after Stroessner and the Colorado governments solidified their control over the country, Paraguay elected a president from outside the party. Alfredo Boccia Paz, a physician and columnist, said despite the two parties’ ideological similarities, the election was a major symbolic shift: “Ahora por lo menos se abra la mente.”202 Explaining his vote for Fernando Lugo, who beat the Colorado candidate in 2008, Guido Rodríguez Alcalá said Lugo was the lesser of two evils: “Él es tonto. Pero es la posibilidad del cambio,”203 the historian said. “A partir de ahora, vamos a tener alternancia del poder. Bueno o malo, no sé, pero ya no va a ser solamente el Partido Colorado.”204

These hopeful signs have not translated into full recognition for Paraguayan journalists, however; they are still fighting for respect from their readers and, in some cases, from media owners. Much like when it first developed, Latin American journalism education struggles to train its students for what their societies need. Throughout the twentieth century, most Latin Americans did their journalism training in the United States or Europe. Those programs traditionally focused on three elements: skills training, core liberal arts courses, and conceptual courses — such as media law, media history and ethics. As Latin American countries began to flesh out their own journalism education programs, they added an interesting component. They called it

201 “It’s the system that doesn’t function … The Colorado governments made the state what it is today in Paraguay.” Bosio. Interview with author.
202 “Now, at least, minds are open.” Boccia Paz. Interview with author.
203 “He’s stupid. But he’s the possibility of change.” Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
204 “From now on, we’re going to have changes in power. For good or bad, I don’t know, but it won’t just be the Colorado Party.” Ibid.
“developmental journalism,” and it was meant to focus its students on specific economic, political and social needs within their country. Still, most journalists in the region say such education is insufficient, especially when it comes to teaching professional skills.\textsuperscript{205} The debate about effective journalism education, including the use of developmental journalism, is only a continuation of a discussion that dates back to the establishment of such programs in Latin America. As explained in Chapter 2, Latin American countries have struggled with defining a role for the press in a society that places such a premium on both religion and patriotism. A free press, left entirely separate from those traditions, worries people, and that tension is evident in university programs. The region considers mass media to have social responsibility.\textsuperscript{206} While the Paraguayan Constitution does not make that quite as explicit as some other countries’, the combination of high societal expectations and low-quality education makes it difficult for Paraguayan journalists to establish themselves as a professional class.

Partly owing to these difficulties, journalists in Paraguay often don’t stay in the industry long-term. In October 2008, a report by the Sindicato de Periodistas del Paraguay found that almost a third of journalists there had fewer than three years on the job and more than half of them had fewer than five years. Only 13.7 percent had worked as journalists for more than 15 years. These journalists do not have much job security and still face threats and economic pressures. In the same report, the SPP found that only 56 percent of Paraguayan journalists had a contract with their

\textsuperscript{205} Cole, \textit{Communication in Latin America}, 59.
\textsuperscript{206} Ferreira, \textit{Centuries of Silence}, 241.
employer and only 49 percent of those contracts were in writing. At that point, only 33 percent of journalists earned above minimum wage in Paraguay.\footnote{Sindicato de Periodistas del Paraguay, *Principales Resultados: Encuesta de Derechos Laborales de Periodistas – Precarización Laboral y Censura* (October 2008), E-mail.}

The Paraguayan press’s decision to regulate itself was a major step forward. Although writers and editors are still working on the specifics of enforcing internal checks, the fact that the discussions are happening indicates a level of industry self-awareness that hadn’t existed before. There is no question that the freedom of expression and the ability of media to operate freely are necessary for a true democracy to exist. *ABC Color* made the point clear in its first issue back after Stroessner’s fall:

> “Nos ha reafirmado en la convicción de que la libertad de expresión es condición indispensable para la defensa y el ejercicio de los derechos, garantías y obligaciones que proclama nuestra constitución, y que sin ella, los ciudadanos estamos indefensos ante la arbitrariedad.”\footnote{“We have reaffirmed the conviction that freedom of expression is a necessary condition for the defense and exercise of rights, guarantees and obligations that our constitution proclaims, and without it, we citizens are defenseless against arbitrariness.” *ABC Color*, 22 March 1989, 1.}

