

## Satiric Magazines as Hybrid Alternative Media in Latin America

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### Abstract

This article explores the cases of two satirical publications—*The Clinic* (Chile, 1998-) and *Barcelona* (Argentina, 2003-). Through critical humor, visual subversions, and parody, these independent magazines challenged mainstream journalism and official political discourse, offering alternative interpretations about the ruling class and society after traumatic periods—the Pinochet’s military dictatorship in Chile and the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina. Through interviews with the editors and content analysis, this article examines how these satirical publications responded to their respective national contexts by questioning the functioning of power on several levels of society, and how they evolved after they became popular negotiating their space within the national mediascape. This study also suggests the notion of “hybrid alternative media” to describe these publications, which became part of a liberating process of collective healing. Initially perceived in opposition to mainstream media in contexts when the press’ credibility had decreased, they filled gaps in their society’s political communication.

**Keywords:** Satiric Press, Latin American Magazines, Alternative Magazines, Hybrid Alternative Media, Chilean Journalism; Argentinean Journalism.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Satire, “a blend of wit and criticism, aimed particularly at political leaders and institutions” (Collins 1996, 645), has had a global resurgence during the past decades. More specifically, satiric infotainment as a sub-genre that parodies news and journalism has become a phenomenon in political communication in many nations. In the United States, comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert were considered two of the country’s most influential “journalists,” and the fake news magazine *The Onion* played a critical role in reframing the news agenda after 9/11. Global adaptations of *The Daily Show* have become leading political programs in countries like Germany (*Heute Show*) or Egypt (*Al Bernameg*). In France, the most shocking terrorist attack on the freedom of the press was directed towards the satiric magazine *Charlie Hebdo* on January 7, 2015, causing the death of 12 people and highlighting the role that satire plays in today’s socio-political discourse. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of satiric infotainment in Latin America remains scarcely explored<sup>2</sup>.

This article explores the cases of two contemporary satirical magazines—*The Clinic* (Santiago, Chile) and *Barcelona* (Buenos Aires, Argentina)—which challenged hegemonic values after traumatic national experiences (the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina, respectively). Through the use of biting

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<sup>1</sup> Este artículo fue originalmente publicado en *Latin American Research Review*, 54 (4), pp. 944-957, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> The only regional study on contemporary Latin American satiric infotainment, “Satiric TV in the Americas: Critical Metatainment as Negotiated Dissent” (Alonso 2018), focuses on television and digital platforms, analyzing primarily cases from Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador.

parody, fake news and visual subversion, these satirical magazines incorporated an original journalistic approach, a critical perspective on national and international topics, and new angles and ways of telling public interest stories. Through interviews with the editors (conducted, first, in 2005 and then ten years later in 2015) and content analysis, this article analyzes the relation of *The Clinic* and *Barcelona* to their socio-political contexts, their patterns of production, and their evolution after they became popular. Building upon theory on satiric infotainment and using the notion of “hybrid alternative media,” this article explores how these satirical publications negotiated their space within the national mediascape and their meaning between alternative, oppositional, and mainstream characteristics. In an era of increasing globalization, these publications highlight the idea that the relation between local culture and media still predominates. They established a direct dialog with the national context and can be considered as social catalysts with an important role within a process of collective healing after a traumatic crisis.

### **Satiric Infotainment as Hybrid Alternative Media**

Infotainment—media forms that “blur traditional distinctions between information-oriented and entertainment-based genres” (Baym 2008, 2276)—has usually been framed negatively for democracy and political communication (Postman 1985, Garcia Canclini 2001, Bourdieu 1998). However, contemporary satirists have also used it to negotiate an appealing and critical voice in public discourse that critiques, first, journalism and media practices, and then, a variety of social and political values. Popular TV shows like *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* proved to be influential in US political communication and political action (Baym 2010, Jones 2010, Day 2011), and

some critics even called these shows “neo-modern” journalism (Baym 2005) or new types of public journalism (Faina 2012). The “fake news” magazine *The Onion*, for example, was said to have developed a “call for healing” after the 9/11 attacks (O'Rourke and Rodriguez 2004). By exposing the news as mere production and reframing them as mediations, *The Onion*'s meta-discourse invited citizens “to address racism and fundamental questions about the motives behind the attacks, and to lay out an agenda for learning about cultures and political histories of people involved in the war on terror” (Achter 2008). In this article, I argue that *The Clinic* and *Barcelona* played a similar healing, cathartic, and reconciliatory role through transgressive humor in their respective societies after a traumatic socio-political event.

Satire is a type of humor that ridicules human vices and follies through the use of parody, irony, and grotesquery; it aims to hold people and institutions accountable for their actions, attacking “dangerous religious, political, moral, or social standards” (Cuddon 1991, 202). Connecting with Bakhtin's (1984) conceptualizations of carnival—a prevailing spirit of fun mixed with social criticism—contemporary satire has established itself as a transgressive space to mock authority. In the case of the satiric press or satiric infotainment, its primary target is traditional journalism and the mainstream media. Its use of parody unveils the artifice in contemporary news practices, while critical humor provides the tools to engage in serious political criticism. The label of “fake news” allows satire to say what traditional journalism cannot. Its deconstruction of news and political rhetoric is developed through the practice of “political culture-jamming.” Derived from the Situationist movement<sup>3</sup> and its strategy of *détournement* (which means “turning

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<sup>3</sup> The Situationist International (SI), an international organization of writers, artists and social critics, was active in Europe from 1957 to 1972. It aimed to eliminate capitalism and revolutionize everyday life.

