



Journalism Culture and Political Conflict: Mexican Journalists Reflect their Performance During 2006 Presidential Elections

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Abstract

This paper examines Mexican journalists' perceived roles, values, and practices that shape the reporting of political conflict, such as the 2006 presidential elections—one of the most critical moments in contemporary political history. It is argued that traditional journalistic values often expected in Western models of journalism such as impartiality, objectivity, factuality and editorial detachment, turn out to be crucially passive devices to collect political utterances and promote information overload, scandal and superficiality. Exploring the views and testimonies of 85 radio and print journalists from twenty-one news organisations based in Mexico City, the paper outlines a typology of the varying ways in which Mexican journalists interpret and negotiate their roles and performance in relation to political conflict, by signalling out contradictions and dichotomies entangled in the construction of their occupational values, principles and roles. The paper shows how Mexican journalists were in a position to reflect on their own coverage and assess the extent to which they facilitated debate, described and/or explained occurrences, animated or reflected on political conflict and reported on or actively engendered social polarisation. It is revealed that journalistic roles embraced by Mexican journalists are trapped in contesting terrains of ambiguity. Clashing opinions about what to do meant that crucial information concerning the 2006 electoral conflict was left out from the public dominion, radio presenters handled information with an important charge of ideological and partisan bias, and reporters faced restrictions either imposed by their media's economic interests or by existing inertial practices of reporting and gathering of information.

Keywords

Mexican elections 2006; journalistic culture; journalism values; political conflict

1. Introduction

This qualitative study aims to disentangle the role of media, journalism and journalists in the framing of political discourse from a perspective that focuses on the points of interaction between journalistic practices and production and the wider political context, by analysing the way in which Mexican print and radio journalists evaluate their performance when reporting the 2006 presidential elections. Key teleological questions underpin the inquiry: what is the specific job of journalism and journalists in relation to political conflict? a) Is it to inform and disseminate information as it unfolds; b) to reflect neutrally the tone of the political debate by giving voice to the contesting parties; c) to explain and analyse issues beyond political

discourse; or d) to seek the ultimate truth by scrutinising and investigating official claims? These roles are normally expected from the media in critical events, disgraces and specifically, during election time, if they are to enable citizens to make meaningful decisions. Yet the question that remains unsolved is: can these roles be performed through the ordinary reporting of political conflict and if not, what are the journalists' self-expectations of their job? As we shall see, while scholars and practitioners throughout the years have traditionally endorsed all these media roles, the pursuit of one frequently entails the disregarding of the others, resulting in clashing of media roles and values that often lead to misinformation. Yet, in the context wherein fraud allegations and suspicions tarnished not only the elections, but also the perception of political institutions and effective consolidation of democracy, how are media roles and journalistic values being re-negotiated, interpreted, and enacted?

This paper shows how after a year of the 2006 presidential elections, Mexican journalists were in a position to reflect on the media coverage of events and assess the degree in which they facilitated debate, described and/or explained occurrences, animated or reflected on political conflict and described or actively shaped social polarisation. The paper shows how the journalistic roles are engrained in ambiguity by outlining a typology of journalistic roles that show clashing approaches to reporting of political conflict, and illustrates the ways in which journalists often felt unsure about the work they should be doing and especially the extent of detail they should be describing. The paper concludes that, as a collective professional entity, Mexican journalists felt that Mexican media could have done a much better job in the reporting, explanation and interpretation of the 2006 post-electoral conflict, while several participants signalled out stances of problematic factors shaping their work, such as overt partisanship, clashing economic interests, changing editorial policies and managerial decisions aimed at defending the status quo.

2. Concepts in Journalism

The liberal and professional values that underpin American model of journalism (Schudson 1995, 2001; Allan 1997; Chalaby 1998) have extensively pervaded the universal foundations of journalistic values and roles such as objectivity, factuality and impartiality, values greatly cherished by journalism students (Splichal and Sparks 1994) and practitioners from around the world (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Weaver 1998). These values, are widely acknowledged as necessary to guarantee fairness and independent reporting, and are intrinsically linked to the idea of professionalism, accountability, democracy, and the public interest (McQuail 2003; Hallin 2000b; Gans 2003; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Rosanvallon 2008). Although the American model of journalism (Schudson 2001) champions the idea of a functioning fourth state whose role is to serve as a watchdog of the political power, such ethnocentrism has been widely questioned (Curran and Park 2000; De Burgh 2005); by scholars studying the failure of importing Western journalistic values in non Anglo-Saxon journalistic cultures (De Smaele 1999; Márquez Ramírez 2005; Araya 2009; Epp 2009). For instance, the different cultural traditions between American and European journalists have been noted widely: while journalistic culture in the liberal media places heavy emphasis on information, description and narrative rather than political commentary (Hallin and Giles 2005: 8), many European countries are more closely linked to political parties and factions. For instance, Italian journalists have traditionally been portrayed as “advocates, linked to political parties, and very close to being active politicians themselves” (Mancini 2000: 266).

Similarly, studies examining the nature of European journalism, like the French, have highlighted its literary heritage, intellectual aspirations wherein there is a prioritising of ideological positions and opinion articles instead of prioritizing the fact-based information, and some European journalists press have been traditionally more reluctant than Americans to endorse values such as objectivity or editorial detachment (Chalaby 1996: 319; Palmer 2001).

