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Research Article

Latin American Universities and Platform Solutionism*

Universidades latinoamericanas y solucionismo de plataformas

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Abstract

The overall objective of this article is to bring the findings of a qualitative study conducted at six Latin American public universities into dialogue with four overarching ideas concerning the accelerated digitization that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first idea is that universities are undergoing a profound internal transformation induced by a decades-long sociotechnical process of *digital platformisation*. The second is that this process becomes embedded in institutional imaginaries through an innovation-oriented logic that shapes how universities envision their future. The third idea is that such logic reproduces longstanding patterns of dependence and colonialism, now articulated through data production. The fourth posits that digitization contributes to the dislocation of university autonomy by fostering privatization. Based on the results of a documentary review and in-depth interviews, a fifth conclusive idea emerges: the depth of this transformation is most clearly expressed in university communities themselves—among students, faculty, and workers—altering interactions and practices, promoting specific forms of sociability, and thereby consolidating a new sociotechnical university regime. The article concludes by underscoring the need for these changes to be critically examined within the communities involved in order to rethink the future of universities in a post-pandemic context marked by massive digitisation and the widespread use of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: university autonomy, data colonialism, digitisation, digital platforms, Latin American public universities.

How to Reference

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Resumen

El objetivo general de este artículo fue relacionar los hallazgos de una investigación cualitativa en seis universidades públicas latinoamericanas, con cuatro ideas generales en torno a la digitalización acelerada acontecida durante la pandemia por COVID-19. La primera idea es que las universidades atraviesan un momento de profunda transformación interna, inducido por un proceso sociotécnico de varias décadas conocido como plataformización digital. La segunda idea, que dicho proceso se incrusta en el imaginario de las universidades a través de una lógica innovativa que inspira las propias ideas sobre su futuro. La tercera idea, que dicha lógica preserva una continuidad de dependencia y colonialismo en las universidades, esta vez mediante la producción de datos. Y la cuarta idea, que la digitalización incide en la dislocación del concepto de autonomía universitaria a través de una privatización de lo público. Con base en los resultados de una revisión documental y unas entrevistas en profundidad, es posible sostener una quinta idea concluyente: que la profundidad de la transformación señalada acontece en las comunidades universitarias, es decir, con sus estudiantes, profesores y trabajadores, alterando las interacciones y sus prácticas, promoviendo una sociabilidad específica y consolidando con ello un nuevo régimen sociotécnico universitario. Por último, se considera la necesidad de que estos cambios sean reflexionados profundamente en las propias comunidades, a fin de repensar el futuro de las universidades en un contexto pospandémico de digitalización masiva y amplio uso de la inteligencia artificial.

Palabras clave: autonomía universitaria, colonialismo de datos, digitalización, plataformas digitales, universidades públicas latinoamericanas.

INTRODUCTION

For several decades now, the widespread use of information and communication technologies in universities has been evident. Particularly, the incorporation of digital tools over the past twenty years has profoundly been reshaping university teaching and learning, as well as the relationship among knowledge, individuals, and environments. Intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (Atairo, 2022; UNESCO IESALC, 2020), this transition continues more recently with the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), which is positioning itself as the technological promise for automating learning solutions, improving administrative efficiency, and enhancing teaching evaluation (Marquina, 2025).

Discursively, digitization supports the aspiration for a "digital university," establishing a hiatus in the argument where innovation is framed as a promise of improvement and expansion of institutional possibilities. Through this narrative, universities are embedded in the epochal debate about the way the platform economy (Casilli, 2022; Costa, 2021) configures social functioning and relations. This calls for a specific form of sociability, one that entails an accelerated and broad shift in the university sociotechnical regime, permanently deepening the interplay between distance and face-to-face education.

Against this backdrop, this article examines whether the accelerated digitization experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the relationship between Latin American public

universities and the principle of university autonomy. In this regard, the objective of this paper is to connect the findings of a qualitative study conducted at six higher education institutions with a review centered on four dimensions.

Initially, the theoretical framework explores these four dimensions: (1) the concepts of platform and digital platformization,[1] (2) sociotechnical imaginaries surrounding digitization, (3) digitization understood as a new logic of data colonialism, and (4) university autonomy. Then, the methodology, results, and discussion are presented. Lastly, the conclusions highlight the need to reflect on digital sociotechnical regimes in light of university autonomy, sovereignty, and democracy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Platforms, Platformization, and Universities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the massive incorporation of digital technologies into different spheres of life, the notion of platforms has spread throughout our societies. Srnicek (2016) essentially defines platforms as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more social groups to interact"[2] (p. 45). Drawing on this definition, Casilli (2022) points out that platforms are typically multifaceted and multisided, with different user integrations and levels. Additionally, a second trait is the intensive use of personal data, and a third feature is the capture of value resulting from user interaction. A platform "is therefore a support structure through which others, whether individuals, companies, or institutions, seize the value produced by users" (Casilli, 2022, p. 68).

