

Press (Latin America)

By [Patricia Vega Jiménez](#)

Summary

Latin America experienced the Great War, which consumed Europe between 1914 and 1918, through the press. From the beginning, leading newspapers waged intense, constant, and diverse propaganda campaigns on behalf of both of the quarrelling sides in an attempt to obtain the public's support. The international news agencies and wire networks turned the conflict into the first major media-covered event of the 20th century.

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Introduction

On 29 June 1914, a day after it happened, the foremost Latin American newspapers spread the news of the [assassination](#) of [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#), heir to the throne of the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#), and his wife [Sophie, Archduchess of Austria \(1868-1914\)](#) in Sarajevo. They did not expect that this event would be the beginning of a conflict that would bleed Europe, affect most countries in the world, and involve the press as no other war had done before.

Wars had always been a news subject of first-order importance; however, given certain recent developments, this particular conflict would fill the pages of [printed media](#) around the world in a new way. Prior to the war's onset, the revolution in [transportation](#) had begun to bridge gaps and facilitate the exchange of people, objects, and news. Paper and ink became cheaper at the beginning of the 20th century. Publicity and advertising evolved into the main source of income for newspapers, generating additional dividends that were invested in the acquisition of machinery, which in turn improved the quality of printed text and images. This led to the purchase of stories provided by news agencies. Technological development, particularly submarine cables and [wireless telegraphy](#), made it possible for news to travel

great distances in a fraction of the time, joining continents separated by vast oceans. In addition, the development of persuasion and propaganda strategies, which had been rehearsed during the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the American Civil War (1861-1865), could now be applied to and perfected during the First World War.

Throughout the war, communication played a leading role in forming public opinion in favour of the antagonists' military and political interests. Its importance in the formulation of government policy quickly became evident. The civilian population, both within and outside the battles' geographic perimeters, was subjected to a barrage of [propaganda](#). The armed confrontation transmuted into a reality show. The news management was such that the public, scattered, heterogeneous, and anonymous as it was, increasingly demanded large doses of fresh news on the conflict. Some did so because they were directly affected; others, solely to share in the media representation. Thousands of spectators were witness to a war manufactured by the newspapers and news agencies.

In need of current news to satisfy the demands of an audience they themselves had called to life, the Latin American press produced a version of the war based on the intelligence sent by press agencies, who had an intimate relationship with the nations involved in the conflict. The result was a blatant and unfettered media distortion of the war.

To date, academics have largely ignored the involvement of the Latin American press in the First World War. The aim of this essay is to identify the role played by the main Latin American newspapers in the conflict. The goal is to create a deeper understanding of how the Great War affected newspapers, and how they in turn catered to the demand for war stories in a world just beginning to grapple with technological networks and the ensuing accelerated flow of information.

The Propaganda War

[Propaganda](#) was, and still is, a highly persuasive means of communication. It is of vital importance in times of war, since its primary purpose is to positively influence [neutral nations](#) and undermine enemies. During the First World War, printed text, in the shape of newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, posters, and even graffiti, was the main vehicle for propaganda, although talks and cinema were used occasionally as well.¹

From the onset of the conflict, [Latin America](#) was the target of propaganda from both the Allies and the Central Powers. The opposing powers primarily targeted [Brazil](#), Chile, Argentina, and Mexico, countries of considerable business interest and where the presence of immigrants from warring countries, particularly in southern Europe, was both numerous and culturally, socially, and financially influential.

In Argentina and Uruguay, the Italian presence was substantial, while in southern Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia, German predominance was more evident. Here, German imports and exports were essential to economic survival. Moreover, in urban centres and some agricultural regions, the representatives of German firms acted as secure footholds for Central Power propaganda, managed through the wireless enterprise, Telefunken.

In Chile and Argentina, for example, the clergy collaborated with those spreading [German propaganda](#), due to their deep dislike of the French anticlerical policy. The armies in both nations also leaned toward the Triple Alliance, given that German instructors had reorganised the Chilean militia and that several Argentinean officials had been trained in German schools.²

In the Chilean capital, Santiago, the *Military Gaceta*, primarily for officers, and *La Unión*, a conservative newspaper, both promoted the Central Powers' politics.³ At the same time, in the majority of South American countries, relations with [Great Britain](#) were as old as they were solid, and French culture was viewed as the ideal culture by a large share of the population, particularly by intellectual groups, who ultimately set the course for entire nations. These groups favoured both Reuters and Havas, official news agencies employed by the [British](#) and [French](#) governments respectively.

