

# US Media Coverage on Latin America Today: An Interview with Investigative Reporter Juan González

by **Claudia Ferman** | University of Richmond | [cferman@richmond.edu](mailto:cferman@richmond.edu)

On January 31, 2018, award-winning broadcast journalist and investigative reporter Juan D. González presented a revealing talk at University of Richmond, entitled “Paradise Lost: Puerto Rico’s Descent into Economic Collapse and Climate Devastation, and Prospects for Its Recovery.” I took advantage of this opportunity to engage in an extended conversation with González about US media coverage on Latin America today. In the current context of “truth decay” and the enormous challenges that journalists face in many countries in Latin America, González’s comments on the numerous restrictions faced today within the media environment are quite educational. In what follows, I reproduce González’s responses to my questions.

Juan González is currently Professor of Professional Practice in Journalism and Media Studies at the School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University. His research interests include journalism; mass media history; federal mass communications policy; history of Latinos in the United States; Puerto Rico-US relations; immigration, race and labor relations; and the role of dissident movements in promoting social change. His book *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* has been used for more than a decade as a required text in nearly two hundred college Latino history and ethnic studies courses. A 2012 feature documentary based on the book (narrated by González) obtained several major documentary awards. He is a two-time winner of the George Polk Award, and he is co-host of Democracy Now! He is the founder of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. He spent 29 years as a columnist for the *New York Daily News*.

## **In the English-language media Latin America is a dark hole.**

**Juan González:** There is virtually no news on Latin America in the American English language media, on a regular basis. Other than the occasional Venezuela-is-collapsing-story, or a story about drug trafficking in Mexico. Obviously, Mexico is now what Colombia was few decades ago. Other than those cyclical stories, which I would call “stock stories,” there is no real coverage of Latin America in the US English-language press. Now, it is very different in the Spanish-language media in the USA. There is no doubt that both Univisión and Telemundo, the smaller Spanish language network, do a lot more coverage of Latin America, because they are feeding the needs of the diaspora of Latin Americans and Latinos here in the US—these networks understand that they need to feed information of their homelands for those folks. However, it is not necessarily a balanced coverage—it is often politically slanted because the owners of Univisión and Telemundo have their own agendas. Nonetheless, you will get regular coverage if anything major happens in Mexico or Colombia or Ecuador in the US Spanish-language media—they will most likely have some coverage of it. In the English-language media Latin America is a dark hole. There is no major interest of the USA at this point in Latin America—there is no major threat to the USA from Latin America. Basically, the national press really takes its cues from whatever it is that the government is concerned with, and if the government is not concerned, the national press will rarely pay much attention to it.

**There is a disconnect between most of the national media and what is actually going on in the US as well as in Latin America.**

This lack of information certainly has an impact on the image that the average American has of what is going on in Latin America—the notion that there could be any sort of positive aspect to American society of the relationship with Latin America or even of the migration of Latin Americans is almost nonexistent. I remember for instance about two years ago, I was invited to Northwest Arkansas by the Rockefeller Foundation to speak to business and community leaders about the growing Latino population—I had no idea how big the Latino community is in that region. In that occasion, I discovered that there are some public schools in Fayetteville, Arkansas, where 40 percent of the students are Latino. They are largely Guatemalans who had come to work in the chicken-processing factories of Tyson foods. That area is also headquarters for Walmart, so a lot of people had gone working through Walmart chain and corporate headquarters. What I was stunned by was that all of the business people and the farmers in Northwest Arkansas were saying that, had it not been for the influx of Latinos, all of their towns would have died. There would be no downtown business community if they would not have had agriculture workers. Strangely enough, in Arkansas, they were really glad to have all of these newcomers to their towns and their area because they saw the migration as reviving the area, not necessarily bringing it down. Which is a very different image from what you get through media. So, I am sitting across the table from 10 or 20 of the wealthiest people in the town and big farmers talking about “we don’t know what we would do without these people coming to our area to provide us the labor that we need.” You don’t get those kinds of stories in a lot of the coverage of Latin America migration, nor on what is going on in those countries. I think that part of the problem is that there is a disconnect between most of the national media and what is actually going on in the US as well as in Latin America. The reporters for the most part travel in their own bubbles and with their own agenda. As I said before, news are set primarily by what the government officials that they cover tell them are the big issues.

