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# THE THREE FACES OF MEXICAN TELEVISION

Imagine that instead of the large television networks ABC, NBC and CBS there was only one television consortium. Imagine that Don Rather, instead of being an aggressive interviewer of the vice-president, was an open collaborator and propagandist for the government. Add to this the possibility that instead of the PBS network, there existed only a few isolated television channels with a cultural or educational bent. Consider also the possibility that the U.S. government had its own national television network that depended directly on the State Department.

The comparison is certainly difficult. But that is how difficult it is to describe television in my country to non-Mexican readers. Mexican television, although it is obviously and deeply influenced by U.S. television programming, bears little resemblance to the system of propriety and social and political equilibrium present in U.S. television. Nor does the Mexican television model resemble the Western European television where the government's presence has been so dominant that there are now calls for a "deregulation" of the television industry to allow private groups to operate television channels. In Mexico the situation is as far from the U.S. model as it is from

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## Since 1972, the Mexican government has begun forming its own TV network

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the Western European one. Here, as in the United States, the exploitation of television as a business and as a cultural industry has been the responsibility, basically, of private interests. But, unlike a free enterprise system where rivalry acts as a stimulus, Mexico television developed during its first twenty years under the auspices one company. And, in contrast with the European model, the Mexican state showed little interest in the electronic communication medium until the early 1970s. On the other hand the attempts on the part of independent social groups and new private enterprises to make professional television have been scarce and, up to the present, almost always unsuccessful.

## The Most Successful Business in the Mexican Crisis

Mexican television is known both inside and outside the country for the notable capacity of its techni-

cians, for its presence in other nations and of course for its outstanding financial boom. Television is big business anywhere: given the investment required, television profits can be astronomical.

Mexican television has been no exception and because of the peculiar conditions in which it has developed, Mexican television has been a unique business in the world of electronic communications.

Although technical experiments and financial investment began in the 1940s in Mexico, the first formal TV transmission did not take place until July 31 1950, when Channel 4 first transmitted from Mexico City. One month later Mexican President Miguel Alemán Valdés' State of the Nation address was transmitted. Although not premeditated, these first events in Mexican television would have historical significance. Since that time, Mexican television has been directed by private interests, although without disregarding the government's interests. According to Mexican constitution, air space through which the electronic signals pass belongs to the state. Thus, the government concedes the right to transmit by radio or television to private groups and to public institutions. The principal concessionary today is the same one that in July 1951 began television transmissions in Mexico City. *Televisa*, at present the principal communications consortium in the

Spanish-speaking world, and without doubt, one of the most influential in the world, has its origins in the group of companies which began promoting commercial television in Mexico in the 1950s.

The character of private television in Mexico—conceived as a money-making instrument rather than a medium for information, education or service—has prevailed during the nearly forty years it has existed. The company that began television transmissions inaugurated three channels in Mexico City in the 1950s and soon thereafter expanded throughout the country. First known as *Telesistema Mexicano*, in December 1972 it took over the only other private competitor and changed its name to *Televisa (Televisión vía Satélite)*. During the 1970s *Televisa* grew at a rate that was unusual in the world telecommunications industry. At present, it dominates the greater part of television transmitting and repeating stations in Mexico, and has affiliates in other countries. Its most important foreign affiliate is *Univisión* which heads more than 300 cable TV, stations in the United States. *Televisa*, inside and outside of Mexico, is connected with video film production, radio and recording companies, as well as with tourism, advertising, entertainment, sports, museums and news agencies. In spite of Mexico's economic crisis, *Televisa* has made notable financial progress during the last few years.

### Despite cordial relations between Televisa and the government, conflicts often arise in reporting on Central America

If one were to take into account only *Televisa's* advertising revenues from the three national chains that it owns inside Mexico it would be considered the most important private consortium in the country. In 1986 *Televisa* sold more than 766 billion pesos worth of publicity space for Mexican commercials during television peak hours. Without a doubt, only the state-owned oil company PEMEX has greater revenues than *Televisa*.



