

TINY STEPS FORWARD:
THE MEXICAN MEDIA
AND THE 1994 ELECTIONS

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ON THE EVENING OF FEB. 23, 1993, 30 of Mexico's leading businessmen were summoned by President Carlos Salinas to a private dinner party where each was asked to contribute \$25 million to the campaign fund of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has ruled Mexico since 1929.

News of the dinner was soon leaked to a small Mexico City newspaper, and a political firestorm ensued; several of those present at the dinner were beneficiaries of state privatization policies. Press accounts focused on one guest who reportedly offered a staggering \$75 million.

That donor was Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, owner of Televisa, which dominates Mexican television and is the largest media company in the Spanish-speaking world. With a personal fortune estimated by *Forbes* at \$5.4 billion, Azcárraga is a Latin American version of Rupert Murdoch. After the president, he is perhaps the most powerful man in Mexico and a loyal member of the PRI. "I've made so much money in these years that I...[will] contribute an even larger amount," he reportedly said.

The fund-raising dinner provides a stark example of the interlocking relationship between the Mexican government and the major media, a relationship that, despite government promises to the contrary, remained virtually intact before, during and after the historic election of Aug. 21, 1994. Many Mexicans believe that slanted coverage by television—and Televisa in particular—contributed heavily to the PRI's stunning victory.

Nineteen hundred and ninety-four was supposed to be a propitious year for Mexico. NAFTA was passed by the U.S. Congress in November 1993 after acrimonious debate. NAFTA's success seemed, at the time, to vindicate the free-market policies of Salinas, whose administration, above the objections of many nationalistic Mexicans, privatized numerous state-owned industries and opened the economy to billions of dollars in foreign investment.

While he was lobbying for NAFTA, Salinas argued that the accord would not only bring eco-

conomic prosperity to Mexico but democratization as well. Salinas was acutely aware that the 1980s had seen the end of authoritarian rule in many Latin American countries, including Chile, Brazil and Argentina, while Mexico had yet to hold a truly free election. He promised an honest vote at the local, state and federal levels.

Extraordinary events intervened. The Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas, which began on Jan. 1, 1994—the day NAFTA went into effect—served as a reminder that, despite Mexico's economic strides over the last decade, part of Mexican society was left behind. Although the Zapatistas never posed a military threat to the Mexican state, they exerted an enormous symbolic and psychological influence by demanding, in sharply worded communiqués to the media, democracy for Mexico and justice for its Indian peoples, thereby energizing groups across the political spectrum.

Before the collapse of the *peso* in late 1994 obliterated his reputation, Salinas had been popular with many sectors of Mexican society. Nevertheless, the economic policies implemented by his administration led to a steep decline in real wages for workers and fueled widespread discontent with the system. The mysterious assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, as well as a number of scandals involving the PRI, further darkened the horizon as the August elections approached.

Responding in part to pressure from the international community, the PRI implemented a series of political reforms involving the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), the government body responsible for overseeing the election. Mexico has virtually no tradition of impartial electoral officials, and historically IFE was controlled by the PRI. But in early 1994 the government agreed to restructure the General Council of the IFE, shifting control from PRI partisans to six independent "citizen counselors"—composed of prominent journalists, businessmen and lawyers—who would have a voting majority. The citizen counselors took office on June 3, three months before the election.

As a result of the reforms, the PRI's candidate, Ernesto Zedillo, was forced to compete on a more level playing field against his opponents: Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the left-leaning Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD) and Diego Fernández de Cevallos of the conservative National Action Party (PAN). While the reforms were unable to curb the PRI's habit of outspending its opponents by huge margins, the citizen counselors did draw attention to an issue of great interest to the opposition: the PRI's almost total control of the media.

The system that arose out of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 was corporatist, hierarchical, stable and deeply authoritarian. What has enabled the PRI to maintain itself as the world's oldest ruling party is its control over a bloated and corrupt government bureaucracy, its unique ability to co-opt political opponents and its innate instinct for self-preservation in moments of crisis.

The relationship between the media and the government, like Mexican political culture in general, is filled with contradictions. For example, while freedom of the press is guaranteed by the con-

stitution of 1917, in reality the government exercises an enormous influence over the media by providing cash "gifts" to underpaid journalists and supplying advertising revenue, without which most newspapers would fold. The degree of media openness varies according to medium and audience size. "The government generally places more stringent limits on those media that reach more people," according to Daniel Levy, a professor of Latin American studies at the State University of New York at Albany. Newspapers, for instance, which rarely have circulations of more than 100,000, are more independent than the leading television news programs, which are seen each night by millions. Indeed, 74 percent of Mexicans rely on television for their news.

