Notes on Practices of Musical Exchange in Colombia

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Practices of musical exchange have been at the vanguard of the contemporary disjuncture between the nature of artistic objects, economic practices (or business models through which the trade of musical objects is enacted), and their legal status. Today the debate between the celebration of diversity and the anxieties of unequal exchange has increasingly moved to a legal terrain. At the economic level, this tension is often presented as a struggle between two opposing economic models. On the one hand, one would find open business practices, that is, those that rely upon an economy of sharing and, on the other, business practices that rely upon monetary remuneration in which every person doing intellectual work owns the "product" and by exercising "property" control they are able to obtain a profit that remunerates the individual effort. This is what Lessig (2006) calls, respectively, the second and first economies. In this oppositional model the idea of exchange is primarily located at the site of consumption. But if we understand listening as "a historical relation of exchange" (Novak, 2008, p. 16), then the moment of trade is not located solely at the site of consumption but also at that of creation and production of the musical work. In this paper we would like to explore the idea that paying attention to the practices of musical recording and production complicates this dual economic model. As such, struggles about musical recognition, labor, and circulation are not only struggles about the status of music as property but also about the way listening as a site of exchange is inscribed into productive and creative practices.

Practices of musical exchange have been at the vanguard of the contemporary disjuncture between the nature of artistic objects, economic practices (or business models through which the trade of musical objects is enacted), and their legal status. In the 1990s, debates about world music were permeated by a dialectic between discourses of anxiety and celebration that hinged on the tension between economic appropriation of subaltern artists’ music, especially those coming from the third world, and the enhancement of diversity that the intensification of circulation of music from different parts of the world entailed (Feld, 2000). Today the debate between the celebration of diversity and the anxieties of unequal exchange has increasingly moved to a legal terrain. At the economic level, this tension is often presented as a struggle between two opposing economic models. On the one hand, one would find open business practices, that is, those that rely upon an economy of sharing and, on the other, business practices that rely upon monetary remuneration in which every person doing intellectual work owns the "product" and by exercising "property" control they are able to obtain a profit that remunerates the individual effort. This is what Lessig (2006) calls, respectively, the second and first economies.

LISTENING AS EXCHANGE

In recent literature on sound, the "aural" is increasingly considered a crucial site of constitution of human modes of sociality, of networking, and of constitution of the public sphere. Such focus on the aural has led to questions on listening as a locus of constitution of socio-political processes. In Latin America, different moments and processes of aural perception and musical recontextualization have always been accompanied by an intense debate about the meaning of sonic localization and sonic temporality and its place in Latin American modernity; that is, they are constitutive of an aural public sphere. Today, the technological enhancement of aurality of the media that has occurred with digitalization plays a crucial role in recasting the very idea of political participation in a public sphere (Vianna, 2006; Winocur, 2002). The intermediariness of the aural and its capacity to transgress boundaries (Kahn, 1994) becomes an increasingly privileged site of constitution of a contested public sphere.

Novak (2008) states that listening "is a distinctly virtuoso and creative practice of circulation . . . Listening is not the final link of a chain of musical transmission, but the very crucial of musical innovation . . . [L]istening itself lies at the core of creative production, both of musical sound and its social meaning." (2008, pp. 15–16). As Novak himself notes, such a conceptualization unsettles clear-cut boundaries and definitions of what is meant by "local" music or by such music industry categories as "world music." By emphasizing a conception of listening as circulation, we wish to relocate the politics of exchange at multiple sites of constitution of a musical work, from its composition to its eventual distribution.

1See Yudice (2007) for the way this opposition plays out in music.
reconfiguration of the relation of tradition and modernity. However, the transformation of musical production into a home technology has enhanced the combinatory possibilities of sounds to such an extent that current notions of musical creativity across genre boundaries cannot be understood solely as the mixture of two previously disconnected musical genres or cultural traditions, or conceived primarily as an intertextual process where previously disconnected musical texts or fragments are reassembled into a new one. Rather, what we have is a reconfiguration of musical creativity as an assemblage of musical practices that involves knowledge about sounds coming from different sources, practices of listening, practices of musical performance, uses of technology, and ideologies about aesthetics, among other things, in which each of these elements operate as part of a network of relations. What we are proposing here is that we need to get beyond a conceptualization of the musical fragment as a “text” and the economic practice through which it circulates as an a posteriori fact. Rather we conceive of listening as a practice of circulation in articulation with other practices that interface with it, such as technologies of production (itself conceptualized as another mode of relation), labor practices, and economic conditions of production and distribution.