Miguel Alemán Velasco, President of Televisa. (Photo by Herón Alemán)

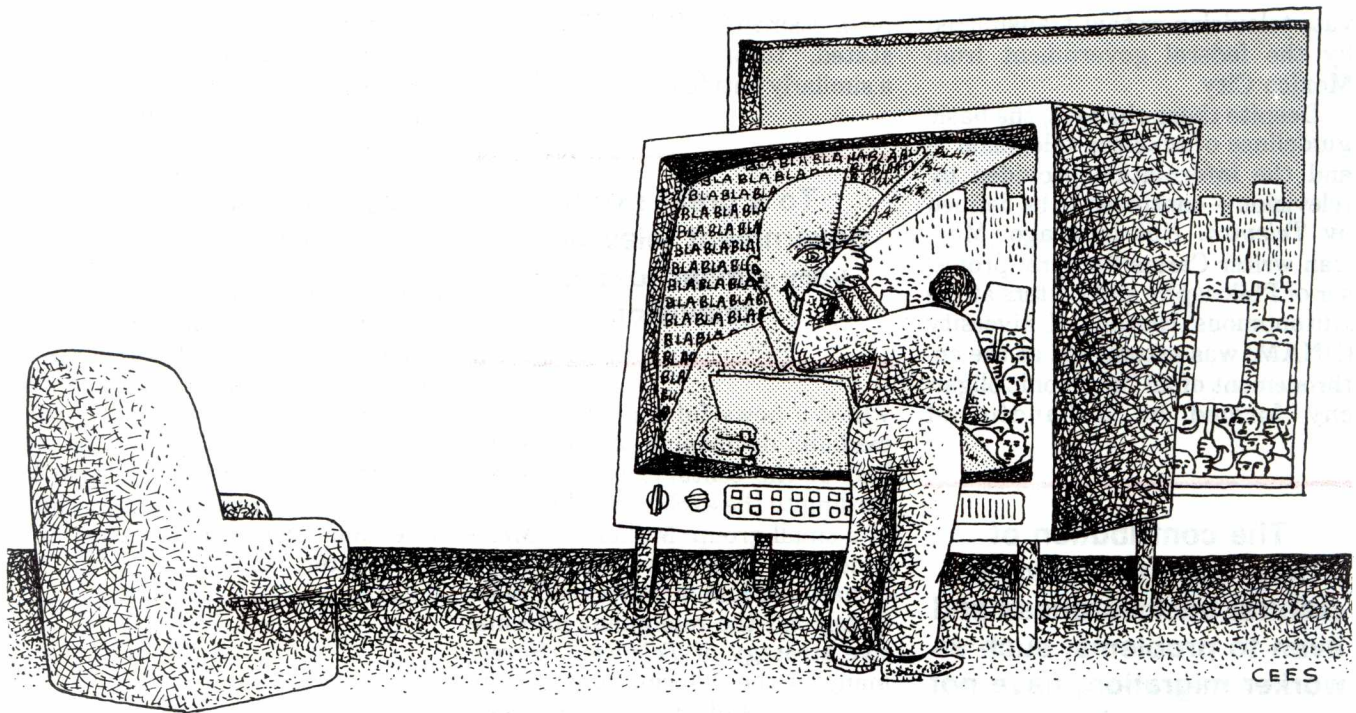
### Unmeasured Political and Cultural Influence

But perhaps more important than *Televisa's* financial strength is its political and ideological influence. It has often been said that *Televisa* has become the country's Ministry of Education. Children and young Mexicans pay more attention to televised messages than to classroom instruction. Various researchers have shown that Mexicans with an elementary school education know more about cartoon characters than about national heroes. That is, without doubt, an international phenomenon. But in the case of Mexico, the cultural omnipresence of this medium is particularly serious since TV programs frequently are not even made in Mexico nor do they have any connection with Mexican interests. U.S. programming continues to occupy a very large portion of *Televisa's* air time. Several years ago, Mexican writer Carlos Monsivais described the situation by saying that we are faced with "the first generation of Americans born in Mexico."

But more decisive than the indirect American cultural penetration is the specifically political influence of *Televisa's* owners. The political importance of *Televisa* has been recognized by the Mexican

government, which has maintained a close alliance with the private television network. In exchange for its non-critical attitude towards the government, *Televisa* receives preferential treatment in the transmission of its signals by the public microwave network and the state-owned satellite system, as well as exemption from taxes. The most important concession has been the almost unlimited permission which the government has granted *Televisa* in the lucrative entertainment industry. One of the best known examples of *Televisa's* influence was the World Soccer Cup which Mexico hosted in 1986. Due to its influence over the International Soccer Federation (FIFA), *Televisa* managed to overcome the negotiations headed by Henry Kissinger who tried to bring the World Cup to the United States. The 1986 championship provided incalculable gains for *Televisa* and its partners, despite complaints from several European countries about the poor quality of some transmissions.

