

The News Media And Political Competition

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It is almost self-evident to say that there can be no politics today without the communications media. The enormous reach and broad penetration of radio and television throughout our country leave them no competitors in the dissemination of information.

According to 2000 figures, Mexico has 1,332 radio stations and 595 television channels; 95 percent of the country receives television broadcasts, making it the means of distribution of information to the public par excellence.¹

The media are not only transmitters of news and events, but have also become true molders of people's interpretations of reality, shaping aspirations, perceptions, collective reference points and even behavior patterns in a particularly effective way precisely because of their ubiquitousness.

In a system that claims to be democratic like our own, politics and political actors require the recognition and legitimation of the citizenry; from this stems the fact that the way in which public matters are posed and discussed—from speeches to decisions and policy, where the communications media come into play—is key to achieving that social backing.

The media have specific characteristics that determine their social impact:

1) *The media are never neutral.* As conduits for the transmission of news, the facts that behind them are commercial interests that they must push and that they have broad coverage have turned them into authentic social and political actors capable of carrying out tasks traditionally shouldered by governments and politicians. Thus, the media have gone so far as to: a) fix the public agenda, selecting and ordering the issues according to their own criteria and even the way in which they disseminate them; b) determine the content, timing and emphasis in public debate. In fact, what

does not appear in the media is virtually non-existent, since they are the ones who breathe life into different issues; c) define the priorities of public attention since they emphasize certain issues while obscuring others; and d) condition the relationship between government and society insofar as the media are almost omnipresent, forcing those in government and political leaders to accept their protagonism, if not conform to their logic and demands. In this way, the predominance of image over content, or sound bytes over complex ideas, is imperative in the electronic media that has been imposing its dynamic on the deliberation of matters of public interest, among which are precisely those issues related to political competition.

2) *The communications media have a social role to fulfill.* Because of their broad coverage and the fact that they use the airwaves, property of the nation whose use must be licensed by the state, the media are entrusted with the task of fostering and defending certain fundamental principles of peaceful and democratic concert, such as freedom of expression, the right to truthful, timely information and, more recently, equality in political struggles.

During the long period of hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the communications media were unconditional allies of those in power because their interests coincided: the media openly backed up those in power and those in power renewed their licenses, and therefore, their ability to stay in business. This power relationship was demonstrated during the 1968 student movement and during the severely contested elections of 1988 in which the main television news programs dedicated 83 percent of their air time to cover the PRI candidate's campaign.²

Throughout the 1990s, political competition grew, to a great extent because electoral norms gradually created a clean, transparent and level playing field and because the main political parties became more deeply rooted in society. With

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this, the political electoral panorama broadened out to a plurality of contenders with the effective ability to attract voters and dispute the positions up for election.

The plurality of the political actors and the increasing competition among them has also demanded the opening of the media to reflect the diversity of offerings, but also stepped-up competition among the media themselves to win different audiences. In other words, changes in political life had an impact not only on the relationship of the media to a less and less concentrated and monopolized power structure, but also on their relationship to the public itself which, given its increasing ability to have an impact on political decisions, particularly the election of public officials, would demand better and more diverse sources of information. The steps forward in political-electoral competition were having clear effects on the mass media's behavior.

Since 1973, the importance of the media for political competition led to the pertinent legislation to include access for all political parties to air time during electoral campaigns using government time slots.³ However, it was not until the 1996 electoral reform that the principle of equality in electoral campaigns was put at the top of the agenda as a democratic demand, leading to its being incorporated into the Constitution (Article 41), guaranteeing in the legislation permanently balanced spaces in the media for all political parties given that they were considered entities in the public interest.

This guarantee of plural and balanced access to the media was made in two basic ways:

1) Political parties were given per-

manent, equal access to official time slots (15 minutes a month each on radio and television); they have access to additional time during political campaigns (200 hours on television and 250 on radio during presidential elections and half that at half-term elections), distributed according to a formula (70 percent proportional to their vote count and 30 percent equally); they have the right to participate in the distribution of commercial spots purchased directly from television and radio owners by the electoral authorities (10,000 radio spots and 400 television spots, whose costs must not exceed 20 percent of public financing for the presidential election and 12 percent for a mid-term election), which are then parceled out according to the aforementioned formula.

