Political and social actors in TV news programmes. A challenge for Mexican TV channels

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Abstract

Introduction: Broadcast television is the main medium of communication in Mexico, but its news programmes offer biased information regarding political issues, as they tend to privilege governmental sources of information to the detriment of non-official sources. **Method:** In order to prove this hypothesis, the contents of the two most-watched TV news programmes in Mexico were analysed to identify the political actors that appeared the most, the diversity of sources, and the frequency of appearance. The obtained data were subjected to the regular statistical analyses used in content analysis, while the Gini index, which is a measure of statistical dispersion, was used to establish the degree of imbalance in the representation of the different political actors in news programmes. **Results:** The findings indicate that the main sources of information included in the TV news programmes were members of Mexico's Federal Government and, to a lesser extent, the legislative power and the state governments. Furthermore, of the different political parties operating in Mexico, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the current ruling party, is the most represented in TV news programmes. Unsurprisingly, the main issues addressed in TV news programmes were economy, security and politics, which are precisely also the main issues included

in the agenda of the political actors. **Conclusions:** The empirical evidence confirms the lack of modernisation in Mexican journalism, which is characterised, among other aspects, by the absence of investigative journalism and its adherence to the agenda of the government, particularly the federal administration.

Keywords
Mexican television; agenda setting; political journalism.

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Translation by **CA Martínez-Arcos** (PhD in Communication from the University of London)

1. Introduction

TV news programmes remain the most widely used instruments among Mexicans to learn about the events that take place in their regions, in the whole country and across the world (INEGI, 2012). Every day, millions of people tune in to watch one of the nightly news programmes broadcast by the only two free-to-air nationwide television networks that exist in Mexico: Televisa and TV Azteca.

For most people in the country the options in terms of TV news programmes are limited to the ones offered by Televisa and TV Azteca. The offer is limited even if people seek for alternatives in regional television channels, because the aforementioned networks operate most of the television channels that exist in Mexico (94%). Televisa controls 56% of the free-to-air television market in Mexico, while TV Azteca controls 38% (CFT and CIDE, 2011).

The high concentration that exists in the Mexican television industry has been possible thanks, among other things, to the Mexican government's protectionist policy which has prevailed since the 1990s, when the government adopted a neoliberal policy towards similar sectors such as telephony, telecommunications and cinematography (Lozano, 2003). The only change that has occurred since then in the field of television is the privatisation of the national TV network known as IMEVISON, which became TV Azteca.

The concentration of the audiovisual media industry in just two corporations has been one of the most frequently criticised aspects of the Mexican political system, especially due the impact that for a long time these TV networks have had on the democratic life of the country. In Mexico, for many decades, people have trusted the television news programmes that are available to them, but the concentration of the TV industry might be working against the population, particularly when these programmes offer a biased view of reality. In fact, some authors consider that under the

abovementioned conditions, the Mexican media cannot contribute to the strengthening of democracy (Trejo Delarbre, 2010).

The concentration under which the Mexican television market develops is a factor that in one way or another impacts the news content which most of the country's population consumes. Moreover, the editorial policies that TV news programmes adopt affect Mexican viewers' perception of the national reality.

Media bias is one of the most disputed aspects, as it contravenes the principle of diversity, which is needed to properly and accurately describe the complexity of reality (CNTV, 2008). From this perspective, in order for a TV news programme to be considered of quality it needs to give the public the opportunity to access a diversity of themes, voices, sources, etc.

Considering how important it is for the Mexican people to have access to information with a diversity of sources, this article analyses the news coverage of the actors of the social system offered by the TV news programmes broadcast by the two most important national television channels.

This research study work will provide evidence about the existence of media bias in country, which has not been able to consolidate its democracy. The study focuses on the two most important TV news programmes in the configuration of Mexico's democratic culture. The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

a) To what extent are TV news programmes representing the diversity of actors that exist in the social systems of the different regions of the country?
b) To what extent are TV news programmes representing the diversity of types of actors that exist in the social system?
c) Do the TV news programmes exhibit a tendency to favour the presence of certain actors?

