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Researcher to build Latin American corruption database sourced from newspaper coverage

By [Alessandra Monnerat](#)
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Corruption, a common concern among citizens and journalists from several Latin American countries, will be the theme of an exclusive index for the region that plans to launch next month. [Daily Corruption: News Feed & Database](#) will provide quantitative and qualitative data on a range of relative variables for ongoing cases in 29 Latin American and Caribbean nations.

The source of the cataloged information is selected from newspapers of each country, focusing on cases of medium- and high-level corruption, as well as anti-corruption initiatives. Variables include the sector, type, scope, quantity and actors involved in each case. The project's creator, [Joseph Pozsgai-Alvarez](#), a doctor of Political Science and International Associate at the University of Tsukuba in Japan, explained that Daily Corruption is a response to weaknesses pointed out in traditional case studies and indices.



"Daily Corruption offers a level of detail and transparency that the Corruption Perception Index and the Worldwide Governance Indicators can't; and it covers forms of corruption that are impossible to measure by relying on citizen surveys," he told the [Knight Center](#).

The project is implemented with [Citizens for a Better Bahamas](#) and [Forum Solidaridad Peru](#), as well as [Japiqay](#), also from Peru, and the [Foundation for the Development of Citizen's Freedom](#), from Panama.

Preliminary data collected by the tool in Peru already indicate several trends, according to Pozsgai. For example, the size of corruption-related coverage is eight times greater than that of anti-corruption news. Negative information on illicit acts comprises more than 50 percent of all corruption-related news, while information about effective/control and punishment measures little more than 6 percent.

Pozsgai added the index also found that, in Peru, more than 90 percent of all corruption-related news involves the public sector; and the executive branch is involved in corruption news three times more than members of Congress or local and regional authorities.

With more than eight years following anti-corruption policies in Latin America – including a position with a corruption prevention team of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of Peru – Pozsgai talked to the [Knight Center](#) about the Lava Jato scandal, the upcoming Latin American elections and the role of the press in tackling corruption cases.

Knight Center: Corruption became more of a transnational issue with the Lava Jato investigation. How did this change coverage for Latin American newspapers?

Joseph Pozsgai-Alvarez: Although Lava Jato has become the most prominent case of transnational corruption ever reported in the region, it is by no means the first time that a corruption case has mobilized stakeholders across borders in Latin America.

What is different this time, however, is that local anti-corruption circles were better prepared, both in terms of organization and technology, to face the challenge and coordinate local and international efforts. Latin American newspapers have profusely fed from the knowledge of those groups, and as a consequence they have been able to introduce a level of sophistication rarely seen in the past and that better approaches the standards of more developed countries.

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Joseph Pozsgai-Alvarez (LinkedIn)

On top of that, the internationality of the event has made it difficult for local elites to control editorial lines, which is partly why the media has been able to report as actively as it has; but it is unclear if this selective freedom will spill out to other more politically sensible cases.

KC: What role does the press play in anti-corruption movements in Latin American countries?

JPA: Grand corruption, as a matter of fact, would go absolutely unnoticed if it were not for the free press, as exemplified by the low levels of corruption perception in Peru during the last years of president Alberto Fujimori's administration in the late 90s. But it is easy to confuse the specific tasks that the press carries

out in this subject, so it's best to spell them out: information, and mobilization. Anti-corruption movements, considered as public manifestations of demands, get coalesced by the information obtained and distributed by the media; and they are also able to mobilize more effectively thanks to the use of the media as a communication channel to the population at large. In short, the press and the movements create a synergy that makes reform possible.

KC: What do you see as a flaw in press coverage about corruption?

JPA: The biggest sin of the press is the preference it has for negative news and immediate scandals. Regardless of reality, the press usually gives an unfair amount of coverage to corruption scandals against that offered to anti-corruption policies, initiatives, and actions. Likewise, after scandals exhaust the investigations stage, reports tend to die down rapidly. These two tendencies give the common individual the impression that there is very little being done to fight malfeasance, and that impunity is the rule. In a way, then, the news cycle helps perpetuates stereotypes that in turn are responsible for a high level of citizen tolerance towards corruption in the region.

KC: In what ways can new journalistic tools, such as data journalism, improve coverage on the issue?

JPA: Without a doubt, data journalism is the most powerful tool that the press has at the moment, and when combined with social media activism it has the potential to be a game changer in countries with competitive elections. (The choice of words is not free: only by pushing the political agenda can the synergies of press and anti-corruption movements have any impact, and so vertical accountability through effective electoral processes is crucial.) Data journalism, in this framework, represents the opportunity to actually substantiate a lot of popular beliefs about national politics, and to become the instrument reformers have lacked in the past.



Brasília - Demonstrators in favor of Lava Jato and against the decisions of Minister Gilmar Mendes protest with dolls and candles in front of the STF (Fabio Rodrigues Pozzebom / Agência Brasil)

KC: With presidential elections this year in Chile and in 2018 in Costa Rica, Paraguay, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil, do you see corruption being at the center of debate during presidential campaigns?

JPA: For quite some time already, corruption has become a staple of electoral campaigns and its allure has not diminished. Its symbolism is powerful, as it can be associated to a great number of individual and structural characteristics, and it is one of the few issues on which almost everyone agrees as it offers a general cathartic outlet for people's grievances. Regardless of its appeal, however, corruption does not usually live up to the electoral hype, and seemingly corrupt leaders still get re-elected notwithstanding strong rhetoric against them throughout the campaign. The reason behind the apparent contradiction between rhetoric and vote can be explained by the difficulty of voters to take up information about corruption and move it through the stages of perception, attitude change, and punishment. These stages of vertical accountability provide ample room for many other factors to intervene and limit the effect of anti-corruption rhetoric, as partisanship, political awareness, economic interests, and political values compete with integrity as the core value driving votes. Therefore, I'd expect debate to center around corruption (particularly in Brazil), but also to be ultimately ineffective in tilting the balance.

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