



Watchdog Journalism in Peru: 16 Case Studies from Political Corruption to Journalism Scandals 2020 – 2025

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Abstract. This article analyzes the crisis of democratic legitimacy and structural political corruption in Peru from 2020 to 2025, a period during which the nation transitioned from a flawed democracy to a "hybrid regime" marked by severe institutional instability and constant presidential successions. With a non-probability qualitative methodology based on researcher judgment, this study examines 16 high-impact investigative journalism cases that exposed illicit acts across national and subnational governments. These cases range from public emergency malfeasance and patronage networks to opaque state resource usage and high-level illicit enrichment—including scandals such as "Vacunagate," "Guacamaya Leaks," and "Rolexgate". Drawing upon Social Responsibility Theory and the public accountability model, the findings highlight a shift in corruption from large corporate schemes to fragmented and personalized networks. Furthermore, the corpus reveals a dual journalistic ecosystem: independent, digital-native media perform sustained watchdog journalism that uncovers systemic failures, while commercial television drives short-term mass outrage. Ultimately, the study underscores that despite operating in a hostile environment characterized by high political distrust, party fragmentation, political coercion and disinformation.

Keywords: Watchdog Journalism, Digital-native Media, Democracy, Peru

1 Introduction

Peru ceased to be considered an imperfect or flawed democracy in 2022. According to the 2022 Democracy Index [1], the downgrade was attributed mainly to Pedro Castillo's failed attempt to dissolve Congress and take control of autonomous institutions; Dina Boluarte's assumption of the presidency; and the violent repression by the new government formed after Castillo's removal, that of his successor Dina Boluarte, against demonstrations that ended with the deaths of more than fifty Peruvians in protests held across the country. Peru is considered a "hybrid regime," meaning it lies halfway between flawed democracies and authoritarian systems, which perfectly describes

the democratic crisis the country is experiencing, characteristic of many Latin American democracies that do not seem able to fully consolidate. What took place during the three months of Peru's elections, from the first round (April 12) to the second round (June 7) in the year 2026, once again, this elections revealed four features characteristic of this crisis: a high political distrust, a party fragmentation, a hostile digital ecosystem in terms of political information and, finally, an electoral disinformation [2]. After the Presidential Elections in 2026, Keiko Fujimori, Alberto Fujimori's daughter, reach the power on July in Peru, defeating Roberto Sanchez, the left-wing leader in the country after Pedro Castillo.

With Pedro Castillo as president in 2021, after 31 years, Peru once again experienced an electoral tsunami similar to that of 1990, explain Costa and Romero [3], who recall the perfect storm that brought Alberto Fujimori to power, laying the foundations for a new economic, social, and political order. Quiroz is the scholar who has delved into the origins of corruption in Peru and its context after the Cold War in Latin America in his work *History of Corruption in Peru*, noting that between 1960 and 1980, corruption was considered a lesser evil: "The persistence of corruption was accepted as something inherent to less developed political systems, together with vague notions about its possible benefits in income distribution" [4]. The tally in terms of presidencies is as follows: over the last 10 years, Peru has had nine presidents, many of whom were not elected by popular mandate but came to power through succession following the downfall of elected presidents, as happened with Dina Boluarte, José Jerí, and José María Balcázar from 2023 to 2026. In this article, we seek to answer these three main hypotheses, which are written here:

H1: Investigative journalism and watch-dog journalism have been a driving force over the last five years in Peru due to the excesses of corruption by Peruvian governments in the country's recent history, something characteristic on Peruvian politics due to a crisis of democratic legitimacy.

H2: Investigations stemming from allegations against politicians can have significant legal effects, both in politics and in society. Public Opinion should know when politicians are not doing well, above all, in a 'hybrid regime' like Peru as a country.

H3: Digital-native media have played an important role in bringing to light findings about political corruption and have effects on public opinion and Peruvian politics, based on investigations carried out by independent journalists who courageously expose cases of corruption through independent media outlets, many of them digital with many examples of watch-dog journalism on Peruvian politics.

Below, we can see a table of presidencies from 2020 to 2026 with the names of presidents, the periods and the reasons for departure as a context in order to understand how political turmoil has been working in Peru during the latest five years.