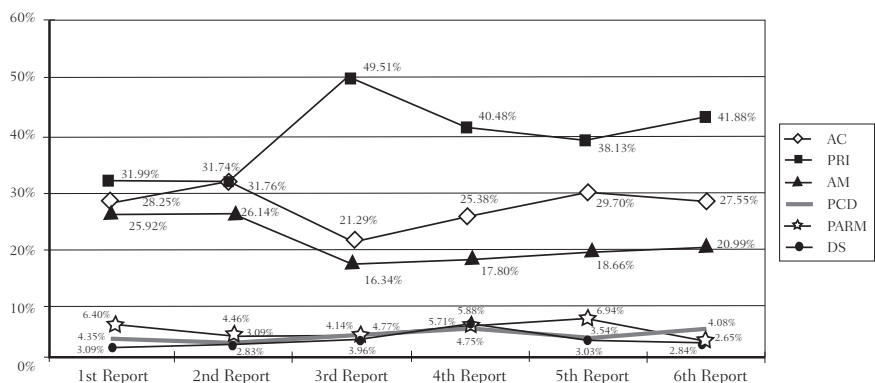
2) The electoral authorities monitor the main radio and television news broadcasts during political campaigns by taking a sample selected by the political parties themselves that allows them to determine the exact air time given to the different candidates and parties. The electoral authorities have only dissuasive measures at their command to make sure the news broadcasts cover the campaigns equitably. More moral

than legal in nature, this leverage consists of broadly disseminating the results of their monitoring. However, this has been effective because it has sensitized the TV channels and radio stations about the benefits of equality in campaign coverage; in addition, the public is now more demanding and requires this kind of coverage.

According to monitoring data for the 2000 federal elections —considered undoubtedly the most competitive of modern history— the distribution of news time among the main political parties was balanced during the first two months of the campaign, but in the third month the preponderance of the PRI shot up noticeably, taking up practically 50 percent of the broadcasts. Despite the fact that this disparity decreased in the last months of the campaign, the PRI still maintained an important advantage nationwide of 12 percent more air time than its closest competitor (see graph 1).

It is worth noting that the average results include all the stations and channels in the study, regardless of their audience penetration. Taking into account only the news programs broadcast from Mexico City —and they are the ones with the greatest audience

GRAPH 1. RADIO AND TV AIRTIME (2000 REPORT)



Source: Results of IFE Monitoring, 2000.

(AC) Alliance for Change • (PRI) Institutional Revolutionary Party • (AM) Alliance for Mexico • (PCD) Party of the Democratic Center (PARM) Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution • (DS) Social Democracy Party.

penetration because many of them are re-broadcast in different states—the PRI's advantage is reduced to two percentage points; that is to say, this shows a greater inclination of the media in favor of political competition. This is because the news programs broadcast from Mexico City are not only the best known in the country, but also the most dependent on public acceptance, or their ratings, because they are the ones that compete the most among themselves.

The explanation of why some media comply better with contributing to equality in political contests than others lies in the tension between freedom of expression and equality in campaign coverage since both principles are upheld in the Constitution. But in the case of equality, the norm is imperfect because there is no way that the electoral authorities can force the media to comply. This means that the media exercise quite a degree of discretion with regard to this principle and can use freedom of expression as a pretext to better serve their own interests. For example, during the 2000 campaign, Televisa, the country's most important network, openly came out in favor of equal coverage of the campaigns, perhaps to erase its image as a

traditional ally of the PRI. Channel 40, on the other hand, adopted a policy of only covering what it considered news during the electoral campaign, regardless of whether it left some of the political actors out of its coverage.

Another dimension of the communications media and political competition is the ability of the parties to purchase air time with their own resources, limited only by the need to stick to the campaign-spending ceiling. During the last two federal electoral campaigns, parties' purchases of air time on radio and television increased noticeably compared to 1994: in 1994, they invested one-fourth of their campaign resources in this area, while in 1997 and 2000, they spent 56 percent and 54 percent respectively. In absolute terms, this means that the amount increased from 365 million pesos in 1994 to 1.311 billion pesos in 2000 (see table 1).

