In the first few years after the Italian-born sociologist Gino Germani arrived in Buenos Aires in 1934, he became an interested observer of the changing structure of Argentina’s urban social classes.\(^1\) By 1942, he looked to move beyond the traditional tools of census data in order to quantify how the professional classes in Buenos Aires described their cultural habits. After collecting data by surveying a variety of professionals as they left their white-collar jobs, he pointed to one aspect of his data that was particularly striking: respondents reported reading an incredible amount of literature. They claimed they read so many books and periodicals, in fact, that he could only conclude that the data must be inflated—it was impossible to read so much. Reading—and the *appearance* of reading—were important to the men he surveyed. Taking this analysis a step further, Germani argued that the reading material Buenos Aires residents chose (or claimed to have read) served as a marker of segmentation within the middle classes.\(^2\) Partitioning the middle classes into three cultural sectors, he described “the intellectuals” as a small cultural elite that produced reading for themselves, the “cultured public” as professionals that read literature as well as more popular periodicals and, finally, the largest segment, the “popular” middle class, which read very few books.\(^3\) Germani said that the most typical example of this final sector’s reading was a U.S. magazine: *Selecciones del Reader’s Digest*. Unbeknownst to Germani, the U.S. advertising conglomerate, J. Walter Thompson, Co. conducted a survey a year before and came to a similar conclusion. Following a survey of 1,677 men, the agency expressed disbelief when their findings indicated that 99 percent of respondents claimed to have read a newspaper and magazine on the day they were surveyed. The advertising company reported

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\(^1\) Gino Germani. “La clase media en la ciudad de Buenos Aires.” (1942) *Boletín del Instituto de Sociología*. V.2 (1942), 105-126; Gino Germani. “Sociografía de la clase media en Buenos Aires, características culturales de la clase media en la ciudad de Buenos Aires estudiadas a través del empleo de las horas libres.” *Boletín del Instituto de Sociología*. V.2, (1943), 203-209; As scholars have also noted, his assertion that Argentina offered its residents a clear social progression to the middle class upheld a romanticism of local anti-fascist, and in the future, anti-Peronist, argument that would locate lower class populist activism as an ahistorical process in a history of national class progression. Also see: Gino Germani. "La Clase Media en la Argentina con Especial Referencia a sus Sectores Urbanos." In *Materiales para el Estudio de la Clase Media en la América Latina*, edited by T. R. Crevenna. Washington: Pan American Union, Departamento de Asuntos Culturales, 1950.

\(^2\) Germani, (1943).

\(^3\) Ibid.
to the U.S. government that Selecciones was so often cited as reading material that it figured as an outlier in their collected data.  

These findings were rather remarkable, particularly considering that Selecciones had only arrived on Buenos Aires kiosks a little more than a year before. In Buenos Aires, a city with an extreme abundance of reading options and thriving printing and reading culture, this was a short time for a foreign magazine to rise to become “typical” of a class. Yet, Selecciones del Reader’s Digest maintained this reputation for much of the 20th century: the magazine not only thrived in the Buenos Aires market, but became a consumer item increasingly associated with the city’s middle classes.

Over the last few years, scholars of Latin American and global history have advanced our understandings of the middle class as a historical subject. While “the middle class” remains an elusive term, its multiple constructions as an identity, a political construction, and an economic category of analysis, have made it a complex (and understudied) component of 20th century history. The recently published volume, The Making of the Middle Class: Toward a Transnational History, edited by Barbara Weinstein and A. Ricardo López, has pushed a new middle class studies agenda forward by bringing together global historical essays on the emergence of middle class cultures and politics during the late 19th and 20th century. The volume contended that middle class identities have been historically constructed in connection to one another. Using examples from around the world, the essays also served to complicate and historicize the commonly articulated idea that middle classes either served as a stabilizing political and economic force or, conversely, as a counter-revolutionary class.

The edited volume Latin America’s Middle Class: Unsettled Debates and New Histories has also sought to sort through these ideas by examining the “middle classes” in Latin America as a

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plural concept and recognizing that, while quotidian experiences of middle class life are informed by surrounding theory and debate, lived histories of the middle classes are far more nuanced, contradictory and complex than traditional categorizations often allow.\(^7\)

In Argentine historiography, middle class studies have also seen renewed interest. In separate works, Natalia Milanesio and Enrique Garguin have both traced the racial and political discourses of Argentina’s middle classes in the 20\(^{th}\) century.\(^8\) Ezequiel Adamovsky has traced the history of the idea of the middle class, arguing that the term emerged as a powerful political and cultural construction in mid-century Buenos Aires. For Adamovsky, the middle class is associated with counter-insurgency, an identification that he says took form during the rise of Peronism when anti-Peronists exalted the middle class professional as an ideal political counter-symbol to the laborer.\(^9\) Eduardo Elena’s history of popular consumerism also underlines the middle class as an oppositional political identity during the first Peronist period. Elena has shown that the rising buying power of the lower classes became a central theme of controversy as anti-Peronist middle and upper class commentators criticized the “frivolous” purchases of new consumers, redefining middle class tastes as a contrast.\(^10\) Read together, these works highlight that, even though the two may be inextricable, one must be cautious in equating middle class identity and experience with the way the idea of the middle class has been understood as a politically constructed category. In examining middle class history, it is important to welcome the multiple complicated quotidian forms in which middle class identities was formed, recognized and acted out by its members, while understanding that these identities were constructed in a broader global and national context.

This article examines the initial popularity of the magazine, *Selecciones del Reader’s Digest* in Buenos Aires as an example of a quotidian culture that gained local meaning while also functioning as a key element of an international political project. The magazine was not only one of the first examples of a U.S. mass media product to gain extraordinary commercial success abroad, but was also a magazine created with the specific aim of spreading political messages to the Latin American middle class. In this, the magazine figured as a part of a specific moment in globalization history. The technologies of communication available during World War II (mass printing, literacy and international shortwave radio) created the context for a new era of transnational propaganda preparation. On the one hand, global powers exhibited a new eagerness to extend international relations beyond the battlefield and the diplomatic table, into the realm of popular culture and mass communications. On the other hand, the ability of these international media messages to cross national boundaries and be delivered directly to consumers on a massive scale, required that states grapple with new questions of cultural control—in many places, as in Argentina, the creation and enforcement of a nationalist cultural protectionist policies became components of both domestic politics and geopolitical strategy.