Table 1. Peruvian Presidencies from 2018 to 2026

President	Period	Context
José María Balcázar	Feb 2026 - Present	Elected by Congress as interim President.
José Jerí	Oct 2025 – Feb 2026	Elected by Congress as interim President.
Dina Boluarte	Dec 2022 – Oct 2025	Impeached by Congress for ‘permanent moral incapacity’
Pedro Castillo	Jul 2021 – Dec 2022	Elected president; ousted after failed self-coup attempt. Current in prison.
Francisco Sagasti	Nov 2020 – Julio 2021	Transitional President following the November crisis
Manuel Merino	Nov 2022	Resigned after just 5 days due to massive social protests
Martín Vizcarra	Mar 2018 – Nov 2022	Impeached by Congress for ‘moral incapacity’

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 The ‘Vladi-videos’, a tipping point in Peruvian Politics’ Corruption

The concepts we are going to address are related to corruption, but also to watchdog or investigative journalism and public accountability, as the journalistic models best suited to bringing to light abuses of power that occur in governments, as well as the consequences they may have. This research not only stress the importance of freedom of expression but also highlight how journalists or news media outlets play an important role by either supporting immoral political practices that reproduce public corruption (lapdog journalism) or by assuming their civic responsibility in playing a watchdog journalism. In the Peruvian context, it is important to examine the role of media in the

battle against corruption for three reasons: firstly, media outlets have acquired a remarkable amount of cultural and political power in the latest years, secondly, the Peruvian democratic system has not yet succeeded in building mechanisms to investigate public institutions and to denounce corrupt activities that undermine the democratic system; thirdly, due to the weakness of state institutions, the more power the media accumulates, the more vulnerable it becomes to being exploited by the very political and economic actors it is supposed to hold accountable in the fight against corruption.

Lippmann [5] expressed this idea bluntly: 'The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what should happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the slightest reason to think that the combination of individual ignorance in masses of people could produce a continuous guiding force in public affairs'. The answer to the question 'What is the most serious problem facing Peru today?' is ideal for beginning to examine the structure of Peruvian public opinion. The three main ones would be: problems linked to the country's and families' economic situation, problems related to insecurity and, lastly, problems of a political nature (mainly corruption). Corruption appears among the top two or three problems for struggling democracies, apart from human rights' violation, poverty and institutional weakness. Public opinion can also have a positive impact on democracy by holding politicians accountable for their actions [5].

However, apart from citizens, Waisbord [6] pointed out that as South American journalists quip about liberal positions defended by press owners. For Waisbord, '*Libertad de prensa* (press freedom) means *libertad de empresa* (market freedom)'. In other words, the ideal of free media is hopelessly utopian or simply false when press organizations regularly succumb to market pressures. An emblematic case occurred in 2000 when Peruvians were enthralled by revelations of the bribery and extortion schemes carried out – and videotaped – by Vladimiro Montesinos, the coordinator of the Peruvian Intelligence Service, to keep President Alberto Fujimori in power. Montesino's videotapes, known as the 'Vladi-videos', represent an important documentation of illegal activities in which Peruvian media figures, as well as politicians and business leaders, engaged. Analysts say that Peru's television networks were particularly vulnerable to Montesino's entreaties because many of them were in debt. An economic recession during the late 1990s had significantly cut private-sector advertising.

This case illustrates the two faces assumed by the news media in their relationship with the State. On the one hand, corruption became encrusted in the Peruvian State, in part, because the media abandoned their role as 'watchdog' and became a 'lapdog' instead when journalists helped to legitimate government responses to the denunciations presented by civil society. On the other hand, a group of journalists remained faithful to their ethical calling by doing serious investigative reporting that revealed the actions of this corrupt mafia. In addition, this episode revealed the structural dimension of the relation between media and political power. In spite of civil society-based anti-corruption campaigns generated by the so-called Vladi-videos, Pro-ética, an important Non-Governmental Organization devoted to the investigation of corruption cases in Peru, has reported that the government still has not demonstrated the political will to eliminate corruption in public administration. Regardless of the relation between the media and political power, we underline three aspects of this scenario:

1. Peruvian governments have continued to manipulate public resources to reward complacent news organizations and punish critical journalism such as the allocation of official advertising, tax breaks and favorable loans from state-owned banks to news corporations is still shrouded in secrecy and favoritism.
2. Governments have used legislation to advance political goals and business interests, they have been reluctant to support legal changes to facilitate media diversity and public scrutiny.
3. Anti-press violence has continued in Peru. Human rights and press freedom organizations have recorded scores of cases of coercion of the press. Methods include verbal attacks on news organizations, pressure on journalists and media owners to suppress critical stories or cancel news programs, and ordering tax inquiries and police raids of newsrooms, even killing Peruvian journalists.

2.2 The Social Responsibility of News Media

Social Responsibility Theory is an important contribution to theories of the press. According to this theory, the media have responsibilities toward society; therefore, the essence of the Social Responsibility Theory is an affirmative role in advocating social justice for the public, which are powerless. The Social Responsibility Model involves several ways in which the state could attempt to play a role in attempting to ensure that the media fulfill their social obligations while, at the same time trying to retain journalistic independence and freedom of speech [7]. Mass media should provide citizens with information. They should identify the problems in our society, and document the unlawful activities of those who have power. Media outlets also should have a mobilizing function, campaigning for societal purposes on politics and economic development. So, in all cases, social tasks come prior to media rights and freedoms. The essence of social responsibility doctrine, as McDevitt [8] points out, is the principle that the media must serve the interests of society first, as opposed to the interests of business or government.

The Social Responsibility Model suggest, among other points, that: the media have obligations to society; news media should be truthful, fair, objective and relevant; the media should be free, but self-regulated and should follow agreed codes of ethics and professional conduct [9]. This model is related to the idea that a free and independent media is one of the principal vehicles for informing the public about corrupt activity. Apart from this, watchdog journalism and independent media also contribute to effective action by civil society organizations against corruption. The impact of civil society is dependent not only on reliable information, but also on the existence of means to disseminate its opinions and raise issues of public concern. Although the Peruvian mainstream media are vulnerable to attempts to curb its effectiveness in countering corruption, there are many independent media and Peruvian journalists working on politics, mostly located in Lima, the capital of the country, such as important opinion leaders about politics. Media independence, however, does not mean that the media should not be regulated; it does mean that particular attention must be paid to how the media is regulated to ensure its continued independence.

The ability of the citizen to obtain information possessed by the State can be defined as access to information [10]. The right to know is linked inextricably to accountability, a central tenet for good governance. Therefore, Curran [11] gives three standard arguments for media independent from government in a democratic context: first, to act as a watchdog; second, to facilitate debate and the exchange of ideas; and third, so they may act more as the voice of the people. These contributions are closely connected to the theoretical contribution of Dewey [12] on the public and democracy. His analysis shows that a democratic state, as he believes and defends, demands a democratic life that requires that social, political, and cultural institutions, including the State itself, must serve the public interest. An important study monitored by International Transparency (2007) observes that public access to such information promotes greater transparency and accountability of those public authorities, and that the right information is fundamental for transitional democracies. According to this report, the purpose of these acts, also known as access to information laws, is to make a government more open and accountable to its people. According to Lippman [13], 'it can be presumed that the public interest is that which people would choose if they saw clearly, thought rationally, and acted selflessly'. Lippmann does not limit himself to making this simple criticism regarding the objectivity of the press, but also adds a question as the underlying problem: How are citizens going to obtain the information they need to make any rational political judgments, if they cannot trust the press? Consequently, impartial information is essential because 'in modern states, decisions are not made through the interaction of the legislative chambers and the executive, but rather through that of the executive and public opinion' [14].

2.3 The Watchdog Role of Journalism in Peru

Coronel [15] (2008) maintains that the watchdog role of journalism is particularly important during democratic transitions, when the media are still in the process of asserting their autonomy from government and helping construct the new rules of engagement with officials. For Bennett & Cerrin [16], this notion is related to the independent reporter or engaged citizen journalist, as opposed to the journalist as passive transmitter of information. According to this perspective, media should be considered as a 'watchdog' that the public rely on for revealing errors and wrong-doing by governmental institutions. Many scholars [17, 18, 15, 6] agree that in countries where democracy is fragile, there is less emphasis on the 'watchdog' role of the media. On the other hand, in democratic countries, in societies with a high level of political culture, the 'watchdog' role of the media is highlighted very strongly. Media are considered as a 'fourth state', whose role is to reveal abuses of state authority and to protect the democratic and constitutional rights of citizens [19].