Furthermore, platforms as economic circuits are part of the history of informational capitalism itself, known today as an "information civilization." Zuboff (2015) translates this notion for almost all aspects of the world into "a new symbolic dimension that renders events, objects, processes, and people, making them visible, knowable, and shareable in a new way" (p. 33). Thus, digital mediation tends to reconfigure practices and knowledge, placing information at the center of both production and process control.

Similar to Casilli, Zuboff (2015) argues that platform-mediated social relations are mechanisms of accumulation. One of these mechanisms is data production, whose sources are small data obtained through economic transactions or from sensors embedded in objects, bodies, and places. Data can also come from corporate sources (e.g., governments, banks, consumer operations), as well as from tracking systems (e.g., video surveillance, satellite monitoring). Another mechanism is data extraction, which Zuboff (2015) defines as a process that occurs in the absence of dialogue or consent, as a unilateral operation between companies and user populations. Finally, data analysis completes this cycle of extraction whose purpose is to obtain schemes of information accumulation that, together, produce surveillance assets.

[1] In this article, *platformization* is interchangeably used with *digitization* and, in some education-specific cases, with *virtualization*.
[2] All translations of non-English quotations are by the author.

According to Zuboff (2015), this form of surveillance, grounded in individual data, dislocates the social contract governing the relationship between individuals and the rule of law. In addition, it places power in the impartial mediation of the machine, as an imaginary entity or a "big other," an extension of human authority through technology. In doing so, a new symbolically universal architecture is established, which configures "a ubiquitous, networked institutional regime that records, modifies, and commodifies everyday experience—from the use of household appliances to our bodies, from communication to thought itself—all with a view to establishing new pathways to monetization and profit" (Zuboff, 2015, p. 61).

Additionally, digitization reflects a long-term sociotechnical process, a gradual and historical development. Following Plantin et al. (2018), this evolution corresponds to the shift from the "platformization of infrastructure" to the "infrastructuralization of platforms," where the establishment of digitization ultimately leads to a broad reorganization of social, cultural, and economic structures and relationships. As a result, digital platforms are consolidating their mediating role between people, machines, and environments, becoming nowadays the equivalent of old infrastructures such as railways or electricity grids (Poell et al., 2019).

Within this broader context, universities are also witnessing a widespread reorganization of social relations caused by the digitization of everyday life. This means that they are necessarily involved in the platform economy because they operate in social contexts that require them to be at the forefront of technology. Thus, universities are not immune to these changes, which are by no means linear or homogeneous.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, universities underwent accelerated digitization processes. On the one hand, this acceleration was due to pressures from the technosystemic landscape (Feenberg, 2017), which for several decades has promoted market-driven logics to justify the digitization of higher education. On the other hand, it was driven by the needs of Higher Education Systems (HESs) in an emergency context that demanded forced changes (Atairo, 2022) across teaching, research, and administrative domains. In general, these adaptations took place in a large part of institutional units that were able to transfer their activities to remote modalities because of such an unprecedented health crisis (UNESCO IESALC, 2020).

As noted by Brunner et al. (2023), during the pandemic these market-driven dynamics operated as a specific form of market rationality in higher education. In examining digitization in universities, this rationality can be associated with the procurement of platforms from for-profit corporations, namely GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft). These corporations mediate and monetize, via licensing arrangements, the need to maintain university activities, amid the global call to establish a "new normal" during the pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020) and in its aftermath. In this way, they leverage virtualization to consolidate their influence and weigh the radical scope of their presence.

The Imaginary of Digitization in Universities

Digitization is embedded in the collective imaginary of universities as part of a transitive notion based on the idea of innovation. It reflects a sociotechnical imaginary that gathers the collective understanding (Jasanoff, 2015) that certain ways of living are achievable through science and technology. In this sense, it compels universities to include innovation in their new institutional mission for the 21st century (Arocena & Sutz, 2021).

In the educational dimension, universities are moving towards forms of "uberization" such as "video-'packaged' classes designed for just-in-time and just-in-case consumption, on-demand tutoring services, competency-based curriculum standardization, profile-driven recommendation platforms, computerized assessment, etc." (Adell Segura et al., 2018, p. 60). However, this extends beyond teaching itself.