Culture, in this way, was both a part of emergent post-war geopolitics, as well as a part of local popular culture. Keeping this in mind, this article proposes that *Selecciones* needs to be understood not only as a tool in U.S. cultural strategy or as a local pop culture phenomenon, but also as part of a critical historical moment in international—and local—communications history. It first examines the production of the magazine and then contextualizes its arrival under new cultural protectionist policies. Finally, it analyzes the magazine’s significance in local cultural history, paying particular attention to its ascribed meanings in daily life. In doing this work, this article contends that state plans to use or control mass media—in this case, either those generated from Washington or in Buenos Aires—were neither totalizing nor made neutral by a local culture of consumption. *Selecciones* became integrated as a part of Buenos Aires quotidian life and, amid increasing nationalist and cultural protectionist policies, emerged as a symbol of an alternative idea of middle class globalism—a part of identity that reflected both a local, and international, politicization.

11 The use of radio and news propaganda by Nazi Germany is well known, and scholars have also shown the important role of mass-oriented propaganda/information for Japan and Great Britain. The history of U.S. global communication has likewise generated important debates over “Americanization,” “cultural imperialism” and propaganda. See footnote 19.
I. Creating Selecciones: Culture and Geopolitics

The Reader’s Digest rose to popularity in the United States in the 1920s with a simple format and formula. Since the turn of the century, magazine consumption had grown considerably—new printing and shipping technologies, as well as widespread literacy, had created a boon in reading material for the common consumer. The Reader’s Digest condensed this information: editors selected articles printed in other magazines, simplified the writing, and reprinted the stories as a monthly collection, or “digest.” The magazine’s founder, DeWitt Wallace, promoted this magazine as a solution to one of modernity’s problems: there was simply too much information available and, he said, no man or woman had the time to read everything. He advertised his publication as sustaining a premise that one did not need a college education to be informed or to understand the world.12

In the United States, the Reader’s Digest became famous for its simplicity, its optimism and its “common sense” perspective. Each issue of The Reader’s Digest offered around twenty-five articles along with a section of vignettes or jokes and a condensed book, which ran at around twenty-five pages. As Joanne Sharpe argued in her study of the U.S. magazine, its emphasis on common sense was “interpreted knowledge that presents itself as self-evident, unquestionably true and therefore not requiring further interpretation.”13 Many articles posited a binary of “good and bad” and turned complex problems into simple easily resolved conflicts.14 This interpreted knowledge was right of center, often anti-union, extremely anti-communist, as well as anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic and supportive of racist policies.15 In 1939, for example, the Reader’s Digest drew controversy after publishing a series

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13 Sharpe, 12.


of pro-Nazi articles, including an essay inciting international race war by the famed aviator, Charles Lindbergh.

By 1940, some of these editorial choices began to backfire, and the company began looking for methods to recover its popular reputation. The company’s business manager, Al Cole, met with State Department officials to examine the possibility of collaboration in early 1940. The government officials recommended that the company become involved in its burgeoning effort to counter Nazi propaganda in Latin America with pro-Allied media. The editors agreed to make a trial edition that would imitate the domestic edition in style, but would offer a specific selection of articles written in Spanish and designed for middle and lower middle-class Latin American audiences. It would be the first time a U.S. magazine generated a new non-English product for mass export and, also, the first time a U.S. magazine manufactured a new adaption of their product specifically for Latin American audiences. The result, Selecciones del Reader’s Digest, replicated much of the U.S. Reader’s Digest format but included a different set of stories and advertisements designed to project and explain U.S. culture and foreign policy to the foreign consumer. It remained anti-communist, was far more anti-Nazi than the U.S. magazine, and refrained from any explicit discussion of racial or religious politics. The magazine also eliminated any reference to internal cultural conflicts in the United States.

Within the United States, Selecciones’ ties to geopolitical strategy were broadcasted publicly: editors announced the project in their domestic Reader’s Digest and even asked U.S. readers to pitch in and donate money to help subsidize Latin American subscriptions. The editors told their U.S. readers that Selecciones was a “patriotic sacrifice”; if Reader’s Digest could help stem pro-Axis sentiment in Latin America, they said, the costs of production and distribution would be an appropriate expense to support U.S. defense. Meanwhile, in Latin America, Selecciones editors planned to deny any relationship to the U.S. war effort. To explain to their Spanish-language readers why they had created a special edition of the Reader’s Digest, the editors strung together a rather awkward collection of Pan Americanist phrases: “in sharing the same hemisphere, [Latin American readers] shared many problems, interests, a similar character and political philosophy that had formed over identical bases of exploration and adventure.”

16 Charles Lindbergh. “Aviation, Geography and Race,” Reader’s Digest. (November 1939), 64-67
17 “La historia de The Reader’s Digest y de Selecciones.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (October 1941), 82-83.
dry ink that permitted the company to print, cut and place pages in a few seconds—had cut costs and made printing more efficient, making expansion into a Latin American market an economical business decision.\footnote{Ibid.}

Meanwhile, however, the U.S. propaganda effort was becoming more organized and better funded. In early 1941, Nelson Rockefeller was hired to run a special government office, the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA). Rockefeller, armed with a substantial budget, was at the helm of a multitude of programs that aimed to fortify U.S.-Latin American relations (and U.S. power in the region) by bolstering the existing Good Neighbor Policy with economic and cultural programming. An Inter-American Bank for the disbursement of loans in the region, the creation of “psychological warfare” in the form of radio, print and film propaganda, and a wealth of cultural exchange programs began to be implemented on a large scale. As scholars have shown, these projects looked to dissuade Latin American alliances with Axis powers, while, at the same time, evicting European nations from their positions of dominance in Latin American commerce.\footnote{See, Seth Fein. “Myths of Cultural Imperialism and Nationalism in Golden Age Mexican Cinema.” In Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov, eds. Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico Since 1940. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). Introduction. Close Encounters of Empire. Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, eds., (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Bryce Wood. The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); Bryce Wood. Dismantling the Good Neighbor Policy. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Fredrick B. Pike. FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995); more recent works have decentered this U.S. focus, including, Eric Paul Roorda. The Dictator Next Door: the Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).}

In order to synchronize the geopolitical messages of U.S. foreign policy with exported commercial mass media, Rockefeller’s OCIAA deepened collaborative relationships with private corporations like The Reader’s Digest, CBS, NBC, and U.S. international advertisers. The extent of government involvement with each company’s Latin American products varied, but the consistent use of private/public collaborations became a hallmark of U.S. cultural strategy. This format distinguished the United States’ use of mass communications from Axis propaganda by generating a superficial appearance of being privately-run, consumer-driven popular culture, rather than state-directed propaganda. In the case of Selecciones this was particularly true. Even if, perhaps, consumers on the ground understood the clear connection between the magazine and the U.S. war effort, both the editors and the U.S. government believed that the illusion of separation was critical. U.S.
media’s globalization were to appear as a moral and fair enterprise and U.S. products would seem exceptionally desirable for their quality.