COLOMBIAN FUSION MUSIC

The terms “fusion music” or “New Colombian musics” are used to name Colombian contemporary musics that mix sounds coming from musical genres that have historically been considered traditional in Colombia, especially from the Caribbean, the Pacific Coast and the Eastern Plains, with elements coming from rock, jazz, electronic music, and other music from the African diaspora, such as salsa, funk, and rap. The rise of these musics is mostly an urban phenomenon that took shape in the 1990s in response to a radical increase in interest in folkloric music among urban middle class youth in Colombia and to recent massive migrations from the countryside to the city due to the displacement generated by war. Many of the music groups either have members that come from different regions of Colombia or have established intense, long-lasting research and pedagogical relations between urban musicians and those coming from different regions. How and which sounds are used depends on how these urban-rural relations are articulated and how they in turn are articulated to a consumption of musical genres originating outside Colombia. The resulting sound can be very different. While some groups seem to invent a new form of highly danceable music such as Mojarra Electrónica, others like Puerto Candelaria try to integrate jazz experimentalism with humor and salsa, while others look for an avant garde sounding jazz such as many of the groups belonging to the collective Distritofónica. Moreover, while some groups privilege music from the Pacific Coast of Colombia, others privilege music from the Caribbean and from the Eastern plains. And while some music groups mix this with massive Afro-diasporic musics such as funk or salsa, others prefer to connect to different musicians from avant garde jazz. While the general aesthetic intention may be guided by the same general principles (remixing of sounds in which one of the sources is Colombian traditional music) the resulting sound or aesthetic is not the same. Thus, the name of the category does not respond to an integrated, unified sound and cannot easily be identified as a new “genre” although the phenomenon of the rise of these music groups is amply talked about in the Colombian press and is clearly identified.

All music groups recognized as belonging to this category self-produce their recordings. This situation contrasts with the 1990s when independent Colombian music companies, especially the independent MTM, recorded, produced, and distributed some of these musicians. However, with the move to the home studio and the descent in sales of the formal music industry, the financial responsibility of production has moved to the music groups themselves. We found three main types of producers associated with this type of music (many of them part of the music groups themselves): those that had become professional sound engineers by training in Colombia or outside the country and had created recording studios in their homes and work through freelance; those that are self-taught and have acquired their recording equipment as they learn either through friends, through the Internet or through practice; and those producers that belong to highly professional, established studios.

One example of the first type is Merlin Studios. This is a recording studio in Medellín created by the members of the music group Puerto Candelaria, in association with two friends who are music producers and who function as the sound engineers for the group both for recordings and for live performances. Merlin Studios/Puerto Candelaria is considered a collective that seeks not only to do musical creations but also use the recording studio as a service center — to musicalize events such as fashion shows and weddings, to provide recording services, to write commercial jingles. The studio is seen as providing a key labor outlet for some of the musicians in the group. Initially, the music group associated with the studio was only Puerto Candelaria. Since salsa music sells more, in 2006 they formed the group Banda La República that has emerged in the midst of a current revival of salsa that is taking place in Colombia, especially in Bogotá. When we interviewed the members of Merlin Studio in early 2007 they were trying to decide how to label what they expect is a growing catalogue of music. The issue of labeling created not only an aesthetic problem but also an economic one. Says Juancho Valencia, the leader of the group:

Our intention has been to create a catalogue of products but we have had trouble finding a name for it or even defining what we want to produce. It is a particular niche but we do not know what its borders are. We cannot say that it is noncommercial music because salsa is commercial music. La República can get 5,000 people dancing in a park. So this approach does not work. We cannot say that it is new tendencies in music because reguetón is also a new tendency, the vallenato ranchera is also a new tendency. We could say that these are musics chosen through the aesthetic judgment of Merlin Studio. We could also say that it is related to a desire of innovation. But so is regueton. We do not know how to call it and have had a lot of problems at the moment of presenting the studio. It is a problem of communication. (Valencia, 2006)

What we have here is a crisis of the underlying principles through which music categories that are still used today were historically created. On the one hand, the differentiation between commercial and noncommercial as a principle of distinction, in Bourdieu’s sense of the term, no longer works. On the other, the idea of innovation, so closely tied to avant garde aesthetics, is seen as cutting across highly massive and popular music.