**There are fewer and fewer reporters, more and more dependence on government officials for access and information, and less and less investigative reporting.**

I think that there is not a lot of independent reporting in the US, and less and less every day. It is not that the reporters are mean or are intentionally trying to sort of parrot the government’s view. It is just that there are fewer and fewer reporters, and more and more dependence on government officials for access and information, and less and less investigative reporting. I think that that is why the people in the USA are suffering in terms of what they are getting about Latin America. How many more stories, even in the *New York Times*, are they going to have about that Venezuela is in crisis? And these stories lack a real examination of the roots of the crisis. Or how many more stories about Brazil and about the corruption in Brazil? All that we are hearing now is about the corruption in Brazil. When Brazil was arising as an economic power in the world there was very little in the US press about how Brazil had suddenly emerged as an economic force certainly in Latin America but also throughout the world. But now that there is a battle among different interest groups in Brazil, we are seeing all these stories about corruption. It is to the detriment of the American public that there is not a deeper historical analysis and no contrasting viewpoints are presented of what is going on in these countries.

**Today the way you make regime change in the world is through corruption investigations and through removing political leaders from office through disinformation campaigns.**

Today military coups have been pretty much eliminated as a form of regime change in the world because they are so obvious. When you put troops into the streets and you depose a government by force, it is a pretty unpopular way of operating. It still happens every once in a while, but for the most part, ruling elites no longer favor military coups as a way of making regime change. Today the way you make regime change in the world is through corruption investigations and through removing political leaders from office through disinformation campaigns. There was a great book back in the eighties from the cultural analyst Neil

Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985). Postman said “you can be misinformed.” Someone who is misinformed just doesn’t have the right information. But, increasingly, in American society people are “disinformed,” which is that they do not have the right information but they think they do, they believe that they do. They believe that they have got the right information but they have been disinformed, and the process of disinformation lays the basis for this kind of regime change under the label of corruption. It is very hard to tell who is corrupt and who is not. We are seeing it in this whole Russia investigation where, not only is the Trump administration being investigated now, but the Trump administration is investigating the investigators—the president is trying to claim that the investigators are corrupt. For the general public, after a while, it becomes really difficult to find out what is the truth.

**The problem is that people are drowning in information in both, false information and erroneous information.**

The reality is that in a world where there is no limit to information, the problem is that people are drowning in information in both, false information and erroneous information. Therefore, to be able to find accurate information is a difficult task. We do not face censorship in the USA. We face drowning in data and tweets and social media—finding the truth through all of that is a difficult process. I think that this is how the elites are increasingly governing today—in the old days they would have just sent the tanks in the street and remove whom they did not like. It is a tougher situation for the public to get accurate information. In Mexico, for example, the government buys off the press—they have developed this mechanism into a science. Similar things happen in this country in terms of government officials providing greater access and more tips to those reporters who cover them “well.” If you cover them critically you get shut out, you do not get any access, and you become less able to do your job. In today’s Mexico, they have been practicing it as an art now—the government has it down to a science in terms of how they control the press. This is still a problem, especially in Latin America.