around” or “turning upside down”), culture jamming is a symbolic form of protest that “targets central symbols of dominant discourses, deconstructs the discourse, and reintroduces the symbols in alternative contexts” (Wettergren 2003, 28). Contemporary satire uses political culture-jamming to add a subversive interpretation to the continuous stream of political images, exploiting leverage points – factual errors, logical contradictions, and incongruities – in both the dominant political discourse and the media that disseminate it (Warner 2007). Satire then also becomes a tool to enforce accountability by pointing out falsehoods, inconsistencies, or inconsequential news blown out of proportion (Painter and Hodges 2010). It challenges the legitimacy of serious news and forces media professionals and the audience to think more responsibly about what journalism should look like (Feldman 2007). In this sense, the label of “fake news” does not mean that the information it imparts is untrue. As Jones (2007) noted, satiric infotainment is “fake” only in that it refuses to make claims to authenticity. Indeed, its humor offers a means of reestablishing common-sense truths to counter the spectacle and artifice of politicians and the media. At the same time, any notion of “fake” depends upon an equal conception of “real”: “Fake news necessitates assumptions about some kind of authentic or legitimate set of news practices, ideals that one rarely hears articulated or necessarily sees as evident today” (Baym 2005, 261). In a media environment where an increasingly savvy public realizes that mainstream news are no more “real” than satire is “fake” (Jones 2007), news becomes defined and constrained by a set of arbitrary cultural practices open for reconsideration. In this sense, many satiric infotainment contents can be considered as an experiment in journalism, an “alternative journalism” that uses satire to interrogate power and parody to critique contemporary

news. Furthermore, today's satiric infotainment questions conventions of public speech and how we make sense of the political world. It is ultimately a struggle about meaning. As part of this process, satire performs the important function of saying what is otherwise unsaid, especially in certain sociopolitical contexts:

When historical reality presents periods of social and political rupture (such as culture wars, hot wars, and unpopular leaders) or mind-numbing manufactured realities (such as celebrity culture, media spin, and news management), satire becomes a potent means for enunciating critiques and asserting unsettling truths that audiences may need or want to hear (Gray, Jones, and Thompson 2009, 15).

Because of its transgressive and unsettling nature, satire has always found it difficult to make its way into mainstream mass media. This is true not only because satire has usually targeted values and practices of the oligarchic or corporate media, but also because its transgressive nature risks alienating segments of their broad audiences, therefore affecting the potential advertising which has been a foundational method of support of commercial media. While the situation varies according to socio-political contexts and platforms, Latin American socio-political satiric magazines have usually been born as independent, alternative media projects. "Alternative media," nevertheless, is a very ambiguous concept that has been used to refer to a variety of non-mainstream communication practices. Media scholars have noted that it is "a term so elastic as to be devoid of virtually any signification" (Abel 1997, 79) or that alternative media is oxymoronic: "Everything is, at some point, alternative to something else" (Downing 2001, ix). Searching for common ground, Chris Atton (2002) defined alternative media as much by its capacity to generate non-standard, often infractory methods of creation, production, and distribution as by its content. In the case of the alternative press, it develops its own construction of news based on alternative values and frameworks of

newsgathering, sources, and access (Atton 2002, 4). O'Sullivan (1994) believes a primary goal of alternative media promotes radical social change as they “avowedly reject or challenge established and institutionalized politics, in the sense that they all advocate change in society or at least a critical reassessment of traditional values” (O'Sullivan 1994, 10). Similarly, Downing's notion of “radical media” refers to media that is “generally small scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives” (Downing 2001, v).

As can be noted, the goals of satire and alternative media share their counter-cultural, anti-mainstream and critical spirit. While communication scholars in Latin America tended to discuss the potential of alternative media as a counterbalance to the trend toward transnational communication and cultural imperialism (Reyes Matta 1983), these debates placed alternative media as a rigid, marginal form that seek the “construction of a new hegemony” (Reyes Matta 1983, 52). Rodriguez (2001) has criticized this vision not only because of its narrow categories but also because “in this David versus Goliath scenario, alternative media is frequently declared a failure” (Rodriguez, 2001, 11). The case studies analyzed here are positioned within the tension of “alternative” and “oppositional” as defined by Raymond Williams: “Alternative culture seeks a place to coexist within the existing hegemony, whereas oppositional culture aims to replace it” (McGuigan 1992, 25). More importantly, this study emphasizes Atton's idea that an alternative publication might be interrogated as to its radical level in terms of a multidimensional character, a perspective that privileges the overlap and intersection of dimensions, evidencing that an alternative publication is, in the end, a hybrid product that includes mixed voices and discourses. This “crossover”

might include “ideas, content, style, and not least, people between what might be termed the alternative and the mainstream” (Harcup 2005). This *mélange* is framed in a global scenario where media content and public discourses have been increasingly shaped by hybridization: the thorough melding of news, politics, show business, and marketing. Baym (2005) called this process “discursive integration,” in which these once differentiated discourses “have lost their distinctiveness and are being melded into previously unimagined combinations” (262). . Scholars have argued that globalization produces the emergence of a variety of “hybrid,” “creolized,” or “glocal” phenomena, in which local elements are incorporated within globalized forms and other combinations (Robertson 1995). While hybridity is an intrinsic characteristic of post-colonial realities like Latin American nations, the production and consumption of hybrid cultural products represent a struggle for meanings between classes within countries, between high and popular cultures, and between local, national and imported cultural traditions (Garcia Canclini 1995, Kraidy 2005). For Martin-Barbero (1993), it reveals the syncretic nature of popular culture that both adopts and resists the dominant culture and also transforms it. In this sense, hybridization describes a process in which elements of different cultures are synthesized together into new forms that reflect elements of the original cultures, but constitute distinct new ones (Garcia Canclini, 1995).

As a multi-layered, hybrid form in itself, satire is “mainly about a time and a place and people” (Test 1991, 35). It helps individuals to create connections to others, an imagined community based on the audience’s moral commonality (Schutz 1977, 332). Despite the increasing process of globalization, the publications analyzed here confirm that national contexts remain indispensable. Media and national cultures still have ties

that bind them (Waisbord 1998). As noted by Hall: “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific” (Hall 1990, 222). In the case of *The Clinic*, this period was the democratic transition after the bloody dictatorship of Pinochet in Chile; for *Barcelona*, it was after the economic collapse of Argentina in 2001.