From a broader perspective, digitization can be understood as a transition towards the incorporation of digital technologies into all areas of the university's mission (Almaraz Menéndez et al., 2017). Indeed, for several decades universities have been dealing with the increasing digitization of all their processes and activities, for example, in administrative procedures, co-governance systems, and student and union voting processes, often combining face-to-face and remote modalities.

This decades-long coexistence has fostered a lasting relationship among individuals, institutions, and machines. For Adell Segura et al. (2018), "the digital university is the product of the complex interplay between technologies, people, and regulatory frameworks" (p. 62). As an imaginary, digitization aspires to a desirable future of decentralized and automated governance oriented towards efficiency, framed by data control (i.e., digital surveillance), information traceability, and continuous evaluation through performance measurement.

Accordingly, in the so-called "era of innovation," digital technologies are the narrative of anticipatory governance that *coexists with*—but also *seeks to replace*—the traditional and bureaucratic administrative structures of universities. As indicated by Acosta Silva (2022), this new form of governance is structured around the management of data knowledge in a technical and intellectual effort to project possible futures into presents "populated by futures."

However, considering the market-driven logic of digitization, public universities, as complex and dynamic spaces, far from experiencing the immutability of technologies or merely resenting their potential, underwent a decline in the use of their campuses during the pandemic. In consequence, this underutilization limited the capacity for human interaction, as well as political, critical, and educational articulation, among other vicissitudes. In Feenberg's (2017) terms, the virtualization of teaching within a neoliberal agenda operates as a rhetorical justification for deepening commodification dynamics in higher education, reducing society to market terms and altering epistemological and research priorities.

Within the wider nexus between neoliberalism and higher education, Arocena and Sutz (2021) contend that universities today "have been pushed towards being machines of individualist behavior where speed in production is a hallmark of success" (p. 8). While digitization promises improvements and optimization, its incorporation perpetuates the "analog" and neoliberal condition of a large part of Latin American university systems (Adell Segura et al., 2018). In this light, digitization appears simultaneously as a promise of improvement and as a vehicle for the reproduction of old asymmetries, in which the new does not necessarily imply transformation, but rather a sophistication of the existing order.

Digitization: A Form of Colonialism?

Driven by both pressures from the neoliberal technoscientific landscape (Feenberg, 2017) and by the impetus of innovations from technological niches, digitization comes from external sources, mainly corporations in the Global North.

This geopolitical positioning conditions Latin American universities to depend on the acquisition of digital and technological solutions, while placing them in comparison rankings that confirm their peripheral status. According to Naidorf (2016), this corresponds to the "myth" of competitiveness vis-à-vis "first-world" institutions.

For the purposes of digitization, the notion of "data colonialism" (Couldry, 2020) encompasses a logic of appropriation of actions, decisions, and behaviors, analyzed and commercialized by the large technology corporations—GAFAM. This appropriation is paralleled with historical colonialism, more specifically with the expropriation and monopoly of data in this case, without full consent or compensation from hegemonic technology companies in the market. Couldry (2020) thus captures the essential idea of colonial thinking, according to which the world is there to be taken, appropriated, and exploited. From this perspective, the platformization of infrastructure, or digitization, may be interpreted as a specific manifestation of structural dependence.

However, far from being a metaphor, data colonialism suggests

> [...] a way of living in which all individuals are involved. It would link new ways in all aspects of life, creating new manners of dependence on technology and connections, as well as new forms of governing and ruling individuals, all based on values that seem quite positive (Couldry, 2020, p. 7).

This new colonialism can be understood as a new form of mediated sociability (Casilli, 2022), which, supported by the sociotechnical imaginary enabled by platforms, is beginning to establish new human–machine–environment interactions, often with an extractivist orientation.

Generally, digitization in universities has been happening at a rapid pace over the last two decades. Guerin et al. (2019) classify platforms and networks, according to the way they are used in the academic world, as follows: "(1) social networking (LinkedIn, Facebook, ResearchGate, Academia.edu); (2) social bookmarking and reference management (Mendeley, Zotero); (3) social

data sharing (figshare, SlideShare); (4) video (YouTube); (5) wikis (Wikispaces); and (6) blogging (WordPress, Wix) and microblogging (Twitter)" (p. 240).

