

Vicente Fox and the Media

A Difficult Relationship

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Antonio Nava / A6 Photo

In a country like Mexico —for decades without plural, independent communications media— the transition to democracy that culminated emblematically with Vicente Fox's July 2000 electoral victory also meant the emergence of public opinion formed through the activity of print and electronic media that progressively became free, critical political actors. What is more, the political change the country has gone through in recent years would be incomprehensible without the media's decisive influence on the public's perception of the limits of government power, that is, the depth of its vices and deficiencies, as well as the possibilities of overcoming them.

The media's contribution to this transformation has been uneven and contradictory: at the same time that they

are effective in their criticism, they also lean toward scandal, a lack of objectivity in handling information and often simplistic judgments. Increasing competition among the different media outlets has generated a dizzying spiral in which the fight to be first or sport the most attractive headlines has led to the construction of a political reality that is not very precise and in which balanced analysis has lost ground to sensationalism. This is why it is no surprise that the traditional political actors, the elite that operates within the political parties, the legislature or the government, have an uncomfortable relationship with the media: depending on the political moment, they can either greatly benefit or suffer enormous damage from the media's evaluation of their performance.

This has been particularly clear in the case of the president, still key to the Mexican political system. In fact, the declarations and discussions about the function and impor-

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tance of the communications media during the first stage of the Fox administration have constantly referred to the president's relationship with them, an ambivalent one since, at the same time that the president is certain of their political importance and therefore of the need to use them as a basic tool in his work, he has also shown his irritation at the evaluation they have made of both the form and content of his performance.

For a political actor who based his electoral victory on very effective use of the media, the widening gap between the media's presentation of the image of the state of the nation and the president's perception of the real results of his work cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, the growing distance between the president and the media has not been accompanied by a self-critical evaluation or a more serious—and urgent—debate about communicators' social responsibilities.¹ Far from it, the president has simply opted, first, to say that he would not be "hounded out of office by headlines" and, second, to publicly state that the media were far from reflecting what was really happening in the country.

Naturally, a position like this led to a spiral of mutual accusations that became an additional obstacle to creating a favorable climate for an overall discussion of the system of social communications, taking up the issues of freedom of expression, the right to information and the media's public accountability.

Obviously, if we want to better understand the magnitude of the president's irritation about communicators' work, perhaps we should not concentrate too much on the content of the media's critical observations or analy-

ses of the deficiencies of Fox's public policies, his cabinet's lack of solidity or his unorthodox personal style of government. Rather, we should look at the enormous effect that all of this has had on society's perception of the new administration's performance and particularly that of the president.

The public's certainty that the effects of alternating in office had no relationship to campaign promises grew, and this caused a drastic drop in the president's popularity, showing the increasing gap that actual governing had caused between government and society. This was so large that by January 2002, public approval of presidential performance plummeted below the

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critical 50-percent point to 48 percent, something that had not happened since his taking office in December 2000.² The significance of this plunge can be better appreciated if we consider that during his first month in office, President Fox enjoyed a 79-percent approval rating. On the other hand, it is not surprising that together with his drop in approval, the number of Mexicans who think the country "is on a bad course" increased to 52 percent in January 2002.

Regardless of our opinion of how fair this public evaluation of the president's performance is, in the dispute with the first executive, the media has

once again shown its importance as a political actor of the first water. This is true first of all because of their defense of what they considered their right to exercise unrestricted freedom of expression, above all in the context of a new government associated with the slogan of change and a critique of authoritarianism.

Evidently, for a politician who became president on the basis of a strident, radical discourse, who made no concessions to the mistakes and deficiencies of previous governments, it was no easy matter to present himself as the victim of a campaign by precisely those who had contributed decisively to giving his project resonance and making it effective. Therefore, we should not be surprised that the president's protests were met with everything from surprise to indignation that gradually became harsher given what the media considered a terrible lack of political maturity on his part because it contradicted his own democratic discourse.

It is in this context that we must situate statements like that of Robert Cox, president of the Interamerican Press Society who said, "Vicente Fox has used language typical of *caudillos*....He has to accept that bad news is not the fault of the press and that criticism is important for governments."³ However, as if it were merely a matter of hypercritical media, the presidential view does not seem to have room for a deeper reflection about the causes of the media's dynamic, and much less for a serious proposal about the issue of their public responsibility.

In that sense, it is a matter for concern—and also regrettable—that the president's displeasure has not been followed up by rigorous thinking that

could at least open the possibility to understanding the media attacks and their effects on public opinion in the considerable gap between what were the “super-promises” of his electoral campaign and the meager results of the first stage of his administration. It does not seem exaggerated to say that the citizenry’s discouragement and disappointment in the government it initially perceived as an alternative for rapid, profound change in practically every sphere of the country’s life began to turn into social dissension that has been the ideal framework for the media’s sharp criticism (even if it is often frivolous and irresponsible).