**Case one: *The Clinic*, the post-Pinochet satiric press of Chile**

The satiric magazine *The Clinic* was first published in Santiago soon after former Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet was arrested in London in 1998 for human rights violations. Backed by the United States, Pinochet took power in September 11, 1973, through a coup d'état against socialist president Salvador Allende. Under Pinochet, the Chilean military was responsible for developing a campaign of widespread, violent repression that led to more than 3,000 dead or missing people and forced thousands into exile (Dinges 2004). The media, in particular the newspaper *El Mercurio*, the biggest mainstream newspaper in the country, played an important role in Pinochet's rise. After receiving around 2 million dollars from the CIA, *El Mercurio* developed a campaign to destabilize Allende's government (Kornbluh 2003), supported Pinochet's coup and subsequent regime, and did not question nor investigate the accusations of human rights violations committed during the dictatorship (Aguero 2008).

In spite of the strong censorship during Pinochet's regime, oppositional publications existed (and resisted), such as *Fortín Mapocho*, *Hoy*, *Apsi*, and *Análisis*. A pioneer example of an attempt to modernize the Chilean press during this time was *La*

*Época*<sup>4</sup>, a newspaper that played an important role as the nation moved toward the 1988 Chilean national plebiscite, a national referendum to determine whether Pinochet should extend his rule. At the same time, the plebiscite campaign marked a breaking point for oppositional voices to be heard in the mass media. While Chilean television had not offered any critical political debate since the coup, in advance of the plebiscite the opposition received 15 minutes of TV advertising time each night for its “No” campaign. The broadcast covered topics related to human rights abuses, but also introduced elements of humor influenced by the joyful language of television advertising. After Pinochet lost the plebiscite, most oppositional media gradually disappeared when their financial supporters (such as international groups and European advertisers) no longer considered them essential (Sorensen 2011). In the commercial advertising-driven Chilean marketplace of the democratic transition dominated by the duopoly of *El Mercurio* and COPESA, few critical publications survived<sup>5</sup>.

Pinochet left the presidency in 1990 but kept power as Commander in Chief and Senator for life. The subsequent democratic governments were able to maintain the economic stability that began in the mid-eighties, largely influenced by the free-market policies promoted by the so-called Chicago Boys, and turned Chile into one of the best performing economies in Latin America. During the 1990s, Chilean public discourse experienced an overwhelming period of denial and rejection of claims about the years of state terrorism while celebrating the economic growth that had its roots in the neoliberal

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<sup>4</sup>In spite of its initial independent journalism and editorial success, *La Época* could not adapt to the new democratic transition period. Its editorial stand became pro-government and lost its critical edge. The founder of *La Época*, Emilio Fillipi, was appointed as Chilean Ambassador to Portugal by the newly elected president, Patricio Aylwin. Without an effective business model, the newspaper went through a deep economic crisis and disappeared in 1998 (Alves 2005).

<sup>5</sup> An important publication during the democratic transition was the cultural magazine *Rocinante* (1998-2005) that maintained a critical discourse against the neoliberal mentality established in the country.

policies implemented by the military dictatorship (Moulian 1997). Since Pinochet left power, the authorities tried to construct an image of a solid country and a perfect transition. However, it was unreal: “There has not been a purification of the karma produced by seventeen years of terror. Current Chile is based on impunity, on the symbolic application of punishments, on the absence of truth, on a historic responsibility never assumed by the Armed Forces or the businessmen,” wrote sociologist Tomás Moulian in 1997 (66), the year before Pinochet’s arrest<sup>6</sup>.

The media played an important role in maintaining impunity and the absence of truth. At the time when Pinochet was arrested, an important part of the mainstream press was still pro-Pinochet (Macari 1999). While the international media condemned the dictator as a violator of the constitution and human rights, the Chilean mainstream media’s language was full of euphemisms: instead of “dictator” or “dictatorship,” the Chilean press used “retired General” or “military regime;” and instead of “crimes against humanity, murder, and torture,” the communication establishment used “the process” (Velasco 2004). In this conservative media environment, a new generation of journalists, headed by writer Patricio Fernández, created *The Clinic*. It was first published in 1998 as a satiric pamphlet to question the way the press portrayed news about the dictator (Alonso 2005). “There was still a lot of distrust and fear. We tried to turn the old man into a human being. The untouchable became touchable,” Fernández said (Personal Interview, 2005). The editors came up with the name for the publication from the hospital

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<sup>6</sup> In spite of the general impunity, an important reconciliatory event during the democratic transition was the creation of The National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation Report (also known as the Rettig Report), produced in 1991 by a commission designated by President Patricio Aylwin. It investigated human rights abuses resulting in death or disappearance during the dictatorship and found that over 2,000 people were killed for political reasons.

where Pinochet was interned (The London Clinic) while he awaited legal struggles regarding his future. Since its inception, *The Clinic* established a clear dialogue with the role of the media in the country: it did not only targeted *El Mercurio* and its conservative political stance, but also included the slogan “Firme junto al pueblo” (Firm Next to the People), copied from the Left-wing Chilean newspaper *Clarín*, which was closed after the coup in 1973. In this way, it positioned itself ideologically within the Chilean mediascape.

*The Clinic* exploited the figure of Pinochet and his cronies. The dictator had been the main media figure of his authoritarian regime. After 1990, as the Commander in Chief of the Army, he maintained a significant presence in the media during the democratic transition, and after his detention in London, the attention generated by the judicial process continued to position him as a main topic in the news agenda. This was intensified by the accusations of corruption related to his secret bank accounts (Velasco 2004, 19). Through ridicule, *The Clinic* transformed the powerful image of the former dictator and his regime, offering a new perspective that attracted readers who had not seen irreverent opposing views in the press for decades. Examples include the early covers of the magazine: “En Agosto Cagó Augusto” (“August Shit on Augusto,” August 10, 2000), “Hombre Muerto Caminando” (“Dead Man Walking,” March 9, 2000) and “El Rey ha Muerto, Viva el Reo” (“The King is Death; Life to the Prisoner,” February 8, 2001) are the leading titles of covers that show the physical and political decay of the former dictator upon his extradition to Chile.