This strategy sought to emphasize that U.S. “products” were not imposed on the consumer by a foreign government, but were demanded by the consumer. Over time, as Washington’s geopolitical strategies became more important to Reader’s Digest business direction, the government-corporate relationship remained discrete. In 1947, Barclay Acheson, Director of the International Editions at Reader’s Digest described this relationship as he requested government funding for the company’s expansion behind the Iron Curtain. The lessons from Latin America, he said, had made it clear that consumers placed value on the idea that the magazine represented “unsubsidized, free media, untouched by the taint of organized national propaganda, purchased freely and voluntarily by the foreign reader”: the “effectiveness” of Selecciones’ message in Latin America, he said, was dependent on the idea that it was not a government production. Should such a relationship be openly admitted, he said “the State Department will subject itself to vicious attack by foreign opponents as misleading the foreign public by engaging in paid propaganda falsely presented.” He underlined that “voluntary purchase” was “the key to any educational effectiveness American magazines may have.”

It was, however, more important for the magazine to convey this message than to refuse government funding. Acheson encouraged the government to continue to find ways to fund the magazine’s ongoing global expansion while reiterating that they must not “give opponents of American policy a ready-made proof of the designs of the U.S. government for 'cultural imperialism’ all over the world.”

As such a discourse implied, for Selecciones, government funding arrived via somewhat indirect channels. In September 1941, Rockefeller generated a strategy to consolidate U.S. corporate power over Latin American media by organizing U.S. exporters and advertisers. Until the creation of the OCIAA’s campaign, U.S. corporate print and radio advertising functioned much as one might have expected: corporations placed consumer-oriented ads in Latin American media using local and international advertising agencies according to available marketing information. By 1941, however, with production cuts and no way of

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21 Ibid.
moving their products through increasingly hostile waters, U.S. corporations were reducing their advertising in the region. Rockefeller recognized that if the pattern continued, U.S. industries would not only lose their foothold in Latin American markets, but may also minimize an important political opportunity in the Latin American press. He invited advertising agencies, major U.S. corporations and media specialists to join together to develop a collaborative advertising program that delivered propaganda messages to consumers under corporate labels, and, at the same time, funneled funds to local pro-Allied media. The strategy functioned as a double-edged sword: if advertising messages became better coordinated with U.S. public diplomacy aims, U.S. psychological warfare could spread into a larger array of popular local news and entertainment outlets. Media unsympathetic to U.S. policy, meanwhile, would be starved of the dollars necessary to purchase type, paper and broadcasting equipment, until their opinion changed.\(^2\)

This advertising program, which would buy almost twenty pages of space in every issue of \textit{Selecciones}, would fall under the United States wartime tax budget. Rockefeller created tax breaks and subsidies that made expenses for foreign advertising tax deductible\(^3\) and ultimately encouraged more than 800 U.S. companies trading in the Americas to join the campaign.\(^4\) An internal memo noted that most of these companies would experience such large tax exemptions that “in a sense, government would be paying for this advertising indirectly.”\(^5\)

Subsidies enabled mass media’s expansion while government input made the magazine’s content relevant to U.S. international interests. At the same time, however, \textit{Selecciones} did see rather impressive consumer success.\(^6\) Before the launch of \textit{Selecciones}, company executives predicted that the propaganda project would operate at a loss, reaching a maximum circulation of 25,000 copies per month. Charter subscriptions, however, exceeded this number by November 1940. When the first issue went for public sale, Latin


\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Particularly in comparison to the OCIAA’s official magazine, \textit{En Guardia}, which mimicked \textit{Life} magazine’s format, but concentrated on war themes.
American vendors sold out the 225,000 copies distributed. In Lima, vendors reported that copies of Selecciones were gone two days after the magazine’s delivery, and, in Havana, the first allotment of 18,000 copies sold out within hours. However, in no country was success quite so extreme as in Argentina, where, in one year, circulation reached 155,000 copies. The company estimated that it reached more than 400,000 readers. By the close of World War II, Selecciones regularly sold twenty times its original estimate, with consumers buying over a million copies of the magazine every month. Selecciones became the single most widely-read magazine in Latin America and it maintained that position for much of the 20th century. By the time Acheson wrote to the State Department to request more funding for its ongoing politicized global expansion, the magazine was already being sold in five more languages and experiencing similar commercial success in Europe and the Middle East. By 1960, it would be the most widely-read magazine in the world.

Content and messaging

Shortly after Rockefeller’s office began to aid Selecciones with Latin American bound advertising, it also began to supply Selecciones with Pan-Americanist themed stories, tips for appropriate content, and promotional assistance. The government supplied The Reader’s Digest with articles it wanted to see distributed to Latin American readers: articles that emphasized cultural unity in the Americas, U.S.-Latin American trade, the benefits of U.S. development projects for Latin American countries, and discoveries of U.S. science that could benefit Latin America economies. The company, in turn, regularly requested articles of interest that fell within the editorial guidelines of the magazine’s particular style: stories of personal uplift with U.S. protagonists, optimistic visions of the post-war era, and efforts undertaken by United States citizens and groups to improve hygiene, agriculture, and life abroad.

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29 Wharton, 40.

In 1944, for example, the OCIAA Press and Publications services sent *The Reader's Digest* a list of new story ideas for the Latin American editions of the magazine. The eleven outlined stories reflected the government’s wartime emphasis of a specific geopolitical idea: that, in contrast to Europe, “the Americas” were a united and peaceful geopolitical unit, bound together by science, by commerce, and by media communication. The first story, on the Amazon Valley, asked the editors to “tie in the many United States activities which have given new significance to the area, as rubber, port improvements at Belem, health and sanitary work, and food supply.” The memo added that the “geographical concept” should receive more emphasis and that there should be more “dramatization” of the interplay of U.S. and Brazilian interests in Amazon development projects. Other story ideas, on Latin American merchandise in the United States, Inter-American trade, Latin American industrial scholarships in the United States, and a story on Nazi spies in the United States, emphasized U.S. trade benefits and underlined the dangers of Nazi infiltration. A final article for interest was on U.S. media itself: a story might be written, the OCIAA said, about the efforts of editors to find and strengthen a “Pan American” reading public. They suggested that the article feature discussion of its own publication, *En Guardia*, and forthcoming Spanish languages editions of *Time* magazine.