When we began this research in August 2006 the mode of distribution of these musics was highly unstable: musicians were in the midst of either designing or enhancing their recently created Web pages, they had begun to post their music in MySpace and YouTube, they were either trying to sell their recordings on their own in live concerts and some stores, or establishing contacts.
with practically the only distributor in Bogotá that was formally distributing this music at that moment, a company called Millenium. Since then, and due to the boom that this music has experienced in Bogotá especially, some of the most successful music groups have begun to be distributed by the independent company MTM.

The musicians belonging to these music groups consider themselves professional musicians who want to make a living from their music performances. However, none of these musicians make a living from their music performances or music productions. To the contrary, since recording companies do not record a CD from scratch, they actually need to finance the production of the recordings themselves, even when the recording company, such as MTM, assumes the costs of its final mix and design of the CD cover. Let us take a closer look at the two productions done by the group from Bogotá, Mojarra Eléctrica. In their MySpace Web site we find the following description of the group:

Mojarra Eléctrica is Colombian ensemble directed by the clarinetist and composer Jacobo Velez. The band developed a new sound taking traditional Afrocolombian music (Bullerenge, Chontial, Currulao and others) as a starting point, melding it with afrodescending elements [from other musics] (Soukous, Ragged, Cuban Timba, Funk and Jazz). Their music is destined for parties (i.e., is danceable music) without leaving aside the critical direction of their lyrics . . . DISCOGRAPHY: “CALLE 19” (2003) Produced by Mojarra Eléctrica. Cataloged by Revista Avianca as one of the ten best albums in the history of Colombian music. “RAZA” (2006) Produced by Jacobo Velez and Santiago Jimenez. Given four stars by Rolling Stone Magazine Latin America. Cataloged by Revista Semana as one of the ten best Colombian recordings of 2006. The song “Calle 19” was included within the top hundred songs of Latin America by Rolling Stone Magazine. Distributed in Colombia and Ecuador by MTM.3

The language of success that permeates this self-presentation makes it seem as if the group was highly successful economically, but this is not so. The recognition that has emerged out of their music productions has gained them the possibility of distribution through an independent (MTM) but does not translate into either music performance or selling CDs as a mode of making a living, at least not yet. The way the two CDs were produced is interesting in understanding the tight relationship between economic networks, musical creativity, and production. They began recording the first CD after they won a folk music competition in Esmeraldas, Ecuador. It is through the demands of performance in the recording studio that they begin to realize the need to transform their relation to musical form. Says Jacobo Vélez, the director of the group:

When we arrived at the recording studio for the first time we realized the songs were too long and had basically an ongoing improvisatory structure. One in which you begin but you do not know where to end. As such, the songs were extremely long. So we had to begin to change that, to articulate musical form in other terms. (Vélez, 2007)

They try to do a first recording based on a live performance, but it does not work precisely because the aesthetic of the live performance does not match that of the recording. This production, however, did fulfill the pedagogical function of allowing the group to reorganize its musical aesthetic to allow the possibility of recording. The use of recording technology and the modes of production of the recording at their disposal became crucial elements for transforming their musical style. At that particular moment, the music functions here less as a preconceived text to be recorded than as an assemblage to be transformed through its relation to the practices of production.

To make the second CD, Raza (2006), they got ten million pesos (roughly US$5,000) from different sources: from a composition grant of the city government of Bogotá, from friends who lent them money, and from MTM, the company that distributed this recording who also lent them money as an advance of their royalties. Even though this recording received rave reviews, it did not sell well.