In the beginning, *The Clinic* was not designed to become a successful commercial publication. It had barely six pages, just two colors, and free distribution. Editors

produced eight self-funded issues. Then, they invested around one million Chilean pesos (about \$1,500 US dollars) and started *The Clinic* as a biweekly, with 16 pages, designed and edited on a personal computer and with a circulation of 10,000. Fernández remembered that during that period every issue seemed like the last one: “We had no commercial concerns, but a serious ideological commitment. We created new sections and the people liked them. The magazine was a chaos that found its own personal organization” (Fernández, Personal Interview, 2005).

Like the US magazine *The Onion*, *The Clinic* turned some contents of the news agenda into fiction to “better tell the truth” (Fernández, Personal Interview, 2005). Its initial formula also included satiric commentary, subversive illustrations, and caricatures by local artists. *The Clinic*’s covers became an essential part of its distinctive features. The ironic photomontages took advantage of the large pages of the tabloid format, some in color and others in black and white. An early example of this is the cover in which Pinochet appears dressed in Che Guevara’s emblematic outfit with the ironic insult: “Che Tu Madre” (August 18, 2005). Abundant examples of covers are available on *The Clinic*’s website, starting with the issue 148. Some issues have also become collectables in Chile, for example, the special issues for the 30th and 40th anniversary of the 9/11 coup and the issues after the death of Pinochet, in which the face of the dead dictator is shown, first, with his eyes closed and the headline “Liz Taylor,” and then, in the second special edition, the same picture shows him with one eye open with the headline “Cuidaííto” (“Be Careful”).

In addition to the popular section of fictional headlines, editors invited a variety of Chilean intellectuals, artists, writers, poets, and journalists to participate (such as the anti-

poet Nicanor Parra, the transgender performer/writer Pedro Lemebel, or the award-winning novelist Roberto Bolaño). The magazine also included “secret insider sources.” Several journalists who worked for the mainstream press collaborated with the publication by leaking information that had not been published in the traditional media or by writing stories bylined with pseudonyms. At the same time, *The Clinic* integrated an important space for letters to the editors, which highlighted the importance of interaction with citizens, and an often-confrontational editorial bylined by Fernández. While *The Clinic* continually parodied *El Mercurio* (they even created a section named *El Mercurulo*), the magazine also served as a platform for attempts of reconciliation between the media and the public. An example of this was the mea culpa letter that María Angélica de Luigi, a former journalist for *El Mercurio* during the 1980s, published in *The Clinic* (De Luigi 2004). In this emotional letter, she admitted her indifference to reporting about human rights violations during the regime, remembered her colleagues “desaparecidos,” and asked for forgiveness from society.

When the editors realized that Pinochet would not be an eternal topic, they faced the country’s problematic democratic reality. While in general terms the country was well off, it also remained a very unequal, frivolous and conservative society. So, *The Clinic* tried to challenge the diverse spheres that controlled and manipulated power, from politicians and businessmen to the mainstream media and entertainment. Despite its affinities with the Chilean Left, they tried to remain critical of power during the presidency of Ricardo Lagos, who supported the publication in its beginnings. *The Clinic* realized that beyond the image of Pinochet, Chilean society could be described as “permanently absurd.” This absurdity became the news and was reflected in the different

sections of the magazine, such as *Quinta de Recreo* (analysis of the media agenda), *Historia Nacional de la Infamia* (an account of critical episodes of Chilean history), *La Carne* (an unprejudiced and colloquial column on sex), *Caldo de Cultivo* (reviews and commentaries on the local cultural scene), *Los 100 personajes menos influyentes de Chile* (on common citizens), and *The Clinic Interview* (an anthology of these interviews was later published as a book). At the same time, *The Clinic* engaged in an observation of urban contemporary Chile, covering topics not often reported in the Chilean media, such as on all the varieties of prostitution in Santiago or the investigation into the diverse alteration methods in high demand drugs that circulate in the country, especially among young people. In-depth investigative pieces increasingly began to appear in the issues. Even though these stories focused on current politics, social scandals, or any newsy hot topic, *The Clinic* was committed not to forget the dictatorial past. They continued publishing stories like the interview with Manuel Contreras (former director of the DINA, Chilean Intelligence Service during the dictatorship); a conversation with Alberto Cardemil (former sub-secretary of the military regime), an investigative story on Iván Moreira (politician of the UDI, the right-wing party, and defender of Pinochet), and a variety of features and columns on crimes committed during the dictatorship. Partly because of the government's release of the 2004 Valech Report, which detailed the cases of victims of torture under the dictatorship, *The Clinic* became a leading source for the coverage of human rights discourses in the post-Pinochet Chile (Sorensen 2011). In order to not alienate potential readers, journalists at *The Clinic* learned how skillfully embed "hard-hitting human rights stories among silly jokes, cartoons, photos, and references to popular culture" (Sorensen 2011, 420).

Similarly, more recent covers about local politics also trace the links between today's political players and Pinochet, connecting them humorously with current pop culture references, such as the Chilean soccer team (October 8, 2015) or the last movie of the Star Wars saga (October 22, 2015). After 9/11 and during the US invasion of Iraq, *The Clinic* also maintained a consistent attack on George W. Bush's administration and his foreign policies. It did not criticize only the US interventionist foreign policies, which directly affected Chile and allowed Pinochet to grab power, but also the authoritarian governments of Fidel Castro in Cuba and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Its political stand on the Latin American political ideology spectrum might be summarized by one of its satirical headlines in a special issue on Fidel Castro: "CIA plans to leave Castro alive to destabilize Cuba economically" (August 10, 2006).

By 2005, *The Clinic* was Chile's highest circulating magazine (around 70,000 per issue) and published 40 pages, except for special issues that contain 76 pages. It economically survived through sales (its price was accessible, 500 pesos, around two dollars) instead of advertising (*The Clinic* initially did not draw much advertising due to its controversial editorial stand). However, this situation changed as readership increased. Editors also used the brand they created to generate revenues. They opened a *The Clinic*'s store in downtown Santiago, where they sold anthologies of their best interviews, posters of their more popular covers, special issues, CDs, documentaries, and t-shirts, among other souvenirs. For many years, they kept their budget tight and the journalist team small. The director and four editors worked with a group of ten people, including reporters and unpaid interns. The newsroom became a hands-on school for young reporters, forming a new generation of journalists.