These themes melded so well with the editorial selection of the *Reader's Digest*’s Latin American editions that, for the reader, it would be nearly impossible to discern which articles originated at the OCIAA and which were *Reader's Digest* originals. Articles that were set in the United States constructed a simple, sensitive and culturally unified idea of the nation. The framework was repetitive and insistent on a positive view of capitalism and U.S. culture. A typical storyline often feature a young man born in a small town that had an epiphany—a business idea, a simple solution to a common problem, or a realization about the value of “giving back”; with hard work he becomes both rich and helpful to society. “A town without dental pain,” for example, told the story of a dentist from a small Texas town who realized that, unlike dentists in neighboring towns, he saw few patients with cavities. Upon investigating the water supply, the doctor discovered that the chemical fluoride prevented

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32 Frantz To Miss Martha Delrymble, CC: Mr. Jamieson. Subject: Story ideas for Reader's Digest. 29 February 1944. RG 229 Records of the Department of Press and Publications. General Records (E-127) QN-RZ. [NA CP].
cavities. Selecciones describes his success was not the work “of a great wise man or of a famous medical center, but of a simple rural dentist who make a great discovery.”

Another story titled, “The farmer who invented corn,” told the success story of Lester Pfister. Selecciones not only celebrates Pfister for “feeding millions” with his innovation of genetically modified corn, but also emphasizes that he was a humble and uneducated man who simply had a great idea. The article states that Pfister may have once been a “poor and desperate man that everyone called ‘crazy,’ but today, he is a prosperous and happy man. His six children will not have to leave school to make a living like he did.”

A consistent set of similar stories offered repetitive, optimistic portrayals that romanticized U.S. culture as moral and guided by capitalist meritocracy.

The editors, however, were careful to not only publish pieces about the United States. Most stories in the magazine were set outside of the United States, but imagined a world in which the same qualities of hard work, sympathy and capitalist success guided global citizens. In so doing, Selecciones dissolved nationalist allegiances, arguing instead that through consumption of knowledge, like-minded individuals could connect to a common culture. To reinforce these ideas, the editors used repetitive tropes and story devices. “Ah Wong would not convert,” for example, told of a U.S. missionary’s servant in China who enjoyed reading U.S. books and magazines but did not want to convert to Christianity. The narrator suggests that although Ah Wong did not accept the missionaries’ God he learned from the Christian “worth ethic.” Although he arrived as a wasteful laborer, he learned to save his salary and dedicate himself fully to his work. After two decades, he left, not a Christian, but with enough money to travel ticket to see his family and care for them.

A story set in Peru relayed a similar narration of a middle (or upper) class man “converting” a laborer to a moral manhood. A story by the Peruvian writer Ciro Alegría told of the summer a young “savage” boy, “Guillermo Silvestre,” was found on his father’s plantation. Alegría characterizes Silvestre as ugly, resembling a bear, but says he projected an “animal nature that inspired sympathy, even compassion.” In contrast to his animal-like appearance, Alegría's father demanded that he see himself as a man and respect himself by working.

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33 “Un pueblo sin dolor,” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (September 1943), 30.
34 George Kent. “El campesino que inventó su maiz.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (September 1942), 18-21.
35 For more on the domestic edition’s construction of nationalism, see Sharpe.
36 “Ah Wong no se dejó convertir.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (May 1944), 17.
37 Ciro Alegría. “El salvaje que se capacitó.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (September 1942), 9-11.
you want to return to live like an animal? You are a man. Work. I won't oblige you. Come back tomorrow with your decision.” Alegría writes that Guillermo was shocked by the proposition that he was a man, like the others. After working for two years, Alegría’s father gave him some land to cultivate. These types of stories marked out a racial and moral identity for a paternalistic middle class, and, in the context of the magazine, also directed readers to participate.

Reinforcing a common middle class identity, articles encouraged readers to employ their faculties of sympathy, to engage in charity, and do good deeds, through acts of care for those “less fortunate.” One common promotional tool used by the editors, for example, was to encourage Latin American readers to give their used copies of Secciones to those who could not afford to buy their own. The advice benefited the circulation of the magazine’s message: in 1952, demonstrating the importance placed on spreading the Reader’s Digest’s political messages rather than gaining more subscribers, the company celebrated that copies were so often “handed down” after being used that their actual readership was four to six times their circulation.38

In addition to adding readers, however, the act also echoed the paternalistic “conversion” described in the magazine’s pages. These acts of charity invited readers to see themselves as similar to the cultured, moral middle class described in the magazine’s stories, implicated them personally in the circulation of that message, and celebrated them as a cultured, non-greedy consumers that made a positive impact on the world. The activity caught on: in Argentina, memories of Secciones are often tied to an act of charity, with readers remembering either passing down used copies of Secciones, or receiving the magazine from others. Esther Vedia, a reader in Buenos Aires, for example remembered regularly giving her used magazines to her family’s domestic help for much of her life; another reader likewise recalled that her uncle regularly took his used copies of the magazine to a worker who lived in the country—“isolated, very far from everything.”39 A third recalled receiving the magazine from his aunt, who would bring Secciones to his family in the country once a

month, packaged along with used cloth that his mother would use to make blankets. While articles and advertisements asserted that personal betterment and charity were the noble tasks of the modern world resident, passing on the magazine allowed readers to participate in social uplift and participate in a moral, classed action.

**Cultures of consumption**

Coinciding with this characterization, these readers elaborated on historical documents that signaled the magazine as typical of a middle class, confirming that it was most characteristic of a middle class of a particular generation: Argentines who reached adulthood from the 1940s through the 1960s. Meanwhile, however, in Washington, this early commercial success was casually interpreted to be a signal of a strong, pro-U.S. (and, at the time, anti-Axis) cultural affinity. In March 1942, the OCIAA officially acknowledged the *Selecciones*’ “influence” in Argentina, where it had amassed a remarkably large regular audience. Nelson Rockefeller wrote to the company’s owner, DeWitt Wallace, and recognized that the government viewed the magazine as an important component of its psychological warfare program. He commended the editor that “the Spanish edition has made an excellent impression, and that it is doing an outstanding job in carrying our message, particularly among the upper sectors.” He regretted that he could not celebrate the magazine’s success more publicly. Like Rockefeller, later political analysis of the role of culture in U.S. foreign policy would continue to dramatize the commercial success of the magazine as an indicator of political “influence.” This idea, that the magazine was impacting political culture as the strategists had planned, would, notably, be an assumption shared among U.S. strategists and critics alike. In Latin America, some of the most vocal critics of cultural imperialism and “Americanization” would equate the commercial success of message-laden products like *Selecciones* with a success of U.S. political strategy.

