

# **The manipulation of the Mexican public sphere throughout the 2018 electoral process**

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## **Introduction**

The print and broadcast media had traditionally been an obstacle for the transition of Mexico to democracy throughout the post-revolutionary regime. Indeed, during this historic period of Mexico, the news media used to be controlled mainly by co-optation and, when necessary, by repression. Regrettably, these practices over the news media have endured until date, despite of the so called “transition” of Mexico to democracy.

Indeed, from the beginning to the end of the “*sexenio*” of Peña Nieto, high profile journalists, such as *Carmen Aristegui*, *Pedro Ferriz De Con* and *Víctor Trujillo “Brozo”*, were fired from their respective radio or television programmes (which enjoyed wide public audience) due to their “harsh” criticism to this President. However, not only these high-profile journalists suffered persecution from the regime or the organized crime throughout this “*sexenio*”, but also several low-profile journalists.

For all these tragic circumstances, Mexico continues being one the most dangerous countries in the western hemisphere for journalists, since many of them have been and continue being silenced through violent repression (death or at least serious assassination attempts), specially when they dare to reveal collusion deals between the “mafia” and certain politicians.

However, co-optation remains as the favourite tool of the PRI regime to check the editorial lines and the spin of the news of print and broadcast media. Unfortunately, throughout 2012 – 2018, this party intended to return to its “golden” age of tight control over the news media, mainly by patronage and clientele practices, through which prominent and rank and file journalists

benefited from the famous “*chayotes*” (bribery), as recompense for their favourable news coverage of President “Peña Nieto” and his government.

This attempt of the PRI of restoring an authoritarian regime by manipulating the news media, distorted the Mexican public sphere, in such extent, that, at certain point, it seemed that there were few news media independent from the official editorial line of the federal government. Critical voices to the regime could mainly be “accessed” through the social media (mainly Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp), since the main news media used to be heavily co-opted by the PRI regime.

Despite the firm control of the print and broadcast media, the popularity of President Peña Nieto had never been so low as in his last years of government: Corruption scandals of several governors, public servants and functionaries of the PRI regime, and even of the very same President, eroded severely the already feeble prestige of the PRI regime.

In the context of frantic defence of the popularity of the President through close attention to the news media, suddenly, the most important television networks of the country (TV Azteca and Televisa), as well as several channels of national cable news networks, started supplying extensive and positive coverage to the “presidential” ambitions of the then candidate, “Andrés Manuel López Obrador” (AMLO), a politician who had “supposedly” been regarded as the most serious and threatening rival of the PRI regime.

The fact is that if we compare the news coverage of AMLO with the respective coverage of Ricardo Anaya (the other serious challenger to the PRI regime), in the news media, we would observe a clear preference of this kind of media for AMLO.

The argument of the present paper is that the news media played a crucial role for the electoral triumph of López Obrador in the presidential race of 2018. Indeed, the owners of the news media, apparently without an understandable reason, decided to support this presidential candidate and make use of their favourite and powerful tools to make him win these elections: a) Favourable editorial lines, b) extensive and positive coverage, c) the positive spin of the

news, and d) extensive spaces in news programmes in order to reply accusations of corruption, among others.

Despite the triumph of AMLO and its positive consequences for the democratizing process of Mexico, this paper points out that the missing structural reform in this country is still the reform of the news media so that it may be conducive to a democratic regime. In other words, Mexico urgently needs a constitutional and legal reform of the news media, which could effectively enhance the democratic character of the public opinion process and prevent its manipulation to make a candidate win elections unfairly.

### **Theoretical Framework**

One of the most complete scholarly works on the relationship between the mass media and the transition to democracy in Mexico is certainly Chappell H. Lawson's "Building the Fourth Estate. Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico", published in 2002. Undoubtedly, this book has become one of the major academic texts that have ever been written on this topic.

In this book, the author describes extensively the mechanisms through which the PRI regime used to control the news media throughout the post – revolutionary era and even the period of transition to democracy. First and foremost, Lawson (2002:48) explains that this regime used to assure positive coverage from the news media through three mechanisms: "1) Official control of the public agenda, 2) selective silence on issues of particular vulnerability for the government and 3) partisan bias in favour of the PRI during election campaigns".

According to Lawson (2002: 49), "news coverage was particularly *oficialista* in the agenda setting sense" until the late 1980s, and the events used to be framed "in ways that reflected ruling party paradigms". As we can observe, both mechanisms unquestionably constituted signs of an authoritarian regime.

On the other hand, throughout the post revolutionary era, the PRI regime used to practice extreme measures to control the public sphere, for example, through ensuring the right spin on political coverage: Indeed “subjects like *economic mismanagement, official corruption, drug trafficking, electoral fraud, opposition protest, political repression* were ignored or downplayed” (Lawson, 2002: 50) by the traditional media in this era, to protect at all cost the prestige of this regime and guarantee its electoral popularity.