*The Clinic* introduced alternative ways to report on Chilean society, but the editors preferred not to consider themselves as “alternative,” believing that this term placed them in a marginal sphere. “The one that says that something is alternative might reserve the center for someone else, usually for what we are against. *The Clinic* wants to fight for the center, wants to transform the center,” Fernández said in 2005. Ten years later, sitting in his office in Santiago, Fernández reaffirmed this position:

A marginal magazine that pretends to keep being marginal is a failed magazine, because that means that your option is to be on the fringes and not have your ideas succeed. Here [in Chile] I think that our ideas have been incorporated into the country’s democratic life... *The Clinic* changed from being only a small club of friends to a world incorporated into Chilean society.  
(Patricio Fernández, Personal Interview, 2015).

By the end of 2015, *The Clinic* had been in circulation for more than 17 years and could barely be considered alternative. Almost 600 issues later, in a country of around 17 million people, the magazine had become a weekly with almost 140,000 readers, one million Twitter followers and a website with more than 3 million unique visitors a month<sup>7</sup>. According to the editor, the magazine changed with the evolution of Chile:

The magazine was born in 1998 in a country where film censorship still existed, divorce was not legal, sodomy was a crime, senators were still appointed by the government. It was the end of the second period of the democratic transition with Eduardo Frei. Chile was a different country in terms of freedom. Advertising about condoms was scandalous. The archbishop of Santiago published a letter about the moral crisis of society... I would be embarrassed to publish the first covers of *The Clinic* now because of how conservative they were, but they were outrageous in that context. Was *The Clinic* extremely avant-garde? Yes and no. Yes, for Chile, not for the world... Humbly, I think that we helped to change Chilean culture.  
(Patricio Fernández, Personal Interview, 2015).

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<sup>7</sup> The online version (<http://www.theclinic.cl/>) was created in November 2004, and has significantly improved during the last decade.

In times of a global economic and institutional crisis of the journalism industry, *The Clinic* found alternative ways to financially survive:

Since advertisers were very resistant to work with our the magazine, we had to find other ways to survive: we organized events, music shows, parties, we even organized a national striptease championship in a theater, with 2000 regular citizens (workers, students) who were completely naked on the stage. We had a store where we sold souvenirs with the brand of *The Clinic*. Then some businessmen offer us to make a franchise of bars. That's when it became clear for us that *The Clinic* was not only a magazine, it was a brand. And this brand was attractive and generated trust; it was associated with freedom, disobedience, difference, certain political options, humor, and with the idea of not wanting to take the world too seriously. (Patricio Fernández, Personal Interview, 2015).

Demystifying the symbols of the country's traumatic past, *The Clinic* succeeded as a cathartic therapy that functioned as part of a national healing process and then adapted to Chile's imperfect democratic transition while establishing itself as a major media player. When asked in 2005 about his projections for the magazine, Fernández joked that he hoped *El Mercurio* would become a supplement of *The Clinic*. "A humorous supplement," he added. When asked the same question in 2015, the editor responded: "I have no idea. It might become, I don't know, maybe a magazine about business" ("una revista de negocios").

### **Case 2: Barcelona, the Argentinean satirical press post-2001 economic crisis**

After the military dictatorship (1976-1982) that waged one of the crudest dirty wars of the region with casualties of approximately 30,000 "desaparecidos" (and around a hundred journalists among them), Argentina suffered an inflationary crisis during its democratic transition. In the midst of economic turmoil, President Carlos Menem, of the Peronist party, took power in 1989. After being elected with a populist discourse that

promised a “revolución productiva” (productive revolution) and “salariozo” (a substantial growth of salaries), Menem betrayed his voters and made a radical political turn toward neoliberalism (Weyland 2003, Wehner 2004, Bonnet 2008, Fair 2014, Piva 2010). In the midst of rampant government corruption, his administration implemented a series of structural reforms based on the privatization of state companies, the reduction of public social spending, commercial deregulation, an increase in external debt, and other measures that principally benefitted the interests of business and corporate elites. The “Ley de Convertibilidad” (Law of Conversion) – which established parity between the Argentinean peso and the U.S. dollar – created a fictitious economy that minimized inflation and raised the country to an apparent state of wellbeing. The GNP grew an average of 7.9% annually from 1991 to 1994, salaries increased, and the middle class grew its consumer capacity. Although this economic model collapsed some years later, from the mid 90s the social impact was already clearly manifested in the growth of unemployment and poverty indexes (Rapoport 2003).

In 1999, Argentina entered a recession. When the economic crisis worsened in 2001, people began withdrawing large sums of money from their bank accounts, causing a run on the banks. The government enacted a set of measures, which included the devaluation of the national currency (it ended the pegging of the Argentinean peso to the dollar). The infamous *Corralito* effectively froze all bank accounts, allowing only minor sums of cash to be withdrawn. This led to a popular insurrection that reached its most critical point in the violent incidents of December 19 and 20, 2001 (Dinerstein 2002, 2003). President De la Rúa declared a national state of emergency, when, in Buenos Aires and some other cities, people took the streets in a popular protest known as the

*cacerolazo* (banging pots and pans). Thousands of working-class and middle-class Argentines gathered in the historical Plaza de Mayo to protest, and 39 citizens died in the public protests. Their slogan, “Qué se vayan todos” (“Out with them all”) not only included the political class, but also the mainstream press. It was no longer respected by the public and was considered part of the institutional complex that brought Argentina to a critical point, a business more committed to generating money than to playing its watchdog role. Within two weeks, five presidents took power and had to resign almost immediately. In January 2002, Eduardo Duhalde was elected as provisional president. At that time, according to the INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas), 57% of the population was in poverty; 27.5% was in extreme poverty, and unemployment was 21.5%; all of these were record levels in the country. The Argentinean media also suffered from the crisis. From 1998 to 2002, the circulation of the Argentine press decreased by 36% (Rey Lennon 2002b, a). By the end of 2002, the Argentinean economy began to stabilize due to a drastic devaluation of the currency. In 2003, President Néstor Kirchner was elected, and the country began a process of economic recovery. In April of that same year, the first issue of the satiric magazine *Barcelona*, born out of the desperation and indignation generated by the crisis, appeared on the streets of Buenos Aires (Alonso 2007).