Assuming that media, held a direct political influence on the consumer, however, did not take into account the complicated ways that culture can become integrated in a specific place. It also granted the reader little critical capacity. As any observer would note, most

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40 Raúl Costa. Personal Interview. 8 August 2005. Raúl, who lived in the rural interior of Argentina as a child, remembered the magazine as the only magazine that the family all regularly read.
readers in Buenos Aires would be more than accustomed to encountering an array of reading options that held strong editorial and political agendas and described global and local politics in any number of perspectives. The wide array of local magazines, newspapers and pamphlets available for purchase at the kiosk reflected on foreign and domestic conflicts with clear political stances and perspectives. In addition, Selecciones, although an early arrival, was notably only one example of a larger flow of (popular) new wartime propaganda that arrived in Buenos Aires from the United States, London and Germany. While regular purchase of any of these media might reflect a growing personal affinity with a particular perspective, it would be rather illogical to assume that the reasons for consumption were the same as the motives of production, or that any single article of consumption captivated with some sort of totalizing impact. While the success of some “commercial” U.S. mass media was often overwhelming in local markets and, thus, endangered the business of local products, its exacting psychological effect on readership would be an almost impossible—and absurd—question to evaluate.

In this light, the emergence of Selecciones as a popular symbol of middle class life needs to be understood as a phenomenon born of both the local and global context. The discourse within the text, created with the aim of a foreign policy, resonated with an audience that was experiencing, on the one hand, a new consumer modernity, and, on the other hand, new, local political and social contexts. Germani’s analysis of census data is often cited by historians that look to track the enormous changes in Buenos Aires urban life in the 1930s: a rise of professional jobs, a fall in illiteracy and an increased standard of living among a large sector of the population had generated an expanding white collar, professional class. Schools (both for children and adults) multiplied throughout the first half-century, as did attendance—the 54,738 students in high school in 1925 had more than tripled in number (to 175,245) by 1943. Between 1869 and 1914, illiteracy in Argentina dropped from 78% to 35%, and in Buenos Aires, literacy neared 100% by the 1940s. Salaried professional jobs grew between 1900 and 1930, particularly in government, banking, commercial, secretarial,  

43 While a more extensive analysis of these propaganda are beyond the scope of this article, it must suffice to say that the amount of media that claimed to emit the most factual and reliable “war news” constituted an impressive array. Most of these media found a local audience.
44 Gino Germani. La Clase Media en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires. Boletín del Instituto de Sociología. 2. (1942), 105-126.
government, and management; women were also gaining employment.46 Population growth and public education also meant more small business, more teachers, and more services, and a thriving culture of neighborhood cafes, bars, markets, restaurants, and bookstores.47 Radio listening had erupted into popularity since 1920 and “modern” appliances, including gas-powered stoves, refrigerators and freezers, were transforming domestic life.

These changes spurred a wealth of public commentary from residents who recalled the historical moment as one of observable change. Enrique Carriego remarked in his 1938 essay “Por las Calles de Buenos Aires,” that, “from thirty years ago until today the people, the building, the customs have changed fundamentally.”48 Florencio Escardó’s 1944 Geografía de Buenos Aires lamented that the new “professional” class was so engrossed in a culture of transit from home to work that they had become strangers to the city they inhabited: “The large majority of them,” he said, “know a bit of their own neighborhood, of downtown, and the hurried route they take between the two zones.”49 They were also ideas of “modernity” and “modern living” that framed readers’ memories of their first encounters with the magazine. One reader, born in the early 1920s, recalled entering the subway on the day the latest issue of Selecciones came out and seeing well-dressed men heading home with their copies of the magazine; another reader, Adela Martínez remembered buying the magazine at the kiosk in her neighborhood and “taking it on the subway to school and then back home; its size was perfect to carry around.”50

Cultural Geopolitics and National Protectionist Policy

Selecciones’ landing in Buenos Aires also coincided with important political and cultural ruptures. The beginning of World War II in 1939, on the one hand, drastically reduced the availability of European imports in Buenos Aires. In this context, Selecciones’ arrival in 1940 made it the first of a new wave of imports that were neither European nor directed at a traditional elite, but rather at a mass non-intellectual consumer audience. On the other hand, World War II also saw dramatic reflection in local political culture. By 1939, the public contest between pro-neutral, pro-allied and pro-Germanic sympathetic political

46 Adamovsky, 41.
47 Ibid.
associations was creating a dramatic divide in the Buenos Aires public life. Media in support of both pro-Axis and pro-Allied presses stoked fears that the opposite side was implicated in a plan for imperialist invasion of Argentina’s territory; mainstream and niche presses took note of the degree to which, despite distance and neutrality the war was lived as a part of public culture.

These public contests in the media, as well as the presence of an array of foreign propaganda, films and clandestine communications, stirred the federal government to generate increasingly restrictive communications policies. In late 1940, President Castillo installed infrastructure to begin to monitor radio signals and generated a new legal structure for telecommunications. A new telecommunications law used a Pan American Union guideline as a model, but, rather than only restrict German communications as suggested, the Argentine directive permitted both English and German languages to be spoken on non-clandestine radio. Over the course of the next year, and as the levels of propaganda and local commentary increased, the government began to restrict any “partial” public media commentary on the war, allowing national newspapers and periodicals to only present war “news.”

Amid these new restrictions, local pro-Allied political groups adopted the discourse of “Americanism” and “hemispheric unity” as a method of expressing anti-fascist activism without directly addressing the war in Europe. Following several events that promoted Pan Americanism, including a homage to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Castillo signaled a warning to the anti-fascist activists, reiterating that the government would not tolerate a corporation of citizens that aimed to meddle with national foreign relations. Local pro-Allied magazines including *El Hogar*, *Sur*, and the socialist, historically anti-imperialist magazine, *Claridad*, also became outspoken proponents of U.S.-inclusive call for American Unity. All three publications hosted OCIAA-produced articles and invited local OCIAA-collaborating writers to contribute opinion pieces that extolled the importance of Pan Americanism and

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52 Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto to Ministerio del Interior. 10 August 1942. Fondo Ministerio del Interior. [SCR] 1942; R; Caja 6. [AGN-I]
53 “Postergan el Homenaje Preparado en Honor del Presidente F. D. Roosevelt.” *El Mundo*. (December 20, 1941), 4.
the United States’ Good Neighbor Policy. The “Americanism” inclusive of the United States that was so avidly constructed on Selecciones’ pages thus saw a brief—but rather prolific—popularity as a temporary organizing tool for an increasingly restricted anti-fascist political consortium.