The regime devised several strategies to manage favourable public opinion, depending on the case, for example, making sure that the news media reported “official responses to the events in question without providing any orienting context” or that “potentially shocking events were reported without much attention, analysis or follow up” (Lawson, 2002: 52).

Furthermore, to avoid electoral defeat, the PRI regime used to promote within the news media “derogatory coverage of the opposition” or “coverage of small parties” to promote “political brand proliferation”, which would reduce the risk of facing a serious challenger in the political arena.

Another strategy to ensure the popularity of the ruling party, was to frame the elections in terms of “stability” versus “instability”. This strategy became one of the most recurrently used by the PRI regime to discourage opposition vote, even in the last electoral process of 2018 one could observe this strategy put in place to avoid the triumph of the presidential candidate AMLO.

Nevertheless, little by little, slowly, a more vibrant, investigative and professional journalism developed in the print media as consequence of different social movements, which emerged since 1968 and provoked that some newspapers started to focus on Mexican civil society’s discourse and agenda, since their audiences were becoming increasingly receptive to more assertive coverage of these issues.

Lawson (2002: 53) claims that “commercial competition between an emerging Fourth Estate and Mexico’s traditional media establishment

encouraged diversity and independence in the press”. Furthermore, during the *sexenio* of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the implementation of “fiscally minded rationalizing measures forced newspapers to rely more on commercial sources of revenue (...)”, since “the state effectively abdicated substantial control over newspapers revenues”, which caused that “publishers and broadcasters became less dependent on government distribution and importation monopolies” (Lawson, 2002: 54).

Lawson (2002: 56) argues that, among the main factors responsible for the emergence of independent journalism in Mexico, the following could be considered *a) political liberalization, b) the improvement of journalistic work ethics, c) the expansion of market competition, d) the increase in literacy and market size of newspapers, e) the intense scrutiny of the Mexican government by foreign media and watchdog groups, f) the expanded manoeuvring room for financing of research and g) the technological innovation and diffusion of the news media.*

In the case of the broadcast media “format changes on certain talk – radio programmes encouraged the emergence of high – quality independent news programming” (Lawson, 2002: 60), which earned substantial advertising revenues and caused that other radio stations followed the same format.

Furthermore, “the scarce supply of advertising revenues and the lucrative opportunities presented by news programs made commercial pressure particularly keen” (Lawson, 2002: 61) for opening Mexico’s broadcast media.

In the case of Televisa, it is still commercial competition, civic pressure, political reform and generation change that is slowly encouraging its opening (Lawson, 2002: 62). On the other hand, Televisa in the 1990s “confronted a highly mobilized civil society that was carefully scrutinizing its every move” (Lawson, 2002: 62) and this circumstance forced it to improve its journalistic standards to remain attractive in the news market.

Lawson (2002: 63) explains that the main causes of the opening of Mexico's broadcast media, both radio and television networks, were *a) political reform, b) commercial competition, c) the improvement of journalistic norms, d) the self-restraint of President Zedillo in threatening or abusing broadcasters and e) the conscious attempt of IFE of ensuring balance in electoral coverage on both radio and television.*

However, "the most important drivers of media opening lay outside the political establishment", which caused that "the profitability of independent news programs gave radio broadcasters an incentive to resist government pressures" (Lawson, 2002: 64)

Nevertheless, the opening of Mexico's broadcast media was a more halting and protracted process than in the print media (Lawson, 2002: 64 ) and "the links between technical competence, honesty and independence were much less clear in television than in the print media" (Lawson, 2002: 65). In the end, all these circumstances caused that "a culture of independent journalism did not develop in the same way" in the broadcast media than in the print media (Lawson, 2002: 66).

One of the main consequences of increased attention to viewpoints of civil society by the independent press was the creation of a "new political discourse that encouraged civic mobilization". A more "civic interpretation of politics" emerged at independent publications", which "portrayed political conflict in Mexico as a struggle by organized civic groups against the regime" (Lawson, 2002: 68).

According to Lawson (2002: 68) "this distinct interpretation of political contestation legitimized and encouraged mobilization outside the regime (...) and provided a rationale and strategy for concerted action against the system".

Indeed "the adoption of a "civic" lens changed the way elites viewed their political environment and their place in it" (Lawson, 2002: 70).

Understandably, “the result of media framing was to encourage civic mobilization and political reform (...)”, since there was a “strong empirical relationship between increasing journalistic attention to the viewpoints of civil society and the organization of civil society” (Lawson, 2002: 70).

