

Housewives, Politics and News Programmes in Mexico: An Unexplored Trinity¹

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- *This work analyses the role that the information broadcast on Mexican television news shows had on the political participation of housewives in the context of the 2000 presidential elections. The purpose was to find out how the programmes showed the electoral process and the way that women watched the news, their reasons for doing so, the goal they pursued and the cognitive, social and media elements that defined their voting decision. It also explored whether the news shows helped these women learn about politics and form opinions and whether they led them to participate in the events that took place with regard to the elections.*

Introduction

From a conventional definition, the political participation of women² is judged as passive and conservative because fewer women vote than men or because they do not vote for the candidates that men do. It is said they have less knowledge than men about political options and issues and that their political behaviour is ingenuous, idealistic and puritanical.

With that background, the reception of television news is constituted as a central field of study given the recognition

that must be awarded the genre to the extent that it represents a fundamental entry point of information for the public. This phenomenon is more important when it involves political news, which explains why during crucial times of political activity, as elections can be (VELÁZQUEZ: 1999), the political discourse repeatedly says that the role of television news is a requisite for and indispensable condition of a healthy democracy.

In the 1980s, two schools of thought, i.e., cultural studies and reception analyses (HALL: 1980; MORLEY: 1980, 1986; JENSEN: 1987; FISKE: 1987; LULL: 1992; OROZCO: 1996; BUCKINGHAM: 2000) opened up new ways of approaching reception studies. If we take culture as the stage on which the communicative phenomenon is built as the starting point, the two perspectives, while still recognising television's role as a producer of meaning, have also been interested in the contribution of the audience. On the basis of that, today the reception phenomenon can be understood as a social, active and dialogical process:

- a) Social, because it takes place in the social reality.
- b) Active, in movement, because it is cognitive and reflexive, in so far as it is an act of the production of meaning in which the receivers and television itself participate, the latter as a producer of contents, discourses and cognitions.
- c) Dialogical, to the extent that the receivers and television maintain a permanent interaction of coming and going, of goals, information, contents and interests, which exceed the space/time limit of the act of watching TV (VEGA: 2004).

With the aim of meeting the goal that guided this work, two types of observables were defined: election news broadcast by the main Mexican television news shows and the reception group made up of housewives.

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Election News

In the context indicated, I analysed the content of the election information broadcast:

- 1) By the four most popular television news shows: *Noticiero* (the private company Televisa), *Hechos* (the private company Tv Azteca), *Noticias* (state-run Canal 11) and *CNI Noticias* (the private company Canal 40);
- 2) Throughout the closing sessions of the campaign (the last 15 days of the electoral process, from 14 to 28 June 2000)
- 3) In relation to the campaign activities of the candidates that contended the presidency of Mexico, and the statements that other agents (the president, electoral authority, journalists, intellectuals, the Catholic church, etc.) made with respect to the elections. A total of 626 news stories were analysed.

This sample made it possible to obtain the data needed to determine the quality and equity of the news programmes with regard to the different political forces. The analysis variables were: total news time, speaking and image time, position of the news item on the news rundown, television shots, representation of attendees at political events, adjectives used in the story, issues the politician was speaking on and emphasis of the politician's speech.

Reception Group

This work considered housewives living in the federal district and metropolitan area with ages that ranged from 25 to 60.³ I decided to work with women from the main three socioeconomic groups: upper-middle class, middle class and working class, because one of the goals I established was to find out how their position in the socioeconomic sphere affected their interpretation of electoral news. The same criterion was used to contemplate their level of schooling, which ranged from primary to tertiary studies.

The Social Function of Television News in Mexico

Although significant differences were found in terms of form and content between the four programmes analysed (*Noticiero*, *Hechos*, *Noticias* and *CNI Noticias*), in general terms there were a number of similarities with regard to their

informational values about politics.

Firstly, I saw that during the elections all the TV news shows emphasised, to a greater or lesser extent, three issues that David Buckingham (2001) says are often emphasised on television news shows today: events that involve important people over ordinary people; public matters over private matters; and the new and spectacular over the old and humdrum.

During the electoral process, these classifications were used as a resource on Mexican TV news shows to award a status to each subject and event. Average citizens (the vast majority) did not appear on any show and, if they did, it was through numerical representations, such as surveys.

This invisibility acquired more importance in the case of housewives, who, despite constituting one of the most important targets of TV news shows in Mexico, were not alluded to either implicitly or explicitly throughout the closing sessions of the campaign by any news story (or any politician). On the basis of the results presented by this research work, therefore, it is possible to deduce that Mexican TV news shows see citizens as simple viewers of the electoral struggle and the political show rather than subjects with the potential capacity to intervene in the public political sphere.