Mexican television is almost entirely controlled by a single company, Televisa. One of the world's largest media conglomerates, the network is often referred to as the "Ministry of Culture" because of its unabashed pro-government coverage. In exchange, Televisa has been allowed to function as a virtual monopoly. Instead of paying taxes, it provides the state with free airtime. (Although Televisa continues to dominate the market, a nominal competitor, TV Azteca, emerged out of the 1993 privatization of two state-owned networks. Azteca, however, is unlikely to challenge Televisa's power anytime soon.)

"Imagine if ABC, CBS and NBC were one company," Mexican media critic Raúl Trejo once observed. "That is what Televisa has been in Mexico."

Televisa's owner, the flamboyant and enigmatic Azcárraga, is open about his political preferences. "Televisa considers itself part of the government system and as such supports the campaigns of PRI candidates," he remarked in 1991. "The president of the republic, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, is our maximum leader, and we are happy about that."

Demands for impartial media coverage first arose during the contested 1988 presidential election, during which there were allegations of widespread fraud. Anger over Televisa's partisanship that year led the PAN to organize several large demonstrations outside the network's offices, spearhead a boycott of its leading advertisers and print more than a million bumper stickers which derided Televisa's top news program, "24 Horas." The stickers read: "Don't Watch 24 Horas because it doesn't tell the truth."

In late May 1994, the Mexican Academy for Human Rights, one of Mexico's most prominent nongovernmental organizations, issued a detailed, day-by-day assessment of television coverage of the campaign and announced that regular reports would continue until the day of the election. Never before had such an analysis of media coverage during an election year been attempted in Mexico.

Sergio Aguayo, a leading human rights activist, is the president of the academy and the leader of Civic Alliance, an umbrella group of more than 300 nongovernmental organizations that attempted to monitor the credibility of the electoral process by sending thousands of observers to polling stations around the country. Civic Alliance co-sponsored the study with the academy.

Interviewed at the academy's headquarters in Mexico City several days after the election, Aguayo traced the origins of the academy's report to the 1991 midterm elections, when he himself was censored by television. "I was giving an interview to Imevisión," Aguayo said, referring to the state-run channel. "The interview was cut in the middle because I was speaking in favor of the opposition."

The academy's first report, "The Media and the 1994 Federal Elections in Mexico," released in May, was based on 1,287 news items broadcast on "24 Horas," which draws nearly 20 million viewers nightly, and "Hechos," Azteca's evening news program, from Jan. 3 to April 29, 1994. The academy found that the PRI received 43 percent of the total air time, a 3-to-1 advantage over the opposition candidates, and that television played a decisive role in familiarizing the public with the PRI's new presidential candidate, Zedillo.

"In his first month as a candidate," the academy wrote, "from March 29 to April 29, Mr. Zedillo received nearly the same amount of coverage that his predecessor, Luis Donaldo Colosio, had received in three months, and twice as much coverage as PAN candidate Diego Fernández de Cevallos and PRD candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas received during the entire four-month period of the study." In July, the PRI expressed satisfaction with the coverage when its president, Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza, said that "because of radio and television, everybody knows our candidate" in the politically significant rural areas.

The report also took note of subtle news judgments that are difficult to quantify but are common practice on Mexican news programs. For instance, on one segment, a TV journalist covering a Colosio campaign stop excitedly said, "In a warm atmosphere full of hope, the candidate patiently fielded the peasants' questions." But when PAN candidate Fernández campaigned in Ciudad Juárez, the announcer, grim-faced, reported that he attended "a meeting snubbed by businesspeople, and with a tiny audience."

The academy's initial report generated considerable attention in the independent newspapers, but was virtually ignored by the television networks. Televisa executives, who almost never speak to the press, refused to comment on the findings. But with each new report from the academy, pressure began to build for improved election coverage.

On June 18, the General Council of the IFE urged the networks to "respect the right to information of the Mexican people, and to behave in a manner that is truthful, objective, balanced, plural and fair," adding that objective media coverage is a "necessary condition for the advance of democracy." On July 8, Salinas' office responded, issuing a statement urging the networks to give equal and unedited space to each candidate. Televisa immediately offered 45 minutes of unedited airtime to all of the contenders, an unprecedented move by the network.

