

Government advertising in Argentina between 2000-2017: exponential growth, electoral usufruct and media crisis

La publicidad gubernamental en Argentina entre 2000-2017: crecimiento exponencial, usufructo electoral y crisis de los medios

Publicidade governamental na Argentina entre 2000-2017: crescimento exponencial, usufruto eleitoral e crise da mídia

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ABSTRACT

Between 2000 and 2017, the advertising public funds of the Argentine government multiplied almost eight times, from 23 to 182 million dollars a year, despite the retraction of the national economy. The resources –2.594 million dollars in the entire period– had growth peaks in election years. This seems to confirm the electoral usufruct of government advertising, as warned by the academy and civil society. Based on data from official sources, this work determined the total volume of public funds destined for that purpose and explored its social and political impact.

Keywords: government advertising; political communication; freedom of expression; media economy; access to public information.

RESUMEN

Entre 2000 y 2017, los fondos públicos del gobierno argentino destinados a publicidad se multiplicaron casi ocho veces, de 23 a 182 millones de dólares anuales, pese a la retracción de la economía nacional. Los recursos –2.594 millones de dólares en todo el período– tuvieron picos de crecimiento en años de elecciones. Esto parece confirmar el usufructo electoral de la publicidad gubernamental, como advirtieron la academia y la sociedad civil. A partir de datos de fuentes oficiales, se determinó el volumen total de fondos públicos destinados a ese fin y exploró su impacto social y político.

Palabras clave: publicidad gubernamental; comunicación política; libertad de expresión; economía de los medios; acceso a la información pública.

RESUMO

Entre 2000 e 2017, os recursos públicos do governo argentino destinados à publicidade multiplicaram-se quase oito vezes, de 23 para 182 milhões de dólares por ano, apesar da retração da economia nacional. Os recursos –2.594 milhões de dólares em todo o período– tiveram picos de crescimento nos anos eleitorais. Isso parece confirmar o usufruto eleitoral da propaganda governamental, como alertaram a academia e a sociedade civil. A partir dos dados de fontes oficiais, o volume total de recursos públicos destinados a esse fim foi determinado e explorado seu impacto social e político.

Palavras-chave: publicidade governamental; comunicação política; liberdade de expressão; economia da mídia; acesso à informação pública.

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INTRODUCTION

Between 2000 and 2017, the public funds of the Argentinean federal government destined for advertising multiplied almost eight times, going from 23 to 182 million dollars annually in a context of retraction of the national economy. The resources – which since 2007 never dropped below 100 million dollars a year and totaled 2,594 million dollars throughout the period– had growth peaks in election years, which seems to confirm the electoral usufruct of government advertising, as indicated by some authors and as noticed by the dissemination works commissioned by civil society entities, pioneers in raising the issue.

Government advertising, also known in Argentina as official guideline, goes through multiple aspects: the dissemination of government acts and access to public information, the lawful use of fiscal resources, freedom of expression and of the press, and economic viability of the media. In the first decade of the century, the issue was studied by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) in its Special Rapporteurship for Freedom of Expression, which assessed the risks of official advertising as a tool for indirect censorship.

In addition, different Argentinean justice courts had to analyze claims made by some media that assured they had been discriminated against, and civil society organizations promoted field work to determine how the management of advertising funds impacts the media agenda, which also ended up in court, in the search for access to public information. The investigation resulted in some crucial documents, commissioned by *Poder Ciudadano* and the Association for Civil Rights (ADC, by its Spanish acronym).

In Argentina, as a federal republic, official advertising has several sources: 1) the national State; 2) decentralized national agencies and private companies with a majority State shareholding; 3) provincial jurisdictions and their companies, 4) and municipalities. This diversity of sources, added to the lack of regulations at both national and subnational levels that forces to publish the data periodically and in detail, are some of the causes of the lack of a general accounting on the total funds allocated annually for *dissemination of the government's acts or advertising and propaganda*, according to the terminology most commonly used in official documents.

After the socioeconomic and institutional crisis of 2001-2002¹, official advertising was a recurring theme in the public debate both in the media –which

added the issue to their agenda– and in the speeches of public officials, who defended the policies decided by the governments, as well as during the successive electoral campaigns, where it was mentioned by the opposition parties.

Throughout all these years, partial databases were produced from the available information, mostly obtained with delay through requests for access to public information (introduced as a formal mechanism in 2003 by the decree 1172, signed by President Néstor Kirchner) and in formats that did not facilitate its processing and analysis. Periodically, the results of the aggregates in these bases fueled the public debate among politicians, editors, journalists, academics and specialists of civil society organizations, and allowed to draw useful conclusions in the short term. However, they lacked a comprehensive look that, with a historical perspective, permitted to deepen the study of the consequences that official advertising has in all areas in which it is discussed: communication policies, the economy of the media and their business models, freedom of expression and the press, and access of societies to truthful public information and quality cultural content.

To provide a tool to overcome this lack, the Universidad Argentina de la Empresa (UADE) –with the assistance of LN Data, the data journalism division of the newspaper *La Nación*– began an investigation with the following objectives:

- a. To list the norms applicable to the regulation of official advertising of the national government in Argentina.
- b. To list the judicial decisions related to claims regarding the distribution of national official advertising in said period (focusing on the administrative contentious jurisdiction and without considering criminal cases).
- c. To list the background information about the study of official advertising in Argentina, considering its impact on freedom of expression and of the press, and on citizens' access to information.
- d. Determine the amount of public funds invested in mass media and advertising supports for publicizing the national State government's acts (jurisdiction 19 of the national budget) between 2000 and 2017.

- e. Update those amounts of money considering the inflation to allow the comparison between periods and transform them in US dollars, deflated to facilitate international comparison.
- f. Identify the recipients of public resources and the amounts of money allocated to each of them, as well as the evolution for each case.