On December 27, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, restrictions on local media became more entrenched. President Castillo declared a state of siege citing “the safeguarding of neutrality and the defense of the continent.”\(^{55}\) The Executive Office called for the suspension of constitutional rights, and, shortly after, the Ministry of the Interior began more closely monitoring the press for editorial opinion on the war.\(^{56}\) La Prensa broke its silence momentarily to publicly argue that the state was intent on “muzzling the press” and Claridad printed blank pages in its editorial section, which it titled “America faces the destiny of the world.”\(^{57}\) On the radio, all foreign-produced programming was required to be pre-recorded and reviewed for violation of neutrality laws.

These new limits on local and international press became even more extensive following the military coup in 1943, when policy progressed towards a more elaborate cultural project grounded in the discourse national cultural protectionism. New laws drastically reduced the presence of foreign media while also outlining a more definitive role for mass culture in nationalist discourse. A new set of radio laws, amended extensively over the subsequent years, closely monitored the presence of foreigners and foreign culture on national airwaves. Here, the connection between culture and geopolitics was made explicit. Radio stations were required to submit each script that was scheduled for broadcast to government redactors, could only read news from official news bulletins, and were required to present 50% local news.\(^{58}\) Citing that radio was an “exceptional part of artistic and cultural education of the people, and, in times of war, an important resource for the security and the defense of the nation,” the state announced that “it is necessary to secure that the business and service of radio are Argentine, that the capital invested is argentine and that the direction and execution of these fundamental public services are in native argentine hands.”\(^{59}\) Thus, framed as wartime restrictions, the reforms borrowed language from Castillo’s state of siege

\(^{55}\) “Decretáse el estado de sitio en toda la nación.” El Mundo. (December 17, 1941), 8.
\(^{56}\) “Es Oportuno y Vasto el Plan de Obras Sanitarias.” El Mundo. (December 28 1941), 8.
\(^{57}\) “América Frente el Destino del Mundo.” Claridad. (December, 1941), 1-3.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
to interpret media censorship as a consequence of international geopolitics and state neutrality.\textsuperscript{60} They also illustrated an important chapter in the history of media in international relations: as transnational instant communications and mass cultures began to take root in local political life, states grappled to regulate and take control of communication technologies.

In this context, in Buenos Aires, \textit{Selecciones} appeared at once as a visible article of U.S. wartime media and, at the same time, as a rather innocuous modern consumer item. Indeed, it was no secret that \textit{Selecciones} was associated with the U.S. war effort, or, in the post-war era, that it was a U.S. consumer good. In the 1940s, the major pro-fascist and anti-Semitic newspaper in Argentina, \textit{El Pampero}, made casual announcements of \textit{Selecciones}’ propaganda intentions, mocking \textit{Selecciones} articles for their over-emphasis on U.S. innovation and their constant promotion of the idea of Americanism—one report lambasted the magazine for crediting U.S. scientists for developing a commonly-used folk technique in cattle raising. The article sardonically thanked \textit{Selecciones del Reader's Digest} for bringing “civilization” to a “barbarous” Argentina.\textsuperscript{61} Nor were such commentary limited to pro-fascist media—readers also recognized the promotional tone of the magazine. One devoted reader in Buenos Aires remembered the magazine first arriving as a part of, “cultural penetration.” He recalled: “I had a collection [of the magazines]. It came with the war movies, with the war propaganda. It was cultural penetration. But I still enjoyed the articles, the talks of world politics, and the war—it was easy to read, short and compressed in the common language. I bought it.”\textsuperscript{62} Another reader, recalled that it was part of war propaganda and that it romanticized life in the United States, but insisted that reading the magazine “was not about finding out about [the United States]. There were things that were more just human.”\textsuperscript{63}

As these recollection reflect, amid increased censorship and media monitoring and through the first Peronist period, there was no break in the circulation of \textit{Selecciones}. As a foreign media, the magazine was immune to many of the restrictions placed on the local press. As a print source, rather than a radio transmission it bypassed many of the strict new politics. Moreover, unlike other types of official, foreign propaganda, the magazine rarely


\textsuperscript{63} Anamaria Guzmán. Personal Interview. (6 August 2005).
addressed war news specifically, preferring first-person narratives about war issues and a broader spectrum of human interest stories that exalted the United States’ capacity for innovation. For the duration of the war and through the first Peronist period, the magazine would also display a complete ambivalence to Argentine affairs.

**Selecciones and the geography of a globalized middle class**

Muriel Otollos Alla’s father brought *Selecciones* with him from work—he would read it on the commute home, she remembered, and set it down on the living room coffee table, where she would find it and read the magazine’s jokes and stories. Decades later, she recalled “learning to read with *Selecciones*,” but, as her mind turned to the city beyond her home, she contrasted the safety of her living room with a changing city:

> It was once a beautiful city, you can’t imagine what it was like […] It was one of the most beautiful cities, but, everything changed. After, politically, after Perón rose to the government, everything changed. One couldn’t go out like before. There was no truth to what was being said. It was clean before…the city, it was cultured, a beauty. But everything changed.  

Nellida Tomasceli, who also began reading the magazine as a young girl, remembered seeing the magazine at most of her friends’ houses: “One found it in all the houses, in the living room,” she remembered, and recalled a feeling of transportation when she read the magazine’s stories each month. “The magazine told how people lived in the world,” she remembered, “I had not been to any foreign country but I had imagined them all.”