Yet, despite the controversial and sceptical views to objectivity and independence, opposite roles and values such as interpretation, editorial involvement, partisanship and advocacy are still portrayed in negative light. In the dominant narrative, interpretative, opinionated journalism tends to represent the “vestiges of the old-time partisan press” (Donsbach and Patterson 2004: 255), or pertain to countries with a history of partisan politics, state interventionism in the media and authoritarian political systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Hence two distinctive functions of journalists, either as mouthpieces of elites or autonomous scrutinisers of political power, are classified as opposite and mutually exclusive. In their survey of American journalists, Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) examine the adherence of journalistic roles grouped into three main categories such as *disseminators* of information, *adversaries* who ‘feel strongly about the government watchdog responsibility’ and a third role of *populist mobilizers* of ‘small media, community-oriented idealists’ who aim of ‘giving voice to the unheard’. While in their 1992 study (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996) found that most of American journalists tended to see two responsibilities as extremely important: getting information to the public quickly and investigating governmental claims (namely embrace the factual, watchdog role), further surveying of 20.000 journalists in 21 countries, including Mexico (Weaver 1998, 2005) showed slightly different results. While the role of getting information quickly also scored high in their priorities, there was less agreement in the watchdog role of the press, the importance of providing analysis, and of objective reporting. Other studies analysing journalistic roles in countries that experienced authoritarian governments such as China (Zhou 2000; De Burgh 2003), Russia (Pasti 2005); or Brazil (Waisbord 2000; Herscovitz 2004) have found an overlapping, changing nature of journalistic roles and values that mutate and adapt to historical context and local cultural values (De Albuquerque 2005; De Albuquerque and Roxo de Silva 2009). The issue of contesting journalistic cultures characterised by a focus on opinions and commentary as opposed to the pursuit of objectivity and editorial detachment is a crucial one in the understanding of Mexican journalistic culture. As we shall see, these roles are sometimes indistinguishable and have pervaded specific forms of labour organisation, presentation styles and occupational identities.

3. Press and state relations in Mexico: a history of complicity

Literature has widely documented the subservience and complicit nature of press-state relations (Rodríguez 2007) during the 71-year-long authoritarian regime of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI by its Spanish acronym). Journalistic culture, practices and reporting were engrained in the structures of political control and power, wherein private-owned media enormously benefited from governmental patronage and loose media regulation, in exchange of the State’s control of (favourable) information (Scherer and Monsiváis 2003; García Calderón 2007). Government administered such control through myriad means –the dispensing and subsidy of print paper; the discretionary awarding of broadcasting licences to a handful of government-friendly families (Caletti Kaplan 1988; Hallin 2000b); by being the main –if not sole— provider of advertisement (Benavides 2000), and through the direct

payoffs to editors and reporters (Fromson 1996). Hence, during those years, scholars widely noted how the media were an appendix of the State, placing the journalists roles as that of collector and disseminator of official truths, greatly shaped by a widespread practice of institutional censorship and self-censorship and the congratulatory reporting of events. Scholars conclude that during the 1970's and 1980's, Mexican reporters lacked judgement, professional competence, journalistic degrees and professional standards (Baldivia et al, 1981; Riva Palacio 1998). The exception to the overwhelming complicit press was comprised by a handful of challenging journalists, newspapers and radio news programmes that emerged throughout the country and overcame the official control. However, as from the instrumentation of political and economic reforms during 1990's, some scholars (Lawson 2002; Hughes 2006) documented the consolidation of independent and critical press, claiming the emergence of a new 'civic-oriented' generation of journalists that accompanied the democratising of the political system crowned with the PRI's overthrow from main office in 2000. The most accomplished studies are those of political scientists Chappell Lawson (2002) and Sallie Hughes (2001, 2006), who claim that the change of Mexican media from authoritarian to free, from lapdog to watchdog is real and tangible after economic and political reforms in the mid 1990s. They observe the strengthening of an effective critical, free, autonomous, plural, citizen-oriented, and commercially viable fourth state that, although facing several obstacles, has engendered a new generation of journalists holding professional values and embracing practices of critical, assertive and investigative journalism, replacing the encroached model of authoritarianism, passive, subservient press. For Mexican scholars, however, the situation after political transition is one wherein power has transformed the formerly subservient media into all-powerful actors. The outcome is the prevalence of a 'republic of (mediated) scandal' (Espino 2009), characterised by a systematic, uncontested ruling of 'mediacracy' (Trejo Delarbre 2004; Villamil 2005; Esteinou 2007).

Just as in many other Southern European countries (Hallin and Mancini 2004), journalism in Mexico has grown parallel to the overall political system and the social and cultural conventions emanating from vertical communication and dissemination of news where audiences were the passive, homogenous receivers of equally homogeneous information. Without denying the dramatic changes propelled by increased commercialisation, growing competition and the advent of a new professional culture, this paper contends that such a progress in the outlining of journalistic culture during the ongoing political transition is far from being progressive and horizontal – it is, as we shall see, embedded with hybrid, contradicting practices of sourcing, gathering and packaging of news. Different approaches to objectivity and factuality manifest in roles that adhere to the traditional model of the press but clash with the challenges of everyday reporting, particularly at times of crisis, such as the 2006 post-electoral conflict. To understand the role of the media in (political) crises, Marc Raboy and Bernard Degenais (1992) have explored the ways in which crises serve to highlight the problematic issues of media performance in democratic states, by questioning the extent to which threats to the sovereignty or status-quo work to subvert the contribution of the media to democratic political processes. They propose the notion of *crisis* as a paradigm “for understanding the dialectics of continuity and radical change (rupture), the thread (both real and imaginary) connecting social order and disorder in our times” (1992: 3). As the accusations and tension between opposing parties escalated, and the losing candidate was at the forefront of a massive 'civil resistance', fuelling fears of violence, 2006 elections became a

paradigm for crisis, not only in the negative sense, but in the rupture of the order and normalcy and media framing of elections.