Even when the TV news programmes that have been included in the study are part of the two television networks in the country, the results cannot be extrapolated to all the TV news programmes that are available in the country.

2. Theoretical framework

TV news programmes are considered to be "a window through which people have the opportunity of seeing the world". However, the fact is that this window is not big enough, so it can only show certain aspects of the world. No matter how hard they try, the media do not have the capacity to report on everything that happens every day, so they only report those events that are important to them. Faced with the incapacity to cover all the information that is generated daily, news media establish which are the issues that, according to them, deserve attention and resources for their coverage.

The setting of the agenda by the media involves identifying those issues that each medium will include in or exclude from their programming. However, by paying attention only to certain events, the press gives them a certain level of –real or perceived– importance that makes them stand out from the rest of the daily events. Giving importance to certain issues over others, ideally, can make the public remember these "more-valued" issues and, subsequently, discuss them and do something with them (McCombs 1993, 1997 and 2004).

The news media's agenda setting is not fortuitous, but rather a product of the editorial line of each medium, which can reflect their political ideology. In other words, the editorial line is a system of values, beliefs and meanings that determine how the journalistic institutions represent reality. It is precisely this way of seeing the world that determines which issues will be talked-about and which will be ignored. The agenda setting does not only establishes the issues and topics of interest, but also the aspects in which the coverage will focus and the treatment that they will receive (Patterson & Donsbach 1996; Benson 1999; Hallin & Mancini 2004; McNair 2007; Çarkoğlu & Yavuz 2011).

In addition to the editorial line, the agenda setting involves a series of determinants that include, among other things, the daily work routines of journalists and the situations related to editorial policies and the relations of the media with some external factors (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

Journalistic routines are the result of an agreement between the people involved in the news-making process, which is a situation that occurs more implicitly than explicitly, because it results from the internalisation of a series of daily practices, which eventually become the framework that guides reporters in the field (Tuchman 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Schudson 1989; Wahl-Jorgensen 2007; McNair 2007; Miller and Kurpius 2010).

In practice, it is difficult to speak of a single agenda, as there may be different agendas. Hence, various actors with different interests intervene in the process of news production and each of them wants to cover the issues that matter to him/her (McNair 2007). McCombs (1997) distinguishes between the news agenda (controlled by the media), the public agenda (the issues that matter to society) and the government's agenda (defined by the authorities). For his part, González (2013) argues that three types of agendas coexist in Mexican journalism, specifically the one that is practiced outside the country's capital: First, the public agenda, which includes all the events that occur daily and are not controlled by the press; second, the news media company's agenda, which is composed of the issues that fit its editorial and commercial interests; and finally, the agenda of the journalist, who also, and as far as possible, covers the topics that particularly matter to him/her.

The theory of the *agenda setting* was formulated precisely to explain the previous circumstances. This theory refers to the ability of the media to direct public attention to certain topics or characters, to the detriment of others. However, this capacity is not limited to inclusion or exclusion, and also involves the way in which these topics and characters are presented. In other words, the central argument of the agenda setting theory is that –in its daily work– the press determines, on the one hand, the events that will be given coverage and, on the second hand, the treatment they will receive. Specifically, this means establishing what issues will be covered and how (McCombs 1993, 1997 and 2004; Valenzuela and McCombs, 2007; Boydstun, Glazier and Phillips 2013).

With regards to how information is presented, it is important to emphasise that in their desire to present only the most important information of an event, journalists use an information selection criterion. That is, each reporter –based on his/her routines and the editorial line of the medium for which he/she works– determines the perspective from which the news story will be presented and the aspects on which the reporting will focus. This process is called framing and refers to the fact that every news organisation, through its staff, frames or restricts what is going to be reported on a particular topic. In doing so, certain attributes are emphasised over others. In this sense, frames have a selective function, since they are interpretation patterns used to classify information and properly process it (Valkenburg, Semetko & De Vreese 1999; Dimitrova & Strömbäck 2005; Schuck and De Vreese 2006; Lecheler & De Vreese 2013).