The research is limited to the national jurisdiction, since it is the one with the highest, most publicly discussed budget, which was most involved in lawsuits and the one that offers the easiest to obtain information. As a result of the work, we produced a database containing the annual funds informed by ministers' cabinet, their distribution as reported, and grouped by holding companies, groups or parent companies, in nominal pesos and updated by inflation, and in dollars at the exchange rate of each period. Given the length of the period analyzed, the heterogeneity of the original information and some economic processes that occurred at that time, we made some methodological decisions, explained below, where we also—considering the limits set for this article—explain the findings that respond to the objectives c), d) and e) of the project, which continues to evolve towards the other goals.

THEORETICAL-CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This work is framed at the crossroads of media economics studies (Albarran, 2002)—how economic and financial conditions can limit industry activities and influence their market—and mass communication (Torrice Villanueva, 2004), which seeks to unravel the social process of meaning construction, culturally and historically situated. Both perspectives are connected through communication policies, with which the State intervenes—by action, omission or negotiation—in the regulation of the media system (Califano, 2015).

In that context, official, State, government or institutional advertising, according to the different denominations used, appears, in Latin America in general and in Argentina in particular, as a very relevant source of financing for the media system. As a vehicle of the relationship between the different social actors—mainly the government and the media—it determines the processes of production, circulation and consumption of information (Marino & Espada, 2018), and, therefore, affects the exercise of rights

to freedom of expression and of the press, and the right of societies and individuals to be informed, with the consequent impact on the maintenance of open democratic societies (Fiss, 1999).

In the Americas, the discussions on freedom of expression used the concept of *indirect censorship* to refer to the *soft* pressures that States can exert on the media to prevent them from publishing certain information. The regulatory function and the power to allocate resources can negatively affect the exercise of freedom of expression and the right to information (Saba, 2008).

The definition of official advertising could be understood, in general, as any form of communication, advertisement or institutional campaign of an onerous nature, free or transferred by legal means, carried out through any means by the entities that make up the State administration to disseminate actions or information of public interest. In more specific and immediate terms, as a form of communication of public administrations issued in any means of communication in the spaces in which commercial advertising is inserted. In that sense, it differs from propaganda since it clearly and explicitly pursues the propagandist's power objectives over the social structure, which is not the focus of the communicative action of advertising (Pineda Cachero & Rey, 2009). In an even broader sense, State advertising is also a form of existence of the State, which expresses itself with its symbology and is perceived by citizens (Cortés González, 2011).

Some authors place official advertising in the general field of advertising, in a classification shared with commercial and non-profit civil organizations (Ortega, 1997). Others, on the other hand, consider it more similar to the field of public relations, by placing paid ads among the work tools of that discipline (Otero Alvarado, 2000). Despite the efforts to conceptualize this field, it is clear that the border between public service government advertising, political-party advertising, the propaganda to exalt political leaders and the use of advertising as an explicit or implicit public relations tool mix and recombine in different ways in different contexts and eras (Pineda Cachero & Rey, 2009). Research in this regard has been very prolific in the European sphere (Martínez Pastor, 2011). The conceptualization of State advertising as a government resource that ends up becoming an electoral advantage has also been registered in other cultural, political and economic contexts, such as the Australian (Young, 2006).

From another perspective, which focuses on the need for public resources for the economic viability of the media, official advertising could be incorporated among the subsidies to the press studies, which originated in the French Revolution (Eliades & Larrondo, 2009) and have evolved in different ways to the current day, in which they are reconsidered given the impact of the transformations derived from the new digital context. The main argument in favor of grants to the press is the fundamental role played by the media in the construction of open democratic societies (Schizer, 2010).

These grants, not without strong controversies (Skogerbø, 1997), have a large scope: subsidies to the circulation of copies, digital visits or the creation of new media; for the production of certain type of content (local, scientific, etc.); for the acquisition of newspapers; for equipment renewal; for the reduction or exemption of postal and telecommunications tariffs, transport or distribution prices, taxes and general fees. They also include access to preferential loans (bank or other) and other stimuli to the demand for journalistic content through bonds or checks.

In Latin America there have also been some of these grants, which may include government advertising (CIDH, 2003, 2012). However, in recent decades that relationship was heavily questioned: Should we defend the media from the State or the State from the media and journalists? (Rincón, 2010). The conflict arose between governments fascinated by the logic of the media and media that did not want to lose their privileges and dominion over public opinion, according to the critical prism of the political economy of communication.

Official advertising as a concept and as a concrete reality in the Latin American context seems to be trapped between three centuries, which could also reflect historical moments of the media, understood as technologies and as cultural systems (Gitelman, 2006):

- Gutenbergian era (19th century), characterized by the consolidation of press freedom and the constitutional obligation imposed on governments to publicize their actions, for which specific items are allocated in the budgets. "Advertising is the guarantee of guarantees. The press is the focus on which all the advertisements concentrate", wrote the inspirer of the Argentinean National Constitution (Alberdi, 1853, p. 86).
- Electronic era (20th century), characterized by the emergence of the new mass media (radio

and television in their different forms) and the consolidation of private media financing models based on the sale of spaces for commercial advertising, which also emerges as a discipline and economic sector with its own characteristics.

- Digital era (21st century), characterized by radical changes in societies' forms of production and circulation of information and in the habits of cultural and informative consumption due to the emergence of mass interpersonal communication, the disintermediation of traditional media actors –born in the previous stages– and the reintermediation of new actors of economic and communicational impact: the technological platforms (Srnicek, 2018).

Communication policies also evolved at this time (Murciano, 2005), to move from the regulation of the printing press to that of audiovisual media and, more recently, to telecommunications. It could be said that to allocate large amounts of resources to official advertising (and also the means to receive them), governments find a legitimacy that dates back at least to the 19th century, crosses the 20th century and enters the 21st with multiple questionings, although more referred to the distribution schemes than to their own existence and relevance in the context of financing sources of an industrial media system in crisis.