Although *Televisa* maintains cordial relations with the Mexican government, on occasions *Televisa* finds itself the target of criticisms by government officials and members of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). One of the reasons for such confrontations is *Televisa's* reticence to accept the Mexican government's foreign policy, particularly with regards to the situation in Central America. While Mexico has shown solidarity with the government and people of Nicaragua, *Televisa* has supported Ronald Reagan's position in Central America and has even refused to give space to artistic and cultural events featuring Nicaraguans. In 1986, the well-known *Televisa* director Raúl Velasco refused to present the Nicaraguan beauty queen in his Sunday television program, insisting that he did not want to "offend" his Miami audience by bringing someone to the screen who represented the Sandinistas. Velasco's attitude was condemned by a legislator in the Chamber of Deputies who stated that the private TV consortium did not have the right to "act as an electronic chancellor." Nevertheless, relations between the government and private television in Mexico have



noticeably improved. Both Miguel Alemán Velasco, son of the Mexican ex-president and himself president of *Televisa* since 1986, and Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, principal shareholder and president of the council heading *Televisa* and *Univisa*, have indicated that they are active members of the PRI.

The main TV news program anchored by Jacobo Zabłudovsky dedicates approximately a fifth of its 30 minutes daily transmission time to information on the PRI presidential campaign. The combined time given to coverage of the opposition candidates does not reach even half of that time. The entire opposition has criticized *Televisa's* handling of information and all the parties—primarily the PRI—understand that the 1988 electoral results will be greatly influenced by television.

#### State Television, a Still Undefined Project

In order not to depend solely on its alliance with *Televisa*, the Mexican government has been forming its own television network since the 1970s. In 1972, the government acquired Channel 13, previously a private channel. Since then, it has increased its participation in the electronic medium through numerous local repeat stations. With the inauguration of Channel 7 and a national network in May 1986, the

federal government established an official TV system, called *Imevisión* (Mexican Television Institute) which is directly dependent on the Ministry of the Interior. The existence of the two national networks, one private and one state-owned, and of some local *Imevisión* channels, has provided a balance, in relative terms, to *Televisa's* cultural and informative hegemony.

To a great extent, government television is very similar to private television, partly because there has not been another sufficiently attractive and solid model. In order to attract the *Televisa* audience, *Imevisión* has almost always fallen back on the same programming as private television: foreign series, soap operas and game shows. *Imevisión* has suffered notorious administrative instability because it is subject to political control. State-owned Channel 13 had seven directors between 1976 and 1981, which prevented it from developing medium range projects. Even today, state-owned television, in contrast with private television, has not developed its own personality.

A third option has been developing in the rest of the country: television owned by state government. In the last few years, approximately twenty TV stations of this kind have been established. Although each state TV station has its own peculiar characteristics, together

they constitute a novelty as much in their programming as in the relation with their audience. Although funded by state governments including Quintana Roo, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Veracruz and Tabasco, state television has taken into account not only official information but also local concerns. Because these TV stations have ties to the social situations in each city or region, they awaken a new interest in their TV audience. Local audiences begin to see television not only as a source of messages from the center of the country (or from foreign countries) but also as a vehicle for expressing their own opinions. This is an option that is also subject to bureaucratic changes.

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#### Mexican television developed during its first 20 years under the auspices of one company, today the largest TV monopoly in the Spanish-speaking world

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In Michoacán and Veracruz for example, changes in state government meant inevitable upsets in the work of local public TV stations. Nonetheless state government-owned television is already seen as a new possibility unlike either pri-

## CULTURE

vate television or that transmitted by the federal government from Mexico City.

Despite these changes, the basic guidelines of Mexican television — and the information provided by television— continues to be defined by *Televisa*. Not long ago, Mexican writer Carlos Pereyra, professor of Philosophy and Letters at the Autonomous National University (UNAM) was astonished at the enthronement of an “electronic oligarchy formed by a handful of

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businessmen.” “It is difficult,” he stated, “to find in the whole world a similarly antidemocratic situation

**To a great extent, government television is very similar to private television**

where a powerful communications medium, developing in the second half of the century, functions according to the exclusive arbitration of a small group. Millions of Mexicans have almost no other record of national and international reality beyond the repugnant informative strategy of *Televisa*.” Surely many of the deformations and insufficiencies of Mexican television cannot be attributed only to his medium; limitations of political cul-

ture and the deviations in the Mexican systems are also to blame. But the contribution of television to Mexico’s cultural backwardness and even to problems, such as worker migration, have not been minor. In July 1985, Senator Guadalupe Rivera stated that television’s cultural “invasion” has contributed among other things to the illegal emigration of “hundreds of thousands of peasants and workers from other sectors [who] abandon the country every year with the idea that in the United States they will find all that [the media] let them believe, but the reality is something else and they will discover this much later.” □

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