On the other hand, it was clear that the logic guiding the work of television stations in reporting on political events today obeys the predominance of the commercial function over the social one.

For the four TV news shows analysed, and particularly in the case of those belonging to private companies (*Noticiero*, *Hechos* and *CNI Noticias*), the backbone of the campaigns was based not on proposals but rather the showy nature of the news, which guaranteed better ratings. This emphasis on things that make 'good television' was understood to be the most important feature of today's political communication. In accordance with what was observed, 'good television' was achieved through brevity, fragmentation, lack of equity, negativism, personalisation and prognostics about the news of the elections in question (through polls).

In this way, the study data and reflections found that the four most important TV news shows in Mexico are increasingly tending to copy the North American model of political communication, focused on showy techniques. They also make it possible to conclude that none of the

programmes provided elements that would lead you to think that the country is enjoying a healthy democracy. Today's television stations clearly show, more than ever, that their social function (a function which in the context of elections should be addressed, in theory, at promoting a plural and democratic debate, motivating public participation and guaranteeing the right to information) depends on the laws laid down by the market.

Housewives, TV News and Political Participation

In line with the results of this research work, we cannot talk about reception in terms of effects but rather active reception, in which these women creatively participated to construct a meaning about these messages. Of all the factors that could intervene in their particular forms of reception, I identified their gender identity as the main element that determined this process.

On the basis of the housewives' testimonies, it is possible to say that the idea they had of politics in Mexico was negative. They thought that politics was an activity guided by convenience rather than conviction. They associated it with sentiments such as disappointment, because they felt that the party that was governing at the time, the PRI, was increasingly less interested in meeting the basic needs of the population. They also felt despair, because they did not see any other political force that could represent a viable alternative, and anger, because they had the idea that politicians lie and 'steal'; that they are dishonest and that the general mood of electoral campaigns today involves attacking and discrediting opponents, when it should be presenting proposals. In general, they also felt sceptical, both towards politics and politicians, a feeling based on three main grounds: corruption, unfulfilled political promises and the distancing of politics from the public:

"I don't keep up with what is going on in politics because I don't believe in politics and because I find it hard to understand it, particularly when the people involved do not want you to understand it so you cannot make demands on them".

Despite these criticisms, the participants manifested their interest in politics. They valued the importance of knowing what was happening in this sphere and of voting. Regardless

of class, age or educational level, the participants said their interest was mainly motivated by their desire for a country in which their families could live in peace.

But how did the housewives see themselves with regard to politics? In general, the women interviewed said they felt alienated from it. Regardless of class, age or educational level, they felt marginalised from the political public debate. This feeling also came about from a weak position in their very domestic sphere: a low level of self-esteem was detected in their testimonies with respect to their political knowledge and actions. They valued other people's opinions above their own, mainly those of their husbands:

"My husband's opinion matters to me in terms of learning more, because the truth is I don't know much about politics and also I don't know how to express myself".

Despite these feelings, however, all the women without exception manifested their interest in the elections because for the first time they believed that a change of government was really possible. They were pleased that politics was opening up as a result of the process of democratic transition that has made the progress of the opposition possible. They saw competition between parties as a first step towards a new alternative.

Of the candidates they knew, the housewives mainly referred to those who had the most possibilities of winning the elections: Francisco Labastida (PRI), Vicente Fox (PAN) and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD). Their voting decision oscillated between the first two, i.e., between the representative of the centre party and that of the right.

A first reading suggests that the political tendency of these housewives was conservative – even more so if we look at the parties they intended to vote for and their voting characteristics (for reasons relating to present conditions, because it was their traditional voting preference or because they were voting out of fear). However, if we look at what motivated them, we see that their vote was conditioned by their presence in the domestic sphere, which in general translated into concern about and the constant search for the wellbeing of others.

On the other hand, in forums such as neighbours' committees, political parties, NGOs and altruistic associations, these women have found the possibility of exercising a more active and ongoing participation, spurred on by the search for improved living conditions. In that

regard, it was their family role, as the administrators of quotidian life, which mainly stimulated their political activism.

Sources of Information

Of all the sources, the media constituted the main way the women kept abreast of the elections. Resources such as radio news shows, principally the one presented by José Gutiérrez Vivó, *Monitor*, were an optimal source of information. Their preference for radio shows responded to the fact that they believed radio was more credible than the other media and, in particular, because they had a lot of work to do in the domestic sphere and listening to the radio did not demand their exclusive attention.

The press was another source of information. Although consumption was very marginal, I did not find a distinction between socioeconomic levels: the upper-middle, middle and working class women all used the press as a source of electoral information. Finally, among the younger women and those with more economic resources, the internet represented another way of keeping abreast of the elections.