To this list, platforms for "non-academic" tasks should also be added. These include online bibliographic resources (e.g., Primo), data systematization platforms (e.g., Power BI), and online voting systems (e.g., E-voting). Likewise, user-level services that mediate interaction within university communities, such as email (e.g., Gmail, Calendar) and cloud storage systems (e.g., One Drive, Google Drive, Dropbox), constitute a large part of university activities.

Within this landscape of widespread use, a crucial component of the colonialist logic of data in university systems is the extraction, circulation, and storage of information on platforms controlled by corporations. For example, the Observatório Educação Vigiada (2025) reveals that companies such as Google and Microsoft dominate the management of public university emails (79%) in South America. This can extend to the use of cloud storage, meaning, among other things, that "most of the academic and research communications produced by Brazilian public institutions are outside their institutional control" (Carta Soberania Digital, 2022, p. 1).

As a starting point, data colonialism in Latin American universities can be examined through at least three interrelated dimensions of structural dependence. One of these dimensions is dependence on external solutions. Williamson and Hogan (2020) use the term "solutionism" to describe the influence of private companies in the field of education, particularly through the promotion of digital technologies as a means to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. This situation favored public and private partnerships that went beyond the health crisis.

Structurally, dependence and solutionism occur in the context of dissimilar innovation capacities of certain universities compared to those in the Global North (Dudin et al., 2020), even though innovation is strongly promoted as a relevant component of the mission of 21st-century universities (Arocena & Sutz, 2021). From this perspective, limited local innovation, together with the need to be innovative, enables the widespread pressure exerted by the dominant technoscientific and technosystemic landscape (Feenberg, 2017) of the Global North on Latin American universities.

A second form of dependence concerns the sociotechnical imaginary that symbolically and collectively supports universities' understanding of their digitization and, consequently, their projections about their own futures. This support is grounded on the pressure exerted by big-tech companies through the massive adoption of digital platforms in the general production of life.

Finally, a third dimension relates to the location of data. This is more than just hosting because it also involves the public and private partnerships that sustain licensing agreements with certain technology corporations, already established as new monopolies (Plantin et al., 2018). Additionally, these corporations operate as custodians of both customizations and automations that, on a sociological level, end up structuring the very logic of life production. For Latin American universities, this entails coupling with digital mediations across vast areas, including teaching, research, and administration.

Thus, the extensive use of digital platforms in universities is producing changes that are being mediated by the predesigned functioning of corporate applications. As Costa (2021) suggests, this is part of a new informational order that emerged in the wake of the "virtualization shock" experienced during the pandemic.

University Autonomy in the Age of Platforms

A fissure has emerged in the historical understanding of university autonomy, particularly when analyzed through a colonial lens on digitization in Latin American universities. As mentioned above, such a form of colonialism is reflected in their reliance on technological solutions, the construction of an imaginary of innovation dominated by the Global North, and the lack of control over data stored in external cloud infrastructures.

According to Acosta Silva (2020), university autonomy is a political construct that seeks to safeguard the balance between normative, factual, academic, and political aspects. For the author, autonomy encompasses a series of "spirits of the times" that come together in a complex concept. It takes into account the emancipatory reforms inspired by Córdoba, Argentina—or other "modernizing" moments of the 20th century,[3] including the authoritarian periods—or by the current context of university management and institutional efficiency.

As such, autonomy differs from the notion of sovereignty because

> [...] the corporate interests of the various segments that make up the university community cannot prevail over the higher interests of the institution and society. Public universities must be republican and understood as a *res publica* with specific rights, duties, and missions for the common good (Gazzola, 2022, p. 167).

Therefore, far from being a uniform ideal, autonomy is a concept that must be weighed in relation to its own conditions of applicability and understanding. As Nairdof (2016) argues, autonomy can hardly be considered an absolute value but must be critically reviewed to reveal its own contradictions because its rhetorical use has occasionally favored the continuation of institutional endogamy and resistance to change.

Precisely, university autonomy is inseparable from the context where it operates. In Latin American HESs, public universities experience strong pressures from a highly marketized environment. For Brunner et al. (2023), this situation reflects the universalization of an economic rationality that aims at productive optimization, competition, and market centrality. Marketization is reinforced by cultural and sociotechnical transformations, establishing efficiency-oriented models of governance. Within this framework, the digitization that is taking place within universities acquires

[3] Along with the 1918 *Liminal Manifesto* of the University Reform in Córdoba, the 1932 *Manifesto to the People and Government of the Pioneers of New Education* in Brazil and the 1935 Statute in Uruguay stand out as expressions of these milestones. They responded to increasing social and systemic pressures to democratize access to higher education, pressures generally associated with greater societal and state demands for specialization during periods of national industrialization (Marsiske, 2015).

particular significance—but how does this significance affect the conditions under which autonomy is exercised?