In the first decade of the 21st century, with the transition from the electronic to the digital era in an advanced phase, official advertising became one of the public policy instruments of leftist or progressive governments in Latin America, both of the so-called populist and those considered social democrats, who sought to structurally transform the media system (Waisbord, 2014) to reach greater democratization and decentralize the ownership of communication companies and audiences. For Waisbord, official advertising is a resource historically used by presidents to modify dynamics and structures in media systems. Governments have used advertising with a patrimonial logic as a private resource, to pressure and punish opposing media and reward those who diligently support them. This network not only reaches the government-business relationship, but also reflects personal links between officials and journalists who exchange favorable coverage for advertising for their employers or individual projects. It also shows a new aspect: the impact that the growing State participation

in the economy, through new public companies or the nationalization of private companies, has on the general advertising distribution; this is a novel element in the analysis, which impacts the definition of official advertising that would not only cover public funds destined to promote government actions but also that of commercial businesses with a majority State participation.

For Amado (2016), in the Latin American populist context, a media system was set up in the image and likeness of the leader, who dedicates enormous amounts of public resources to support related media, which benefit from government advertising and ensure its dissemination, while trying to financially suffocate the disobedient media and organizations dedicated to issues of freedom of expression and journalism. Amado stresses that these systems were created in the name of plurality, citizen discussion, community and alternative communication, but ended up spending public money in media made in the image and likeness of the ruling populist leaders.

In short, from the media economy, mass communication and communication policies, this work proposes as its first and main objective to determine the volume of public funds invested by the Argentine federal State between 2000 and 2017 as official advertising, to then draft the first conclusions in the light of the incipient theoretical reflection on the subject.

BACKGROUND IN OFFICIAL ADVERTISING RESEARCH

Civil society organizations played a leading role in the study of official advertising as an indirect censorship mechanism in the last decade. They did so explicitly, requesting access to public information or precautionary judicial measures, conducting their own investigations, and financing the work of journalists or academics. These efforts left an abundant production of empirical and theoretical works.

In 2005, the Association for Civil Rights (ADC) and the Open Society Justice Initiative published the book *Buying the News: A Report on Financial and Indirect Censorship in Argentina*, which documents financial and regulatory abuses on media and content-based interference. In addition to being one of the first studies, the originality of the work was putting the focus simultaneously on the national situation and in four provinces (Córdoba, Neuquén, Río Negro and Tierra del Fuego) with different geographical, political and media characteristics. Most

of the research –which mentions numerous specific cases and includes interviews with journalists and field officials– was conducted between April 2003 and August 2004. The work had as its main conclusion:

We found an entrenched culture of pervasive abuse by provincial government officials who manipulate distribution of advertising for political and personal purposes – in clear violation of international and regional free expression norms. The effects of such abuses are especially insidious when public sector advertising is critical to the financial survival of media outlets (...). At the national level, fewer media outlets depend on government advertising for their survival. This does not stop the federal government, however, from allocating advertising in ways that can only be described as political favoritism (p. 12).

This ACD and Open Society investigation also stressed the indirect subsidy character of official advertising for some media politically closer to the government. In that regard, the investigation highlighted the cases of the newspaper *Página/12* and the television channel *América TV*. The work investigated the reasons why the government assigned more advertising to a medium than to another.

Since 2003, Julio Bárbaro has been the head of the government's federal broadcasting agency, known as COMFER. When asked, in a February 6, 2005, interview, why *América TV* and Channel 9 receive more government advertising than other channels, he replied, "Because if the government does not help them, they will go out of business. If the government does not give alms to *América [TV]*, the channel will go out of business" (Open Society Institute, 2005, p. 71).

Official advertising has functioned in Argentina as an informal subsidy to the press, since in some media these resources represent more than 90% of total revenues (Becerra, 2011). In 2006, ADC published its *Basic rules for the regulation of official advertising*, recommending: 1) legal regulation with clear and specific legislation at national and local level, 2) advertising must be clear, objective, easy to understand, necessary, useful and relevant to the public and should not promote the interests of any party or government, 3) the distribution should not be discretionary or have political favoritisms, 4) management should be decentralized to technical agencies and officials, 5) there must be mechanisms that promote transparency and guarantee easy access to information, and 6) there must be adequate external control of spending and how resources are used. As already stated, ADC adopted a very active legal strategy,

even going to court to suspend official advertising before the 2011 elections. Two years later, a ruling by the National Electoral Chamber demanded to the National Congress a revision, as soon as possible, of the current regulation on the subject (Rabinovich, 2014).

Based on ADC's investigation and monitoring and her own requests for access to information, journalist María O'Donnell published in 2007 her journalistic book *Propaganda K, una maquinaria de promoción con el dinero del Estado* (K propaganda. A promotional machinery with State money). That work, which covered multiple aspects of official propaganda, included State advertising but exceeded its limits and encompassed the use of public media, street graffiti and national government's management of press and public relations. It is the first long-term study and analysis of official advertising that included something unprecedented until then: the spreadsheets of these funds among the top 100 recipients (in which media, companies and societies were mixed). O'Donnell's book—which also had the financial support of the Fund for Investigative Journalism—highlights the mechanism of media creation with the sole purpose of collecting official advertising or to allow splitting the amounts and thus diluting the billing weight in comparison with other media.