4. Presidential Elections, social polarisation, and political conflict

Doubtless, the 2006 elections are one of the most acrimonious episodes in recent Mexican history. Resulting from ‘dirty campaigns’, perception of fraudulent performance, impugnation of results, questioning of key political and legal institutions (Villamil y Scherer, 2007), the post-electoral conflict surpassed the realm of politics to impregnate society in such a way that severe polarisation arose. The tense atmosphere ensuing the election sparked fears of violence outbreaks and ‘social decomposition’ (Arias Lovillo, 2007, free translation), or interrogations on whether “institutions are so shaky that the actions of a single man could cause their collapse” (Lawson 2007: 45). It is widely acknowledged that the 2006 presidential elections underwent ferocious competition tinted by aggressive strategies involving intensified doses of what political communication scholars have labelled as ‘dirty politics’ (Hall Jamieson 1992). Some commentators argue that Mexican political conflict and social polarisation had to do with the way that campaigns had been carried out, PAN¹ candidate Felipe Calderón’s team made good use of ‘hate and panics’ media campaigning (Villamil and Scherer 2007: 62; González Marín and Rojas, 2007). The successful campaign, which gained greater visibility through prime-time television spots, openly called citizens not to vote for the left-wing candidate² Andrés Manuel López Obrador, branding him ‘a danger to Mexico’³ a label that still resonates widely in public opinion when referring to his personality and temperament. But López Obrador, a popular ex-Mexico City mayor, who had formerly claimed to be ‘indestructible’ and was leading the opinion polls by up to ten per cent points up to three months before the election day—almost envisioning himself and Mexico’s to be president, could not anticipate the volatile nature of voters and the powerful effect of the PAN’s successful media campaigns and his own mistakes and erred media strategy (See Espino 2009; García Calderón 2007 for a detailed analysis of candidates’ media campaigns). To further jeopardise what looked like an anticipated victory for López Obrador, media campaigns were aggravated with displays of partiality and undue intrusion on the part of key political actors such as President Vicente Fox (Esteinou 2007; Villamil and Scherer, 2007), who had openly supported his party’s candidate, Felipe Calderón in public events⁴.

With these factors playing a significant role, on the night of July 2nd, after a busy poll day, the whole country was expectant for the Federal Elections Institute (IFE) to declare the

¹ National Action Party (PAN, by its Spanish acronym)

² Candidate by the Coalition Good for All (CPBT, by its Spanish acronym)

³ In his book, suggestively entitled ‘*A Mafia stole the Presidency from us*’ (free translation from Spanish), López Obrador would claim: ‘Any serious analysis about the role of the media and the way they attacked me during April and May, would demonstrate no other episode alike in recent history. In those days, not only I was ‘a danger to Mexico’, but in this view, I was like ‘Hugo Chávez’, I was to put the country ‘in serious debt’, to ‘seize the middle class property’ and other numerous lies about me, let alone when they circulated a psychological profile of myself that describes me as a ‘deranged’ (López Obrador, 2006: 310-311; free translation from Spanish, quoted by González Marín and Rojas 2007: 202-203). Even PRI’s candidate Roberto Madrazo, a life-long political rival of Obrador, agreed. He wrote: ‘the media seized the stage and conducted the campaigns. To the degree that I’d dare to claim that they had decided, beforehand, even before the citizens did, who was to win and who was to lose, who was in and out, who had a good message and who didn’t (Madrazo 2207: 245, free translation from Spanish, quoted by González Marín and Rojas, 1997:202).

⁴ President Vicente Fox, April 18th, 2006 uttered these words in an informal speech when holding a meeting with property developers in Aguascalientes, central Mexico: ‘*We can’t be making up a new wheel every eight years, every administration...What we do need is the permanence of public policy, not of Government, I agree on that. We may change of jockey, why change of horse? the horse is running fine*’. (El Economista, April 18th, 2006).

winner of the election, although few anticipated an overwhelming victory. In what was later deemed to be one of the most controversial statements to date, IFE's president, Luis Carlos Ugalde, announced presidential election was too close to call, meaning that the difference between the two front-runners, Felipe Calderón (PAN) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (CPBT), was smaller than their margin of error of three per cent of the vote. No similar episode had been registered before—a draw is not permitted under the existing legislation that contemplates no second-round. Events of the election night were closely followed and reported by the press. Some political commentators and political parties pointed out systematic irregularities in the blink tally programme (known as Preliminary Results Programme-PREP), and questioned that by calling no winner the IFE left open space for speculation and rumour, while for others IFE had done the job properly (See Pliego Carrasco, 2007; Tello Díaz, 2007 for a detailed chronicle of result-releasing and blink-tally progress). Few days later IFE finally published official results and declared a winner. From a universe of more than 40 million votes, Calderón had obtained 35.89% suffrages, while López Obrador 35.31 per cent, a difference of 0.58% votes only⁵.

As from that day, Calderón endured a difficult path towards getting consensual legitimacy and recognition, and being appointed President-elect would not be a straightforward endeavour. López Obrador refused to recognise his rival's victory, impugned the result alleging tendentious partisan disputes, fraud and irregularities, demanded a total recount of ballots taking 'vote by vote, booth by booth' as his motto. Everyday his team would release to the media alleged proofs of evidence of the so-called electoral fraud, accusing a boycott of businesspersons and the establishment to prevent his victory, and gathering his supporters to massive rallies and public demonstrations, protests, marches, and civil disobedience. The culminating action was the setting up of 'plantones' or encampments alongside Mexico City's main central roads, a measure arguably unpopular among residents and drivers and severely criticised by political analysts, journalists, radio presenters and his own supporters. Although the majority of international observers considered the elections to be fair, several pointed out serious irregularities and undue behaviour on the part of the electoral authorities, the state, political actors, businessmen, and TV corporations (Villamil and Scherer, 2007; García Calderón 2007). But the Electoral Tribunal, in charge of solving López Obrador impugnation of the results, could only authorise a partial recount of 10% of the booths, where justification and provided evidence of irregularities had been convincing, not the full recount demanded by Obrador's team. The final result proved several irregularities that supported some of his claims, including a Tribunal official summoning president Vicente Fox for his unlawful intervention in favour of Calderón. However, neither the recognition of such irregularities nor the partial recount altered the result in such a way as to nullify the election or brand it 'fraudulent', if only, it did reduce the difference from 0.58 to 0.56 per cent, yet confirmed Calderón's victory nevertheless. The tribunal's decision on September 5th, while giving institutional closure to a long process of impugnation and political conflict and silencing many of the losing candidate's unproved claims, failed to satisfy many of his supporters who demanded a total recount, as the Tribunal's resolution had tacitly admitted all the irregularities López Obrador had accused. His demonstrations culminated days later, with

⁵ The final result was: Felipe Calderón 35.89% of suffrages (15.000.284), López Obrador 35.31% (14.756.350 votes), a slim difference of 243.934 votes (or 0.58%). PRI's Roberto Madrazo obtained 22.26% (9.301.441 votes). The turnout was of 58 per cent. Source: IFE (Presidential Elections 2006).

thousands of supporters gathering again in Zócalo Square to acclaim him ‘the legitimate president of Mexico’.