This notable rise in resources spent on media campaigns during recent federal elections reflects the media's increasing importance as competition has grown among the parties. The traditional forms of carrying out electoral campaigns through face-to-face contact with the public in rallies, house-to-house visits, etc. have been discard-

ed in favor of media campaigns, with the consequences that this has for political life. Nevertheless, each of the parties and electoral alliances that ran in the 2000 elections dedicated different percentages of their overall spending to radio and television publicity. While the Alliance for Mexico, which ran Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, spent 41.7 percent of its resources in this area, the PRI spent 63.5 percent and the Alliance for Change, with Fox at the head, spent 52.5 percent (see table 2).

These differences in campaign spending reveal the different political communications strategies of the main political parties; nevertheless, in all cases, the media campaigns were the biggest single item in their campaign budget.

If we agree that the media are indispensable for political campaigns because they make candidates visible, we must ask how much of an impact they have on electoral results.

NO DIRECT LINK BETWEEN AIR TIME AND VOTE COUNT

Both radio and TV monitoring results and the amounts invested in promo-

**TABLE 1. CAMPAIGN EXPENSES
(Mexican pesos)**

Expenses	1994	1997	2000
Radio and TV	25% 365,587,207	56% 1,113,040,261	54% 1,311,183,378
Operations	75% 1,081,878,074	44% 910,435,256	46% 1,114,805,088

Source: Auditor's Report, IFE (1995, 1998 and 2001).

TABLE 2. CAMPAIGN COSTS BY PARTY (2000)
(Mexican pesos)

Expenses	Alliance for Change	PRI	Alliance for Mexico	PARM	PCD	DS
Non-press, Radio and TV Publicity	18.17%	23.44%	23.25%	33.76%	39.04%	26.44%
Campaign Operations	29.36%	13.04%	35.05%	9.71%	32.24%	14.00%
Press, Radio and TV Ads/slots	52.47%	63.52%	41.71%	56.53%	28.72%	59.56%
Total	\$673,695,813	\$901,392,199	\$566,756,040	\$28,612,639	\$28,027,366	\$28,010,494

Source: Auditor's Report, IFE (2001).

tional spots put the PRI in first place among the political parties, but this did not translate into an electoral win precisely because there is no direct proportional relationship between the amount of air time and the results at the polls. It would seem correct to say that more than creating trends, the media reinforce already existing trends in that they are more effective for attacking one's adversary than for presenting alternatives. In the 2000 elections, the center of the debate was the issue of change and this was repeated throughout the campaign by the different candidates.

To put it another way, in a competitive electoral campaign, many elements may be involved, from the positive or negative judgement about the outgoing administration to a simple renovation of electoral posts. In Mexico's 2000 elections, the law was put to the test to see if it was sufficient to guarantee trust in the elections, if it was possible to peacefully defeat the party that had monopolized power for 70

years, if change was possible, if it was possible for parties to alternate in office. This idea was the central nucleus of the electoral campaigns and the fundamental message of political marketing, and, although it is difficult to say that its effective handling was the key for Vicente Fox's victory, undoubtedly his media campaign made it possible to identify him as a figure with sufficient capability and energy not only to lead a change but to make it possible.

In summary, today there are no electoral campaigns without the communications media, nor is authentic political competition possible without all contenders having access to radio and television. And given that the dynamic and nature of the media imposes a specific content on the political messages by forcing them to limit themselves to short times—because it makes the persuasive capability intrinsic to politics depend more on appearances than content—the development of campaigns is necessarily subject to the media framework.

Despite all this, the communications media have played an important role in democratizing the country because they have echoed the existing plurality and the fact that no one can now claim to represent all the different groups and social and political tendencies. The media have come to stay and have spent recent years adjusting to the requirements of political competition. ■■■

NOTES

¹ "La dimensión nacional," *La Jornada* (Mexico City), 7 January 2000.

² Pablo Arredondo, "Opacidad en la ventana electrónica: el proceso electoral de 1988 en las noticieros televisivos," Pablo Arredondo, Gilberto Fregoso, and Raúl Trejo Delarbre, *Así se calló el sistema. Comunicación y elecciones en 1988* (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991).

³ Article 39, Federal Electoral Law, January 5, 1973. (In Mexico, radio and television licenses by law must cede 12 percent of broadcast time for programs, commercials and other messages issued by government bodies and other institutions of the public sector. [Editor's Note.]