Regarding the objectives of the investigation, the highlight of O'Donnell's book is the description of the informal official advertising distribution system implemented during the first part of the government of President Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007). As for the distribution, there was an account that could be called *wholesaler*, to distribute spots to the mainstream media (television, radio, press and thoroughfare, mostly), and a *retailer* one, to directly sponsor dozens of journalists through their producers or marketers. The book quotes excerpts from an interview granted by the then Media Secretary, Enrique Albistur, to journalist Susana Reinoso, published in the newspaper *La Nación* on February 4, 2007. There, the official responsible for the distribution of advertising explains:

We do the share with certain criteria of our own, which have to do with political decisions (...). We do not allocate official advertising to the magazine *Noticias* or the weekly publication *Profil*, which Jorge Fontevecchia calls a newspaper, because they belong to a type of yellow, sensationalist journalism with extortion features. It is a medium that has made journalistic mistakes, not recognizing them, such as when it confused the president's son with the son-in-law of the (media) businessman Raúl Moneta (Reinoso, 2007, p. 11).

The author also remembers when on July 3, 2005, in her presentation before the National Congress, the chief of staff Alberto Fernández said that the controversy surrounding official advertising is “a barbarity, a huge lie, a fabulous nonsense”, because it exaggerates the ability of the Executive Branch to influence the content of private media (O'Donnell, 2007, p. 64). According to the numbers he mentioned for that year, official advertising represented less than 2% of the whole advertising distribution.

In another pioneering work, from the perspective of administrative law, Eliades and Larrondo (2009) analyzed the management of official advertising in light of the inter-American human rights system, based on the provisions of the American Convention on Human Rights and the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression, and its application in cases prosecuted in Argentina until then. They concluded that a legal regulation of the distribution of these funds is required to avoid affecting freedom of expression. In addition, they analyzed international comparative law to propose some general criteria for resource allocation. In his research *Quid pro Quo, la publicidad oficial en la Argentina y sus múltiples facetas* (Quid pro Quo, official advertising in Argentina and its many facets), commissioned by the Foundation *Poder Ciudadano*, Becerra (2011) estimated that the official national advertising represented 9% of the total advertising in Argentina and stated that the federal State is the main advertiser of the country above the most active private entities in the advertising market, Unilever (5%) and Procter & Gamble (4%). That investigation also compared the 2010 national government advertising expenditure per inhabitant (30.61 Argentine pesos) and that of the Buenos Aires government (53.34 Argentine pesos), administrations of different political tendencies. The most original contribution of Becerra's work is to have obtained data on the distribution of official advertising in the province of Buenos Aires, although only for six months (from May to October) and without being able to break them down.

What is the role of citizens in this structure? That is the question that Secchi and Pavese, from *Poder Ciudadano*, (2014) asked themselves. They are imprisoned in political-economic disputes that distort the media they consume, flooded with advertising for electoral purposes and with little service content, which also distorts electoral competition. In addition, due to lack of transparency, they fail to obtain answers on the amounts, who they benefit, and the advertising

distribution criteria. For the authors, when there is no clear regulatory framework and the distribution and allocation is discretionary, advertising can be a mechanism for controlling the media, a form of censorship, or directly a mechanism for creating media in line with the current government. As a result, the government has a tool to proselytize, generating an inequality in the electoral competition and pressuring the media to influence their editorial line.

Di Tella and Franceschelli (2011) measured the centimeters of coverage of government corruption cases on the cover of the four main newspapers in Argentina between 1998 and 2007 and correlated them with the advertising they received in the same period. They concluded that the coverage of corruption scandals is negatively correlated with the amount received. The greater the official advertising in relation to the income of a media company, the lower the coverage of corruption cases that may affect the government. In other words, in that period, the newspapers *La Nación*, *Clarín*, *Página/12* and *Ámbito Financiero* reduced the size of bad-looking news for the government when they received more advertising. And the public seems to resent that distortion, because the circulation suffers. According to their work, *Página/12*, even during Néstor Kirchner's presidency—president with whom the media formally identified, as O'Donnell states—, the size of news related to governmental corruption increased in the months in which the advertising fell.

The distribution of official advertising has been an object of study in several Latin American countries, in a broader context that analyzes communication practices and policies during the emergence and consolidation of governments of a popular nature in most of the continent's states. In the matter of official advertising, as already mentioned, they have reviewed the comparative law, especially in relation to the United States and Europe; however, it is relevant to look at other cases.

The Russian market has been studied by Gehlbach and Sonin (2014), who presented a model of government control of the media in which they demonstrated that the bias in the editorial line of a medium reduces its ability to generate income from independent advertising, and the demand for media is lower when the pro-government bias is evident, producing a vicious circle. The model presented concludes that if the advertising market is large or the amount of media is also large, the government has more incentives to acquire media than to control them through subsidies or advertising guidelines. In an economy that has a small advertising

share, the government/State only needs to distribute official guidelines to try to control the media.

The qualitative finding of these phenomena can be seen in the situation report made by the Argentinean Journalism Forum (Fopea, by its Spanish acronym) *Periodismo cercano, periodismo cercado, de Jujuy a Tierra del Fuego* (Close journalism, sieged journalism, from Jujuy to Tierra del Fuego), published with the assistance of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in 2015 (Toller, 2015). In it, the issue of official advertising appears as a problem for journalism in several provincial jurisdictions. The work, intended to be a diagnosis of the situation of journalism in most Argentine subnational districts, confirms a good part of the abstract statements made since a decade earlier.

More recently, in 2017, the LED Foundation (Freedom of Expression and Democracy) ventured into the study of official advertising from a double perspective, regulatory and economic, considering the cases of some countries that, at the time, had set rules and criteria with which resources should be managed (Argentina, Canada, Chile, Peru, Uruguay, Spain, Italy and the United Kingdom).