5. Journalists and Elections: Methodology

Arguably, Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s claims of electoral fraud and his refusal to recognise Felipe Calderon’s victory deepened the social polarisation. On one side lay those who demanded a full recount and mistrusted the transparency of the process and the performance of political institutions, and on the other those who believed López Obrador’s to be a self-centred and intolerant man, a sour loser simply seeking to demean the prestige of the institutions such as IFE and the Electoral Tribunal by accusing electoral fraud and impugning the results. The role of the media was therefore crucial for the understanding of the core issues underlying the conflict. While media coverage of elections is a popular topic of scholarly research in Mexico, the day-to-day interactions of journalists with candidates, their perceptions on candidates and their observations about the campaigns within the wider political context have deserved a nearly very little scholarly attention, even though journalists values are deemed as crucial in the shaping of content as extra-organisational factors (Tuchman 1978; Shoemaker and Resse 1996). The way they select and frame their leads out of the everyday campaign, and the journalists’ possible mediation in the type of political information they report, conceivably reflect a preponderance of familiar narrative and stylistic devices characteristic of the journalistic culture. Drawing from Raboy and DeGeneais’ (1992) typology of media framing and roles during crisis, questions underpinning this study are: how do Mexican journalists face and negotiate professional dilemmas between choosing –and therefore believing in, competing political allegations regarding electoral fraud? How were radio new and press contributing to the wider debate and explanation of the conflict? Were they the guardians of the truth, did they create their own agendas or maintained a neutral, descriptive role of the events? What is the ultimate role and purpose of journalism? To explore such questions, 85 qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted as the methodology of this study. The respondents were print and radio journalists from twenty-one outlets based on Mexico City –nine national newspapers, seven national radio organisations⁶, and a small sample of four weeklies and a press agency⁷. Participants were interviewed face-to-face between August and October 2007. To guarantee the best possible representativeness, at least one journalist in managerial or decision-making position (editors, editorial directors, radio news presenters, radio producers) from each news medium were included, and at least two political reporters out of each media outlet⁸. Reporters participating in this study were selected for being involved in the coverage of either political campaigns or the Electoral Institute, or the post electoral conflict, but in most occasions, they had covered at least two campaigns, and several other political news-beats such as the Congress, Presidency, Political Parties and all the governmental branches and ministries. Table (I) illustrates the media affiliation and number of respondents. All respondents were offered anonymity and to avoid disclosing their

⁶ Please note that *Monitor MVS/Infored* daily newscasts are no longer on air as from 2008.

⁷ All news radio organisations have headquarters in Mexico City, but their newscasts are syndicated or re-transmitted throughout hundreds of local stations across the country. Similarly, newspaper columnists write for more than one medium, i.e in the case of the freelancer columnists for *La Crisis*, he quoted that as the medium he contributes for daily, based in Mexico City, although his column appears in 22 newspapers across the country too.

⁸ While some of the respondents work for more than one news organisation (as most radio presenters are also TV presenters and newspaper columnists, and some reporters work for multimedia outlets) they have been considered in the list as pertaining to one medium.

identities, they are identified by their code. Following a semi-structured format of interview, with open-ended questions, reporters were asked to describe their everyday experiences with candidates, while editorial managers and radio presenters to reflect on the planning of their electoral coverage. All respondents were submitted to a main question: *Overall, do you think the media were up to the job in covering and reporting the post-electoral conflict?* Follow-up questions helped them to look at particular issues on detail and reflect on the post-electoral conflict in perspective. Their responses were transcribed, analysed and compared with each other, utilising a frame of recurrent themes that revealed the presence of consistency and repetition in perceptions, and quotes to be utilised in this study were transcribed into English and are representative of the tone, angle and prevalence of responses. The type of medium and the position and hierarchy of the respondent gives us plenty of insights into what are their main concerns regarding media performance during the conflict, although there were surprising consensus regardless of type of media or position, about the shortcomings of the media while reporting the conflict and the issues that could have been better approached. More than a year after the elections, interviewees were prepared to share their analysis of self-performance critically and honestly. To our surprise, Mexican journalists were prepared to take responsibility for shaping the historisation of the event in a limited, partial, oversimplified and superficial fashion.

Table (I) Participants per medium type and position

Print media	Editors or Managers	Political Reporters	Columnists Stringers	TOTAL
Newspapers				
<i>El Centro</i>	-	3	-	3
<i>El Economista</i>	3	2	-	5
<i>El Financiero</i>	2	2	1	5
<i>La Crónica de Hoy</i>	1	1	-	2
<i>La Jornada</i>	1	3	-	4
<i>Milenio Diario</i>	-	4	-	4
<i>Nuevo Excélsior</i>	2	2	-	4
<i>Reforma</i>	2	3	-	5
<i>El Universal</i>	4	3	1	8
Weeklies				
<i>Día Siete</i>	1	-	-	1
<i>Eme-equis</i>	-	-	1	1
<i>Cambio</i>	1	-	-	1
<i>La Crisis</i>	-	-	1	1
Press Agencies				
<i>Notimex</i>	-	1	-	1
Total	17	24	4	45
Broadcast media	Managers	Political	Senior	

	Producers	Reporters	Presenters	TOTAL
News Organisations				
<i>Grupo ACIR</i>	2	3	1	6
<i>Grupo Imagen</i>	2	2	1	5
<i>Núcleo Radio Mil</i>	2	6	1	9
<i>Radio Centro</i>	2	3	-	5
<i>Radio Fórmula</i>	-	3	3	6
<i>Monitor MVS</i>	2	3	-	5
<i>W Radio</i>	1	3	-	4
	11	23	6	40
Total				
Grand Total	28	47	10	85