These recordings are produced through an economy of sacrifice (someone lends money to do the production; someone, often a family member or friend, lends money to be returned later; the money of all live performances goes into the production and not to the musicians); an economy of the gift or of exchange (labor for the music production is free, the CD is given away so people can hear it because it does not have formal distribution channels, someone lends hours for studio recording, etc.); and the formal economy of the music industry, especially the independent music industry through contracts of distribution when they exist, or through selling the CD at live concerts and other venues. We find a tight relation between the money for producing the CD and a service economy (teaching, doing arrangements for commercial publicity, performing at events such as weddings, mixing a recording) that finances the musical production of the group. At one level, this translates into the existence of a celebrated solidarity between differently located musicians and producers ("I help you, you help me"), but at another level what we find is an extremely tight economic situation for the survival of the musician: these recordings do not sell massive amounts, the performance venues are few and do not pay well (a closed circuit of bars in Bogotá and Medellín, folk music festivals in different regions in which the groups themselves finance their presentations, special government sponsored events such as urban feasts and celebrations, and occasionally concerts at large theaters in Bogotá or Medellín), and informal labor (doing musical arrangements, giving music lessons, etc.). If the venues for performing are limited, then the distribution of the music or the economic possibilities of the musicians, even when their musicality is greatly recognized, is tremendously limited as well.

In both of the cases outlined here, that of Puerto Candelaria and Mojarra Eléctrica, we can see that the defining moments of exchange of a musical piece are not solely located at the moment of consumption. Moreover, multiple types of economic exchange occur at the different moments of planning, recording production, and distribution of a recording. The changing forms of labor of the musician are embedded in multiple practices that are becoming more and more integral to the definition of an urban musician. Recording knowledge and easy studio access have become economic necessities for musicians who increasingly see themselves as responsible for their own productions. Recordings are financed here through networks of interaction between folk music festivals, government grants, the refusal of the musicians to get this money for personal usage, the loans of friends and family, the inevitable relation to independent companies to finalize and distribute the production and others. The crucial item here is not whether the economy is open or closed, or even private or public, but how the labor of the musician increasingly depends on the relations between multiple forms of economic networks. Those forms of interaction and the economic relation to practices of exchange begin at the moment of integration of the musical project of each group itself, and coalesce through the networks of relation in which the labor of
the musician is immersed and through which the music itself takes form. We turn now briefly to one example of anarcho-punk to create a contrast with these musicians.

COLOMBIAN ANARCHO-PUNK

Even though a history of Colombian punk has yet to be researched and written, from the information we were able to gather we deduce that Colombian punk bands first emerged in the early 1980s in the cities of Medellín and Bogotá. In these early years, punk music was not sold in stores and was acquired mainly through personal trade that took place through the mail. In Medellín the initial trade of items was not only of items produced by Anglo-American punk bands but also with bands in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. In Bogotá, the trade was mainly with Spanish groups. Says Juan, a person from Medellín who was involved in the early years of the emergence of punk and who today holds one of the most extensive archives documenting this period:

Since there were no stores that sold punk, we began to organize and get materials such as fanzines, posters that arrived from Spain, from the United States, from Brazil. And we began to write to different people. Initially we did not have recordings to trade because there were no groups so we either sent money or books about Colombian history or politics, plants. They often said, it does not matter just send us something autochthonous. Then we began to have demos, cassettes, and we began to send these. And then we began to trade singles. Slowly, as groups emerged the trade through mail was established. (Juan, 2006)

One of the subcategories of the genre that was established early in Colombia was that of anarcho-punk. According to Thompson (2004), this genre "emerged in England in 1977... and within punk it is seen as the most radical aspect of punk in terms of its opposition to the commodification of music" (Thompson, 2004, p. 83). In contrast to the musicians described above, the musicians of anarcho-punk are not interested in making a living out of their music, even when they come from lower classes as do many of the members of Colombian anarcho-punk bands. The philosophy of production of anarcho-punk bands is that of DIY (do it yourself, in Spanish hazlo tu mismo), in which not only a politics of self-production but an aesthetic of craftmanship permeates everything from T-shirts to fanzines to musical instruments and CDs. One finds a great difference in terms of practices of economics of exchange between middle class bands in both Bogotá and Medellín and lower class bands. The lower class bands are ideologically identified with DIY but in fact exist through what in Colombia is called the economy of rebusaque - a difficult to translate word which means the economy of inventing whatever it is in order to be able to make a living. Examples of economies of rebusaque are washing car windows at stoplights, selling everything - from fruits to AA batteries and pirated CDs - in street corners or in places in the city especially designated for this type of informal economy; in short, practices that constitute the informal economy. DIY implies being against the capitalist system, through ideological identifications with anarchism and through practices of self-production that favor an economy of free exchange as an ideological choice. The economy of rebusaque is one that implies being outside the system not by choice but to the contrary, by lack of choice. DIY, as an anti-capitalist ideology, finds its limits in the way alternative economies become economies of subsistence, which are functional to the mainstream economic system itself, in the same way that, for example, illegal immigrants are functional to the American economy. In other words, the boundary lines between legality, illegality, alternative and mainstream shift meaning depending on what side of the economic chain of production one is on, and what negotiations between the formal and informal economies one does in order to subsist.