**The giant media companies are basically controlling “the navigation instruments.”**

Ten or 15 years ago people would have said that the Internet was the salvation, that increasingly we were breaking the control of the dominant media companies in terms of the flow of information, and that eventually everybody could become a reporter or a publisher or a radio station owner thanks to the Internet. It is true that anybody can publish now and produce their own content; but the real question is: Who is going to see it? What kind of critical impact will it be able to have? Increasingly the giant media companies (and there are some new ones now that did not exist 10, 15 years ago) are basically controlling what I call “the navigation instruments,” precisely because we live in a jungle of information. The question is how you navigate through the jungle to get to the best information? This becomes the key: What is your navigation tool? What are your search tools? The real power in the media has shifted now from the producers of the content to the people who control the means by which you acquire your content. Now, for instance, Facebook has become the biggest media powerhouse in the world. Not the *New York Times*, not ABC, not CBS, it is Facebook because supposedly they have two billion people on their network. And they control the algorithms that determine what is a trendy post on Facebook, and only they know their algorithms. Therefore, they essentially control what it is that people will see the most, and the same thing with Google, and with Apple through the phones. These are now the main means by which people get information. An example: I do a quiz on my journalism students every semester to see how they consume media. The young people today do not read newspapers, they do not watch television, they barely get news on their laptop computers—they get everything on their phones. I asked them what is their favorite social media site and how often they go on that site. In one group of students that I had, 16 out of 19 students went on Facebook ten times a day or more, and they read articles that were posted to them by their friends—it is a closed network. Their friends find an article because Facebook tells them what is trending on Facebook. In that sense, Facebook becomes the most powerful media vehicle in the world right now. Twitter is

right behind it—they are not producing their own content, they are just recycling other's content; but there is a selection process in the recycling. The other question is that the very instrument they are using, their phones, influences the content. Marshall McLuhan showed that the medium is the message—well, the very instrument of a smart phone makes it difficult to read long documents. The shorter the better, and therefore, if it is going to be a complex subject, you are not going to be able to read it on your phone, and so you will not read it. The medium is determining the way that people are going to process the information. Whereas it used to be different with a book, you could actually hold the book, you knew you were going to be in for a long read, you had to visualize everything that you were reading using mental exercise. But, now you are on a phone, you don't have a lot of time and you need a quick and condensed read. You don't want any nuance, you don't want any complexity, and that is what people get and that is reflected in how they vote and how they see their political leaders. Simplistic, no complexity, no nuance. Everyone is either white or black, good or bad.

**The media relies on scholarly expertise to provide analysis or context.**

Relying on university experts to provide analysis or context is relatively new. In the last 75 or 100 years of American journalism, and increasingly after, I would say, after World War II, there was an attempt to professionalize. The mass media in the USA in the 1920s, thirties, and forties was really partisan—every newspaper was affiliated with a political party and everyone knew it. The radio stations were commercialized and everyone hated it. There was a huge public revolt against the media, in the thirties and forties, especially so after World War II. Henry Luce, the founder of *Time*, the Time Life empire, headed an initiative to professionalize media and make it less partisan—the Hutchins Commission was created under his initiative. Gradually the work of the commission got all the journalism schools to adopt this idea that reporters and journalists should become more objective and fair in the way that they report the news. Increasingly, I believe, journalists started to rely on experts to interpret for them things that they didn't necessarily know

much about, and so you really had a recognition that specialties should be analyzed by people who knew the subject matter. After World War II, in the fifties and sixties, more attention was paid to specialization—if the topic was politics, a political science professor was consulted; if it was about science, a chemist or a biologist would talk about it and explain the question. Since the Hutchins Commission, journalism has been done in this way. It is generally better to get your information from people who have actually been studying an issue for a while and know something about it, rather than having somebody who just picked it up yesterday. There is always a move to go back to the partisan ways, but this is a rooted practice, and a well-established trend that is going to continue. I would hope so, but nothing is guaranteed. We don't know what is going to happen.

**Initiatives exist to create more effective North-South media communications.**

Regarding alternative connections, in *Democracy Now*, for instance, we have about 300 stations in Latin America that play portions of the show. *Democracy Now* has an entire crew of people (three or four people) who every day translate the entire show into Spanish. They dub the headlines in Spanish so that the Latin American stations can get an actual Spanish voice for all the headlines, and they translate the entire script of every interview so that by noon of that day, the information is available to any station in Latin America that wants it—the entire transcript for the entire show, so that the station can decide what they want to use. A lot of these stations just use the headlines but in Argentina, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo station uses the entire show, like other stations in Honduras, Puerto Rico, and elsewhere. //