However, observing the Peruvian case from the institutional perspective, it is possible to observe that changes in media could have a watchdog function many have developed as a result of organizations responding to external influences for change, such as a crisis in media economies or changes in regulatory structures. However, they also resulted as consequence of internal change such as ideological and political assumptions about the democratic culture, the role of the State, the existing business model and

so on. Independent media should be related to effective civil society action against corruption. Waisbord [6] underlined that economic independence is the only ticket for arriving at press freedom and making concrete the ideal of a watchdog press. ‘The separation between the state and the press is certainly necessary for watchdog journalism, especially in a historical context of permanent violations of liberal freedoms and news organizations ready to court state powers’, points out Waisbord [6]. Summing up, the relationship between press freedom, information access and strong democracy are the three keystones to rethinking any strategy to curb corruption. The awareness of owners and journalists of new media of their social responsibility should be connected to the efforts for constructing a pro-democracy journalism model which includes a certain autonomy or distance from external and dominant centers of power, assertiveness in reporting the news, apart from the diversity voices and points of view, reflected in news. Independent journalism is working on politics during the latest years on many digital media outlets in Peru.

2.4 Public accountability and democracy

The institutional basis of democracy enables the media to shine their torchlight into the public arenas that enable or disable the full enjoyment of citizenship. This is because democratic institutions carry out specific purposes and functions. In this sense, the independence of the media is vital to a democracy and it is essential if the media wants to fulfill its role of keeping decision makers accountable. Media independence, however, does not mean that the media should not be regulated; it does mean that particular attention must be paid to how the media is regulated to ensure its continued independence.

Richardson [10] points out that the fundamental moral responsibility is based on three underlying assumptions about participatory democracy: a) it requires an informed citizenry; b) the information on which citizens base their decisions must be truthful, complete, and trustworthy; c) most citizens have neither the time nor the training to monitor their centers of power themselves. In the same way, Curran [11] gives three standard arguments for media independent from government in a democratic context: first, to act as a watchdog; second, as a way to facilitate debate and the exchange of ideas; and third, so that they may act more as the voice of the people. These contributions are closely connected to the theoretical contribution of Dewey [12] on the public and democracy. His analysis shows that a democratic state, as he believes and defends, demands a democratic life that requires that social, political, and cultural institutions, including the State itself, must serve the public interest.

3 Methodology

This research employs a non-probability methodology based on the researcher's judgment, because the selection of cases did not follow a random procedure but rather the identification of investigative journalism exposes that had high media relevance, political impact, and social repercussions in Peru between 2020 and 2025. To this end,

a comprehensive review was conducted of reports published by independent digital media outlets and investigative television programs, such as *Ojo Público*, *Salud con Lupa*, *IDL Reporteros*, and the television program *Cuarto Poder*. The selected period coincides with a stage of constant political instability, a public health crisis, and presidential changes in the country, a context in which investigative journalism gained greater prominence thanks to the strengthening of digital platforms and programs broadcast through YouTube and national television. Based on this review, sixteen journalistic cases linked to alleged acts of corruption, influence peddling, abuse of power, illicit enrichment, and irregular contracting were selected, including the “Vacunagate” case, the “Pandora Papers,” “Rolexgate,” among some others associated with the governments of Martín Vizcarra, Pedro Castillo, and Dina Boluarte. In this sense, the non-probability methodology made it possible to prioritize emblematic and significant cases in order to understand the role of investigative journalism in exposing corrupt practices during the period studied. Below, a table with the most important periods, divided in presidencies, cases of corruption and political context in the three presidencies of Martín Vizcarra, Pedro Castillo and Dina Boluarte.