Through these agencies, the members of the Triple Entente deployed an unprecedented advertising strategy. Its focal point consisted in presenting the war as a clash between German barbarity and [militarism](#), on the one side, and French justice and civility, on the other. The Germans, for their part, attempted to use propaganda to win over Latin American public opinion, presenting the war as an instance of German self-defence against a decadent [France](#) and an expansionist British Empire. [Germany](#) portrayed itself as a model state, reminding its audience of German efficiency, culture, industry, and [science](#).

It is arguable that newspapers shaped the sympathies of the majority of the population in Latin American countries.⁴ Uruguay, for example, exhibited genuine hostility toward Germany, a fact explained by the substantial Italian presence in the country and by the English influence in financial matters. This was further exacerbated by the fact that Uruguayan liberals, agents, and developers of Allied beliefs were Francophiles, a leaning not shared, however, with conservative and Catholic groups.

The Brazilian, Peruvian, and Argentinean press also tended to assert their sympathy for the Triple Entente.⁵ The British took it upon themselves to maintain and strengthen ties with these governments. *La Prensa*, *El Diario*, *La Nación*, *Le Courier de la Plata*, *Critica*, *El Orden*,

and *La Razón Francesa*, among others, stood out in Argentina as pro-Allied papers. They circulated both in the capital city and the provinces. However, several Germanophile newspapers were also disseminated in Buenos Aires: *La Union*, favoured by the Argentinean government, was particularly conspicuous and was distributed for free. *La Gaceta Espanola*, *Boletin Germanico*, *Ultima Hora*, and *El Nacional*⁶ were also distributed, but it was not long before their editors were exiled. In response, they joined intelligence operations.

In Peru, the only journal of note that betrayed a pro-German stance was *La Prensa* in Lima, in addition to the carelessly written provincial publications *La Actualidad de Chiclayo* and *El Sol de Piura*.⁷

Latin American newspapers were unrestrained in their statements, unleashing a violent war of words and thus endangering their governments' neutral positions. In Colombia, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged magazine and newspaper editors to use moderation instead of excessive and grotesque statements against either side.

This was of particular importance given the press' unprecedented calling power. In Brazil, for example, on 3 May 1916, the *Jornal do Comercio* and other publications expressed their outrage at the sinking of the *Rio Branco*, a Brazilian steamboat, by a German [submarine](#). Several tabloid newspapers cried out for war, which caused irate mobs to crowd Rio de Janeiro's main street looking for German targets on which to relieve their anger. The demonstration was stifled in light of the report provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, showing that the ship had been leased to a British company, and had a British crew, thus leading to no Brazilian casualties.

Intelligence groups from the opposing sides unscrupulously bought the influence of writers, editors, and managers of news bodies through subtle subsidies, generous advertising accounts or shameless rewards. Meanwhile, the American press and its spokespeople and the international press agencies never gave up on their attempts to convince the public that German barbarism posed a grave threat to the known world. News companies served not only as government instruments, but also worked for big banks, specifically Morgan House, which had granted the English and the French substantial loans since the beginning of the conflict. The defeat of the Entente would severely compromise the refund of their deposits, further spurring their pro-Entente propaganda.

Both the Allies and the Central Powers conceded that money invested in propaganda was as profitable as military expenditure on the deactivation of their adversaries overseas. In the battle for Latin American sympathies, the Central Powers hoped to keep countries neutral and ports open so as to continue trading, while the Allies expected Latin American nations to

break off relations with the Central Powers and join the war against them. Newspapers, with the help of extremely persuasive elements, served as the space where this battle took shape.

Allied propaganda, subject to American foreign policy rhetoric, proved effective; however, not all German propaganda campaigns were conducted in vain. In Mexico, Germany permeated the grassroots public opinion with its anti-[United States](#) slant, while pro-neutrality and anti-breaking off movements were fanned in Chile, Argentina, and Venezuela.⁸

In Mexico, two ideologically opposed newspapers stood out: *El Universal*, fed by The Associated Press and Reuters, championed the Allied cause. *El Demócrata*, openly Germanophile, was financed by the [German government](#).⁹ This was certainly not the only such newspaper; illustrated journals aimed at the illiterate were circulated under secret German sponsorship, as well as *La Defensa*, *El Boletín de Guerra*, *El Nacionalista*, and the semi-official *El Pueblo*.¹⁰

In Latin America, the press did not always answer to the interests of its government. Official newspapers and those with a certain sense of commitment to their leadership echoed their stance. The press' position varied according to the state of the conflict and the financial interests at stake. In 1917, for example, [Yrigoyen Hipólito's \(1852-1933\)](#) government in Argentina maintained a neutral position despite the fact that the great majority of newspapers proclaimed their support for the Allies.¹¹

Mexico was still weighing its particularly delicate situation with the United States during the conflict. This led [Venustiano Carranza's \(1859-1920\)](#) government to opt out of committing to either of the opposing sides in the conflict, thus retaining interests in both *El Universal* and *El Demócrata*. The former had pro-Allied sympathies, while the latter was a Germanophile journal.¹² In the juncture between the [revolution](#) and the American intervention in the Mexican economy and politics, the United States had to resort to diverse and extensive propaganda strategies to win public opinion, which it never fully procured.

