

Aggregating Latin American News Media for Fun (and Hopefully Enough Profit to Survive): The Ideas Underpinning the *Latin American News Digest*

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Latin American News Digest

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Abstract

This article describes a news service focusing on Latin America. The Digest provides access to 140 stories from Spanish and Portuguese sources every week. By subscribing to the Digest, an instructor can offer students links to translations and abstracts of dozens of articles including, editorials and commentary, coverage of politics, society, the economy, the environment, travel and tourism, arts and culture, and international relations among Latin American countries. The Digest can be used as a tool to engage students in contemporary politics and culture of any area of Latin America.

Keywords: Journalism; Online Media; Latin American News

Latin America has a vibrant culture of journalism. It's a curious fact, however, that surprisingly little overlap exists between news outlets there and the media landscapes north of the Mexican border or across the Atlantic. In the United States, Canada, and Europe, this world of reporting and writing remains largely undiscovered. Indeed, U.S. citizens are notorious for their lack of engagement with the broader world, and this is doubly true in relation to Latin America. As Scotty Reston of *The New York Times* famously quipped, "Americans will do anything for Latin America except read about it." Since the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001, the U.S. government and media have largely ignored Latin America, while policy seems at best to have been set on autopilot. Tellingly, even the Monroe Doctrine has apparently been discarded; while other powers and economic influences like China, Japan, the European Union, and Russia step in, no one in Washington seems to care.

There are many historic ties between the United States and Latin America as well as ongoing economic connections and hemispheric processes, including billions of dollars of economic investment, military commitments, waves of south to north migration, and the illegal drug trade. And of course the number of people living in the U.S. with ties to the region is growing ever larger. Yet people in the U.S. with an interest in Latin America are very poorly served by U.S. media—a state of affairs that began well before 2001. While world news services make half-hearted efforts to cover the region, the labors of their shrinking corps of foreign correspondents only hint at the journalistic riches available. With these outlets placing default emphasis on the U.S. and Europe (and their global perspectives), mainstream media conglomerates often give relatively short shrift to "emerging" regions, while smaller press entities tend to ignore them altogether. But it's not just a matter of the quantity of coverage—though, to be sure, it is very low on average in major papers outside of Latin America. It's also a matter of what is covered. Mainstream journalism often generates a streamlined and overly simplified version of events transpiring in Latin America, with a fairly narrow scope of what's "fit to print" and an even narrower view of acceptable interpretations. Instead of providing diversified news and commentary about Latin America, mainstream journalism often acts as a filtering mechanism, constricting the flow of information and range of opinions. We at *Latin American News Digest* intend to change this sorry state of affairs.

I'm a historian of modern Latin America but also a news junkie, and I've always believed that engagement with the region must be founded on knowledge of its current affairs. I've always wanted, therefore, to follow news about Latin America and, more specifically, news coverage generated in Latin America. Before the creation of the Internet, there were few options. As a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, I could go to the reading room of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection and read copies of the region's major newspapers; however, they were weeks old at best and the process of gathering them was cumbersome, time-consuming, and rather spotty. Yet, imperfect as my method was, when I could find the time to read these regional sources, I felt a thousand times better informed than if I'd relied on the anemic coverage produced by U.S. newspapers. There aren't many places like the Benson collection, so when I left Austin, I was truly cast into the "wilderness"—where I wandered mournfully until Latin American papers began to go online.

Now, with so much information available online, the problem is where to start. Roughly 585 million people live in the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking countries of Latin America, and there are a lot of interesting things happening there. So the perhaps crazy or quixotic question is, how does one follow news across such a vast region? Or is Latin America simply too big for such a quest? Well, if broad coverage of the region is an impossible dream, then so is most journalism. A similar argument could be made against trying to cover individual countries with one hundred, two hundred, or over three hundred million inhabitants, such as Mexico, Brazil, and the United States. What is "enough" news? What does it mean to be "well-informed"? Just how many papers do most well-informed people read—a local paper, a national paper, and perhaps a couple of news magazines?

Since I've never found a consistent, in-depth source of news from across Latin America and of news coverage produced in the region, I decided to create one myself. At the *Latin American News Digest*, we strive to provide North Americans and Europeans (and Africans, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Australians, and even Latin Americans, who often only read about their own countries) with wide-spectrum coverage of news and commentary written by Latin Americans for Latin Americans. The *Digest's* goals are straightforward: to present a regional perspective and provide context for understanding it; to amplify news coverage produced in Latin America; to be concrete, current, and attentive to what

journalists inside the region think is important; and to point to differences in coverage there and elsewhere. We place ourselves at the intersection of academia and journalism, hoping to encourage cross-fertilization by offering a tool for specialists but also for students, activists, or anyone interested in news. The value we add comes not just from presenting the highlights but from recognizing patterns across countries, noting differences, following themes, aggregating, and synthesizing. We digest over one hundred newspapers and magazines, and that number is growing.