6. Findings. Journalism in Critical Reflection: A typology of media roles

Confirming Deganaís' (1992) account of journalistic roles during critical reporting, I argue that the media act simultaneously as observers, actors and mediators during political crisis. However, while he claims that journalists' involvement with their subjects in the reporting of crisis follows a chronological pattern –this is, the nature of the role taken by journalists evolve from being a detached observer to that of an involved actor, I find that such transition between varying categories is less clear, and indeed, is frequently overlapping and undistinguishable. As we shall see, roles and values endorsed by Mexican journalists are trapped in contradiction and ambiguity. As role of the media is crucial for the understanding of the core issues underlying the conflict, such principles and roles may have been insufficient for a comprehensive coverage and understanding of the post-electoral conflict. The 2006 elections confirm and illustrate that journalists' perceptions of their job occurred amid explicit instances of struggle, contesting clashes, and plenty of information that they appeared overwhelmed with. Most journalists believe they fell short of their role and duty, and feel they were obliged to do a much better job, although they do not necessarily know what and how. In an overall evaluation of media performance in the coverage of the conflict, Mexican reporters spelled out the main limitations to their work. These limitations include tight deadlines and workloads, over-supply of information, the prevalence of personal sympathies, lack of investigative skills, unassertive and inertial newsgathering, hesitation of the extent to which they should investigate; problems with putting values such as 'objectivity', 'factuality' and 'detachment' into practice. Likewise, editors, managers and publishers are accused of lack of coverage planning; overt partisanship (which, despite being admitted in European newspapers, in Mexico carries a negative view after the history of press-state relations in the country) and corporate interests greatly influencing the side of the story to be highlighted and legitimated. To explore each of these findings in detail, it is possible to outline a typology of journalistic roles that encompasses the diversity of responses while illustrating varying degrees of ambiguity they hold regarding their jobs, their performance and their postures before critical events.

a) *Engaged witness or constrained chronicler*

In this form of journalistic engagement with their subject, journalists witness and make sense of the meaningful occurrences behind the scenes that have the potential to become a great source of political commentary and analysis, and hence crucial information for voters, but is left out from the realm of what reporters are supposed to do. From reporters' accounts of their time observing, following and consistently listening to the candidates they were assigned to cover, it is clear that much of this empirical knowledge is often squandered or not fully utilised to frame their stories. For example, many reporters were able to point out very clear, sharp differences in strategy, depth, target, and scope of the three main campaigns –the level of the candidates' popularity, personality traits, PR strategies, the actors whom they held in meetings with and what those meetings revealed about eventual policymaking. Talking about López Obrador's motto 'first the poor', a newspaper reporter admits:

"His campaign was different, yes, in so far as travelling around on ground rather than by air, but I think it was an ornament, a cosmetic strategy (but) he lied easily –many a proposal were frankly unviable" (Political Reporter 2, Newspaper I.)

Others remark his popularity:

"I can really say I've witnessed that López Obrador may provoke whatever phobias you like, but the guy does have some kind of charm with lay people than nobody else ever had in this country" (Political Reporter 1, Newspaper G).

In the model of the press that has been exported to the world as a normative framework, factuality has come to be interpreted in Mexico as for reporters, that commentary and opinions fall outside their permitted tasks and responsibilities. Anything related to a journalist's subjective perception of reality, their anecdotes or observations are better off being kept to self, otherwise may fall within the terrain of interpretation, partisanship or editorialisation/judgement to which reporters are not entitled to. But they seem reluctant to admit that those perceptions are uninformative, on the contrary, most would have liked to go beyond the evident facts and add more insights to their reports.

"I feel we should be allowed to give out some opinions because it's ultimately us reporters the ones who are out there on the streets, and witness the occurrences as they unfold" (Political Reporter 2, Radio P).

At the top of the rank-and-file and due to the school of clear-cut journalistic genres taught as the gospel in journalism schools, it is radio presenters, commentators and newspaper columnists, who are given the traditional right to analyse, opine and interpret, not the low-ranked reporter. Those who covered the relentless presidential campaigns were frequently confronted with the question of how to embark into description without analysis or how to chronicle without personal judgement, and if ultimately, that was at all possible. They observe revealing details during campaigns: rallies being either empty or full of supporters; candidates who appeared uncomfortable in their own skin, or who did not seem to command leadership and authority among their peers. Through their testimonies for this project, reporters appear skilled chroniclers and analysts able to pinpoint and profile candidates based in what they

observe. However, in the terrain of the practice, their dispatches are limited to the reporting of the political speech. Despite the respondent's perceptions of recurrent traits in candidates personalities, stances and policies, it was unlikely they were allowed to publicly refer to Felipe Calderon's campaign as "*utterly gray and clueless*" (**Political Reporter 3, Radio J**), to Roberto Madrazo as "*a disaster, a pantomime, a guy with a fake smile who waves like Miss Mexico*" (**Political Reporter 3, Radio M**) or to López Obrador as an "*magnetic but intolerant man who can't handle criticism*" (**Political Reporter 1, Newspaper D**).

Indeed, journalists feel that espousing a reporting style based on insights and interpretation of politics may be far more revealing and informative, but it would be a conflictive, non-factual approach to election coverage, as it could raise claims of partisanship and bias, while on the contrary, the quotidian transmission of candidates' speeches is the safest, less complicated but more superficial one. The style and narrative conventions of traditional factual journalism, as well as the lack of a Mexican parallel to the Anglo-Saxon figure of specialist 'correspondent', appears to limit any possibility of being conferred with the professional authority over their subjects that they long for.

b) Factual reporting or uncritical disseminator of declarations

Resulting from the previous media role, the most cited reason for failing to explain and break down the post-electoral conflict was the existing newsgathering habits and reporting culture in Mexico. Journalists believe they did not fully investigate the fraud allegations, did not place the numerous political utterances in perspective, or verified the reliability of contesting remarks. It is widely assumed that, on their own merit, political declarations per se are self-explanatory and hence open to public scrutiny, assessment and evaluation, so journalists' role in this regard is limited to report as accurately as possible all the contesting utterances and the 'reality' they see without adding any opinion; as public already hold knowledge about politicians and political games and can decide who to believe. For many, their job is to give political elites a microphone to express themselves. As an influential presenter put it, the main role of the media is "*to inform rightly, record rightly, and present information rightly*" (**Senior TV and Radio Presenter 1, Radio N**).