Regarding the regulatory characteristics, the entity identified the following:

- 1) Official advertising has as its purpose the transmission of information of public good, the promotion of behaviors of social relevance, the dissemination of rights and the transmission of messages when there are catastrophes or public emergencies;
- 2) it is regulated differently from electoral advertising in most countries. Likewise, official advertising is suspended during electoral periods, except for those related to emergencies or catastrophes;
- 3) the countries that regulate official advertising establish neutrality controls in the transmission of information, in order to avoid spreading government propaganda. In addition, it must be done in an objective, real, explanatory language, free of slogans or images of political parties, without the name, image and voice of the official in charge of the ministry that contracts the broadcast of audiovisual advertising;
- 4) most of the countries analyzed apply decentralized mechanisms for contracting official advertising;
- 5) regarding access to information on advertising spending, most countries make full periodic reports that are published on their websites, and
- 6) some regulations impose internal and external control mechanisms before, during and after completion of advertising campaigns (Fundación LED, 2017, p. 132).

As for the economic aspects, the LED Foundation released the investment figures for recent years in

Country/year	2013	2014	2015	2016
Canada	54,189,150	59,058,320	53,953,545	33,141,770
Spain	23,371,081	40,450,549	44,555,629	28,965,742
Peru	63,631,485	68,749,312	55,116,721	50,192,321

Table 1. Government advertising spending in selected countries (in dollars)

Source: Fundación LED, 2017.

countries where there is complete and accessible information (table 1).

The research promoted by civil society organizations dedicated to the promotion of freedom of expression, transparency and civil rights, and the journalistic interest in the subject, seem to confirm the relevance that official advertising has in the Argentinean public debate in recent years; the relevance given to the topic from civil society was much greater than that given in the field of scientific research, where production was much scarcer. Therefore, civil society is a preponderant actor in this regard and its production, an invaluable source of data.

METHODOLOGY

The main goal of this investigation is to determine the amount of federal public resources destined for official advertising, update its value to allow comparisons and determine the distribution of these funds among the final recipients, regardless of the amount of mediums or societies by which they received that money.

With that aim, we built a database fed from multiple sources. For the 2000-2008 period, we used the data obtained by *Poder Ciudadano* through requests for access to public information (decree 1172/2003) and published on the website www.publicidadoficial.org.ar; for the 2009-2017 period, we used the information published on the website of the Cabinet of Ministers (<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/jefatura/pautaoficial>), where they are available semiannually from the second half of 2009 until the second half of 2017. In the first half of 2009, the government distributed around 587 million Argentinean pesos, an amount that was not reported broken down; given the requests made for this work, the Ministry of Public Communication informed that the information for that period is not available nor can it be reconstructed. Updated for inflation as of December 2017, that amount is equivalent to 5,992

million of Argentinean pesos. 2009—when legislative elections were held in which the main candidate was former president Néstor Kirchner—holds a record in resources allocated for national official advertising. For Secchi and Pavese (2014), the 2009 monthly distribution structure of government advertising is proof of its use for electoral purposes. That year the Chief of Staff Office (in charge of Sergio Massa until July 7 and Aníbal Fernández from that day) modified the way of delivering the information, so *Poder Ciudadano* had to discontinue its public access database project. These modifications basically consisted in the fact that the data stopped being broken down by month, the medium in which the advertising was disseminated was no longer identified, and the structure of the presentation varied, which made it difficult to compare with previous years.

As of 2016, the information available on the Chief of Staff Office's website began to be published with the promised periodicity—after the end of each semester—and with a fixed structure that allows its systematization over time. In addition, the register of those inscribed in the National Registry of Official Advertising Providers (Renappo, by its Spanish acronym) is available to be consulted online, which facilitates the identification of current recipients. On the other hand, to identify the previous official suppliers for the next steps of this work, we had to make a case-by-case search in the commercial society sections of the National Official Gazette and in the official gazettes of the 24 subnational jurisdictions where the constitution of societies and other corporate movements are published.

When identification was not possible through this mechanism, we searched alternative databases, in other public forms (such as the Public Access Form created by national law No. 22,285 on audiovisual communication services), in judicial decisions and in media archives. In all cases, we tried to identify the controlling shareholder or owner of the advertising media or support and the

different media of their ownership or control were grouped under that name. In some cases, this task was simple, due to the existence of orderly business structures. In other cases, the main difficulty was precisely in the engineering of societies with cross-participations behind the same group.

In addition to seeking to identify the final beneficiaries of the different advertising sums, this investigation updated the inflation values as of December 2017 of the amounts expressed in pesos and dollars, which forces us to review some episodes of Argentinean history of the 21st century : 1) the political and socioeconomic outbreak of 2001, with the resignation of president Fernando de la Rúa and the succession of four provisional leaders between January 2002 and May 2003, and a 20-point GDP drop; 2) the convertibility plan, which pegged the value of Argentinean pesos to the dollar with the consequent devaluation of the national currency and the confiscation of savers' deposits; 3) the intervention of the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (Indec, by its Spanish acronym) from 2007 and the interruption of the official calculation of the consumer price index –which produced a *statistical blackout* in several indices between that year and 2016, CPI–, and 4) restrictions on the purchase of foreign currency – socially known as a dollar clamp– and the emergence of multiple exchange rates from 2011 until the end of 2015. These facts forced two methodological decisions: 1) adopt an alternative source for inflation rates between 2007 and 2016, and 2) consider the value of the informal or blue dollar for the 2011-2015 period. For the inflation of Argentinean peso we used the so-called *Congress inflation* (average estimates of private consultants) and in this step of the investigation and for the purposes of simplicity, we applied the annual index for the update of the values.

In the case of the exchange rate between 2011 and 2015, we used the value of the so-called blue dollar, reported daily by Thompson Reuters. But since the federal State advertising official information was published semiannually for several months from 2009, without the possibility of breaking down by month, we used an average value of the blue dollar for the conversion of pesos to dollars and updated the resulting amounts by the Consumer Price Index-CPI of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Throughout the work, we used Microsoft Excel as the only processing software and obtained two databases, one in Argentinean pesos and one in dollars.