Of all the media, it was television (and particularly TV news) which was the main source of information about the elections. The evening bulletins were the most commonly watched among these women: *Noticiero*, *Hechos*, *Noticias* and *CNI Noticias*. The Televisa and TV Azteca news were the most watched by the housewives, regardless of age or socioeconomic level. Canal 11's *Noticias* had a marginal audience; some of the women had never heard it, but still identified it as a producer of good-quality educational and cultural content. The upper-middle class and middle-class women watched this channel. Finally, there was Canal 40's *CNI Noticias*, which was only watched by middle and working-class women. All the participants watched some of the four TV news shows on a regular basis. They knew the broadcasts, identified the presenters and were familiar with their narratives.

Credibility of the News Bulletins

Most of the participants in this research work believed it is very hard for news bulletins in Mexico to meet their social

function, because the interests between TV station owners and the government or one or other of the parties affected news production. They were quite sceptical about the truth of the news, believing it to be biased.

In relation to the electoral process, the participants' general perception of the way news programmes handle something like an election was not positive. They mostly agreed that news shows focused on emphasising the negative aspects of campaigns, accentuating their perception of politics as 'scandal mongering'. They believed this action was part of a news strategy used by the shows to distract people's attention from what were in principle the most important aspects of an election.

Did the housewives think a news show could influence viewers' voting decisions? According to the agenda-setting theory, most of the participants shared the idea that the news gave them issues to think about and discuss, but they did not think they defined what they should think or do. Some felt that news shows could only influence swinging voters, i.e., those who had not already decided which way to vote.

In any case, affective and aesthetic components were very important when it came to choosing a news show. That is because the gratification obtained from, for example, the charisma of the presenter, constitutes, in accordance with Stam (1983) and Buckingham (2001), one of the essential pleasures that some news shows offer their viewers today:

-M. Is it important to feel you know the presenter?

-P. Yes.

-P. Yes. Javier Alatorre, for example, looks very smart.

-P. It is important for the presenter to be pleasant, isn't it?

Actually, I don't like Joaquín López Dóriga.

-P. No!

-P. No, I think he's too serious, too dry, too...

-P. Ugly! (laughter)

-P. Javier Alatorre has a smarter appearance, a better personality for reading the news (laughter). Joaquín is good, but he's ugly.

-M. Excuse me? Joaquín is good but ugly?

-P. Yep, and he's old (laughter).

-P. What I like about Alatorre is his voice.

-M. And what else do you like about him?

-P. That he's good looking (laughter).

Contexts and Reception Habits

As David Morley and Roger Silverstone (1991) say, the home, the centre of daily life, is the main framework in which the act of watching TV takes place. For all the participants, their home was the main stage for the reception of news shows, and the lounge room the place where they usually watched them.

On the other hand, the perception the housewives had of their home as a place of work and ongoing responsibilities meant that their consumption of news shows was very particular. They were continually interrupted by other activities, such as ironing, cooking, helping the children with homework, etc., because for them the home was not mainly a place of leisure (as it usually was for their husbands) but fundamentally a place of work.

Another element peculiar to the television reception of the housewives was the power relationship. If we start from the basis that, in the centre of male society, power belongs to men, the same order is transferred to the domestic space. In most cases, regardless of social class or age, it was the husband who chose the news show the household watched. The explanation the housewives gave was that they acknowledged that the men had more knowledge about the issues, which gave them the authority to choose the news show to watch. There was, therefore, an implicit acknowledgement that men were the ones who knew what to do and the women tended to devalue their own knowledge. Furthermore, this power was even more obvious in the case of televisions with a remote control: practically none of the participants 'could even touch it' and it was usually the men who controlled the device.

Communities and Leaders: Socialisation Spaces, Interpretation Spaces

If television information was not a factor that by itself would determine the voting decision of these housewives, what were the decisive elements? The reception communities, as well as the socialisation spaces in which the women regularly exchanged ideas about messages and where they would discuss them repeatedly until they acquired more definitive meanings, were determining factors. In that regard, for all of them, the family was the most important

reception community. They felt that discussing the things had happened during the electoral process with other members of the family was the most important contribution in providing a meaning to the elections and the information they had seen on the news.

All the participants evaluated positively the existence of these spaces as a resource that allowed them to better reflect on their vote:

"Sometimes the approach from television (to information) is not important. So you look somewhere else, for other media and you discuss it with people who know about the issue and that is how you complement your information".

Furthermore, it was in the reception communities where the women regularly identified opinion leaders. The people who the women awarded a special recognition (either because they had access to privileged information or because they were broadly recognised by others as having good opinions) were again found first and foremost in the home.