However, highlighting certain aspects of reality and ignoring others also implies a value judgment, which is also known as *valence.* In this sense, the valence of a frame is linked to the notions of 'good' or 'bad', which are directly associated with 'positive' or 'negative' values. Thus, a news story does not only contain all information related to the event in question, but will also be framed with favourable or unfavourable terms (Schuck and De Vreese 2006).

The term *framing* is not limited to the way news stories are presented, but is also associated with the way in which the recipient decodes the message. In other words, framing news stories based on certain parameters would also define their interpretation. Thus, *framing* impacts both the message and its receptor (Valkenburg, Semetko & De Vreese 1999; Dimitrova & Strömbäck 2005; De Vreese, Boomgaarden and Semetko 2011).

Therefore, by highlighting certain issues and some of their attributes, the press promotes certain degree of consensus among the public (McCombs 1993 and 1997). In other words, the media set a tendency (which can be more or less obvious) so that the issues and events covered by them coincides with what the audience considers to be important. "The news media promote social consensus, [but] not consensus in terms of opinions about whether the president is doing a good or bad job, but a consensus about the criteria used in reaching that judgment" (McCombs 1993: 64).

The agenda setting theory contends that the media determine both "what people think about" and the way people "think about it" (McCombs 1993, 1997 and 2004). However, it is important to note that the consensus about the issues and criteria to judge them does not necessarily imply a consensus of opinions. The reason is that the level of knowledge about something does not automatically translate into a favourable or unfavourable opinion about it. And this is also because "persuasion, understood as a change in attitudes and behaviour, is not a direct and automatic process" (Valenzuela and McCombs, 2007: 5).

Establishing a direct and unique relationship between the media's agenda and the opinions of the audience is a task that has divided opinions (Lecheler and De Vreese 2012). Despite many studies have been carried out, the results have not been entirely consistent: While there are research studies (primarily experiments) that have established a clear correlation between news content and the opinions about certain issues (e.g. Valkenburg, Semetko and De Vreese 1999; Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2005; Schuck and De Vreese 2006; Valenzuela and McCombs, 2007; De Vreese,

Boomgaarden and Semetko 2011), there are other studies whose results question or contradict this argument (e.g. Behr and Iyengar 1985; Martelli and Cappello 2005; Lecheler and De Vreese 2012).

The agenda setting theory has been frequently used to study media coverage in Mexico. For example, Valenzuela and McCombs (2007) focused on the correlation between the news coverage of Televisa and TV Azteca and the voting intentions/results of the 2006 presidential election. In another study, Martínez, Menchaca and García (2008) analysed the content of some American television news programmes about Mexico's presidential elections of 1988, 1994, 2000 and 2006. Meyer (2010) studied the different frames used by the press of the Mexican states of Hidalgo, Tlaxcala and Puebla to cover the economic crisis in 2009 and 2010; and linked them to the perception the population of that region had about it. Once again, in 2011, Martinez examined the elections, but this time in the state of Nuevo Leon in 2009, and carried out content analysis of the news coverage the local TV gave to the elections, and contrasted it with citizens' opinions, which were identified by means of a survey. Finally, Martínez (2012) also carried out a survey whose results were compared with the news coverage conducted by Monterrey's print press during the presidential elections of 2012.

3. Methods

This study is based on the content analysis method, and examines as unit of analysis the news and journalistic pieces that include political and social actors. News stories related to sports events and activities, celebrity gossip, editorials and commentary presented in the TV news programmes were excluded from the analysis.

The sample selection took into account the news and journalistic pieces presented in the two most-watched nightly TV news programmes in the free-to-air television market in Mexico: *El Noticiero Televisa,* hosted by Joaquin López Dóriga, and *Hechos de la Noche*, hosted by Javier Alatorre.

The sample of news and journalistic pieces was limited to those included in the editions of the news programmes broadcast in ten randomly selected days. In this case the universe of study were the transmissions that took place during July and August 2014. The selected days are the following: Monday, 21 July and 4 August; Tuesday, 8 July and and 19 August; Wednesday, 16 July and 27 August; Thursday, 3 July and 7 August; and Friday, 4 July and 8 August.