The pressure on the media seemed to be paying off. In July, Cárdenas received almost the same amount of airtime on "24 Horas" as Zedillo, and Zedillo's approximately 3-to-2 advantage in appear-

ances on the introductory segments of news shows was an improvement over ratios that had been as high as 46-to-1, the study reported. But the academy responded cautiously to the July results, noting that at any time the changes could be reversed.

And that is precisely what happened. On Aug. 16, the academy called a press conference to announce that, in the closing weeks of the campaign, the media were once again favoring Zedillo at the expense of Cárdenas and particularly Fernández. Moreover, the academy noted with dismay that the networks used helicopters to provide air shots of Zedillo's closing rallies, but not for the closing rallies of the other leading candidates.

On May 12, 1994, Zedillo, Fernández and Cárdenas met in a historic television debate. An estimated 40 million people watched as Fernández, a highly charismatic speaker, routed his two opponents. In a demonstration of the power of television to influence electoral trends, Fernández's ratings soared overnight, sowing fear and confusion in the upper echelons of the PRI.

Fernando Estrada has been a member of the PAN his entire life; his father helped found the party in 1939. Educated in the United States and Europe, Estrada eventually became one of the party's leading theoreticians and served in Congress from 1991 to 1994.

For Estrada, television's failure to cover adequately Fernández's campaign in the last crucial months was no accident. Fernández himself, at a press conference two days after the election, issued a furious denunciation of the media's role in the campaign.

"The manipulation of the news, the falsification of truth, the intention to falsify the political contest and the debate through Televisa produced results in favor of the official candidate that go against democracy, equality and justice," he said.

Interviewed several days after the election, Estrada chain-smoked and drank endless cups of coffee as he discussed the Mexican media's longtime hostility to the PAN. As an example, he cited a 41-day hunger strike in 1986 by PAN leader Luis Alvarez, which was almost entirely ignored by television. Estrada recalled a huge demonstration in August in the PAN stronghold of Ciudad Juárez. "Televisa showed Diego getting out of a car and saying hello to two children. Period." He said Televisa offered similar coverage a few days earlier in Tijuana, when Fernández spoke in front of 35,000 people.

Estrada is not alone in seeing a deliberate attempt by the pro-government media to discredit and ignore Fernández. He cited data from the Mexican Academy for Human Rights and IFE indicating that during parts of July and August, the presidential candidates from the tiny political parties—which are widely believed to be funded by the PRI with the purpose of splitting the opposition—received more coverage than "Diego," as he is known in Mexico.

In July and August, a spate of news articles, in both the American and Mexican press, reported

that Fernández had effectively stopped campaigning. Many analysts speculated that a deal had been cut between the PAN and PRI, as the two parties have worked together in the past.

Estrada angrily dismissed such accusations and argued that Fernández's campaign simply underwent a "change in emphasis" in June and July in an attempt to preserve its limited resources. He also said that immediately after the debate, top officials of the PAN received death threats from unknown sources, which contributed to an atmosphere of confusion among the party leadership. But he insisted that Fernández's campaign never ceased. Television, he said, simply stopped covering it.

"For the Mexican electorate, the political function of this noncoverage was precisely to convey the idea—which they did, and they succeeded—that Diego in fact did not want the presidency," Estrada said. If this is true, he asked rhetorically, why did Fernández campaign and draw huge crowds in Torreón, Veracruz, Tijuana and Mérida in the final months?

Estrada's ire is aimed mostly at Televisa. "Technically, Televisa is extremely good, very professional," he said. "But by the same token, they are very good at falsifying or altering things."

He recalled how on Aug. 9, Fernández rushed back from Tijuana to Mexico City, where he was to be interviewed by Televisa. But the program was inexplicably canceled at the last minute. "No explanations were given, or needed," Estrada said.

Despite his long-standing antipathy toward Televisa, Estrada said he wanted to see for himself how the network was covering Fernández, so in August he settled in, at 10:30 p.m., for "24 Horas." "I watched Jacobo Zabludovsky [the anchorman of "24 Horas"] every night," he said. "He would go through one, two, eight presidential candidates. You would be expecting them to say something about Diego." His voice rose in anger. "He was not mentioned for a whole week!"

In the weeks leading up to the election, Mexico City's leading newspapers—*El Financiero*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma* and *El Universal*—reported exhaustively on the campaign, providing ample and balanced coverage of all the main candidates and assessing the political conditions in various regions of the country. These newspapers provided their readers with special supplements on Mexican history, the 1988 election, electoral reform and other topics related to the contest. Detailed reporting and analysis were also provided by the weekly magazine *Proceso*, Mexico's most aggressive and courageous publication.