Of the opinion leaders, men were the most important to the women. Regardless of social class or educational level, the primary opinion leader for all the housewives were their husbands:

"My husband reads a lot and some days he comes home and talks things over with me, and so I go away and think about it. As he says, you shouldn't waste your vote".

"We discuss things while we watch the news and matters come up... he (my husband) is obviously much better informed; he often explains things to me".

However, the housewives found it hard to recognise a woman as an opinion leader and none acknowledged that a housewife could be an opinion leader. There was a general underestimation about the knowledge they could have about issues outside the domestic sphere:

"I'm not running down the opinions of housewives like myself, who might well have a good knowledge, but I think that people who understand these things, like my father, know more".

These communities and figures seemed to represent the main sources for these women to interpret what they saw on television about the elections and, finally, for deciding how they would vote. These figures coincided with those that the

women acknowledged as being experts in politics: men. In accordance with what I could see, this acknowledgement went along with a very limited self-evaluation of these women as citizens. They recognised communities and leaders as a source of information and discussion for them that was fundamental to their political actions. But they had low self-esteem with regard to their own knowledge, opinions and assessments about issues, which meant they did not recognise other women as having a reflexive and critical ability.

We could therefore observe that ideological and cultural limitations went hand-in-hand with the beliefs, values and behaviour that these women have historically incorporated and reproduced. These have been built on the bases of the male chauvinism that dominates the habits of Mexican culture and which, as we can see, directly impacted the political culture of the participants in this research work. In conclusion, it was their gender identity, i.e., the fact of being housewives, which defined communities and leaders as socialisation and interpretation spaces, but also, in some cases, as barriers that made it hard for them to build their own political identity.

Conclusions

This work provides data on the way the women interviewed related to the political sphere. The scepticism and low self-esteem they demonstrated in this area could also help explain the high level of abstentionism in subsequent elections: an abstentionism which particularly involved women, as they accounted for 67% of the total number of people who did not vote in the 2003 federal elections.

This research also helps us understand the role that TV news has on political socialisation. In that sense, we saw that, although the news did have a relationship with the political participation of these women, it was not direct or at all obvious.

We can see that being a housewife impacted the choice of news shows and bulletins. The evening bulletins are timed to go to air when the load of domestic chores was lower. We could also say that the women preferred news stories that addressed problems relating to the domestic area, such as delinquency, corruption, education, inequality, poverty, etc.,

i.e., problems that the members of their families might face.

Their identity was also determined by places, habits and practices of television reception. In line with the statements gathered, reception took place in the space in which these women have historically been present: the home. However, their reception habits were always accompanied by the activities they did around the home: embroidering, cooking and cleaning. Similarly, the power relations that alluded to the male dominance that is an important part of their condition as housewives was a major force in their reception habits. Finally, their identity was projected in the positive assessment they made of the act of watching TV, because it represented for them a momentary interruption to the solitude in which their condition submerges them and because it allowed them to meet with the family.

However, the matters mentioned above do not translate into passive reception. If we start from the fact that they evaluated the activity of keeping abreast of the news as a public duty, all the housewives that took part in this study, in line with what we have seen, made a critical interpretation of the election news. Firstly, they made it on the grounds of the resources that other sources of information offered – which, in the case of the women with more economic resources and young women, even included the internet. They also made it on the basis of discussing issues in the spaces where they regularly socialised and, in the case of these women, the family was a leading source of information. They also made it on the basis of the people they acknowledged as opinion leaders, which, in most cases, was considered to be the husband. And, importantly, they made it on the basis of their own life experiences. Therefore, this ongoing search for sources of information and interpretation denotes the concern the women had for becoming citizens with full responsibility and power over their political and social decisions.

Notes

- 1 This work is an extract from the author's doctoral thesis entitled "Voting Decisions of Mexican Housewives and Television Electoral News" (VEGA: 2004).
- 2 In the formal sense, political participation refers to the political practice of the public in institutions. It involves the action of the subjects that makes them take power-related decisions and the exercise of power, whether in favour or against. Similarly, political participation is collective and therefore presupposes organisation, strategy and action, all aimed at transformation (FERNÁNDEZ PONCELA: 1994). Political participation also involves elements of the subjectivity of people. This definition in principle means that all citizens enjoy this right in a democratic system. However, as this article shows, it is impossible to make a generalisation, and therefore my aim further on in this work is to distinguish the different forms of participation and action in the political public sphere.
- 3 According to the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), females represent half the Mexican population (50.1%). Most are urban, and principally adults and young women (aged 25 to 59). On the other hand, in line with the figures from the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI), in 1990 the main age range of people who worked in homes only in Mexico City was 15 to 49 (a total of 1,064,679 people).

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