Polikarpa y sus Viciosas is an anarcho-punk band which was formed in 1995 and is integrated by three women, Andrea, Paula, and Sandra. Today they hold a mythical status among Colombian punk bands as one of the foundational bands of the genre in Colombia. They have produced four recordings: one CD split with the punk band Libra (Libertad & Desorden) in 1997, one seven-inch vinyl (Animales Muertos) produced by Polikarpa in 1999, one seven-inch vinyl split with Defuse (What's Right?) and produced in Japan by the distributor Answer, and one seven-inch vinyl produced in France, Belgium, and Germany by several independent companies. Besides this, they appear in they do not know how many "recopilas," compilations of anarcho-punk music, "but we do not know how many because often they are not authorized by us because in anarcho-punk many times nobody asks" (Polikarpa & sus Viciosas, 2006). We have no room here to explain how the production of each recording was done. We simply wish to point out that the international reach of the band is based on the free distribution of its music, as an item of exchange to be copied and reused by anyone. Initially such exchange was done by mail, a mode of exchange that today is seen with nostalgia since it is remembered as embodying transnational relations that were forged across a network of trading objects that were highly significant affectively. Today such relations occur mainly through the Internet and thus have altered the way the groups present themselves, although many of the anarcho-punk groups continue to exist through different relations of exchange that depend on the music being free to copy. The reason these musicians continue to uphold free music is in good measure related to the fact that they do not live off the music. This is not the case of other Colombian punk bands (such as the more famous Odis a Botero) for whom their professionalization as musicians and commercial success is important.

CLOSING REMARKS

In Colombia, the regime of derechos de autor applies to musical works from the moment of their creation, that is, from the moment that they materialize without any other formal procedure. However, this was not clear for hardly any of the musicians we interviewed in this project, regardless of the type of music being produced. For them the fact of not registering a musical piece with a notary public was interpreted as going against and outside of the law of derechos de autor. In general, the perception of Sayco-Acinpro, the collecting societies in charge of the

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1In Anarcho-punk bands in Colombia, only the first name is used.

2Derechos de autor (rights of author), in contrast to copyright, is described by Paul Goldstein. "[T]he European culture of copyright places authors in the center, giving them as a matter of natural right control over every one of their works that may affect their interest... By contrast, the American culture of copyrights centers on a hard, utilitarian calculus that balances the needs of copyright producers against the needs of copyright consumers, a calculus that leaves authors at the margins of its equation" (Goldstein, 2003, p. 138).

3As established by Article 52 of Decision 351 of 1991 of the Acuerdo de Cartagena.
recolletion of royalties for derechos de autor and for interpretation in public spaces, is that it is untrustworthy or outright corrupt. It is thought that Sayco-Acinorro has little or no communication about its procedures in its relation with the musicians. Anarchopunk musicians never registered their compositions in any sort of legal rights alternative. This generates a contradiction because, ultimately, if ideologically they perceive this act of nonregistration as going against the system, the music is by default covered by the regime of derechos de autor. The musicians of “fusion music groups” have a more ambivalent relation to either the formal law or alternative systems such as Creative Commons, because they feel caught between the need to make a living out of music and the need to be recognized and listened to through wider channels of distribution. Although posting their music on MySpace and YouTube gives them wider visibility, this does not automatically translate into an alternative, viable economic space from which to make a living.