Marketization guides forms of governance driven by market-based values and interests. In fact, the use of digitally mediated applications contributes to greater efficiency in university activities. Additionally, it effectively improves living conditions for students, professors, and campus staff, enabling distance learning or teleworking and making attendance less mandatory. However, these applications can also weaken the role of universities as spaces for comprehensive development, potentially affecting social relations.

Thus, the expression of marketized digitization lies in the massive use of corporate digital applications and services. From this perspective, data colonialism fails to add conceptual complexity to the notion of autonomy but rather delineates it operationally by taking over (through corporate platforms) the infrastructure of university operations. In doing so, it consolidates a form of delegated usability with external affordances (Adell Segura et al., 2018).

Accordingly, this neocolonialism of data extraction, mediated by digital platforms in the field of education and extending across the broader university mission, can generate new dynamics of structural dependence on services, software, and operational logics that are external to the academic sphere. Indeed, it is argued that the sociotechnical relationship between the Global South and the Global North deeply erodes university autonomy, which is already relative in the face of pressures exerted by states and markets (Acosta-Silva et al., 2021). This relationship also reinforces an institutional imaginary that closes off the possibility of envisioning *another university*, i.e., a university that is truly its own, capable of developing its own technological, epistemic, and governance frameworks.

METHODOLOGY

Investigating the Sociotechnical Imaginaries of University Central Administrations Through Discourse

This study adopted a qualitative methodology (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2014), suitable for describing, interpreting, decoding, and synthesizing social meanings (Ruiz Olabuénaga, 2012). Six public universities from the Association of Universities of the Montevideo Group (abbreviated AUGM in Spanish) were intentionally selected on the basis of variation criteria (Flores, 2009). The sample included two universities from Chile and two from Brazil, representing HESs with high levels of privatization, and one university each from Argentina and Uruguay, representing HESs with medium and low levels of privatization.

Four of the institutions are considered "macro-universities" (Didriksson Takayanagui, 2003), while the other two were categorized as intermediate universities, based on a cross-reference between

enrollment size and quality.[4] As noted by Didriksson Takayanagui (2003), Latin America is notable for the presence of national universities that are highly complex in historical, social, and political terms. They also tend to have the largest enrollment rates, the most substantial funding, and a strong scientific tradition, and operate as leading actors within the education system.

Data was obtained from 45 institutional statements (e.g., speeches, press releases, interviews, news reports on the participation of senior administrators in related events) published on the official websites of the selected universities between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2022. The selection criterion focused on news items referring to the digitization of university activities as promoted or managed by central administrations. Similarly, between the second semester of 2024 and the first semester of 2025, eleven interviews were conducted with individuals who held important roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. All interviewees had participated in central administrative bodies. The group included one president, two senior vice provosts, one associate dean, three faculty representatives serving in some collegiate body, two student associations, and two staff unions.

The textual corpus and interviews were examined through content analysis (Fairclough & Wodak, 2001; Taylor & Bogdan, 1987), supported by the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, Atlas.ti (version 24). Coding was conducted manually and employing open data, whereby emergent codes were assigned to paragraphs relevant to the issue under study. A "zigzag" review of the documents (as suggested by Mendizábal, in Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2014) was carried out to review the information again as new codes emerged. Subsequently, ex post coding was performed using the AI-assisted tools provided by Atlas.ti, resulting in certain coding suggestions that were appropriate for triangulating the previous assignments.

According to the revised statements, the code related to sociotechnical imaginaries (44 citations) encompassed references to the universities' self-perception of their mission or inspiring set of values (32 citations), which in turn included mentions of university autonomy. In the interviews, the code associated with technological adaptation (89 citations) contained references to installed institutional capacities (21 citations), teaching practices (14), the use of platforms (13), among others. Taken together, these codes account for how the pandemic was experienced in terms of decision-making and actions within universities.

The interpretive approach drew on critical discourse analysis to explore the way discourses express the relationship between social practices and social structures (Fairclough & Wodak, 2001) and construe how language is intertwined with power, ideologies, and social structures. For the issue under review, this strategy can be linked to Jasanoff's (2015) standpoint on sociotechnical

[4] The classification was developed by the author according to institutional data from AUGM universities. Institutional size was determined based on undergraduate enrollment: small (<20,000 students), medium (20,000–50,000 students), and large (>50,000 students). Quality ranking was based on the SCImago Institutions Rankings (2024), grouping institutions into high quality (top 50), medium quality (positions 51–200), and low quality (below the top 200 or not listed). Chi-square test, p-value = 0.0020, with a statistically significant association between the two variables.

imaginaries, which seeks to unravel the naturalized discursive logics of functioning, self-containment, and self-replication of technologies in society.