But it was the SPP that first suggested Paraguayan journalists had responsibilities in return for those rights. In 1999, the organization established a code of ethics that, among other things, called for media to publish true, impartial and precise information; contribute to a just and democratic society; and respect the dignity of all people. To achieve those goals, the writers stated, journalists needed to use clear and precise information — in context — and establish a clear distinction between facts,
opinion and speculation. These are largely Western press values, and the Paraguayan press has generally resisted adopting them, at least explicitly. Most specifically, despite the leadership from the SPP, there are few media outlets with their own ethical codes, and there is little support across the industry for such a movement.

“Un código de éticos no existe en ningún medio,” journalism professor Pepe Costa said in an interview. “Hay un código de éticos [de SPP] que no sirve para nada.”

Oscar Ayala, editor at Última Hora, said his newspaper has worked hard over the past few years to draft an internal code of ethics and produced a copy during an interview. But Costa, who also works for Radio Cáritas and wrote for Última Hora for 18 years, and other journalists argued that if the public does not know (or cannot tell) that an outlet operates with formal guidelines, then such codes might as well not exist. He criticized the press for not fact-checking stories, for making jokes in news pieces, and for hiding or simply not running corrections. Costa went even further, though, to say the atmosphere at major media outlets in Paraguay is what causes journalists to engage in unethical behavior. He said students in his classes behave ethically, but when they enter the workforce, “Los medios lo consumen.”

That trend Costa sees is likely related to a skepticism about formal ethical codes and other industry guidelines. Humberto Rubín, the owner of Radio Ñandutí who was a particular target for Stroessner and his judiciary, said he opposes having

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209 Sindicato de Periodistas del Paraguay, “Código de Éticas” (2-16 November 1999, e-mail), Section 2, Articles 1, 3.
210 “An ethical code doesn’t exist in any medium.” Costa. Interview with author.
211 “There is a code of ethics [of the SPP] that serves no purpose.” Ibid.
212 “The outlets consume them.” Costa. Interview with author.
overarching ethical codes because they could be a means of controlling the media. “El código de éticas es algo peligroso, yo pienso,” he said. “Quién va a ser el juez, otra vez? Vuelva mi primera pregunta si es la ley o es el juez que va a decir que Radio Ñandutí no tiene éticas. No sé.” Rubín was imprisoned, put under house arrest, forbidden to leave the country and generally harassed during the dictatorship, so the radio host’s suspicion is not surprising. In fact, in interviews it was more often younger reporters and editors who spoke favorably about formal ethical codes. None of this is to say, of course, that their colleagues function unethically. While Rubín and others say the SPP code is useless and other restrictions could be dangerous, they pride themselves on running professional — and ethical — news organizations. For example, as debate continues about ethical codes, Paraguayan journalists agree they have made progress on one thing that plagued them during the dictatorship: there are no longer official political biases at various outlets. Newspapers have editorial positions, and those opinions often leak into news coverage, but media are no longer officially allied with political parties. Like most Western media systems now, however, journalists complained that their outlets struggle with economic biases. Costa said such influences, from sponsors and others who control the country’s economy, are obvious in all national coverage.