However, equating declarations with facts is what produces *declarative journalism*, a trend despised by the majority of participants. This type of journalism, consisting in the verbatim reporting of the wide spectrum of political opinions, is easy and quick, fits the requirements of minimising editorial involvement on the part of the reporter, guarantees plurality of voices, and most importantly, produces enough raw material for endless cycles of news. However, the high quantity and availability of declarations and opinions is made possible due to over-reliance on official sources, politicians ready to speak about everything and everyone, all at the expense of original and investigative journalism. As this reporter summarises it, amid a battle of mutual accusations after the election day, journalists conformed with being:

"...only spectators, reproducers of the ongoing fabric of declarations –there was never investigative journalism that could really come up with demonstrating something else beyond what we were being told by both parties. I never really read a story that wasn't official information..." (**Political Reporter 1, Newspaper F**).

Hence, factuality constitutes another arena of struggle when defining media roles and evaluating their performance. While some reporters consider that merely describing reality to enable two-side stories flattens the complexity and depth of issues, for others, the accurate reporting of facts as they unfold is their duty. Ultimately, their attachment to the culture of factuality and ‘declarative journalism’ is little related to the pursuit of truth, and more concerned with ensuring not to miss any bit of the daily utterances and statements and internal competition with their competitors to ‘have the story’. The trend, however, does ensure ongoing information to fill news slots and programming but proves counterproductive in the long term. This editorial director observes the impact of such a reporting culture on society:

“...there was an over-saturation of information, of declarations, of radical positions from both sides. There are few facts and much less analysis. So, that’s the problem with journalistic culture in Mexico. What is the result of that? A society that is completely misinformed, little reflexive, and culturally and politically unprepared” (Editorial Director, Newspaper C).

By adhering, although reluctantly, to this ritual they appear to have followed the familiar patterns observed in other national crisis elsewhere: “They faithfully reproduced, without critical distance, all facts, rumours, hypotheses, declarations and contradictions in circulation” (Dageneis, 1992: 122). Everyone from candidates, campaign teams, partisan and religious leaders, multi-partisan congressmen, the President, cabinet members, businessmen, and Mexico City and provincial political elites, all gave their opinions throughout the weeks following the election. News organisations felt overwhelmed by the production of such amount of information, which they fail to digest and reflect on it properly. Hence, it could be argued that the adherence to factuality as a key journalistic role, as embodied in Mexican journalistic culture of reporting, turned out to be a limitation that constraints the possibilities to fully explore the complexity of the 2006 post-electoral conflict.

c) Detached mirrors or active inquisitors

One of the most accepted descriptions of journalistic roles and values is that of the medium as the mirror metaphor. For some respondents, *declarative journalism* does not stem from unassertive or passive practices of newsgathering, processing and presenting news, but is in itself a reflection of the quality and tune of existing political debate. Reporting on contesting declarations epitomise the scandalous, strident way that political life is conducted in the ‘real’ world and media ought to reflect that. In this view, journalists are obliged to present and seek contesting versions of reality that accurately capture the ongoing political struggle –fraud allegations and the demand of a poll recount on the one hand, or the discourse of legitimate and clean elections on the part of the winning candidate and the IFE. While discussing whether the media was up to the job in the reporting of the conflict, and in enabling a space for debate and understanding of all the competing arguments and situations, a small number of respondents referred to the metaphor of the mirror to describe their responsibility: the job of the media, they said, is to reflect what’s going on and nothing else.

Some respondents believe that the deep social polarisation that emerged following López Obrador’s fraud allegations was already there. The media did not create it—the candidate and his incendiary, edgy personality did. Personal beliefs that citizens had about the

possibility of electoral fraud were unchanged despite of any media attempt to document or prove him wrong, as this famous presenter thinks: “*(The public) had their own views already, they still think of fraud today just as much as they did during the harsh days of the conflict, so why blame the media?*” (**Senior TV and Radio Presenter 1, Radio N**).

As part of the media as a mirror metaphor, others consider that media is nourished by a theatrical political reality of political elites, and all the media do is “*let the circus commence*” (**Political Reporter 1, Radio M**), along with, as one editor put it, “*the shortcomings, the insufficiency of debate, and the love for melodrama*” (**Editorial Director, Newspaper D**).

Therewith their explicit role in covering political conflict is not so much to improve the quality of debate, but to capture the exact tone of the allegations, scandal, and mutual accusations of involved actors. In this view, the media are passive actors, merely observers purely registering political occurrences with no intrusion in political life. For the ‘media as mirror’ advocates—mainly radio presenters and newspaper editors participating in this study—their outlets simply reflected the shape of society with no further mediated involvement. But when questioned whether the type of press coverage exacerbated the social tension and polarisation, reporters agreed that the media did contribute significantly and actively to deepen the tension. The division between supporters of both candidates was fuelled by overtly questioning or derision of fraud allegations, interviewing the radical voices, privileging the scandalous information and becoming “*advocates or crusaders for or against the fraud allegations*” (**Political Reporter 2, Newspaper E**).

Likewise, the metaphor of the mirror seems to constrain some normative roles of journalism, such as verifying reliability of contesting claims. While the big question at the centre of the social conflict and polarisation was whether the elections were transparent or not, journalists had mixed feelings about their level of involvement or preparedness to verify or investigate all the numerous fraud claims and alleged proofs of irregularities presented by López Obrador’s team. Even if a significant number of reporters and executives believe a full recount of votes was necessary to give certitude to the election, and during the interview they provided some empirical reasons to justify such view, they pursued no specific media campaign to promote it while reporting on it. The main reason not to follow their own curiosity or launch a campaign for a full recount is that such measures would not have been perceived as their attempt to promote transparency, but would have implied clear coincidences with López Obrador, and pass as cynical partisanship, regardless of whether journalists supported his methods. Ultimately, most journalists claim, it is their job to describe what is happening, not to act over it. The Electoral Tribunal was the institution in charge of defining whether a full recount was required or not. Yet while advocating for a full recount is deemed as explicitly partisan, columnists and radio presenters pronouncing themselves *against* a full recount and validating the election seemed common and unproblematic.

d) Personal sympathies or political bias

Another arena for ambiguity of media roles during the coverage of post-electoral conflict is the exposure of partisanship. One of the most consistent evaluations about media performance during the 2006 campaigns made by participants of this study was the existence of a clear division of political journalists as being for or against candidate Andrés Manuel

López Obrador. Despite his surly behaviour and some hostile attitudes to the press, up to election day the candidate's magnetism with lower and middle classes people (Bruhn and Greene, 2007) had extended to some of the reporters covering his campaign, gaining the sympathy of several newsrooms, editors and a handful of radio presenters that succumbed to his discourse of social justice. Resulting sympathies shaped the coverage of his activities – reporters accompanying López Obrador were the targets of colleagues' criticism for perceived advocate reporting, as this reporter comments:

“His phenomenon permeated really strongly among reporters, they deified him, idolised him. Even colleagues from non-political beats such as Sport or Showbiz adored him. By looking at their stories you could tell who supported him and who didn't” (Political Reporter 1, Newspaper D).