Because of the economic crisis, thousands of Argentines left the country. One of their main destinies was Spain. “People did not have jobs; they were waiting in lines at the embassies to get a visa to anywhere. Barcelona was considered a capital of art and many wanted to go there. We decided to make our *Barcelona* in Buenos Aires,” said Ingrid Beck, editor of the publication (Personal Interview, 2005). The slogan of the

magazine was: “a European solution for the problems of Argentines.” While the launching of the magazine was initially delayed during the crisis (because the price of paper constantly increased due to inflation), by the end of 2002 the editors took up the project again. Thanks to a family loan of 5,000 Argentinean pesos (around \$1,500 U.S. dollars at the time), they were able to publish the first two issues. *Barcelona* was distributed in Buenos Aires, and these initial issues sold out. “When *Barcelona* appeared, the *kioskos* (newsstands) were still almost empty. With the crisis, many magazines suspended publication, and some disappeared. The people could barely afford to eat and a magazine was a luxury item,” said Beck. After its third issue, *Barcelona* became a weekly supplement of the magazine TXT. In 2004, they went solo again. Since then, it has been published every two weeks and distributed in several cities of the country; its price remained around one U.S. dollar. With scarce advertising in its pages, the magazine has economically survived primarily thanks to readers. “From the beginning, we decided to make a magazine that we would like to read, one that does not need advertising to subsist and that does not require us to talk with anyone to write a story, nor to make an audio tape transcription. In fact, at the beginning we did not even have a telephone,” Beck said (Personal Interview, 2005).

Editors of *Barcelona* described their publication primarily as a political magazine. Follower of the famous French tabloid *Charlie Hebdo*, *Barcelona*’s acidic and controversial humor is part of an important Argentinean satiric press tradition, which included iconic magazines such as *Tía Vicenta* (1957-1966; 1977-1979) and *Humor* (1978-1999)<sup>8</sup>. Like *The Onion* and *The Clinic*, *Barcelona* also parodies the newspaper

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<sup>8</sup> *Humor* was published during the military dictatorship. Its critical coverage became a space of resistance during the period of repression. From a different perspective, another important Argentinean referent is

format, especially that of the Argentinean *Clarín*, the daily owned by the main media monopoly of the country. In fact, *Barcelona*'s slogan parodies *Clarín*'s, "A touch of attention to the Argentinean solution of Argentinean problems" ("Un toque de atención para la solución argentina de los problemas argentinos"). Dealing with the news agenda, *Barcelona* developed a critical dialogue with the principles of journalism. Adriana Amado (2006) ironically summarized some of the "news values" that the magazine criticizes: "If there is a doubt, reproduce the rumor" (an opportune denial transforms what was nothing else than a false announcement into news); "oral and visual sex" (any allusion to the hidden parts of human anatomy assures the attention of the audience); "freedom of conditional expression" (news is something that might be occurring or not—and if it really is occurring, it becomes breaking news; for this, we always have conditional verbs); "the certainty of the common place and clichés" (something obvious taken to the headlines and covers becomes a revelation); "the use of the creative retouching" (Photoshop is a valid journalism tool); "the strength of generalization" (the opinion of a few is news if it is presented as a survey); "the unnecessary quote" (a declaration does not need to be relevant; if it appears between quote marks, it might even look important); "the pseudo-deep interpretation" (a personal opinion might be presented as an essential contribution to humanity when it pretends to uncover something that was never hidden); and "it is said" (it is not relevant to quote the source,; the important thing is to show that something is being discussed a lot) (Amado 2006, 20-21).

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*Página 12*. Founded in 1987 by famous Argentinean journalist Jorge Lanata, this newspaper began with 12 pages, a left-wing inclination, intelligent humor, and included articles by a select group of writers. While *Página 12* became one of the current mainstream newspapers and softened its critical coverage, it left an important mark in the Argentinean history of journalism.

The editors and writers of *Barcelona* are a group of friends who live in Buenos Aires and share the craft of non-conformist journalists. They worked for the rock magazine *La García* and the cultural magazine *La Maga* (both local independent publications that do not exist anymore). They describe themselves as operating as a rock n' roll band in a country where the so-called "rock nacional" has an important socio-political tradition and is deeply ingrained in Argentinean cultural identity. Within rock's countercultural spirit, they have been highly controversial, generating visceral reactions from readers. For example, once, a religious woman bought many copies of an issue in which *Barcelona* announced the romance of the year between the Pope and Terri Schiavo (a comatose American woman whose case generated a debate on her right to die) to keep other readers from seeing the story. There were other controversial topics, like those on the Middle East. A cover headline of *Barcelona* stated: "Tolerance. A Jew and a Black decide the future of humanity" (*Barcelona* #88). A photo of Ehud Olmert, Prime Minister of Israel, and U.S. Condoleeza Rice appeared below it. The editors received many letters complaining about the cover, especially from the Argentinean Jewish community (the largest in Latin America), and also from abroad. In the next issue (*Barcelona* #89), the editors published those angry letters as well as the ones that celebrated the cover as a criticism of Israeli and US foreign policies, which purportedly promoted discrimination. In the same issue, the editors included interviews with alleged Palestinian "terrorists" describing "how they would like to explode."