213 “An ethical code is something dangerous, I think.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
214 “Again, who is going to be the judge? My first question resurfaces: is it the law or is it the judge that is going to decide that Radio Ñandutí is unethical. I don’t know.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
The Paraguayan press has made incredible progress improving itself, but the society in which it operates remains a dangerous place for some forms of journalism. While the government is no longer directly targeting journalists, there remains some fear based on its reluctance to punish those who do, including its lack of investigation into the Leguizamón murder mentioned in Chapter 3: “Eso es el problema del temor que tienen,” said Pedro Benítez, who heads the SPP. “Nadie fue condenado acá por mató al periodista.” Organized crime is the major danger facing the Paraguayan press in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Phone and text message intimidation of journalists is common outside Asunción, and judges are beginning to restrict information further than they did in the previous 10 years since Stroessner’s fall, according to the Inter-American Press Association, which monitors press freedoms in the Americas. In the October 2008 SPP study, 27 percent of Paraguayan journalists reported being victims of aggression and more than 58 percent of them said they had experienced direct censorship. Meanwhile, journalists who have grown tired or fearful of covering certain topics often say they resort to self-censorship. In the same survey, a little less than a third of journalists said they had censored themselves. Although 30 percent of those self-censored for economic reasons (they feared being fired), 9 percent did it out of a fear of criminal groups and 12

215 “That’s the problem of fear they have.” Pedro Benítez. Interview with author, 15 July 2009, Asunción, Paraguay.
216 “No one was ever punished there for killing a journalist.” Pedro Benítez. Interview with author.
percent did it for political reasons.\textsuperscript{218} Journalists interviewed stressed that direct censorship does not exist at their outlets, but said self-censorship does, and it is just a part of the job: “La autocensura existe pero al mismo tiempo … ésta es la vida de la prensa realmente,”\textsuperscript{219} \textit{ABC} columnist Felix Lugo said.

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\textsuperscript{218} Sindicato de Periodistas del Paraguay, \textit{Principales Resultados: Encuesta de Derechos Laborales de Periodistas – Precarización Laboral y Censura} (October 2008), E-mail.
\textsuperscript{219} “Self-censorship exists but at the same time … that’s the life of the press, realistically.” Lugo. Interview with author.
\end{flushright}
Conclusion

Paraguay has been recognized internationally for its improvements in human rights and press freedom since Stroessner’s fall. One scholar said Paraguay deserves special mention for its growth: “No countr[y] in the region ha[s] shown more dramatic progress, evolving from situations characterized by the most severe repression into press systems that operate freely and effectively with far fewer problems than might be expected given [its] level of underdevelopment and [its] lack of experience with democratic institutions.”

Journalists and academics in the country say the problems that still exist are simpler to solve than those already resolved or, at least, in the process of being resolved. Historian Beatríz Bosio writes that a general fear of change could prove an obstacle to future progress, but that Paraguayans could move past that:

“El siglo XXI encuentra al Paraguay en un estado de desazón colectiva y un cierto grado de desesperanza, pues antes que nada nuestra sociedad sigue siendo muy conservadora y, por lo tanto, temerosa de los grandes cambios. Por otro lado, la población paraguaya es razonablemente disciplinada y sus problemas son relativamente sencillos de resolver.”

But it may be more than inertia that keeps Paraguayans from fully realizing democracy, and it is clear they have not completely embraced it. In polls, Paraguayans are among the least supportive of democracy of any Latin American population, according to The Economist. In fact, that support has dropped in the past decade from

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220 Cole, Communication in Latin America, 14.
221 “The twenty-first century finds Paraguay in a state of collective anxiety and a certain amount of hopelessness, because after all, our society continues to be very conservative and, therefore, is fearful of big changes. On the other hand, the Paraguayan population is reasonably disciplined and its problems are relatively simple to solve.” Bosio, Periodismo escrito paraguayo, 221.
59 percent preferring democracy to any other form of government in 1996 to 46 percent in 2009. The same poll found 31 percent of Paraguayans think that in certain circumstances an authoritarian government is preferable to a democratic one.\textsuperscript{222}