With regards to diversity, the Gini index, which is a measure of statistical dispersion used by economists to measure the unequal distribution of wealth (Ruiz-Amaya 1978), was employed to measure the inequality that exists in the coverage of the different actors by the TV news programmes, based on the screen time given to a number of variables. According to the Gini Index, the greater the equality in the distribution of screen time devoted to each actor of the social system, the closer the value is to zero. Conversely, the greater the inequality or imbalance in the coverage of these actors, the close the value will be to 1.

4. Results

A database was created with the data obtained from the 20 editions of the two national primetime TV news programmes included in the study. This database comprised a total of 111 units of analysis, i.e., audiovisual messages that explicitly included an actor of the social system. Based on these units of analysis, on average each Mexican TV news programme includes four actors of the social system and each actor is given 7 minutes of screen time.

Noticiero Televisa (69%) presented a greater number of actors of the social system. This news programme presented on average five actors in the social system per day, and dedicates an average of 9 minutes of screen time to each of them. Meanwhile *Hechos de la Noche* (31%) presents three actors of the social system per day, and dedicates 1.25 minutes of screen time to each of them.

The actors of the social system appear on the TV news programmes especially in the national information section, which includes the following journalistic genres: news (87%), interviews (5%) and feature reports (5%). In this respect, both of the TV news programmes under analysis are conducted similarly, as in both cases the actors of the social system appear preferably in the news genre. However, Televisa's news programme includes actors of the social system more in the feature report genre, while TV Azteca's news programme includes them more in the interview genre (see Table 1).

Table 1. Journalistic genres used to present the information related to actors of the social system

	El Noticiero Televisa		*Hechos de la Noche*		Total	
Genre	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time
News	90	81	81	74	87	78
Interview	3	3	10	18	5	8
Feature report	4	15	3	3	5	11
Report	1	1	3	4	2	2
Press conference	0	0	3	1	1	1
Total	100% (N=73)	100% (130 min.)	100% (N=38)	100% (71 min.)	100% (N=111)	100% (201 min.)

Source: Authors' own creation based on the results of the study

Although the study's sample includes the two most important news programmes in Mexican national television, most of the information units extracted from them include information about two regions of the country: the Federal District (33%) and the State of Mexico (19%). This seems to be an identifying feature of the national TVNPs, as they also focus their attention on the actors operating in the aforementioned geographical regions. Moreover, the attention paid to Federal District and the

State of Mexico increases remarkably if we focus on the time allocated to them: almost two thirds (61%) of the total time dedicated to actors of the social system in both TV news programmes. The inequality exhibited by the TV news programmes in terms of the geographical origin of the actors of the social system that are included in their news content has been confirmed by the results of the Gini index: GI = 0.82.

Mexican TV news programmes turn to social actors especially in news stories related to economy, public safety and politics. In fact, four out of five information units that feature actors of the social system are related to these types of contents. The ratio is very similar when we focus on the time allocated to the different topics. However, there are topics such as health, education and culture, in which the presence of social actors is limited or non-existent.

Table 2. Topics of the news in which actors of the social system appear

Topics	El Noticiero Televisa		Hechos de la Noche		Total	
	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time
Health	2.7%	1.8%	0	0	1.8%	1.2%
Education	4.1%	1.3%	5.4%	3.0%	4. 5%	1.9%
Culture	1.4%	4.8%	5.4%	6.5%	2.7%	5.4%
Human rights	2.7%	4.0%	5.4%	50%	3.6%	4.3%
Economy	24.7%	25.8%	40.5%	41.3%	30.0%	31.2%
Public security	32.9%	32.7%	16.2%	13.9%	27.3%	26.1%
Politics	26.0%	22.8%	21.6%	14.1%	24.5%	19.8%
Green issues	5.5%	7.0%	5.4%	16.3%	5.5%	10.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	(N=73)	(130 min.)	(N=37)	(75 min.)	(N=110)	(205 min.)