Table 2. Three Peruvian Presidencies with several corruption’s cases

Presidency	Corruption’s cases	Political context
Martín Vizcarra (2018 – 2020)	Rapid Covid-19 Cases, Vacunagate, Construction Club (Club de la Construcción)	National health emergency, relaxation of regulatory controls, immediate decision-making, rapid loss of institutional trust.
Pedro Castillo (2021 – 2022)	Yennifer Paredes / Anguía, Guacamaya Leaks, Corruption in the Army	Parliamentary polarization, decentralization of nepotistic and informal networks, capture of institutional leadership and irregular promotions.
Dina Boluarte (2022 – 2025)	Rolex Gate, Operation Cacharro (surgeries), Diri Leaks and Qali Warma.	Low public approval rating, political fragmentation, financial / patrimonial and institutional opacity.
Subnational Level	Pandora Papers (PPK) and MML Trains (Trenes de Lima)	Extension of opacity through transnational tax havens and clien-

telistic feuds at the regional and municipal levels.

4 Results

This structured content analysis is designed as input for this research based on 16 cases documented. However, it is remarkable that there were many presidents in Peru who weren't chose by Presidential Elections, apart from Martin Vizcarra and Pedro Castillo. There is a normalization of the Legitimacy Crisis in the Peruvians' Governments: the continuous succession of questioned presidents has generated a fragile institutional framework where concomitant oversight is often circumvented through emergency decrees or informal agreements. This has led to what Barrenechea and Vergara [20] call "democratic hollowing out"—a process driven by the dilution and fragmentation of power. They attribute this erosion to the gradual trivialization of politics itself, which has left Peruvian democracy unable to fulfill its basic functions. Therefore, this institutional crisis generated a low approval on politics in Peru, for instance, Dina Boluarte has had the worst approval rate around the democracies of the Americas' continent during her government with less than 3% in her last year.

In Peru, at least, 86.8% think that more than half or all politicians are involved in corruption cases; Peru ranks first among all the countries where this question was asked in 2023 around South American countries. Politicians are not the only group perceived as particularly corrupt in Peru; this perception also extends to public officials; two out of three Peruvians believe that corruption among public servants is very widespread around the whole country [5]. For instance, Castillo's government's record is bleak, Costa & Romero say [3], because 'it failed to become anything that his voters thought it could be; it did not even lay the groundwork for a course correction amid the democratic crisis'. The structure organizes the data through three key axes: corruption cases, political context and how Peruvian media outlets worked on them from 2020 to 2025, both years included. There is a concentration of cases during the public health emergency (2020-2021), the administration of Pedro Castillo (2021-2022) and the government of Dina Boluarte (2022-2025), as well as subnational administrations. There are four types of identified cases of corruption:

1. *Corruption in Emergency Response and Social Welfare*: Covid Tests, Vacunagate, Qali Warma³.

³ Qali Warma was Peru's National School Feeding Program, created in 2012 under the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion (MIDIS) to provide free breakfasts and lunches to children in public schools nationwide. Following a 2024 corruption scandal, it was restructured

2. *Patronage Networks and Capture of Contracting*: Yenifer Paredes⁴, Anguía's case⁵, Construction Club⁶ and Acuña's case⁷.

3. *Opaque Use of the State*: Guacamaya Leaks⁸, Army Network⁹ and Diri Leaks¹⁰.

4. *Enrichment, Ethical Conduct and Infrastructure*: Rolexgate¹¹, Presidencial Plastic Surgeries or Cacharro Operation¹² and Chatarra Papers (trains in Lima)¹³.

In terms of Peruvian media outlets, the corpus shows an ecosystem divided between digital-native journalism with 70% of corruption's cases and television investigative journalism with 30% of corruption's cases selected. The most relevant digital-native media are IDL Reporteros, Salud con Lupa, Ojo Público, La Encerrona, Epicentro and Hildebrant en sus Trece doing watchdog journalism. However, there are several TV programs working on politics about corruption: Cuarto Poder (America TV), Panorama (Panamericana TV) and Punto Final (Latina TV).