On the day of the election, Televisa broadcast virtually no political coverage, choosing instead to show the soap operas for which the network is famous. TV Azteca, meanwhile, had relatively balanced coverage. While Televisa had little to say about the election itself, it quietly moved to limit the flow of foreign news into Mexico. Cablevisión, a Televisa subsidiary, reportedly suspended transmissions from ABC, NBC and CBS, while a different cable system, Multivisión, did the same for CNN. Viewers responded with a flood of irate phone calls.

What Televisa did report about the election was misleading. Take the experience of Global Exchange, a San Francisco-based nonprofit educational group that sent 120 visitors to observe the elections in five states. Eighty-five percent of their members witnessed irregularities in the voting. On Aug. 22, the group held a press conference in Mexico City to report what it had observed in places such as Altamirano, Chiapas, where a military official in civilian clothes was seen videotaping people as they voted, and in Enseñal Colorado, Oaxaca, where ballots allegedly cast for the PRD were destroyed by voting booth officials.

A Televisa crew spent 90 minutes filming the press conference and then interviewed several members of the delegation. But that evening "24 Horas" showed nothing more than a heavily edited clip in which Global Exchange's director, Medea Benjamin, appeared to be endorsing the authenticity of the election. "We couldn't believe what we were hearing when we were watching ourselves," Benjamin said later. "My mouth was literally hanging open."

The following day, Global Exchange organized a demonstration outside Televisa's offices to protest the network's treatment of the press conference. To calm the demonstrators, Televisa executives offered the group 60 seconds of airtime, which they promised would appear unedited on that evening's program. Relieved that their findings would finally reach the Mexican public, Global Exchange members returned to their hotel to watch "24 Horas." Said Benjamin: "They never put it on."

For the most part, American news organizations echoed the government's claim that the election was the cleanest in Mexican history. But Mexicans themselves were more cynical about the process. Beginning Aug. 21, outraged supporters of the PAN and PRD organized demonstrations across the country. These mobilizations were much less intense and widespread than those that occurred after the contested 1988 elections, but newspapers such as *La Jornada* and *Reforma* gave a good deal of space to protests and sit-ins in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Sonora, Nuevo León, Querétaro, Veracruz and Michoacán, among others.

On Aug. 23, Civic Alliance released its own assessment of the voting based on preliminary reports from its regional representatives. According to the group, the secret ballot was violated in 34 percent of the polling places; voters with the proper credentials were turned away at 65 percent of polling places; and the indelible ink, designed to prevent individuals from voting twice, was not applied to voters at 7 percent of polling places. Many of the irregularities, Civic Alliance said, occurred in the rural states of Oaxaca, Chiapas and Veracruz.

None of these allegations appeared on Televisa.

TV Azteca noted that some irregularities had taken place, but did not independently investigate them. News that appeared on the front pages of major newspapers—*Reforma* and *La Jornada* contained up to 50 pages a day of high-quality election coverage—was also ignored by Televisa. For example, on

Aug. 25, the PAN held a press conference to present 13,000 written complaints to IFE regarding irregularities at an equal number of voting stations across the country. On the same day, the PRD, which had been protesting electoral fraud for months and continued to do so through the day of the election, announced its discovery of a trailer in Mexico City filled with shredded voter credential forms—a harbinger to elections past, when ballots cast for the opposition were routinely destroyed.

But the millions of viewers tuning in to “24 Horas” the same evening, four days after the election, heard nothing about these accusations. Instead, Zabłudovsky began with a long update on the refugee crisis in Cuba before launching into a five-minute segment about an explosion at Sanborn’s, a historic Mexico City restaurant and department store. The third story was a brief excerpt from a speech by Interior Minister Jorge Carpizo, who praised the smooth execution of the election.

Televisa’s postelection coverage provided a veritable showcase of its methods, which entailed the selective use of footage and helicopters. On Monday, Aug. 22, Cárdenas called a rally in Mexico City to protest the results of the election; the rally drew somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 people. Televisa used helicopters to film the relatively small crowd and showed a brief segment about it the same evening.

A few days later the PRD called a much larger rally, which drew 70,000 people. But this time Televisa did not use helicopters to film the second and larger rally, and that evening did not show footage of the assembled crowd. Nor did its reporter estimate the number of people in attendance. Viewers were shown a 20-second excerpt from Cárdenas’ speech.

In the weeks after the election, several PRD members in Guerrero and Chiapas were killed under suspicious circumstances. Human rights abuses, particularly in isolated rural zones, are common in Mexico. The PRD report that more than 250 of its members have been killed since 1988. Televisa ignored the killings, but provided a lengthy tribute to the entertainer Plácido Domingo’s mother, who died in Mexico City on Aug. 28.