In the first decades of the 20th century, the media, which had introduced [photography](#) and improved its printing and distribution, experienced a peak in its spread, albeit with important differences from country to country. In nations with a large market, such as Mexico or Argentina, urban journal sales rose considerably parallel to the increase in population. The Mexican newspaper *El Hogar* reached 100,000 issues daily, despite the instability brought about by the revolution. In Argentina, which experienced a phase of economic prosperity and political stability up until the coup d'état in 1930, *La Prensa* and *La Nación* reached and even exceeded the daily 100,000-issue mark.

Other countries experienced smaller peaks. In Chile and Peru, the newspapers *El Mercurio* in Santiago and *El Comercio* in Lima came close to or surpassed the 50,000-issue mark. Overall, however, distribution levels across the continent remained relatively low compared to population sizes, which in turn hindered the spread of both news and propaganda.

Series of interferences

In Latin America, newspapers merely reproduced the cables from the news agencies representing the groups at odds with each other. The possibility of sending a correspondent to the conflict zone was unthinkable, not only due to the cost, but also given the hindrances in the form of strict censorship imposed by the warring governments. Access to magazines, official documents, interviews or different types of sources was risky. Latin American newspapers had no choice but to reproduce news cables.

The international news agencies linked to the interests of their own countries would celebrate contracts in which clients were distributed geographically, coinciding with their areas of political, financial, and military information influence. No doubt the policy in news agencies was predicated on state interests.¹³

In some Latin American countries, wires did not arrive directly from the news agency. In Venezuela, for example, dispatches were sent to Panama and Colombia, where the United Fruit Company (UFCO), owner and manager of wireless installations, operated, before reaching Caracas. This meant that the dispatches were subject to the whims, facilities, and conditions of local policies.

A chaotic series of interferences prevailed in Central America. Communications were prepared by war correspondents; professionals in different areas were chosen at random and hired, in most cases, to pick and write up journal chronicles. They sent their press releases in their native language and Morse code to The Associated Press (AP) agency in New Orleans. According to the editorial note published by Costa Rica's *La Información* on 14 August 1914, dispatch traffic prior to its arrival at the newspapers was extensive, going via the Galveston line through Panama, San Juan de Sur, La Cruz, and Las Cañas before reaching the Costa Rican capital, where it was immediately distributed to all the newspapers and high government officials.¹⁴ Due to the chain of interference, some notes were unintelligible, and most were no different from those offered by other newspapers, since the Costa Rican government itself had a contract with the Chief of Cable Office in Nicaragua, as a result of which they received 2.000 words daily.¹⁵ Thus, the cable office operator did not only choose those telegrams he considered appropriate, but also deciphered those in Morse code and then translated them into Spanish. Newspaper owners, acutely aware of the problem,

described the dependence on the San Juan del Sur office, “which seems to enjoy mutilating and disfiguring the reports it deigns to send on to us” as “unseemly.”¹⁶

Those in charge at *La Información* knew that the aerogrammes were merely summaries – of varying quality – of the news that Panama newspapers received via wire from a United Fruit Company employee in Colón. They also recognized that the aerogrammes were tinged by the sender’s own bias. The public thus learned of certain events through the lens of a single individual.¹⁷

There was therefore a long chain of “manipulators”: the correspondent, telegraph operator, national agency, translator, central agency, editor, worldwide distributor, and typesetter. In addition, at least in the beginning, correspondents had to overcome significant hindrances: military [censorship](#), bans from the line of fire, and slow transmission, among others.¹⁸ Besides this, the most popular persuasive method used during the war was the atrocity propaganda, a game at which the English and the Americans proved to be undisputed masters.

Conclusion

One of the main lessons the press learned during the First World War was how to fabricate a war, in the best tradition of [Randolph Hearst \(1863-1951\)](#). Battles were made up, non-existent attacks glorified the wounded and drove up the death count, atrocities were fantasised about, and whole towns were destroyed and rebuilt. The profit lay in the financial dividends obtained by news companies and information agencies, as well as the assurance of the press’ powerful role in manipulating public opinion.

The battle for control of communications brought about varied and lengthy disagreements, even between cable companies on the same side. In this tug-of-war, some companies sank and some emerged; however, the United States’ leading role after the [Paris Peace Conference](#) was secured by The Associated Press, which assumed world leadership and highlighted the strong bond between political power and communication.

Latin American audiences also had a leading role as spectator in a conflict that involved the entire world and was experienced through the press.

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