

Navigating Shifts in Audiovisual Policies: The Evolving EU-Latin America Relationship

By Marina Rossato Fernandes

The European Union (EU) and Latin America have a long relationship in audiovisual policies. As happens in many relationships, there are indicators that things might be changing.

Connected by historical and cultural ties, the two regions developed several initiatives to strengthen their relationship. They share a common vision in recognising the cultural value of the audiovisual sector and are committed to developing policies to protect and promote it.

However, recent developments indicate a significant shift in this dynamic. With the rise of global digital players impacting the whole audiovisual industry, the once-dominant influence of the EU on Latin American audiovisual policies is waning. This shift is reshaping the landscape of media policies in the region, where economic imperatives increasingly overshadow cultural considerations.

Historical context

Latin America does not follow the same regional integration blueprint as the EU. It has two supranational political projects actively shaping audiovisual policies on a broader, regional scale. The first one is Mercosur, a regional organisation creating a free-trade region, including Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, whose main audiovisual institution is the Specialized Meeting of Audiovisual and Cinematographic Authorities of Mercosur and Associated States (RECAM). Then, the Ibero-American political project is based on political, economic, and cultural cooperation among Latin American countries, Spain, and Portugal, including in total 22 member states. In the audiovisual sector, a key Ibero-American institution is the Conference of Ibero-American Cinematographic Authorities and the Ibermedia Program.

Despite the institutional differences, Latin American supranational political projects, such as Mercosur and Ibero-American cooperative arrangements, looked to the EU as a model to follow in the domain of audiovisual policies. Supranational institutions, such as RECAM and the Ibermedia Program, were created mirroring the EU MEDIA Program. Although the image reflected was quite different from the original model, the influence of the EU shaped the audiovisual policies developed in this part of the globe (Crusafon, 2011).

Having the same ideas of protecting the regional audiovisual market due to its cultural value, they shared the ambition of joining efforts to strengthen their audiovisual sector and to develop an audiovisual industry strong enough to compete with Hollywood. Therefore, their relationship was motivated by a shared vision of cultural–regional - sovereignty and economic resilience against the dominance of US media conglomerates. Although this ambition was never fully concretised, it was an ideological horizon that enabled policies in the region to move in the same direction.

New trends

With the introduction of VOD players in the market, disruption was created, introducing challenges for policymakers on how to promote the same goals in a new context. While the EU is implementing the revised AVMSD to ensure quotas for national content and to impose investment obligations to VOD platforms, Latin American supranational spaces remain absent from the regulatory debate.

Thinking about the strong influence that the EU audiovisual policies had on Latin America, one could expect that the efforts led by the EU, especially through the AVMSD, would echo across the ocean.

However, on the Latin American side, the EU is not being referred to as a model for audiovisual policy development, with a few exceptions from civil society organisations, such as the Latin American Observatory for Regulation, Media, and Convergence (OBSERVACOM). The supranational institutions seem not ready to lead these debates, while the industry is more interested in debating how to access more funding to be able to produce attractive content for VOD players.

In relevant film festivals—such as 47^o Festival de Huelva cine Iberoamericano, Cinélatino, 34^a Rencontres de Toulouse and the first edition of the industry event Iberseries & Platino Industria, which took place in 2021—the dominant debates adopt an economic viewpoint, seeing digitisation exclusively as an opportunity and viewing platforms as key partners. The main goal is to promote collaborations between the public and private sectors to secure larger production budgets, which are seen as essential for the competitiveness of the Ibero-American audiovisual sector (Fernandes, 2023).

In these debates, we observe that the EU no longer appears as an example of audiovisual policies defending the cultural value of the audiovisual industry. Instead, when mentioned, the EU appears as an example of a public-private partnership among key stakeholders in the industry. At the same time that references to EU media policies diminish, new voices are getting louder, such as the representatives of VOD players, especially Netflix which is investing in shaping the policy debate in the Latin American audiovisual sector (Fernandes & Albornoz, 2023).

Conclusion

Cross-regional relationships are complex and involve several contrasting interests. Although these relationships were not always balanced and stable, in light of the VOD context, we observe indices that the Latin American region is flirting with other actors and ideas. The shift from a predominantly EU-influenced policy framework to one increasingly shaped by economic imperatives and global digital players highlights a transformation in the region's audiovisual policies.

If the EU wants to maintain its normative influence in Latin American media policies, it will need to join more actively in the policy debates. For Latin America, it is time to reflect on its policy goals and expand the participation of different stakeholders. The findings indicate an interesting shift that should be followed closely. This change could result in the region taking divergent paths, or it might prove to be just a temporary misalignment.

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