This politically incorrect attitude treated local controversial issues similarly, like the back-cover on abortion. In the midst of legislative debate about the topic, generated by a rape case, *Barcelona* published the image of a pregnant girl with Down's syndrome

holding scales as a symbol of justice with the headline: “No to abortion. Yes to Justice.” Other headlines on controversial topics were: “Bush says that Chavez is ‘a terrorist who tries to impose his crazy foreign policies on the world’;” “After the frustrated bomb attempt in London, members of Al Qaeda ask their leaders to resign: qué se vayan todos;” “European Union demands the immediate end of Israeli attacks over Lebanon, so they can begin with the great business of reconstructing Beirut;” “After quitting drinking, Lula would like to quit corruption;” “Kirchner: ‘I made a fortune during the dictatorship to prevent the military from having that money;” “U.S. prepares 100,000 Marines, several planes, and three nuclear bombs to help the democratic opening of Cuba;” “Spaniard leftist Zapatero rejects nationalization of gas and oil in Bolivia, but supports gay marriage;” “Exclusive interview with the prisoner with AIDS who sleeps in jail with Etchecolatz.”<sup>9</sup> Despite its provocative content, the editors say that they have not experienced any sort of censorship. “It is maybe because powerful people do not take us seriously,” Beck said (Personal Interview, 2005). However, the publication was commented upon, quoted and reviewed in the major mainstream media, like *Clarín*, *Página 12*, and others. *Barcelona* offered a reference point for other journalists and often became news in itself.

The writers of *Barcelona* developed an original use of colloquial language, crude expressions, and “porteño” jargon. They published *Puto el que lee* (Editorial Gente Grossa, 2006), an illustrated 254-page dictionary of local slang and insults. Through the use of its own satiric language, *Barcelona* expanded to other media. Editors have participated in radio and TV shows, maintaining their particular style of blurring the

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<sup>9</sup> Miguel Etchecolatz was a member of the police force of the military dictatorship accused of human rights violations; he was later sentenced and went to jail.

borders between fiction and reality, between the serious and the unserious. “All the tradition of the Argentinean print press related to humor has a space for serious opinion. Usually people make an explicit distinction: here is humor, and here it isn’t. In *Barcelona*, we do not have those limits,” Beck said (Personal Interview, 2005).

By 2006, *Barcelona* had become the most controversial product of the Argentinean independent press with a circulation of around 17 thousand per issue. Their use of radical humor and fake journalistic stories testified to society’s generalized unrest, disappointment and skepticism generated by the 2001 economic crisis and helped a traumatized country to deal with its uncomfortable truths. Editors questioned the establishment and functioning of power in society. This critique focused on local politics, but it also targeted international affairs, religion, show business, sports, controversial laws, tragedies, sexual culture, the dictatorial Argentinean past and the military repression, and social values in general. In spite of the changes in Argentinean society since the 2001 crisis, *Barcelona* has survived throughout the Kirchnerismo (2003-2015), marked by the left-wing governments of Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and maintained its irreverent position after more than 12 years in publishing. During interviews conducted in Buenos Aires in 2015, editors reiterated the spirit of the magazine. For Mariano Lucano, co-editor of *Barcelona*, the counter-cultural “punk rock” attitude has even increased:

The magazine maintains its lack of faith. It’s a magazine made by skeptical people for skeptical readers.... What has changed in the magazine? Well, probably the older editions had a much more naïve tone. In some ways, the magazine is wilder now.

(Lucano, Personal Interview, 2015)

For Ingrid Beck, *Barcelona*’s satire keeps targeting similar topics:

Our criticisms against the country's media are still valid. We do satire of the communications media, and that's not going to change. We will keep targeting conservative and corporate institutions. *Barcelona* is a trench from which to fight institutional violence, to fight for the legalization of abortion, marihuana, and other causes that we have pushed over time.

(Beck, Personal Interview, 2015)

Both editors acknowledged the permanent role of *Barcelona* as a parody of the newspaper *Clarín* and the conservative and many times sloppy Argentinean journalism. Nevertheless, during the Kirchner era, *Barcelona's* stand against the Grupo Clarín, the largest media conglomerate of the country, became controversial. In the midst of an intense polarization between the ruling party and the opposition, and between liberal and conservative social groups, the government developed a highly confrontational relationship with the media. In fact, the president promoted a communications law (Ley de Servicio de Comunicación Audiovisual) that sought to limit the power of Grupo Clarín, which was critical of the government, especially during the “campo-gobierno” conflict,<sup>10</sup> one of the major political crises of the Kirchnerismo. As part of the debate about the concentration of media ownership versus the freedom of expression, the confrontation underlined the role that the mainstream media has played as a conservative force in the country, responding to the elites' interests. The government's attacks against *Clarín* echoed many of *Barcelona's* critiques against the media monopoly: “Our criticisms against Clarín began to be heard by a lot more people; we also ended up on the side with the government in relation to a common enemy, and we were accused of being pro-Kirchner” (Ingrid Beck, Personal Interview, 2015). In addition, critics of *Barcelona*

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<sup>10</sup> The “campo-gobierno” conflict was an agricultural strike, consisting of a *lock out* and road blocks, in which the agricultural production sector protested against the government's decision to increase the taxes of soybeans and sunflower exports (Fair 2008). The Kirchner government posed the conflict in terms of “the people versus the oligarchy” and compared the agricultural leaders with the repressive *golpistas* of the past.

accused the magazine of receiving official advertising from government institutions. The editors, however, explained the situation. While media monopolies like *Clarín* had unregulated commercial practices before the Kirchnerismo, the independent, alternative and cultural magazines faced many commercial restrictions, such as fees when they did not sell more than 50% of their circulation in the newsstands. As a result, many independent editors, who accounted for 7% of the publishing market, organized into an association and demanded tax reductions and official advertising from the national and local governments. These demands intended to level the media playfield a bit. As a consequence, during the Kirchner era, *Barcelona*, like many other independent or alternative publications, received advertising money from official institutions. “It was not a fortune, but it allowed us to survive,” said Lucano (Personal Interview, 2015), who denied that the official advertising money had created any type of restriction on their content. “Somehow, the State has to distribute the official advertising in an equitable way. And we received what we had to receive, but it did not limit or influence us at all. The magazine is not partisan because our mission is to satirize power” (Beck, Personal Interview, 2015).