Likewise, a form of reverse partisanship was evident. Journalists were quick to signal out radio presenters and specific media outlets believed to be reporting partially and unfairly, particularly after the elections, due to personal biases against Andrés Manuel López Obrador. They performed what many respondents named ‘visceral journalism’, to the point that in some opinions; *“newspaper columnists and radio presenters destroyed them with their comments” (Political Reporter 3, Radio J).*

Responding to critics who accuse him of right-wing tendencies, a popular presenter admitted *“I'm intransigent because I cannot stand López Obrador and never will” (Senior Radio and TV Presenter, Radio K)*, while another one said that if he is accused of advocating the candidate just because he happens to stand for the same issues that Obrador does, *“then be it” (Senior Radio and TV Presenter C, Radio N)*. These widespread perceptions about media ‘cynical’ partisanship appeared to be more evident not during the campaigns, where IFE closely monitors the media coverage, but *after* the election and during the post-electoral conflict. This radio reporter comments:

“As of the night of the elections, media hid their shame no more. Many showed what they had wanted to simulate during campaigns: that they were partial, that they were non-objective, that they had treated all candidates equally when that wasn't the case. Anchors from the two extremes were voicing out really out of place denigrating insults; really, that's not the role of a communicator...” (Political reporter 1, Radio L).

For some respondents the plurality of ideological positions in radio news programmes is actually necessary to represent the voices in society. However, they perceive a risk that justified editorial postures turn into ‘visceral journalism’, one which leads to beating out rival political figures, appeals to the emotion rather than to the reason, and contributes to the string of unsubstantiated opinions. They feel such style is debilitating for the political debate and aims at ensuring high ratings by perpetuating the scandalous and ephemeral, focusing *“on the ambiguity, the black or white, the good or evil” (Political Reporter 3, Newspaper E)*, all of which, our respondents believe, contributed to the social polarisation and the hostile environment significantly.

Most newspapers reporters also admitted continuous and unsettling change in their medium's political support towards one candidate or the other, while ideological leanings on the part of some editors and publishers were not disguised. For example, the following

postures from these editorial directors illustrate contrasting stances towards partisanship and political preferences.

A line such as *“We didn’t criminalise the resistance movement as the other did. All the contrary...”* (**Editorial Director, Newspaper E**) contrasted with the view that *“anybody with a cell of brain know that López Obrador was wrong in signalling out a fraud”* (**Editorial Director, newspaper D**), and with another one claiming *“We are accused of being pro-business but we are the ones most critical to PAN, despite everyone saying otherwise”* (**Editor in Chief, Newspaper H**).

Yet indeed, it was newspaper editors the ones more likely to admit a clear-cut editorial policy regarding López Obrador or some of his allegations, even though it is precisely newspapers, as in opposition to radio, the likeliest respondents to uphold the normative values of objectivity and impartiality not only in their professional culture but in their description of the occupation. Precisely in this arena, some boundaries become blurred: analysis from opinion, critical postures with visceral journalism, doubtfulness with partisanship.

e) Being Institutional or defending of institutions

Partisanship is arguably one of the most noted elements of media (mis) performance, however, journalists noted clear differences between the personal sympathies provoked by the affinity with candidate’s proposals and stances, and those imposed as editorial policy as to suit the economic and political interests of media executives. For example, a form of ‘institutionality’ appeared to homogenise newsrooms once the Electoral Tribunal confirmed Calderón’s victory—the normalcy of media criticism targeted to highlight incompetence of institutions, the ruling of the law and political actors had reversed. At the last stage of the conflict, it was a call to accept the Tribunal’s decision, however controversial. An Editorial director conceded that his prestigious newspaper was not favourable to any specific candidate during the campaign, but he did decide to diminish coverage of protests after the process concluded officially.

‘During campaigns, my paper played with both candidates, we didn’t want to bet to one or to the other, but when Felipe Calderón is declared president the paper decides to lessen the electoral debate, especially after the lack of evidence of an electoral fraud’ (**Editorial Director, Newspaper I**).

As for many reporters, it was clear that their assignments had changed: headlines and story angles were less neutral, and spaces for sympathetic or receptive coverage of those still unhappy with the Tribunal’s ruling were scarce after September 5th. Respondents saw a dramatic change from a two-side coverage to a reporting of the institutional and official process. This quote illustrates a widespread perception among journalists about the progress of media coverage after Election Day.

‘When Calderon is officially declared the winner of the election, everyone regrouped and said we got a new president, let’s respect the institutions, let’s move on. And from that moment, the media started to ignore Obrador and his resistance movement, to corner him and to maximise his mistakes’ (**Political Reporter A, Radio N**).

It is worth to note that, unlike previous elections where the media devoted greater coverage to official candidates, most Mexican journalists participating in this study had observed a relatively fair coverage during 2006 campaigns —although they believe this was done not so much for the sake of democracy or commitment to neutrality, but to avoid criticism from IFE monitoring and adhere to neutrality as a strategy to maximise audiences. But crucially, respondents reveal that their media outlets remained relatively neutral in order to minimise conflict or confrontation with the eventual winner, and hence, place themselves in jeopardy, as this quote illustrates:

“Nobody wanted to risk being prosecuted by a president who branded their outlets as rivals. So everyone, more in surface than in depth, had to feign acceptable coverage” (Editorial Director, weekly Q).