Growing media regulation, restricted imports, and interest in modernity can serve to provide some of the context of *Selecciones*’ early popularity in Argentina. The culture of the magazine’s consumption, however, is inextricable from a larger history of the idea of the middle class, as well as the idea of the middle class as an “anti-Peronist” identity during the 1940-1960 period. Otollos Alla’s recollections are saturated with a recognizable imagery—her descriptions of her own limited movement and the safety of the domestic space contrast with a perception that, beyond the front door, the city had transformed. These are, as many scholars of Peronism have pointed out, commonly stated recollections of “urban isolation” and “dirtying” that have been associated with an anti-Peronist middle class. Here, they point to some of the most critical factors in *Selecciones*’ significance in place: the magazine

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64 Muriel Otollos Alla. Personal interview. (10 August 2005).
67 See Milanesio.
functioned not only as a symbol of a class status, but also, increasingly of a new experience of middle class imagination of spatial alienation. In this sense, some of the most enduring messages in the magazine’s content were not its direct reflections on U.S. culture, or, for that matter, its constant romanticism of a capitalist meritocracy. Rather, while the urban middle class became increasingly associated with an “anti-Peronist” identity, the magazine offered a contrasting vision of cultural belonging. Its repetitive display of a moral, positive, global middle class consumer identity could be participated in by consuming information from abroad, from the “safety” of home.

Tomasceli and Otollos Alla’s memories can be understood in contrast to both the newly emergent restrictions of mass media as well as the nationalist geographic imagery produced during the first Peronist era. Although a more extensive study in contrasts is out of the bounds of this article, one might take the large educational reader released by the Secretaría de Prensa y Difusión in 1949, La Nación Argentina: Justa, Libre, Soberna, as an example of some of the prolific visual iconography that aimed to revive sentiments of territoriality, sovereignty and national rebirth, and which stood in contrast to Selecciones insistence on international and transnational community and middle class connection. In the opening page a glowing earth, centered on Argentina, beams out: “sovereignty, liberty, peace, equality, well-being, education, justice, confidence, work and patriotism.” A second image illustrates Justicialismo as separate and isolated from the contrasts of a Cold War geography: a map of Argentina appears a pendulum between two Cold War hemispheres, labeled “individualism” and “collectivism.” Perón’s description of Justicialismo as “the third way” visualized the nation as both geographically separate, and at a balanced equilibrium between, Europe and the United States.

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70 Ibid.

In much of early Peronist media, this geography of separation and isolation illustrated Argentina as a refuge from a collapsing globe. The poster “The current global situation” [Illustration] for example, warned that the new geography of instant communication and global connection was not a liberation but rather, a precarious threat. In the poster’s first image, a quotation from Perón asserts that modern technologies have made the world smaller. A second image of a mushroom cloud, includes the warning that “applied to future war [these technologies] can bring the consequence of the total destruction of humanity.”

Under a final image of two hemispheres colliding, the text concludes, “it is impossible to think that these powers could co-exist; these are not just powers, they are systems of living in the world whose powers of communication have made the world too small.” In a following poster, Argentina emerges as a phallus from the colliding Western and Eastern hemispheres. Here, in contrast to the geography of intimate global connection, a small world does not allow for connection, but rather, potential destruction; the nation appears powerful in its isolation and the state appears as a (masculine) provider in a conflicted world.

71 Ibid.
This selection not only illustrates the imagery of national geographic separation prevalent in Perón’s populist nationalism, but also serves as a backdrop for understanding how the U.S.-centered transnational media became part of a counter-iconography during and after the installment of cultural protectionist policies. Indeed, while much of the content of Selecciones was not entirely out of line with early Peronist themes—the magazine’s promotion of robust non-intellectual cultural consumption, an idea of expansive cultural populism, as well as an underlying anti-communist messaging—its construction of global space, and Argentines place in that global space, served as clear contrasts.

Selecciones’ rescuing of the “morality” of a middle class paternalism became a part of this geography as well—the middle class Argentines that appeared on its pages reinforced articles that defined the modern, globally-oriented “professional” as a moral cosmopolitan force. On the magazine’s back pages, for example, famous Argentines exalted that the magazine could generate a “personal” global connection for its readers. Roberto I. Unanue, an Argentine journalist, OCIAA collaborator and later the Assistant Director for CBS’s Latin American programming, endorsed the magazine in 1943 as a provider of cultural capital in Buenos Aires. He told readers that on his first day of work at La Nación he brought along a Reader’s Digest (then in English) and told the editor that “thanks to the Digest [he] became informed of a thousand things that happen in the world and never make it to the national media.”

The Reader’s Digest made Unanue appear to his colleagues as a globally-informed individual, and, he said, provided him a connection to the world that could not be found in national media.

Ana de Martínez Guerrero, the Argentine delegate and president of the Pan American Inter-American Commission on Women, echoed the idea in her endorsement in July of 1943. De Martínez Guerrero compared Selecciones to an airplane, emphasizing that the magazine, like an aircraft, had created the possibility for Americanism. She boasted of her jet-setting life: “I still cannot believe the quickness and ease with which an airplane takes me over mountain ranges, vast oceans and thick jungles. Not long ago I went from New York to Buenos Aires in just six days, instead of the three weeks that it took me before.” She told readers that knowing the world was not just for the jet-setting elite: readers who could not afford a plane ticket could have a modern relationship with “the world” by reading.

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73 Ana de Martínez Guerrero. Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (July 1943), back cover.
Selecciones, advertised de Martínez Guerrero, allowed the imagination to travel around the world even when the body cannot.\textsuperscript{74} Selecciones reinforced this idea of imaginary travel through knowledge by directing readers to not passively consume the magazine, but rather to use their imagination. In July of 1942 this was the explicit message of Walt Disney, who told readers that Selecciones was like “wings for the imagination,” and encouraged readers to allow their imagination to fly and to consume only the media that gave them “powerful wings.”\textsuperscript{75}

These set of relationships were enforced by the OCIAA-generated advertisements. Being worldly and knowledgeable, many ads proposed, were markers of “modern” culture that could be accessed by consumers. RCA radio published an ad in 1941 titled “the world is hers,” that featured a blonde woman leaning into hear the news emitted from a small tabletop radio. A globe appeared, emitted from the radio and the ad ran the caption: “The new super powerful RCA Victor radio puts five continents at arm's reach.”\textsuperscript{76} U.S. media appeared to function as a safe connection between the domestic space (signified through the image of the woman) and the world. In 1943, Zenith radios made the contrast between a world at war and the comfortable quiet of the living room more explicit: the company advertised that “far from the tragic scene of a world at war, reclined in the pleasure of your home, you can rest and be at ease beside a Zenith.”\textsuperscript{77} Another ad titled, “Satisfaction”\textsuperscript{78} offered the radio as a way for families to remain knowledgeable of war, but also, to continue to consume European culture. The ad suggested tuning in to U.S. radio to listen to the “great European masterpieces” it imagined the middle class living room—wherever that living room was located—as an appropriate site from which to connect to U.S. media to learn about the world.