Finally, it should be noted that this analytical exercise is part of a broader doctoral thesis entitled *Digitalización acelerada en las universidades públicas durante pandemia* (Accelerated Digitization in Public Universities During the Pandemic).

RESULTS

Examining the statements, interviews, speeches, or public declarations made by central university administrators (e.g., presidents, vice presidents, senior vice provosts) throughout the pandemic helps identify the policy orientations towards institutional narratives and the measures taken during such period.

After analyzing the discourses, university autonomy emerges as a fundamental principle that allows higher education institutions to act independently in academic, research, administrative, and financial decision-making. Across the citations analyzed, autonomy is addressed considering its historical roots and key underpinnings, as well as its decentralized character and challenges. In turn, references to virtualization highlight contexts of change, innovation, digital divides, and milestones for the future of higher education:

> In 1918, the first popular governments brought the famous public education reform. The students of Buenos Aires supported and implemented it, together with our sister institution, the Universidad de Córdoba—which was at the core of the student discussion on that reform. It led us to academic freedom, regular appointments, co-governance, and university autonomy. (Barbieri, 2021, para. 15)[5]

The discourses invoke the historical background and fundamental principles of universities, emphasizing that struggles for autonomy are mainly rooted in the 1918 University Reform in Córdoba and in reformist movements of the 20th century. As a historical concept, autonomy encompasses the ideals of participation, academic freedom, plurality of ideas, and university co-governance. In political and administrative terms, it is credited with the abilities to decentralize decision-making and to distribute the representation of diverse disciplines and perspectives. Equally relevant is the sustained relationship between free education and autonomy as an intrinsic vocation of public higher education.

> [...] Above money, contracts, or facility maintenance, we have autonomy. It gives us the freedom to think, express our opinions, teach, evaluate, financially manage the university, and point out new paths. Imagine a politician, a congressman, a senator, or a public official here inside the university telling us what to do. It would be a disaster for the university. That is the reason we must constantly fight for autonomy. (Carlotti Junior, 2022, para. 13)

[5] This excerpt, and the following discourse excerpts, were originally delivered in Spanish and have been translated into English by the author for the purposes of this article.

University autonomy and digitization converge on the idea of change within universities. Autonomy enables institutional adaptation by allowing universities to operate independently and promoting academic freedom. In this sense, both the statements and interviews underscore the way the COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the virtualization of teaching. This sudden disruption required the incorporation of institutional arrangements, new methodologies, and distance learning platforms, creating or reinforcing dedicated units to coordinate these tasks. In fact, the persistence of the pandemic's consequences translates into a refinement of digitization in terms of its radical nature. In other words, after the massive institutional migration to remote modalities, during the post-pandemic period, digitization adjusted once on-campus activities were resumed. As expressed by one university president, "the pandemic is not over in universities because its effects are long-lasting" (President, University 3, personal communication, August 5, 2024).

Within the scope of universities' autonomous capacity to make decisions, innovation is linked to their institutional vocation because they are expected to be at the forefront of technological advances. In the statements and interviews analyzed, this is primarily associated with remote teaching during the pandemic. In some "positive" accounts, virtualization is closely related to the notion of the "21st-century universities," while other narratives ponder its impact on in-person interaction and the complex and large-scale character of universities:

> All our facilities must be operating for on-campus activities, allowing access to our libraries, our classrooms, and our teaching and research laboratories. [The university] is not a distance-learning institution. Our focus is on face-to-face teaching. That is what our students want and need, and so does our faculty. (Cruz, 2022, para. 2)

Regardless, central administrations secured large numbers of licenses from private corporations to support distance learning and teleworking, albeit at different speeds and in different ways. According to the interviews, senior administrators negotiated directly with certain companies, such as Zoom or Microsoft:

> [...] I talked to them and asked, "How many licenses do you have?" "We have an infinite number." [...] "Then let's make an agreement." "Ok, let's sign now, but I need 10% tomorrow." And so, before classes started, we already had reached an agreement with Zoom. We quickly trained the managers so that everyone—deans, directors, heads of departments—knew about it. We started to download [the software] and then prepared the Moodles. (Senior vice provost, University 5, personal communication, October 9, 2024)