Hence, the change from impartiality to ‘institutionality, may obey causes other than media’s commitment to democracy and truth. There is a widespread perception that during post-electoral conflict, the media manifested a clear malleability and a mutating nature. Owners and executives who had to previously put up with Lopez Obrador hostile discourse to businessmen and the media could now accommodate to cater for whoever the winner was, once López Obrador quickly dilapidated his political capital and stepped out from the real possibility to become a president. The media’s call had changed: instead of airing voices that questioned institutions, were now openly calling, particularly in radio, to respect institutions, call all political actors to contribute to democracy and to put all the social tension and confrontation behind, as if it no longer existed. As reporters put it, it was an underlying message that López Obrador did prove to be, with his arguably incendiary remarks, a real danger to the country. Yet, the perception widely held by participants is that the real danger López Obrador posed was *“a threat to the powers de facto and economic interests of the big electronic media such as Televisa” (Political reporter, Radio O).*

Another reporter summarises the contemporary mutating nature of accommodating journalism:

“In my company for a long time, they used to be Prirites. Then suddenly at the peak of Obrador’s popularity in Mexico City’s mayoralty, they turned Obradorites. Nowadays, as from the election, they back Calderón. But I’m clear in one thing: as long as my bosses are OK with Calderón, I get paid...” (Political Reporter 1, Radio J).

For journalists, media’s economic interests have not changed substantially despite political transition in 2000—sustained income from governmental and political advertisement, and the renewal of broadcasting licences— would be better preserved by legitimising the president-to-be, Felipe Calderón, and being instrumental in channelling Obrador’s rapid decline. With varying degrees of institutionality, journalists assess their performance as an apparent defence of democracy that turned out to suit the economic and political interests of their media bosses.

7. Conclusions: Media roles, journalistic culture and political conflict

Indisputably, a variety of dramatic changes is currently shaping journalism with respect to the authoritarian era of complicit relations between the press and the state in Mexico: a wider and plural range of news sources is enabled by a competitive market with a competitive supply of options, a clear exercise of freedom of speech, less censoring devices on the part of political elites and expanded spaces for debate and deliberation. However, at the core of journalism culture many of the principles and practices are still in clash with competing occupational discourses and media roles with which journalism tends to be teleologically and epistemologically framed. This paper has pinpointed specific instances for struggle and conflict concerning values such as objectivity, factuality and impartiality; as well as media roles such as truth seeking, advocacy, and scrutiny. The hybrid nature of Mexican journalistic culture reveals the contradictions entangled in the perceptions that journalists have of themselves and their work, especially when confronted to the reporting of political conflict. For the occupation, the positive consequence of the 2006 post-electoral conflict, is having lashed Mexican journalists into a state of reflection of their performance, ability to be self-critical and take their share of responsibility for social polarisation that ensued. The participants of this study were able to channel their thoughts about their own performance, and reflect on their attachment to a well-known journalistic culture wherein unwritten acceptance of specific practices and norms surpass the rigid conventions of the occupation.

The study found overwhelming consensus among journalists about their performance—the way the media framed the conflict lagged behind their own expectations, as economic and political interests of the media, saturation of information, and superficial treatment of ‘facts’ blurred the possibility to discuss key issues more thoroughly and in perspective. Reporters admit failure at planning and designing in-depth editorial policies to best approach and mediate the crisis; they acknowledge that punctual, yet excessive reporting of declarations and opinions, had a reverse effect: declarative journalism de-historicised and fragmented fraud allegations; simplified and personalised the conflict as being provoked solely by the tantrums of one of the candidates; facilitated communication between political elites, serving them as a mouthpiece for confrontation and self-promotion; engendered ongoing confusion and deepened the social tensions. In tandem to the questioning of their work, many believe that the normative values of journalism, such as objectivity and factuality, curtail the possibility to explain issues, although they do condemn the overt manifestation of advocacy to any particular cause. Likewise, by exploiting stridence and voicing fragmented truths, publishers and executives could accommodate and align with the candidate that best suited their economic and political interests.

While reflecting in how best to incorporate a new culture of reporting that abandons imported paradigms and adopts to the specific needs of information in Mexico, journalists long for a model of journalism that sets free from its ‘declarative’ hallmark and commits to contextualisation, depth, and independent investigation. Hitherto, the current state of contemporary journalistic culture in Mexico seems to deny reporters the professional authority and specialisation to embark into analysis and commentary. Although radio presenters seem to be filling this gap, the perception is that, apart from few exceptions, this is done either to manifest overt leaning to a particular political actor, or to endorse a ‘catch-all’ strategy of criticism, conceding space to superficiality and ‘visceral’ reporting of events. The iconoclastic

tone of media criticism appears to do little for the understanding of events, and rather, contributes to political cynicism and disenchantment with democracy. Mexican journalists long their occupation displayed maturity, depth and promotes change, while considering the role of media in contemporary society should be more openly discussed.

By outlining a typology that illustrates several instances of ambiguity an tension in the way Mexican journalists perceive and question their role in society and the normative values that should guide their work, the paper finally calls for a reflection of the type of journalism needed in the reporting of political conflict such as the 2006 presidential elections. Coloured by contesting and overlapping 'truths', as well as political actors with clear-cut agendas in a culturally distinctive societies (Berger 2000), this conflict unveils the question on whether students of transitional democracies are prepared to challenge existing epistemological assumptions and categories that may no longer be useful. Despite Mexican journalists do rhetorically adhere to the liberal news values and professional roles that are popular in the United States and other industrialised countries, such a mythology is clearly in clash with the multiple challenges they face everyday in their job. Their clearest arena for controversy is the extent they need to remain detached observers opposed to that of seeking the truth. Indeed, as the 'should do' versus the 'do' of journalistic culture is a popular, unattainable divide elsewhere, the Mexican post-electoral conflict reveals a scenario of hybrid, contesting practices of authoritarian and liberal practices wherein even the 'should do' of journalism remains somewhat unclear. In the terms that Mexican journalists re-enact and interpret news values, it appears as if factuality, editorial detachment, and 'objectivity' are counterproductive and politically debilitating for the 'watchdog' role of the press.

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