Source: Authors' own creation based on the results of the study. *IG* = 0.44

The editorial policies that guide each of the TV news programmes are different, especially with regards to some topics such as public security. In this sense, while *El Noticiero* seeks the opinions of the actors of the social system to address news related to public security, and allocates up to one third of the total time devoted to this topic to these actors, *Hechos de la Noche* virtually never includes actors of the social system in this type of news (see Table 3).

The news programme of TV Azteca usually includes the participation of the actors of the social system when economy is the topic of the news and gives less screen time to the actors involved in topics such as politics and public security. This is due mainly to the domestic policies adopted by each TV news programme.

In addition to privileging the actors of the social system that operate in the Federal District and the State of Mexico and highlighting their presence in certain types of issues, Mexican TV news programmes also have the tendency to present the actors the social system that belong to the Federal Government (41%), the state governments (18%) and the municipal governments (12%). That is, the actors of the social system that are linked to governmental institutions participate in more than 71% of the sample of information units, which represents two thirds of the time devoted to this type of actors in the largest national free-to-air TV news programmes in the country.

Table 3. Amount and percentage of time allocated to actors of the social system the national TV news programmes, according to the sphere of operation

Actors' field of action	Noticiero Televisa		Hechos de la Noche		Total	
	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time
Federal Government	44	39	37	3. 4	41	37
Legislative power	12	22	8	6	11	17
State governments	14	9	26	22	18	14
Municipal governments	15	18	5	4	12	13
Political sector	8	6	5	4	7	5
Business sector			5	8	2	3
Academic sector	4	4	11	20	6	10
Social movements	3	2	3	2	3	2
Total	100% (N=73)	100% (130 min.)	100% (N=38)	100% (71 min.)	100% (N=111)	100% (201 min.)

Source: Authors' own creation based on the results of the study

In the TV news programmes, the tendency is to give greater opportunity and visibility (frequency and time) to the actors linked to the Federal Government. However, there is a difference in the treatment given to the rest of the actors of the social system that appear in these programmes: *El Noticiero Televisa* offers a remarkable presence of members of the legislative power and the municipal governments, while *Hechos de la Noche* resorts more to members of state governments, especially the governors of Veracruz, Puebla and Oaxaca.

A second aspect to highlight in the coverage offered by the Mexican TV news programmes is the limited attention they pay to actors from the business and academic sectors, the civil society and NGOs, among others. This occurs both in *Hechos de la Noche* and *El Noticiero Televisa*, where social actors are virtually non-existent.

The amount and time allocated to the different actors of the social system reflect great inequality in terms of presentation, because while the actors involved in the political arena are allowed to

participate in a large proportion of the news, the actors belonging to the social sectors are only allowed to participate in a third or even a fourth of the news contents. The difference in the treatment given to the different actors of the social system shows a lack of diversity in Mexican television, which has been confirmed by the results of the Gini index (GI = 0.58).

According to the results of the federal elections held in 2012 in Mexico, seven political parties obtained more than 3% of votes and were by law allowed to keep their registration (IFE 2012). Therefore, Mexico's TV news programmes would be expected to offer news contents related to the participation of the members of each of these parties. However, the results of the study show that the TV news programmes only take into account the actors linked to three political parties: PRI, PAN and PRD.

Table 4. Political affiliation of the political actors that appear in Mexico's national TV news programmes

	Noticiero Televisa		*Hechos de la Noche*		Total	
Actor's political affiliation	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time	% of units	% of time
PRI	76.9%	72.7%	71.4%	72.7%	75.0%	72.70%
PAN	11.5%	19.1%	21.4%	19.5%	15.0%	19.20%
PRD	11.5%	8.1%	3.6%	4.6%	8.8%	7.00%
Other party	0%	0%	3.6%	3.2%	1.3%	1.10%
Total	100% (N=52)	100% (93 min.)	100% (N=28)	100% (46 min.)	100% (N=80)	100% (139 min.)