RESULTS

The information analyzed corresponds to jurisdiction 19 of the federal budget, destined for *advertising and propaganda*, which, as explained above, is headed by the Chief of Staff Office. In the period analyzed, the officials responsible for distribution were those shown in table 2.

Between January 1, 2000 and December 31, 2017, the national State paid 15,455,869,000 nominal Argentinean pesos for official advertising, which updated for inflation as of December 2017 are equivalent to 51,150,275,260 Argentinean pesos, and about 2,367,524,687 nominal US dollars; at the exchange rate of each semester –blue dollar between 2011 and 2015– and updated by the inflation of the United States, in December 2017 amount to 2,594,788,383 US dollars (see table 3).

The first major growth leap in funds destined for state advertising took place in 2004, with an increase of 135% over the previous year (see table 5). Since that year, when at current values official advertising exceeded 1,700 million Argentinean pesos, the amount spent never fell below that level (and since 2007 it never dropped below 100 million dollars annually) (see tables 3 and 4).

From 2007 onwards, the official per capita investment never dropped below the constant 3 dollars, and reached 7.5 dollars in 2014 (see table 7). As a reference parameter, we can consider the 2010-2013 average per capita advertising figures cited by Carlos Winograd (2016) at the Inter-American Press Society conference in Punta Cana: for the United States, \$2.63, Mexico \$2.22 and Canada, \$2.70.

CONCLUSIONS

This research, which is still a work in progress, can be useful for comparisons or correlations with other research related to media financing and their relationship with politics. The numbers allow us to make some first reflections regarding volume, distribution over time, those responsible for payments, international comparison and per capita expenditure, as well as some historical considerations.

The annual investment of the Argentine federal State in official advertising (ads in the media spaces that also include advertising pieces of commercial brands) exceeded 100 million dollars per year since 2007; subsequently, it reached 200 million about five times and reached 300 million dollars in 2014. Between

Chief of staff	Minister	President
Rodolfo Terragno (12/10/1999-10/06/2000) Chrystian Colombo (10/06/2000-12/20/2001)	Darío Eduardo Lopérfido (Secretary of Communication and Culture for the Presidency, appointed by decree 37/1999, 12/14/99-20 / 12/2001).	Fernando de la Rúa
Humberto Schiavoni (12/20/2001-12/23/2001)	Vacant	Ramón Puerta
Jorge Obeid (12/23/2001-12/30/2001)	Vacant	Adolfo Rodríguez Saá
Antonio Cafiero (12/30/2001-01/02/2002)	Vacant	Eduardo Camaño
Jorge Capitanich (01/02/2002-05/03/2002) Alfredo Atanasoff (05/03/2002-05/25/2003)	Carlos Alberto Ben (Secretary of Communication Media, appointed by decree 231/2002, 5/2/2002 -25/5/2003).	Eduardo Duhalde
Alberto Fernández (05/25/2003-07/23/2008) Sergio Massa (07/23/2008-07/07/2009)	Enrique Raúl Albistur (Secretary of Communication Media of the Chief of Staff Office of the Cabinet of Ministers, appointed by decree 153/2003 and by decree 142/2007, 5/6/2003-10/12/2009). During 2010 the position was vacant.	Néstor Carlos Kirchner
Aníbal Fernández (07/07/2009-12/10/2011) Juan Manuel Abal Medina (12/10/2011-10/20/2013) Jorge Capitanich (10/20/2013-02/26/2015) Aníbal Fernández (02/26/2015-12/10/2015)	Juan Manuel Abal Medina (Secretary of Public Communication of the Chief of Staff Office of the Cabinet of Ministers, appointed by decree 16/2011, 11/01/2011 - 9/12/2011). Alfredo Eduardo Scoccimarro (Secretary of Public Communication of the Chief of Staff Office, appointed by decree 23/2011, 10/12/2011 - 12/12/2015).	Cristina Fernández de Kirchner
Marcos Peña (12/10/2015-in office)	Jorge Miguel Grecco (Secretary of Public Communication of the Chief of Staff Office of the Cabinet, appointed by decree 193/2015, 12/21/2015-in office).	Mauricio Macri

Table 2. Officials responsible for the distribution of government advertising 2000-2017

Source: Own elaboration

2000 and 2017, the public advertising expenditure increased almost eight times, being the sole economic indicator in the country that had that behavior; rather, the opposite happened: between 2000 and 2004 the country experienced one of its worst economic crises, with a GDP retraction of almost 20 points. After a period of recovery, it returned to instability as of 2007, with almost zero economic growth since 2011. According to World Bank statistics, the country's GDP for the year 2000 was 284.2 billion dollars and practically doubled in 2017, reaching 637.4 billion dollars (Banco Mundial, n.d.).

In the years of national legislative or presidential elections (2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011 and 2013), the annual figure invested increased strongly, with the only exception of 2015, when then president

Cristina Kirchner could not be a candidate due to a constitutional impediment (she had already been elected for two consecutive periods). During the period analyzed, the federal government was in charge for almost fourteen years of the *Partido Judicialista* founded by Juan Domingo Perón, twelve of which were under the command of Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) and his wife, Cristina Kirchner (2007-2015), which are clear examples of populist rulers in the terms already described. For the remainder of the period, two years corresponded to Fernando de la Rúa (*Alianza UCR-Frepaso*), who resigned from the presidency at half of his term, and three to Mauricio Macri (*Alianza Cambiemos UCR-PRO-Coalición Cívica*). The latter kept the investment in official advertising well above 100 million dollars, although part of those funds were not