In terms of business organization, *Barcelona* remains in a precarious position. With six core members and 14 collaborators, its online presence is not significant, and its digital format is very similar to the printed version (with around 2000 paid subscribers, mainly from abroad). Editors acknowledged that they haven’t invested much in the digital operations because of lack of money and time. While there were periods in which the editors had a salary, today, they barely make any money:

Barcelona had different moments. At some point, it was a job with a salary; at other times, it was not. At some point, we worked on radio shows that allowed us

to earn money to support the magazine, but for the past years *Barcelona*, for us, has been a deficit. We don't make revenues, we invest money, and there is no mystery. We publish it, because we want to keep publishing it. There is no other reason. (Beck, Personal Interview, 2015)

We have a very utopian way of functioning... We never found the right business partner. We are morons in business.... [Doing the magazine] is a hobby that takes a lot of time: five days every two weeks to make \$200 dollars is not a great business. (Lucano, Personal Interview, 2015)

In times when Argentina made a political turn to the Right with the election of the conservative millionaire Mauricio Macri as president in 2015, after 12 years of Kichnerismo, *Barcelona* has maintained the critical stance against the establishment that it developed since the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis. Lucano explained that the magazine was created out of professional and creative needs by a group of unemployed, rocker, young journalists who have grown into rebellious middle-aged satirists who use humor as therapy to cope with reality:

Satire can be understood as a consolation for dumb people. Personally, I find it necessary for my psyche. Instead of going mad about issues that I found repulsive, I try to sublimate them through humor. But it's a consolation for dumb people. (Lucano, Personal Interview, 2015)

## **Conclusions**

*The Clinic* and *Barcelona* offered non-mainstream points of view about society after traumatic times in their respective countries. These Left-leaning magazines parodied the news media agenda in their biweekly issues, developing a satirical critique around national politics and local society, including show business and celebrities, social inequalities, and recent national history. Both crude military dictatorships in Chile and Argentina have been principal targets of the magazines, as part of their rigid anti-authoritarian and anti-U.S. foreign policy editorial stand (often providing the connections

to understand the US responsibility in the installation of Latin American dictatorships and authoritarian regimes).

Politically incorrect humor serves as a main resource to develop criticism. It includes local slang, popular culture references, satiric/fake news, and “culture jamming” to transmit subversive and irreverent ideas. Self-defined as political magazines, both publications use humor to create an accessible language to reach wider audiences with counter-hegemonic ideas and representations. Their socio-political critique not only targets corrupt politicians, unethical leaders, political parties, and the higher figures of the government, but it is mainly directed towards the mainstream media and national journalism. Since its inception, *The Clinic* attacked the conservative *El Mercurio*, the biggest newspaper in the country and a historic supporter of the Pinochet regime. In the same way, *Barcelona* targeted *Clarín*, the national daily that is part of the biggest media monopoly in Argentina and which was accused (along with most of the mainstream press) of supporting the neo-liberal policies that led to 2001 crisis and of opposing the progressive measures during the Kirchner era.

Based in capital cities with strong and educated middle-classes, these magazines condensed the frustrations, traumas, and taboos of diverse urban social sectors and produced a liberating discourse about them. After traumatic times (like a bloody dictatorship or a deep social crisis), societies require collective healing and national reconciliation (The Commissions of Truth—which existed in Chile and Argentina after their most recent military dictatorships—are examples of this). The press usually plays an important role in this process. However, in contexts where the mainstream media had been timid, indifferent, coopted or strongly censored during the repressive, chaotic times,

they are not ready to assume a critical discourse after the storm. In these contexts, satire and independent media flourish, filling the gaps and fissures in the mediascape. They acquire the capability to insert traumatic topics in the media agenda and to treat them with cathartic lenses. Humor becomes an appealing cultural product to traumatized urban middle classes, producing a liberation that usually takes place in democratic times. In this sense, *The Clinic* focused on the cruel dictatorial past, offering cathartic laughter as an alternative to exorcizing the long period of repression, as well as to admitting the daily fear that permeated Chile during the military regime, and denouncing the impunity of the democratic transition. *Bacerlona* voiced the social anger and dissatisfaction of Argentinean society towards the corrupt ruling class and its neo-liberal hegemony that led to the collapse of the economy in 2001 and the subsequent social crisis. Both magazines contributed to set the local media agenda by introducing, re-introducing or keeping relevant sensitive topics that otherwise might not get enough critical coverage. As parodies of mainstream newspapers, they assumed a symbiotic relation with the mediascape, questioning the media's practices through a refractory discourse. Within this process, the notion of newsworthiness was also put into question.

As “hybrid alternative media” *The Clinic* and *Barcelona* have been constantly negotiating their meanings and positions between alternative, oppositional, and mainstream within their national mediascape. They have been alternative in the sense that they developed a sometimes-precarious business model in order to survive while advancing social, political or cultural criticism that was not present in the mainstream media and public discourse of their countries. Nevertheless, they found a prominent space within the political national debate, became successful (in the sense of readership, local

recognition, and regularity of publication), and their editors and journalists became influential public figures who participate in other commercial media outlets. While rejecting an affiliation with political parties or social movements, they shared some ideas with left-wing politicians in power (Lagos or Bachelet in Chile; Nestor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina). In these scenarios, they have struggled to maintain a critical attitude towards power, and reject cooptation by these progressive regimes.

After serving their cathartic functions, these hybrid alternative publications negotiate their own mainstreaming. Through the creation of a solid brand and alternative business operations (such as a franchise of bars in different cities of Chile), *The Clinic* has established itself as one of the main publications of the country. Its radical character has evolved over the years as Chilean society has progressed into a more inclusive and liberal democracy. Contrastingly, *Barcelona* still struggles to survive but maintains its counter-cultural and transgressive spirit, operating as a pre-90s rock n' roll band. In the wake of President Macri's right wing government, *Barcelona's* relevance might increase while resources (like official government funding) might decrease. In both cases, nevertheless, their relevance is inextricably dependent on their socio-political contexts. While hegemony and power are always being challenged and negotiated in the realm of culture and society, history shows that after periods of social crisis new satiric publications adopt innovate subversive roles that reflect predominant national tensions.

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