The *Digest* also does its utmost to increase the number of voices heard and expand the diversity of explanations provided. To this end, we bring out points of view (on both the right and the left) that are seldom or, mostly likely, never heard in the “developed” world’s media. Latin America does not speak with one voice, and many of these voices say things that discomfort groups that hold social, economic, and political power in the region (or over it). Critiques of the status quo as defined in Washington DC, New York, London, Paris, or Berlin might as well not exist, as far as the mainstream media “in the north” are concerned. They have no patience with ideas that are deemed “immature” or “unserious,” or that simply don’t tag along obediently behind the accepted narratives. A prime example is the lack of reporting around critiques of the market economy and the so-called “Washington Consensus.” Many Latin Americans lost their faith in the power of market forces to solve all problems (indeed they lost it years ago), but you would never know this reading “serious” U.S. press coverage of the region.

Thanks to the Internet, most Latin American newspapers are now a click away, but creating and sustaining a regional perspective is still a challenge. Paradoxically, this explains why consistent overviews are in short supply. We Latin Americanists, of all disciplines, are also given to myopic single-country infatuations, a tendency to focus at most on one or two countries, “our countries,” or a sub-region (Central America or the Southern Cone perhaps) where we spend most of our time when we visit the region. Of course, this is good, in that it allows us to build up deep knowledge of certain places and come to understand what makes them unique. But it can also be bad if we start to see the countries we know best as “special” or “exceptional” cases, and overlook parallels. Though most would agree in the abstract that a regional perspective is a good thing, in practice we often fail to think regionally because doing so is harder and more unwieldy. I also admit that I have a professionally tinted agenda driving my

effort to supply a much-needed regional perspective. For one thing, I want to counter the move away from area studies in some disciplines, especially political science and economics. Secondly, I want to fight the (natural?) inclination of some historians to ignore the present in their classes (some really do believe that anything in the last 50 years is “current events” and therefore unimportant to historians.)

Our effort is a work in progress. At the *Latin American News Digest* we’ve climbed to the lower reaches of the *altiplano*, cruising at around 18,000 to 20,000 words every two weeks, providing links to every story or opinion piece we touch on (usually around 140 or so). But in time we plan to hike to the high country and provide the same amount of coverage and more on a weekly basis. We think the *Digest* is a valuable resource for academics, who can use it for their own personal information and for the classroom. Our organizational structure reflects that of the papers and newsmagazines we draw on, with a main story, news in brief, editorials and commentary, and coverage of politics, society, the economy, the environment, travel and tourism, arts and culture, and international relations among Latin American countries and with the rest of the world. Students and scholars in various disciplines can stay current on issues that are unique to particular countries, and on common and recurring themes across the region. The *Digest* is easily used for enriching classroom discussions, country and area studies projects, vocabulary building and reading comprehension in Spanish and Portuguese, and understanding Inter-American relations

But at this point we are up against the hard place of the true unknown as we push into territory where the news media are struggling—that is, getting people to pay for “content” online. The sustainability and growth of our digest will depend on building a subscription base, of both individuals and of institutions. In 1984, Steward Brand famously said that “information wants to be free,” yet most people tend to conveniently forget the other part of his statement, that information also “wants to be expensive.” For news coverage, both of these assertions largely miss a key dynamic: Nothing is free, period, but given the economics of scale that are possible online, it can and should be *very inexpensive*. Therefore our yearly subscription rate for individuals is just that: absurdly cheap, at \$2 per month. You can’t buy a double espresso in Washington, DC for that amount. And as more university library systems buy subscriptions, it will be even more economical for academics to use in their classes. The *Latin American News*

Digest is an experiment, an evolving model, and our bet on a hunch that we know where sustainable media may be going, where it may have to go, to survive.

Author Biography



W. John Green was trained as a historian of modern Latin America. After earning a B.A. in History and Spanish from Baylor University in 1986, he received an M.A. in Latin American Studies in 1989, and a Ph.D. in Latin American History in 1994, both from the University of Texas at Austin. He has lived and traveled throughout the region over more than three decades, from Mexico to the Southern Cone, as a student, researcher, professor, occasional journalist, and observant tourist. He has taught Latin American history at a number of colleges and universities including the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá, SUNY-Oswego, Virginia Tech, the University of South Carolina at Columbia, Hampden-Sydney College, and Washington and Lee University. He has held a Fulbright Fellowship in Colombia, as well as a Virginia Foundation for the Humanities Fellowship in Charlottesville, VA. He has written a biweekly column on Colombia, served as an Andean country specialist for Amnesty International USA, for many years was a Senior Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) in Washington D.C., and has published widely on Latin American history and current trends. He is the author of *Gaitanismo, Left Liberalism, and Popular Mobilization in Colombia* (Gainesville: The University Press of Florida, 2003). The book also appeared in a Spanish translation funded by the Colombian Banco de la República under the title *Gaitanismo, Liberalismo de Izquierda y Movilización Popular* (Medellín: Fondo Editorial EAFIT, 2013). And his new book, *A History of Political Murder in Latin America: Killing the Messengers of Change*, is forthcoming from SUNY Press in June 2015.