Year	Amount in nominal pesos	Annual inflation%	Index +1	Accumulated	Amount in pesos updated for inflation as of 12/2017
2000	16,316,127.5	-0.09	0.9991	0.9991	416,523,462.23
2001	19,188,258.5	-1.1	0.989	0.988	495,292,383.35
2002	27,883,986.3	40.9	1.409	1.392	510,822,425.55
2003	46,264,594.8	13.4	1.134	1.579	747,396,057.55
2004	112,972,747.9	4.4	1.044	1.648	1,748,136,071.06
2005	125,106,404.4	9.8	1.098	1.810	1,763,107,301.13
2006	208,534,640.7	10.9	1.109	2.007	2,649,999,935.24
2007	325,902,131.1	24.5	1.245	2.499	3,326,484,501.02
2008	395,302,603.4	23	1.23	3.074	3,280,370,268.81
2009	829,033,000.0	14.8	1.148	3.528	5,992,708,079.57
2010	654,360,501.3	25.7	1.257	4.435	3,762,990,337.76
2011	771,157,684.1	24	1.24	5.500	3,576,329,557.16
2012	939,013,759.4	26	1.26	6.930	3,456,175,223.53
2013	1,360,712,344.7	23.3	1.233	8.544	4,061,879,586.51
2014	2,490,457,789.4	38.5	1.385	11.834	5,367,723,441.04
2015	2,333,952,116.6	26.8	1.268	15.005	3,967,195,792.98
2016	2,439,627,484.9	36.2	1.362	20.437	3,044,655,101.11
2017	2,982,485,734.9	24.8	1.248	25.505	2,982,485,734.91
Total	15,455,869,000.8				51,150,275,260.50

Table 3. Annual expenditure on government advertising 2000-2017 (in Argentine pesos)

Source: Own elaboration (inflation index for the period 2007-2015 Congress CPI, Indec for the rest of the years).

Año	Monto en dólares	Inflación anual %	Índice +1	Acumulado	Monto en dólares actualizado por inflación al 12/2017
2000	16.316.127,5	3,39	1,034	1,034	23.117.973,71
2001	19.188.258,5	1,55	1,016	1,050	26.772.461,90
2002	8.455.516,0	2,38	1,024	1,075	11.523.323,02
2003	15.743.665,2	1,88	1,019	1,095	21.059.813,99
2004	38.315.242,0	3,26	1,033	1,131	49.635.012,79
2005	42.829.396,3	3,42	1,034	1,169	53.648.055,48
2006	67.825.284,4	2,54	1,025	1,199	82.853.401,43
2007	104.620.509,5	4,08	1,041	1,248	122.791.489,07
2008	124.929.365,2	0,09	1,001	1,249	146.495.835,67
2009	216.178.796,2	2,72	1,027	1,283	246.785.040,02
2010	166.818.589,6	1,5	1,015	1,302	187.622.162,94
2011	186.440.144,5	2,96	1,030	1,341	203.662.274,75
2012	205.853.175,9	1,74	1,017	1,364	221.022.759,96
2013	247.965.651,4	1,5	1,015	1,385	262.303.997,66
2014	307.137.358,9	0,76	1,008	1,395	322.446.650,75
2015	253.120.639,4	0,73	1,007	1,406	263.811.637,60
2016	163.484.650,0	2,07	1,021	1,435	166.934.176,11
2017	182.302.316,8	2,11	1,021	1,465	182.302.316,76
Total	2.367.524.687,2				2.594.788.383,62

Table 4. Annual expenditure on government advertising 2000-2017 (in dollars)

Source: Own elaboration.

Year	Percentage of variation in Argentinean pesos	Percentage of variation in dollars
2000	--	--
2001	18.9	15.8
2002	3.1	-57.0
2003	46.3	82.8
2004	133.9	135.7
2005	0.9	8.1
2006	50.3	54.4
2007	25.5	48.2
2008	-2.0	19.3
2009	80.2	68.5
2010	-37.3	-24.0
2011	-5.0	8.5
2012	-3.4	8.5
2013	17.5	18.7
2014	32.1	22.9
2015	-26.1	-18.2
2016	-23.3	-36.7
2017	-2.0	9.2

Table 5. Percentage of annual variation in government advertising expenditure

Source: Own elaboration.

Year	Nominal pesos	Nominal dollars	Dollar value	Pesos to Dic-2017	Dollars to Dic-2017
2000	16,316,127.5	16,316,127.5	1	425,751,853.76	23,117,973.71
2001	19,188,258.5	19,188,258.5	1	506,265,959.76	26,772,461.90
2002	27,883,986.3	8,455,516.0	2.75 / 3.59	522,140,081.75	11,523,323.02
2003	46,264,594.8	15,743,665.2	3 / 2.89	763,955,181.05	21,059,813.99
2004	112,972,747.9	38,315,242.0	2.90 / 2.97	1,786,867,344.52	49,635,012.79
2005	125,106,404.4	42,829,396.3	2.91 / 2.93	1,802,170,273.49	53,648,055.48
2006	208,534,640.7	67,825,284.4	3.06 / 3.08	2,708,712,682.99	82,853,401.43
2007	325,902,131.1	104,620,509.5	3.08 / 3.14	3,400,185,274.67	122,791,489.07
2008	395,302,603.4	124,929,365.2	3.13 / 3.18	3,331,381,822.80	146,495,835.67
2009	829,033,000.0	216,178,796.2	3.82 / 3.85	6,002,243,016.85	246,785,040.02
2010	654,360,501.3	166,818,589.6	3.87 / 3.95	3,762,990,337.76	187,622,162.94
2011	771,157,684.1	186,440,144.5	4.04 / 4.21	3,576,329,557.16	203,662,274.75
2012	939,013,759.4	205,853,175.9	4.39 / 4.70	3,456,175,223.53	221,022,759.96
2013	1,360,712,344.7	247,965,651.4	5.12 / 5.81	4,061,879,586.51	262,303,997.66
2014	2,490,457,789.4	307,137,358.9	7.81 / 8.40	5,367,723,441.04	322,446,650.75
2015	2,333,952,116.6	253,120,639.4	8.82 / 9.69	3,967,195,792.98	263,811,637.60
2016	2,439,627,484.9	163,484,650.0	14.35 / 15.19	3,044,655,101.11	166,934,176.11
2017	2,982,485,734.9	182,302,316.8	15.71 / 17.41	2,982,485,734.91	182,302,316.76
Total	15,455,869,000.8	2,367,524,687.2		51,469,108,266.65	2,531,841,939.94

Table 6. Conversion of pesos to dollars of government advertising expenditure 2000-2017

Source: Own elaboration.