As we saw, the economic regimes or regimes of value and practices of exchange that are accrued between the composition of a piece and its distribution are many. As such, the lack of knowledge of the actual functioning of the law that the groups have is not simply a “mistake” but precisely an integral part of a system that is full of contradictory relations of exchange established at multiple sites of composition, distribution, and production and in which circulation is located in several sites such as practices of listening, recording, modes of production, and aesthetic ideologies, among others. What to us seems increasingly difficult to mediate or even incongruent is the tension between “the proceduralism of public reason” (Povinelli, 2004) that assumes an ethics of understanding the law and the unsolvable spheres of contradiction that people have to inhabit in their everyday lives. Deep down, in the complicated surface of the quotidian, the contradictions and impasses of late liberalism that, according to Povinelli, are found not only among minorities and subalterns but also are actually a “total social fact” often are made of competing interests that cannot be reconciled. This impasse is located not only between different groups of people but also often within groups themselves or even within one same person at the site of uses of performative texts. Ultimately then the increasing legalization of discourses and practices about music is not only about a move from a discourse of marketability to a discourse of legal action but also precisely about how musical practices embody these impasses in particularly intense ways. These contradictions demand that we think of musical genre in different ways.

What is crucial to thinking about musical genres is not necessarily a question of intertextuality that has been at the center of its definition (Bauman & Briggs, 1992) but rather how the network of relations between the different articulatory dimensions of creativity generates a new musical object. The acoustic dimension of musicality and its manipulability at multiple sites (those of listening to it, of recording it, of transferring it as different forms of data, of making it circulate under distinct political ideologies) is thus articulated as a series of relations. This does not mean that musical genres are disappearing (as, e.g., nations did not disappear during the long history of globalization) but that the parameters for understanding them have to be radically redefined. We wish to propose that the idea of the combinatorial possibilities of sound is better explained as a practice of networking across multiple relations and assemblages than as a product of mixture of discrete items.

In these assemblages the potentialities for establishing multiple modes and types of relation between and across networks and musical objects are more important than the internal relation of parts to a unitary whole. In other words, and paraphrasing de Landa (2006), the resultant objects of relations across networks, are more important because of the types of relation they establish than because of the intrinsic unity that the different parts of which they are composed may have. By assemblage we mean “wholes characterized by relations of exteriority” (de Landa, 2006, p. 10). As de Landa states, “these relations imply, first of all, that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a set of interactions in which its interactions are different” (2006, p. 10). The understanding of the relation between musical creativity as a site of exchange mediated by listening practices and economic practices of circulation can only be understood by recourse to musical works as assemblages, that is, as pieces in which the relations of exteriority articulated through such practices as listening, composition, production, and exchange are more crucial than the organic relations of interiority that have been at the center of the concept of musical genre, even when either intertextuality or hybridity is emphasized. Such reconfiguration of sounds as assemblages constituted through networks are not just an aesthetic element, they are a key site for understanding the economic and social ideologies embedded in aesthetic practices and the reconfiguration of labor practices for musicians under the current changing regimes of exchange.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is based on on-going fieldwork on practices of musical circulation and production in several cities in Colombia. This research has been made possible by support of IDRC/The Getulio Vargas Foundation.

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Digital Television: Options and Decisions in Latin America

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The existence of four technological standards for the development of digital television means different options for cultural development in each country. In Latin America, the process of choosing the model for digital television has been conditioned by corporate and government interests. In some nations there has been information and deliberation about the available technological options. In others, the determination has been left up to governments. In any case, it is not a merely technical decision. The high definition that the U.S. model proposes only takes the quality of the image into account. The European model entails more television channels.

Technological convergence has become shorthand for the mediated present and future. We attribute such broad and profound consequences and capacities to the amalgam of information resources that digitalization now makes possible, that often we come to think, in a dazzling reediting of the old technological determinism, that the explosion of convergent devices and networks is enough to make our societies more informed, better educated, and with the capacity to produce their own knowledge. Nevertheless, convergence has different consequences depending on the type of technology at issue. One of its expressions, in which it becomes obvious that there are different social and cultural possibilities depending on the technology that is utilized, is found in digital television. The international discussion, which developed especially starting in the last decade of the 20th century around different technological protocols for developing digital television came late, and has had contradictory consequences in Latin America already at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. The fundamental options for digital television have meant different propositions just as much in terms of quantity as in quality when it comes to the television offerings that the countries of this region will receive. At the end of 2008, the discussion remained open in the majority of Latin American nations. Only a half dozen of them have chosen among the different possibilities for digital television. These decisions, and the economic and social interests that inform them, are sufficient to consider that in the decision about this technological standard the cultural future of each one of these nations, and thus the entire region, is at stake.

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