In this way, we can argue that “press coverage reinforced prodemocracy activity” and that “social mobilization gave independent media something to write about and this coverage contributed to the persistence and growth of popular organizing” (Lawson, 2002: 71).

Another relevant author on the news media in Mexico is *Darren Wallis*, who published in 2004 his research article entitled “The Media and Democratic Change in Mexico”, and in this paper Wallis argues that “between private owners and politicians a more troubled relationship exists in which scandals and mal administration are increasingly exposed” (Wallis, 2004: 118).

Furthermore, along with Lawson, Wallis also affirms that the news media have improved their journalistic values and their quality reporting (Wallis, 2004: 118) and that despite of the attempts of some politicians to harness the power of the media to their own ends, these trials have become a double – edged sword and have damaged the public image of such politicians (Wallis, 2004: 118).

Conversely, Hughes and Lawson (2005: 9) considered that there are five clear challenges for improving media opening in Latin America, including Mexico, which are: “a) Weakness in the rule of law, b) holdover authoritarian legislation, c) oligarchic ownership of media outlets, d) uneven journalistic standards and e) limited audience access to diverse sources of information”.

Nonetheless, both authors also propose six concrete policies that could encourage the democratic opening of the media in Latin America, including Mexico: “a) The appointment of special prosecutors to investigate crimes against journalists, b) replacement of criminal libel laws with civil procedures,

c) legislation protecting journalists' sources and guaranteeing transparency in government, d) the establishment of non partisan boards to allocate broadcast concessions, administer state-owned stations and distribute government advertising, e) user fees to expand public media and f) various measures to enhance professional standards" (Hughes and Lawson, 2005: 9).

On the other hand, Larreguy, Marshall and Snyder in a recent research article (2014) argue that in Mexico "equalizing political advertising opportunities particularly benefits political parties that are not locally dominant". These authors found that "political advertising is effective at increasing the vote share of the PAN and the PRD, but not the previously – hegemonic PRI (...) and that "political advertising is most effective in the least socioeconomically developed and least politically competitive electoral precincts".

What is more, Domínguez and Lawson (2004) affirm that electoral campaigns in the mass media matter to produce certain election outcomes.

Another very relevant academic work on this subject is Larreguy, Marshall and Snyder (2015) "*Publicizing malfeasance: When Media facilitates electoral accountability in Mexico*". These authors found in their research that "voters punish the party of malfeasant mayors, but only in precincts covered by local media stations, which emit from within the precinct's municipality" (Larreguy, et. al., 2015: 2). However, their main argument in this paper is that "additional media stations providing similar news content could considerably increase voter sanctioning" (Larreguy, et. al., 2015: 3), thus enhance electoral accountability of incumbent parties.

One relevant and interesting finding on their research in Mexico's local media was that "each additional local radio or television station covering a given precinct reduces the party's share by up to 1.2%, depending on the severity of the misallocation" (Larreguy, et. al., 2015: 3). However, these authors also claim that the "electoral composition of media markets has



important implications for the types of political news that media stations report, which in turn affect electoral accountability” (Larreguy, et. al., 2015: 4).

Nevertheless, some promising findings in this research paper, for the democratization process of Mexico, were that the “political capture of media stations decreases with the number of stations in the market” (Larreguy, et. al., 2015: 5) and that the “greater competition and diversity in the media market increases the probability that competitors will expose the factual inaccuracies of a report pandering to audience priors, and thus ensures that voters receive truthful signals about political performance” (Larreguy, et. al., 2015: 5).

All these are certainly good news for the quality decision making of citizens at voting, mainly in municipal and state elections, and for the electoral accountability of incumbents. Certainly, this is also a crucial dimension for the quality of democracy in any country.

Nevertheless, the question of this paper is: How come the news media that traditionally had supported the PRI regime, suddenly started giving extensive and positive coverage to AMLO, and managed the spin of the news for his benefit in the last stage of the electoral process of 2018? What happened?

How come the main pillars of the PRI regime (the print and the broadcast media), which had been traditionally manipulated to support this party, suddenly showed a clear preference for AMLO, even over Meade (the official PRI candidate), in the last stage of the presidential campaigns in 2018? What was the reason behind this sudden change of electoral preference of the main news media? Should the Mexicans worry about this sudden change of electoral preference of the stream media in this country? What does this change mean for the democratizing process of Mexico?

## **Research Methods**

In order to answer these research questions, this paper will practice content analysis of national papers like *El Universal*, *Milenio*, *El Financiero*, as well as of the main news programmes of *Televisa* and *TV Azteca* throughout the presidential campaign and will research official archive to find if there was a previous and serious compromise between AMLO and the owners of the main broadcast outlets.

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