Year	Population (WB-Indec)	Per capita investment in pesos	Per capita investment in dollars
2000	37,057,452	11.5	0.6
2001	37,471,509	13.5	0.7
2002	37,889,370	13.8	0.3
2003	38,309,379	19.9	0.5
2004	38,728,696	46.1	1.3
2005	39,145,488	46.0	1.4
2006	39,558,890	68.5	2.1
2007	39,970,224	85.1	3.1
2008	40,382,389	82.5	3.6
2009	40,799,407	147.1	6.0
2010	41,223,889	91.3	4.6
2011	41,656,879	85.9	4.9
2012	42,096,739	82.1	5.3
2013	42,539,925	95.5	6.2
2014	42,981,515	124.9	7.5
2015	43,417,765	91.4	6.1
2016	43,847,430	69.4	3.8
2017	44,044,811	67.7	4.1

Table 7. Government advertising per capita 2000-2017

Source: Own elaboration.

cash but exchanges of advertising spaces for tax debts that the media companies had agreed with the previous administration.

In the 18 years analyzed, the volume of public resources destined for official advertising grew exponentially with small setbacks a few years, generally in the immediate aftermath of national elections. Even without analyzing the contents of the advertising pieces, the figures seem to confirm the electoral usufruct of government advertising, as pointed out by some authors and the dissemination works commissioned by civil society organizations. Only in 2002, perhaps due to the consequences of the economic crisis that began at the end of 2011, there was a significant drop – of more than 50% – in advertising expenditure. After some stability in volume in 2004 and 2005, the investment grew again at an accelerated rate; in 2010 –year of the death of Néstor Kirchner– it fell and then accelerated strongly. In 2009 the expenditure grew more than 40%. That year the audiovisual communication services law No. 26,522 was discussed and approved, the axis and symbol of the populist policies that characterized Argentina and the region, which sought a radical change

in the structure of the large media business groups.

This investigation shows an especially striking fact: the stability of the officials in charge of operating the distribution of State advertising. While between 2000 and 2017 there were eight presidents of the Nation (four of them provisional) and 14 chiefs of staff (which manage this funds), only six officials were responsible for administering the more than 2.5 billion dollars (85% of these resources were allocated by the three officials who held that function between 2003 and 2015 during the presidencies of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner).

The official advertising figures of the Argentine federal government do not resemble any other country for which data are available (see table 8). For 2016, Argentine spending was five times higher than that of Canada, almost six times that of Spain and more than three times that of Peru (the latter figure seems to indicate some closeness between the two Latin American cases). If we added the relative economic or demographic size to the analysis, the differences would be even more impressive.

The per capita expenditure (official advertising per capita) went from 50 cents in 2000 to more than 4

Country/year	2013	2014	2015	2016
Argentina	262,303,997	322,446,650	263,811,637	166,934,176
Canada	54,189,150	59,058,320	53,953,545	33,141,770
Spain	23,371,081	40,450,549	44,555,629	28,965,742
Peru	63,631,485	68,749,312	55,116,721	50,192,321

Table 8. Comparison of government advertising spending in selected countries (in dollars)

Source: Own elaboration based on data from the LED Foundation (2017).

dollars in 2017, with a peak of \$7.50 in 2014.

Despite the evident magnitude of the transfer of resources from taxpayers to the media—mostly private companies with and without profit—the Argentinean communication system did not have great novelties in the offer, failed to multiply the voices—according to the expectations of the populist governments of the period—and it did not avoid the structural crisis that affects the mass media of the industrial era due to the impact of new technologies. The identification of the recipients of public resources quantified here and the determination of the money volume received by each of them remains the main objective of this investigation.

This work aims to be a contribution to the development of academic research on government advertising, its relationship with the financing of the media and its use by governments as an element of pressure to influence editorial lines. Government advertising has been relatively poorly studied in Latin

America, and when it has been done, they have been theoretical elaborations without basic quantitative information—such as the amount of public money spent. The historical series presented here—which covers 18 years in a country that in 2017 turned 34 years of uninterrupted democratic institutional—can enrich other approaches in the field of communication, politics and economics sciences, as well as novel approaches to the study of media contents, which could be influenced by the official guideline. It is also an acknowledgment to the civil society organizations that allocated time and resources to inquire about the governments and media relationship regarding advertising expenditure and their link with human rights in general (and with freedom of expression and of the press in particular), the transparency in the use of public resources and the equal conditions for the parties—officialism and opposition—at the level of the electoral contests.

NOTES

1. After several months of political crisis and economic recession, on December 19, 2001, violent demonstrations took place in different cities of the country, which were repressed by police forces and led then President Fernando de la Rúa to decree a state of emergency. Disobeyed by protesters—who remained in the streets—and without political support, the president resigned on December 20, 2001. Three leaders held the presidency in the next ten days—one of them ordered the cessation of the State's debt payment—until the Congress appointed senator Eduardo Duhalde to complete the period of the resigning president. The new provisional president, who ended his period on May 25, 2003, produced a devaluation of the Argentinean peso of more than 100% three months after taking office, which raised the percentage of poor population to more than 50%.

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