The effects of this reluctance to change and general distrust of democracy on the Paraguayan media is not yet clear. The press has shown dramatic improvement, moving past its initial post-\textit{stronato} sensationalism and developing a more consistent style and voice. However, there are still issues to be addressed and debated, including ethical standards, the prevalence of opinion in news pieces, and access to government documents. Generally, journalists in Paraguay agree that the press has accomplished what it can in isolation and under difficult circumstances. Without support from the people and from government institutions, journalists fear they cannot achieve the quality of work they want to. Oscar Ayala, editor of \textit{Última Hora}, said the press still has a long way to go: “Creo que hemos avanzado pero todavía tenemos mucho para avanzar sobre todo,”\textsuperscript{223} he said, adding with a note of helplessness, “Y de nuevo las instituciones no hicieron nada. Entonces qué podemos hacer nosotros como la prensa?”\textsuperscript{224} This interdependence was reflected in Ayala’s struggle, mentioned in Chapter 3, to identify the impetus for change in Paraguay; has the press changed society or society changed the press? Humberto Rubín was more confident in his

\textsuperscript{223} “I think we have improved but we still have a long way to go.” Ayala. Interview with author.
\textsuperscript{224} “And again the institutions did nothing. Then what can we, the press, do?” Ibid.
answer, however: “La prensa tiene que madurar. Y el pueblo tienen que madurar,” he said.

None of this commentary is meant as an indictment of the Paraguayan press. Journalists throughout the country have fought, suffered and died to achieve their current freedoms, and that progress should earn nothing but praise and admiration. The concern moving forward, however, is whether the media can move the country past its tendency toward authoritarianism that held the press back for so long. Paraguay is still susceptible to those movements, not because its people are irrational or weak, but exactly the opposite; authoritarianism has often made sense for Paraguay. Stroessner’s regime, while brutal and oppressive, was entirely rational. The general saw a chaotic country hungry for leadership and brought order. He saw a world terrified of communism and pledged his support to the West. He saw a people craving unity and limited opposition press. And for a while, that type of leadership was what the Paraguayan people wanted. Even the journalists and scholars who faced some of Stroessner’s harshest attacks admitted he seemed like an honest and heroic man during the first decade of his reign. Those commentators, Zuccolillo, Rubín and Rodríguez Alcalá chief among them, were placed under house arrest, denied permission to leave the country, brought in for “questioning” for days at a time, denied communication with loved ones, and prevented from practicing their professions. Thousands of other

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225 “The press needs to mature. The people need to mature.” Humberto Rubín. Interview with author.
226 Pérez Maricevich. Interview with author. Rodríguez Alcalá. Interview with author.
Paraguayans were forced into exile, killed or “disappeared” during Stroessner’s dictatorship.

The difference between the Paraguayan press and media systems in other Southern Cone countries (all of whom faced a similar period of oppression in the mid-twentieth century) is the foundation upon which today’s society is built. Paraguay, like Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, was heavily influenced by Spanish colonialism. That, however, is where the similarities end. Paraguay’s three neighbors, all with bustling ports and highly-developed commercial economies, grew throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a strong foundation in Enlightenment ideals, including freedom of expression, and an emphasis on democracy. Despite some brief stumbles into authoritarianism, those countries already had experience with free media systems and transitioned quickly and easily back to that culture. Paraguay, by contrast, had so such foundation. Its very first glimpse of a free press came in 1989 with Stroessner’s fall, and its only extended period of free elections has come in the decades since.

Returning, then, to the question of where the responsibility for further transition and evolution lies, it seems only fitting to apply a quote from Zuccolillo:
“[La prensa] es la expresión de la sociedad,” he said, adding that Paraguay has sub-par education, doctors, lawyers and politicians. “Seríamos fantásticos si nosotros fuéramos mejor que la sociedad.” There is obvious hope for Paraguayan journalists as those in the profession and those teaching future journalists are striving to improve

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228 “We would be amazing if we were better than our society.” Ibid.
professional training. Most important, though, is the high standard to which Paraguayan journalists hold themselves. While acknowledging the extraordinary progress they have made in the past 20 years, journalists and commentators in Paraguay insist they are focused on continuous development. Expressing that goal may be the best indication that the Paraguayan press is not just an expression of its society; it is a model for it.
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