Following mass licensing, virtualization required universities to make significant adjustments to address internal challenges. Institutional autonomy became visible in the creation of new regulations and protocols to govern remote operations, mainly in the area of distance education. Moreover, autonomy manifested in providing connectivity scholarships for students and training initiatives to support faculty in online teaching. In this way, access gaps were tackled within communities:

> [The university president] clarified that this situation will require the creation of a new calendar for activities that cannot be completed on virtual platforms, such as clinical education, training in experimental stations, and artistic training. The ongoing institutional efforts aim at continuing these activities as normally as possible. He added that each department will implement distance learning as required, but all must adapt to this modality, adjusting teaching methods, evaluations, and regulations. (Universidad de la República, 2020, para. 10)

Furthermore, perspectives on the future of universities are fundamentally intertwined with the principle of autonomy. Across both the statements and the interviews, visions of what universities should be like are largely framed as part of an internal decision, although closely related to the needs of the social environment. This decision manifests the possibility of developing relationships with technology in the hands of the institutions themselves.

In the discourses analyzed, expectations on how digitization will impact the future are rather optimistic, as platforms have the potential to expand the reach of universities in several ways. For example, in terms of internationalization, online platforms make it possible to pursue studies from any country. With regard to teaching, virtual modules or classrooms enable universities to accommodate a greater number of students connected remotely. In graduate education, flexible formats (hybrid or blended learning) facilitate the participation of geographically distant students and create opportunities for professionals who both study and work. Even in matters of university administration and co-governance, tools such as online voting (e.g., in electoral processes) would potentially streamline decision-making and eventually foster broader participation. Along with these possibilities, reflections arise however on the scope of digitization in other aspects, such as university life:

> When considering university education, one always focuses on the more instructive aspects, but university education also includes many components of human interaction, university coexistence, and progressive induction into professional guidelines. All these occur more organically on a day-to-day basis within schools and classrooms. (Head of Distance Education, personal communication, September 27, 2024)

The interviews indicate that the implementation of online voting systems during the pandemic in Chilean universities faced certain difficulties, especially regarding electoral participation within the university community. In contrast, Brazilian universities appeared to have more well-established online voting mechanisms. Even so, political participation mediated through digital platforms made it challenging to hold debates, campaigns, or university assemblies.

In this context, and alongside the enabling conditions stressed in the statements, the interviews shed light on the practical scope of digitization. They point to a series of "extensions" to face-to-face learning but also revealing some limitations inherent to digital mediation:

> Here at the university, the issue of teleworking has been raised. People can work from home. Is that a good thing? Yes. It is good for people to have a day or two to stay at home, so they can do their work while taking care of other domestic activities. However, it is also bad because it leaves the university empty [...] Our administration is really concerned about the fact that someone from

> outside the university might come in and see empty spaces. (Vice president for Graduate Studies, personal communication, April 28, 2025)

A frequent concern, for instance, relates to the decline in on-campus presence and in spaces for community development and interaction. This reduction has consequences such as the decrease in political participation mentioned above and the depopulation of university facilities, including administrative staff that teleworks or research centers that collaborate remotely. Thus, while the benefits of digitization are evident, various statements and interviews convey a sense of unease, especially in realizing that universities' envisioned critical role may be compromised due to reduced face-to-face activities.

DISCUSSION

Platformization and Digital Dependence in Latin American Public Universities

The findings reveal an accelerated process of digitization in the universities under study. This trend is consistent with existing literature evidencing that such adjustments were driven by the pandemic emergency (Atairo, 2022; UNESCO IESALC, 2020), which affected virtually all HESs in Latin America and around the world.

In the wake of the crisis, this rapid shift consolidated a more permanent level of digitization, gradually establishing a digital sociotechnical regime that reconfigures institutional structures, relationships, and practices (Casilli, 2022; Costa, 2021; Plantin et al., 2018). In this case, digitization has been valued for its mediating potential, but it has also had a significant impact on the ways students, faculty, and staff relate to one another.

The notion of university "uberization" (Adell Segura et al., 2018) appears in agreement with a specific mode of supplying digital technologies from the Global North. Its extractivist logic, whether via subscription-based appropriation or data colonialism (Couldry, 2020), unfolds within HESs in the context of highly marketized systems (Brunner et al., 2023), i.e., those shaped by a rationality centered on efficiency and effectiveness.