Televisa executives declined to be interviewed for this report.

For longtime pro-democracy activists, none of this is surprising. “Televisa is trying to present a Mexico that they would like to see,” said Aguayo of the Mexican Academy for Human Rights. “A Mexico in which the PRI won cleanly, transparently, credibly. So they are minimizing—in a systematic way—all of the evidence of the irregularities that we are finding. There is nothing we can do.”

Others also see a logic behind Televisa’s actions. “The strategy has been very effective,” said Bruno López, a producer for Univision. “What has happened is that the groups that are protesting the elections are becoming more and more isolated.”

What happened to IFE’s call for more “truthful, objective, balanced, plural and fair” media coverage? Juan Molinar Horcasitas, a well-known political scientist and senior official at IFE, explained

in an interview how, in the closing months of the campaign, the citizen counselors of IFE applied enormous pressure on the media to treat the candidates equally. But it was too late to change old habits, he said. Molinar recalled the confused response of one prominent media owner, who he said told him: "This is schizophrenic. They've been telling us for five years not to mention the word Cárdenas and putting pressure on us. And now, in the last five weeks [of the campaign] they are [telling us] to say Cárdenas!"

Within days of the election, as world media attention shifted away from Mexico, the brief period of media openness in July and August came to an end. On Aug. 27, *La Jornada* reported the existence of a memo from the National Chamber of the Radio and Television Industry (CIRT), a powerful group that represents private broadcasters.

The memo, sent to all CIRT's members shortly after the election, reportedly called for a "new" policy of information regarding two themes: the explosive accusations of Eduardo Valle, a former government official who accused a PRI cabinet member of having links to drug traffickers involved in the Colosio assassination, and the Aug. 21 election. The memo, *La Jornada* reported, urged media outlets to prohibit news that mentioned electoral fraud.

Then, on Aug. 23, Enrique Quintana, the host of a popular radio talk show on Mexico City's "Stereo Cien," had Valle on as his guest. Afterward the owner of the station reportedly told Quintana not to mention Valle again on the air and, furthermore, to screen calls by listeners critical of the election. Quintana, who also works as an editor at *Reforma*, instead resigned. (The interview with Valle was later reprinted in *Reforma*.) Other radio announcers also complained that attempts had been made to interfere with their programming. In recent years, radio has become an increasingly important source of independent news in Mexico.

Aguayo said he saw a clear pattern of intimidation. "After the elections, the media has gone back to its old habits: to complicity, to the distortion of reality," he said.

Aguayo himself felt the chill: "After the election, I have not been interviewed on Mexican radio. But I know the rules of the game, and at this moment I am vetoed."

For Aguayo, CIRT's actions demonstrate both the built-in obstacles that inhibit free expression and the system's sophisticated methods of controlling dissent. In his view, the government did not need to issue the media restrictions that many believe led to Quintana's departure. Instead, that task was undertaken by the like-minded CIRT, which represents some of the most conservative elements of the private sector.

In the months after the election, the government quietly clamped down on selected independent media outlets. On Oct. 9, a small radio station in downtown Mexico City that specialized in political commentary and music was raided by the judicial police, who confiscated its transmitter and

antenna. The unlicensed station, which had been open for only four weeks prior to the raid, provided a forum to some of the city's most prominent opposition figures.

Longtime observers of the Mexican media, such as Ilya Adler of the University of Illinois at Chicago, note that at least three fundamental changes must take place for an independent media to emerge in Mexico: Realistic salaries must be paid to journalists so they will not be susceptible to co-optation; greater independence must be given to the news divisions of television and radio stations; and the monopolistic nature of the television industry must come to an end.

Nevertheless, nearly everyone agrees that the media were far more open during the 1994 elections than those that took place in 1988, when the main opposition candidates were virtually barred from television. Some journalists attribute these changes to the free-market reforms unleashed in Mexico during the Salinas years.

"Print and radio have changed," said Bruno López of Univision, citing *Reforma*, a handsome broadsheet in Mexico City, and "Radio Red" as examples. "The people who are behind those operations are people who believe in making their money through good journalism."

In the years to come, Mexico's population may well demand reporting that is both more balanced and more aggressive. Many journalists remain cautiously optimistic. "There is a very deep structural problem that has to be modified in order to really practice independent journalism," Enrique Quintana told *La Jornada* shortly after giving up his radio show. The situation will improve, he added, "but it will be a long process."

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