Source: Authors' own creation based on the results of the study

Evidence confirms that there is a lack of information related to the smaller political parties that are also part of the national political scene. In fact, the Gini index has been calculated at 0.80, which confirms the low level of diversity in Mexican TV news programmes in terms of the distribution of the screen time allocated to the diversity of members of Mexico's political parties. None of the two TV news programmes can be singled out as being particularly more biased, since according to the application of the Gini index both programmes have very similar values.

5. Conclusions

The results of the analysis of the two most-watched free-to-air Mexican TV news programmes has allowed us to reach the following three conclusions: First, the results indicate that the public agenda is clearly dominated by the Federal Government and the political party in power (PRI). Second, this situation reinforces the idea of the existence of presidentialism in Mexico. Finally, as a result of the previous situations, the findings are consistent with the idea that -despite the apparent modernisation

of the country- Mexican national television continues to exhibit the journalistic practices that characterised the seven-decade-long period during which the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled the country in the last century.

With regards to the first conclusion, the content analysis of the main news programmes of Televisa and TV Azteca indicates that the public agenda is clearly dominated by the governmental authorities. Of the government authorities, the members of the Federal Government are the main protagonists of the news stories, since 37% of the news stories have them as their main source of information. Far below are the members of the legislative power and the state governments, with presence in 17% and 14% of the news units respectively. In addition, this situation is reinforced by the political affiliation of the actors present in the analysed news: 72.7% of the represented actors are members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, 19.2% of the National Action Party and only 7% of the Democratic Revolution Party. This lack of diversity is confirmed by the results of the Gini index, which clearly indicate the lack of equality in the representation of political actors and political parties (0.58 and 0.80, respectively).

The centralisation of actors also has an impact on journalistic genres, since the news genre was much more common than the feature report (87% vs. 5%, respectively). This means that during the period under analysis, the audience mainly received the official version of the events, to the detriment of news that contain a diversity of sources. This situation is consistent with the results obtained by similar studies on the Mexican press (see for example, Molina 1987; Hallin 1995; Márquez 2012; González 2013; Reyna 2014). If we accept the central argument of the agenda setting theory, which indicates that the media determine what events will be covered and how they will be presented (McCombs 1993, 1997 and 2004), then we can conclude that, in the case of Mexican free-to-air television, the Federal Government and its political party dominate the news agenda.

With regards to the second conclusion, it is that the empirical evidence presented in this article also reinforces the notion that *presidentialism* is still in force in the Mexican political system. This concept refers to the deference that society in general -and the press in particular- used to show towards the country's President (Almond and Verba 1963; Philip 1992; Camp 1993). While citizens today no longer show the utmost respect to such figure (which is reflected on the countless memes about the president in social networks), according to the results of this study, free-to-air television still offers the Head of the Executive Power openly respectful and even friendly coverage, as it did during the period in which the PRI ruled country (Rodríguez 1993; Lawson 2002; Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar and Adler 2004; Hughes 2006). During those first seven decades, news programmes offered a fragmented view of the political reality, which was only composed by the *authority*, on the one hand, and the rest of the political actors, on the other. The first category included only the president and his inner circle, while the second included senators, congressmen and political parties (Hallin 1995).

Finally, as a result of the previous circumstances, and based on the findings of the content analysis performed for the study, the third conclusion is that the Mexican press still needs to be modernised

(see for instance, De León 2009; Márquez 2012; González 2013; Reyna 2014). This conclusion challenges the notion that the democratic transition of the country allegedly led the media to become more professional and provoked a transformation in the field of journalism, given that unlike the seventy-year-long ruling of the PRI, todays' reporters apparently do more investigative journalism, present more balanced information and are less amenable (Lawson 2002; Hughes 2006; Wallis 2004). However, studies such as this suggest that the Mexican media have not abandoned the old practices that characterised the journalist-source relationship for much of the 20th century: Submission to the official version, friendly coverage in exchange for all kinds of favours, lack of investigative journalism and so on. In other words, instead of undergoing a process of modernisation, there has only been a perpetuation of the journalistic routines of the past.

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