While the magazine relied on endorsements that celebrated an elite lifestyle of global travel and pursuit of knowledge, these models of global success were positioned as aspirational, non-intellectual pursuits of cosmopolitanism. The magazine rejected other aspects of elite culture as overcomplicating and inefficient. In February of 1943, for example, the magazine featured a letter from Argentine journalist Alejandro Sux, who was working with the OCIAA. Sux recounted an evening in 1911 when he and Rubén Darío went to visit

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Walt Disney. “Alas para la imaginación.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (January 1942). back cover.
\item \textsuperscript{76} RCA Victor. “El mundo es suyo.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (May 1942).
\item \textsuperscript{77} Zenith. Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (October 1943).
\item \textsuperscript{78} Zenith Radio. “Satisfacción.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (October 1942).
\end{itemize}
the poet Leopoldo Lugones in Paris. Sux finds Lugones surrounded by a mountain of magazines, books and newspapers, cutting articles and complaining that he needed five polyglot secretaries to keep up with the world. Dario, he says, concurred. He wondered aloud, how there was not any publication that could report and explain what was happening in the world? “Dario and Lugones died without ever hiring their polyglot secretaries,” he advertised,

> With the airplane and the radio the problem of acquiring information got more complicated. Now there are so many newspapers and publication of all kinds that, if you don’t want to dedicate your entire life, there is no time to read it all. Fortunately for me, I discovered a few years ago the publication Rubén Darío was looking for. After I read the first issue of *Selecciones del Reader’s Digest*, I exclaimed, *I have more luck than Lugones and Darío together, I have twenty secretaries...* If *Selecciones* is of such value for a professional like myself, who takes hours of work to inform himself of what is happening in the world, even better for the millions of people who only have a few moments to read!

Here, *Selecciones* seems to receive not only the endorsement of Sux, but by extension, Lugones and Darío. Yet, the path of the intellectual—those who devoted their “entire life” to information, was made unnecessary by the magazine: the “professional” Sux, by contrast, could rely on *Selecciones* for a pithy, more visceral understanding of the world. In *Selecciones*, the U.S.-centered geography of information not only aimed to replace Paris as a cultural center, but also situated the Eurocentricism of traditional “cosmopolitanism” as an antiquated geography of the elite. *Selecciones*’ neat and economical summaries replaced the chaotic (albeit genius) scattering of newspaper cut outs and piles of papers in Lugones’ Parisian studio. Lugones and Dario were both dead, and, with imports abruptly cut by the war, so was Paris replaced: the locus of a new common culture appeared to be New York—the center of easily assessable information built for a new, internationally connected middle class.

Ads and articles like these also proposed that U.S. media created a personal relationship not only with the United States, but also with a global web of media consumers. RCA’s 1943 “La Señora Holtz receives an American visitor” showed this connection as potentially political. [Illustration] The ad shows an illustration of an elderly woman with a kind expression. She appears concentrated on the small radio on her table as she leans in closely, her ear next to the receiver and her fingers poised on the dial. The ad captions the

79 Alejandro Sux. “Aquí están tus secretarios!” *Selecciones del Reader’s Digest.* (Febrero 1943), back cover.
moment,

Until two months ago, when Hans gave his life for the glory of the Furher on the Russian frontline, Mrs Holtz knew very little about what happened in the world outside of Germany. When her youngest son finally suffered the same luck as her two eldest, there were things she needed to know. One night she turned the dial and in her house there entered an American visitor. Her mind became illuminated and she felt herself a victim of a great betrayal. Radio was changing the world, “each time that Mrs. Holtz and countless other mothers hear the voice that says that her enemies are not in America, but rather in her own home.”

Transnational communication alters the possibilities of global politics. Listening to the radio is a private, domestic activity that, through both secrecy and intimacy, afforded a connection that bypassed the immediate context outside the door and directly contested the politics of the state in power. The transnational medium of radio programming created a personal relationship between the individual and the “outside world,” that went unmediated by national politics, distances, and boundaries. If one looks beyond the ad, however, it is apparent that while the radio connects the imaginary Señora Holtz to the world beyond the German border, the magazine, ostensibly in the hands of its Latin American reader, connects the reader to this same circuit of information.

“La Señora Holtz recibe un Visitante Americano.” Secciones del Reader’s Digest. (October 1943).

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80 RCA Victor. “La Señora Holtz tiene un visitante norteamericano.” Secciones del Reader’s Digest. (October 1943).
In these articles and ads, consumers of the magazine are asked to imagine themselves each bending to hear the messages of media, even if behind closed doors. The “direct connection” argued that products like radios and Selecciones itself, could tweak both global and local urban geographical relationships: the radio crossed the public and private spheres, allowing the world to enter the home, or allowing the individual to confront the world. Consumption of mass media disrupted the rules of space to intimately “connect” at a distance. The importance of imagination in private life is, of course, not an invention of Selecciones.

Returning to the image of Señora Holtz craning to listen to her radio, it is important to note the political relationship between her and the voices she listens to. Here, the sense of both privacy and connection that exists in her home illustrates media as a subversive or counter-political connection, even while Señora Holtz’s old age and status as a mother serves to depoliticize the image. Read in the context of Buenos Aires, this image and the broader geography it represents, is significant. Selecciones’ function as a middle class symbol is structured by its peculiar moment of arrival—not only during a moment when commercial imports from Europe became rapidly unavailable, and immediately following an age of increased mass consumption, but also directly preceding the rise of Peronism. If readers felt that their contact with ideas was being limited, images like that of Señora Holtz and articles that directed readers to “fly with their imaginations” offered an alternative vision of consumer geography.

As Reader’s Digest announced the launch of its editions in Arabic, Portuguese, Russian and German, in 1944, the editors advertised to their readership in Latin America that the growing distribution created a network: “a growing international brotherhood that is united by invisible ties of curiosity that awaken them to the world they live in.” These invisible and imaginary social ties, reminiscent of the map of the world’s airways, created an idea of geography that was both locally and internationally significant. The idea that media’s globalization would be synonymous with the internationalization of U.S. culture was not only the idea behind the media’s proliferation but it was also its most repetitious message. However, examined in the context of Buenos Aires during the transitional period from 1940-1950, Selecciones and its geography of U.S. information highlight a peculiar relationship.

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82 “Los artículos de Selecciones le dan vuelta al mundo.” Selecciones del Reader’s Digest. (August 1944), insert.
There, this geography functioned first as a symbolic critique of a censoring state, and later, emerged as an anti-Peronist symbol and a signifier of the often ambivalently defined Buenos Aires “middle class.”