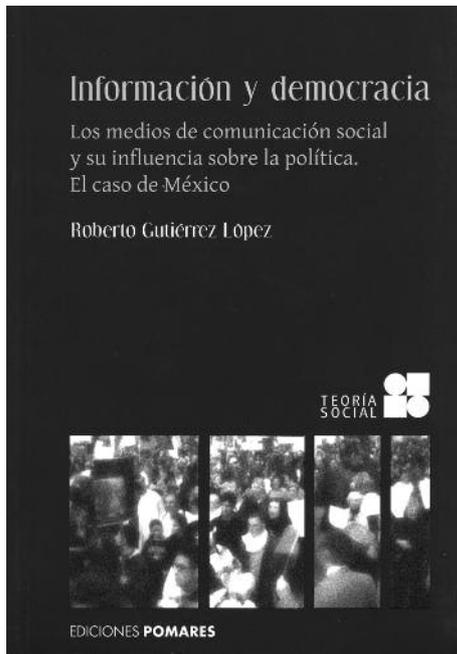


Reviews



**Información y democracia.
Los medios de comunicación social
y su influencia sobre la política.
El caso de México**

(Information and Democracy. The Media and Its
Influence on Politics. The Case of Mexico)

Roberto Gutiérrez López

Ediciones Pomares

Mexico City, 2005, 239 pp.

The media's decisive role in forging public opinion and influencing citizens' political preferences has become a challenge for democracy. Candidates and public officials increasingly need the media, particularly the electronic media, to promote and legitimize their political proposals. This gives the media and those with the economic resources to access its growing power, distorting the exercise of democracy when media strategies are subordinate to private interests and inequitably favor one position over another. In this scenario, the media impoverishes pluralism and misinforms society instead of in-

forming it. Under these conditions, citizens' votes and public opinion lack solid bases for making political decisions in the public interest.

To deal with this challenge, the regimen of social communications must be reformed to simultaneously guarantee freedom of expression, the right to information and the media's democratic responsibility. In Mexico, this kind of reform is being debated, so much so that one of the pending issues on the national political agenda is the limitation of the media's excessive power. As a result, there is great interest about the role it plays in our democratic life. One example of this is an article by the presidential spokesman Rubén Aguilar Valenzuela, "El papel de los medios de comunicación en la consolidación de la democracia mexicana" (The Role of the Media in Consolidating Mexican Democracy).¹

Academia has made important contributions to the study of the relationship between democracy and the media. Among the most recent are those of Roberto J. Gutiérrez López, well-known specialist in political culture in general and of Mexico in particular. Gutiérrez received his doctorate in social sciences from the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) and is currently the director of the UAM's Azcapotzalco campus Division of Social Sciences and Humanities. He has published research results about the relationship between the media and democracy in the now defunct daily newspaper *El Nacional* from 1995 to 1996, in magazines like *Casa del Tiempo*, published by the UAM, *Voices of Mexico* and *Metapolítica*.² Now he has produced the book *Información y democracia. Los medios de comunicación social y su influencia sobre la política. El caso de México* (Information and Democracy. The Media and Its Influence on Politics. The Case of Mexico), put out by a publishing house with a market both in Spain and Latin America.

This book honors its title in two ways: by dealing with the relationship between communications and democracy based on first-hand theoretical, legal and journalistic documentary sources, and by presenting a critical

analysis of the positions of the nation's political actors with regard to the system of social communications from the perspective of democratic ethics. In other words, Dr. Gutiérrez's book informs the reader about the state of the debate and legislation in our country with regard to the relationship among the state, the media and society, doing so with a clear commitment to democracy.

This study is interdisciplinary and uses political sociology as its theoretical-methodological platform. The book is enriched with elements of political philosophy and has a clear historiographic and journalistic vocation. Just as the author himself did at his book launch at the UAM venue Casa del Tiempo, the text narrates an unfinished story: that of Mexico's democratic transition *vis-à-vis* social communication.

From that perspective, Gutiérrez demonstrates that our prolonged political transition has created a gap between the democratic transformation of our institutions and the continued existence of our old regimen of social communication. The right to information has been a by-word since the 1970s, but it was not until recently that it was concretized in the Federal Law of Transparency and Access to Governmental Public Information and the creation of the Federal Institute for Access to Information (IFAI). However, as the author points out, regulating the media through the reforms needed in the Federal Radio and Television Law and the creation of a Federal Law on Social Communication is still pending. Gutiérrez explains this disparity by citing the ambiguity of the political parties, which recognize the power wielded by the private media, particularly the Televisa-TV Azteca television duopoly, and the need to limit that power, but which also fear the media magnates' influence on public opinion.

The way the author deals with the socio-political effects on the media of the lack of regulations is noteworthy. In his third chapter, he warns of the danger of the citizenry being at the mercy of the way the media reports on public issues, which it does favoring private criteria and interests instead of being an open window on what is going on in society and not only in government offices, becoming a space for pluralistic debate and open pro-active deliberation about the national agenda used to design solutions to common problems in the public interest.

Gutiérrez's reflections about the rules of the communications game are no less important: his philosoph-

ical, practical proposal is oriented to the media finding a balance between the principles of freedom and responsibility consisting of limiting the former in favor of the latter to the benefit of society. To argue this proposal, the author resorts to the most outstanding elements of modern political philosophy, wielding a conception of freedom as the responsible exercise of autonomous thought and as a source of the plurality of opinions, a value consubstantial to democracy.

Together with its theoretical rigor and precision in information management, Roberto Gutiérrez's book puts forward a very timely topic for discussion which the author places in the context of the political reform of the state. This unfinished reform process today re-emerges both from the ranks of civil society and the government itself.

For all these reasons, this book is a very lively, intriguing, provocative text which, as the author says in his prologue, points to creating a demand for regulating the media in Mexico. It is clear that if this reform does not happen, our incipient national democracy will be endangered and will run the risk of becoming a "mediocracy", an empire of the media. ■■

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¹ Rubén Aguilar Valenzuela, "El papel de los medios de comunicación en la consolidación de la democracia mexicana," *Este País* no. 174 (Mexico City), September 2005, pp. 4-8.

² See the articles by Roberto J. Gutiérrez López, "La reforma del Estado y el régimen de comunicación social," *Casa del Tiempo* no. 51 (Mexico City), April 2003, pp. 2-8; "The Media in Mexico Today: Politics as Spectacle," *Voices of Mexico* no. 70 (Mexico City), January-March 2005, pp. 16-19; and "Las coordenadas normativas de la comunicación social: libertad y responsabilidad," *Metapolítica* no. 40 (Mexico City), March-April 2005, pp. 77-89. Gutiérrez is also the author of specialized articles about political culture in the magazine *Sociológica*, produced at the UAM's Azcapotzalco campus, the essay *Identidades políticas y democracia* (Political Identities and Democracy), published by Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute in 2001, and the booklet *Cultura política y discriminación* (Political Culture and Discrimination), put out by the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (Conapred) in Mexico City in 2005.