In a continual, reciprocal process that fed on itself, the media’s constant focus on the president’s actions, both in form and content, fit in perfectly with the public’s direct perception of the lack of significant results in the most important aspects of people’s daily lives. A quick balance sheet of Fox’s campaign promises and the main initiatives of the first year of his “government of change” makes it possible to understand that the public’s frustration and the growing critique of the president cannot be attributable entirely to the media. What is more, if we examine the media’s behavior at times like the discussion about the indigent law, we can see that they actually functioned as a great sounding board for presidential aims which were, however, very far from jibing with the view of other actors, among them the legislature, which would, in the last analysis, be the one to decide the matter.

For that reason, on that occasion the president would once again be trapped between the very high expectations generated by the use and abuse of the media and a political reality that

he could not shape to his liking and that would be very costly and seen as a failure and a very bad investment of his political capital. As if that were not enough, this episode also demonstrated the lack of agreement between the political line fostered from Los Pinos [the presidential mansion] and the vision of his own political party, both with regard to content of some of the nation’s main political problems and in terms of the way to deal with them.

To this initial slip-up—which once again postponed the definitive solution to the Chiapas conflict—others would be added, such as the inability to effectively and credibly get bills as important as the fiscal, electrical and political

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reforms passed, as well as the failure of the attempts to solve the problem of public safety or clearly fight both past and present corruption and impunity. Unlike in the past, it can be said that the media made news out of the administration’s mistakes, even if sometimes they did it in a scandal-mongering, irresponsible way.

What is clear is the very lack of clarity about the president’s need to take a different attitude toward the media during a campaign and when in office. At this point in his term, it should be obvious that you cannot play the same role when in office as when in the opposition, and that being in office de-

mands more prudence than effect-seeking, more responsibility than a quest for popularity with everyone and at all costs, an aim which, besides being impossible, is in the end, as has been seen, counterproductive.

Until now, the difficulties in moving forward a balanced, realistic administration, capable of generating trust in a difficult national and international economic context, do not seem to have prompted a serious exercise in evaluation in which mistakes made are admitted and new styles of political leadership are put forward. Thus, the successive changes in the president’s press office have been presented more as changes in individuals than in strategies. If we add to this that the new government does not seem willing to forego such traditional and discredited methods as spectacular news leaks to the media—which completely distort the interaction among political actors, muddy judicial proceedings and contribute to sensationalism in the news spin—we find a rather disheartening panorama for the relationship between the media and the presidency.

In summary, today no one doubts the leading role played by the communications media in the country’s political life, and this means that social and political actors—starting with the president himself—will have to decide very clearly the way they are going to interact with them in order to stimulate their contribution to the democratic consolidation of the political system. Democratic life is inconceivable without the active, critical participation of the media, which must be neither hampered nor overvalued in terms of their limits and intentions. In a society like ours, the media do not bring down governments, but they are an undeniable factor of

power and social influence, and instead of furiously reproaching them for the real or supposed aggressiveness of their criticisms, we should demand of them true public accountability.

The basic problem is not, of course, the drop in the president's popularity rating, but how public opinion is formed, a public opinion that needs objective information presented in context as well as plural analyses and evaluations that allow it to base itself more on reason than on emotions, always fickle and subject to manipulation.

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More than a year after effecting alternation in the presidency, it is clear that both a citizens' culture rooted in the principles and values of democracy and civilized, rational dealings among the political actors cannot be built on marketing strategies, all-out competition for ratings or short term popularity based on the exploitation of misunderstood criticisms. Politicians and the mass media alike are facing a job both complex and necessary: giving democratic life the ethical and cognitive content that will consolidate forms of social and political relations based on civic conscience and a sense of belonging to a common order. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The distancing has been clearer with the printed press which, for historic reasons, has had a greater vocation to and more opportunities for being critical. But there is distance vis-à-vis the electronic media as well; regardless of the substantive nature of their criticisms, they have been decisive in the wide dissemination of presidential gaffs (like the use of patent leather boots at a black tie affair, his kissing his wife in front of the Vatican, his mistake in pronouncing the name of writer Jorge Luis Borges in his speech to Spain's Royal Academy of Letters and his ignorance of protocol for presidential trips, among some of the best known cases).

² These figures and others mentioned further on in the article come from the January 2002 national survey carried out by the *Reforma* newspaper, published January 23.

³ *Reforma* (Mexico City), 6 November 2001.