The results further show that the relationship with these technologies emerged under emergency conditions. Initially, this relationship was largely positive and encountered little resistance during the pandemic, as there was little space for reflection on matters related to reduced autonomy or growing technological dependence.

It has also been argued that the embedding of an imaginary framed as a promise of innovation (Arocena & Sutz, 2021; Nairdof, 2016) is grounded in digitization as one of its forms of expression. In this sense, both the statements and the interview accounts point to the large-scale acquisition of licenses from technology corporations, preferably via direct agreements. These decisions guaranteed the continuity of institutional operations during the emergency. At the same time, however, they consolidated a structural dependence shaped by the logic of educational solutionism (Williamson & Hogan, 2020).

Thus, although university autonomy is invoked in these narratives as a historical principle—following Acosta Silva (2020) and Nairdof (2016)—digitization is valued for its key role in university processes and questioned for reducing on-campus presence through digital mediation. It should be noted, nonetheless, that most reflections on digitization focus primarily on issues of adaptation, such as how universities adjust to new technologies. In the sample and period under analysis, no critical considerations were identified regarding the broader transformation of the university, particularly in terms of the relationship between people, machines, and the campus. Consequently, internal reflections on the scope of these technologies and the structural dependencies arising from their adoption were not central to the debate during the pandemic.

In this context, and returning to the article's guiding question—namely, whether digitization has shaped the relationship between Latin American public universities and university autonomy—the discussion can be further developed in light of the four specific dimensions addressed in this study. First, the analysis of statements and interviews points to an ongoing process of digital platformization (Plantin et al., 2018; Poell et al., 2019), unfolding within a global trend intensified by the pandemic (Costa, 2021). Second, this framework justifies the incorporation of digital technologies through an innovative narrative (Adell Segura et al., 2018; Arocena & Sutz, 2021). Third, this narrative was initially situated in the context of the COVID-19 emergency and operated according to the logic of technological solutionism (Williamson & Hogan, 2020). This logic persisted in the post-pandemic period as a complement to face-to-face activities, gradually becoming normalized and embedded in everyday university life. Finally, placing the results of this paper in dialogue with the critical literature allows for a deeper examination into the structural dependence associated with these technologies, now functioning as new infrastructures in universities. Although institutions formally incorporated the use of digital technologies into teaching or telework regulations, this process also deepened a relationship with platforms whose operation is based on profit (Casilli, 2022; Couldry, 2020). As a result, important questions arise about a decline in autonomy due to the privatization of public spending on digitization—a renewed expression or neoliberal dominance (Feenberg, 2017) within public institutions. Also, this invites discussion on the relationship between autonomy and sovereignty (Gazzola, 2022), especially when it comes to digital infrastructures that can now be considered critical because they support and mediate a substantial share of university activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Drawing on the statements and interviews analyzed in this article, the post-pandemic challenge is not to dispense with technological mediation, but rather to strike a balance between autonomy, sovereignty, and university democracy. This entails reflecting on the institutional needs and capacities in order to pursue a *non-dependent* digitization, thereby laying the groundwork for greater digital independence. Similarly, it is essential to examine how university data circulate within communities and to assess how digital technologies contribute to the social mission of universities with greater institutional cohesion, participation, and outreach in accordance with the needs of their environments.

However, current transformations surrounding digitization have become a university sociotechnical regime that is highly dependent and could be related to the very levels of digitization of national niches (Dudin et al., 2020). In this respect, it is necessary to reflect on the relationship between autonomy and sovereignty, specifically with regard to digital sovereignty in public universities.

Given the historical importance of this technological transition, it is crucial to revisit structural discussions about HESs. From a public perspective, a central question emerges: what role should universities play in highly digitalized societies—societies mediated and automated by external actors but also highly individualized and apathetic towards their environments? Whether or not this represents the emergence of a new type of university, the issue demands a democratic deliberation, which, in the best-case scenario, enables greater democratization within these institutions.

Lastly, although this study focused on the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), the consolidation of a deeply digitalized and structurally dependent sociotechnical regime calls for a broader critique of current education. This reality goes beyond regional boundaries and has consequences for all, particularly in light of the scope of automation and AI as new mediation tools that anticipate the relationships between people, machines, and their environments.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest that could have inappropriately influenced the results or the interpretations presented in this manuscript.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE USE STATEMENT

As mentioned in the methodology section, the AI tool integrated into Atlas.ti was used after the manual coding process had been completed. The results generated by the software were very similar to those obtained through manual coding. However, the tool did not inform the assigned codes; it was only used for comparison and validation purposes.

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