5 Conclusions

5.1 Democracy breakdown in Peru in the latest 10 years

The crisis of democratic legitimacy in Peru became the country in an 'hybrid regime' in 2022 after Pedro Castillo's Presidency, according to the Democracy Index, meaning it lies halfway between flawed democracies and authoritarian systems, which perfectly describes the democratic crisis the country is experiencing, characteristic of many Latin

as the National School and Community Feeding Program (Wasi Mikuna) and subsequently shut down in 2025.

⁴ Castillo's sister-in-law, accused of acting as frontwoman for a criminal network trafficking influence over public works contracts.

⁵ Major of Anguía district, José Medina, implicated alongside Paredes in the same network on aggravated collusion charges.

⁶ A cartel of national and foreign construction firms that colluded to rig public infrastructure bids and bribe officials, operating for years and later linked to former president Martín Vizcarra's impeachment.

⁷ Governor of La Libertad, investigated for influence-peddling and irregular contracting tied to his political network.

⁸ A 2022 hack exposing Peruvian Army emails, revealing surveillance of political parties, journalists, and civil society.

⁹ Corruption schemes within the Peruvian Army (2023–2025) involving arms-procurement fraud, ammunition trafficking, and fuel theft by senior officers.

¹⁰ A 2025 hack of Peru's police intelligence directorate (DIRIN), exposing surveillance files on journalists and judges.

¹¹ Corruption probe into President Dina Boluarte for undeclared luxury watches and jewelry, raising questions of illicit enrichment.

¹² Scandal over Boluarte's undisclosed 2023 cosmetic surgeries, concealed from Congress despite legal requirements to report presidential absences.

¹³ Documents exposing Lima's controversial purchase of decommissioned Caltrain train cars under then-mayor Rafael López Aliaga, bypassing public bidding processes.

American democracies that do not seem able to fully consolidate. The Presidential elections in 2026 revealed four features characteristic of this Peruvian crisis: a high political distrust in the public opinion, a party fragmentation, a hostile digital ecosystem in terms of political information and, finally, electoral disinformation. Almost 10 presidents in the latest 10 years in Peru and plenty of corruption's cases and media scandals, causes two out of every three Peruvians to believe that corruption among public servants is very widespread in the country from 2006 to the present day.

5.2 Many corruption's cases in Peruvian Governments

The corpus shows that corruption in recent Peru has shifted from large corporate schemes toward a hybrid model: fragmented at the local/regional level and personalized at the highest levels of the State. The selection of 16 cases also considered their impact on public opinion, since many of these exposes sparked public debate, widespread dissemination on social media, sustained coverage across various news outlets, and scrutiny of the authorities involved. The research does not seek to statistically represent all corruption cases that occurred in the country but rather to analyze in depth those exposes that generated the greatest media attention, legal or political consequences, and significant social repercussions among Peruvian citizens in the latest five years on politics from 2020 to 2025.

5.3 Digital Native Media is doing Watchdog Journalism in Politics

In this scenario, independent digital journalism has consolidated as the main watchdog of policy design and system failures, while commercial television acts as a catalyst for short-term mass outrage. Both formats fuel the public perception that corruption has ceased to be an anomalous occurrence and has instead become a structural feature of the exercise of political power. This watchdog function performed by digital native journalism does not operate in isolation. Its legitimacy and effectiveness are closely tied to its relationship with civil society. As has been observed in the Peruvian case, independent media constitute one of the principal vehicles for channeling civic demands into public scrutiny, operating in a mutually reinforcing relationship with citizen organizations. Digital native media, precisely because they emerged outside the traditional commercial media structure, have been able to occupy this space more consistently than legacy outlets — sustaining investigative coverage of policy design and systemic failures even when such coverage does not generate the short-term audience spikes that drive commercial television. In this sense, their watchdog role contributes to providing sustained information and strengthening civil society's capacity to demand accountability.

However, this model remains fragile. Both digital native journalism and commercial television operate within a media ecosystem still vulnerable to the same structural threats that have historically limited the Peruvian press's autonomy: pressure from political and economic elites, the risk of ownership concentration, and precarious financial sustainability that can compromise editorial independence. If digital native journalism

is to consolidate its role as the main watchdog of policy design, it will need to be accompanied by broader efforts to build a pro-democracy journalism model, where journalists could be killed in Peru, four in 2025, according to Reporters Without Borders.

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