

Transformations of the cultural industries in Mexico

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When political economists study the patterns of concentration, deregulation and privatization of the mass media, they frequently assume that these patterns have consequences in the quantity and quality of the supply of films, television programs, music and news that audiences will receive. When they criticize the tendency towards a higher concentration of media ownership, they usually argue that one of the main consequences of it is a decrease of the ideological diversity of the genres and contents of media messages. Iosifides (1999), for example, has argued that deregulation and the market system both in Western Europe and in the United States may have led to increased numerical diversity of channels and media markets, but not to the qualitative diversity of media contents: the market system “has not provided either better access for all ‘voices’ or content that satisfies all interests” (p. 160).

Studies about the flow of audiovisual media between different countries may help political economist to check the actual impact current concentration and deregulation trends in a particular country or region exert on their media system’s supply of programming.

This paper looks at the flow of television messages in Mexico, a developing country which signed a commercial agreement with its neighbor the United States and with Canada called the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), agreement that went into effect January 1, 1994. After a review of the recent transformations of the Mexican audiovisual space, the paper discusses empirical data about the supply of television in Mexico and the degree of genre and content diversity.

Transformations of the audiovisual space in Mexico

In Mexico, federal administrations have advocated neoliberal policies from the mid ’80s up to the present day (Lozano, 2003). Mexican audiovisual and telecommunications industries have experienced significant changes since the early 1980s, consolidated in the 1990s, and have dramatically transformed the supply and consumption of these services in the early 2000s. Many years before the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Mexican government embraced trends and economic policies geared toward liberalization, deregulation, and privatization of the economy in general and in particular the audiovisual and telecommunications sectors (Crovi, 2000; Gómez Mont, 2000; Sánchez Ruiz, 2000a). In contrast with the nationalistic and protectionist policies embraced by the different administrations since Mexico’s independence in 1910 up to the 1970s, the 1980s represented a radical shift towards the adoption of neoliberal strategies and models. After a severe economic crisis in 1982, the administration of Miguel de la Madrid decided to open the economy in unprecedented ways. In his administration, Mexico joined the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the government privatized and deregulated many aspects of production

and commerce. This was also true of Mexico's electronic media and telecommunications sector.

In the NAFTA negotiations, the Mexican government decided not to ask for a cultural exemption clause, unlike Canada, which had decided to exclude its cultural industries from the treaty in order to be better able to protect them. Following the logic of the neoliberal policies espoused by the Mexican administration, culture was considered strong enough to be able to defend itself without any governmental policies safeguarding it (Gómez, 2004). The only restrictions imposed by the Mexican government in the NAFTA agreement were: a) limits to the percentage of foreign investment in paid television (49%); the requirement to dub imports in Spanish, and a quota of 30% of screen time in theaters for Mexican films (a quota that would decrease every year until reaching zero); and the prohibition of foreign nationals owning any percentage of broadcasting stations (p. 25).

In many countries of the world, media policies promoting diversity have focused mainly on putting curbs on the concentration of ownership. The assumption has been that a diversity of owners will result in a diversity of content and points of view for audiences. Although this causal link has not been supported by empirical evidence (Napoli, 1999, p. 15), many political economists and policy makers continue advocating strategies to avoid concentration of media ownership. Mexican policies, however, have not paid consistent attention to these kinds of structural regulations, opting rather for general and abstract guidelines geared towards promoting what scholars call "behavioral" regulation (regulation directed at the actions of the sources). The liberalization and deregulation reforms of the broadcast sector in the last decade have not been particularly objective and balanced. The government's neoliberal policies supposed to promote competition and growth have managed to favour some groups or companies over others, generating a "preferential" consolidation in the different sectors (Crovi, 2000; Sánchez Ruiz, 2000b). According to Mexican scholar Sánchez Ruiz (2000a), the Mexican market structures today are highly oligopolistic in movies and television, and there is a high degree of transnational articulation, uneven in relation to its major commercial partner.

That Televisa and TV Azteca represent a duopoly in Mexico is supported by the following data: Combined, they own 98% of the total number of TV stations in the country (Estrada, 2004, p. 18). Televisa has interests in television production and broadcasting, production of pay television programming, international distribution of television programming, direct-to-home satellite services, publishing and publishing distribution, cable television, radio production and broadcasting, professional sports and live entertainment, feature film production and distribution and an Internet portal. Televisa also owns an unconsolidated equity stake in Univision, the leading Spanish-language media company in the United States. In 2005, the company aired 91 of the country's top 100 programs, capturing 71.3% of the sign-on to sign-off audience share (Televisa, 2005). TV Azteca, on the other hand, operates two national television networks through 315 owned and operated stations across Mexico. TV Azteca affiliates include a television network in the United States (Azteca America Network) and Todito.com, an Internet portal. TV Azteca also operates Azteca International that reaches 13 countries in Central and South America, and Azteca music, a recording company with strategic associations with multinational producers and radio stations. TV Azteca also has 46.5% equity stake in Unefon, a wireless telecommunications provider, and a 50% equity stake in Cosmofrecuencias, a wireless broadband Internet access

provider (Television Azteca, n.d.). Both Televisa and TV Azteca participate in the New York Stock Market.

An attempt in 2002 by Mexican legislators to pass a new Federal Communication Law established a limit of 25% of total market share for a media company in any city of the country, an unprecedented measure in Mexican media regulation. The initiative was the result of months of negotiations of a plural group composed of legislators, scholars, media representatives, and civil organizations. However, without prior warning, President Vicente Fox passed in October 10, 2002, a new regulation updating the 1973 provisions of the Federal Radio and Television Law with no mention of the limit of 25% of total market share or any other limit on ownership. Mexican legislators, scholars, and opposition figures reacted angrily about this decree, but they were unable to change it. Due to the strong lobbying of Televisa and TV Azteca, the comprehensive reform discussed and consented by legislators, scholars and social groups was never considered. Instead, on the first week of December 2005, the Chamber of Deputies approved in record time, without a single vote against, a new bill presented by a PRI representative and by a former employee of Televisa, and turned it to the Senate for its discussion and approval. The Senate discussed it and approved it by a majority a few months later. The initiative was called the “Televisa law” by some senators and journalists, who accused Televisa of drafting the legislation itself (O’Boyle, 2005; Padilla, 2006). Senator Javier Corral, one of the authors of the original bill that was never able to move from commissions to the plenary, accused the new proposal of trying to benefit Televisa and TV Azteca by giving them the right to offer new channels in the spectrum freed up by the transition from analog to digital terrestrial broadcasts without a government concession. The new law, according to Corral, would allow Televisa, just by submitting a simple application, to double its number of channels to eight without having to tender or bid against other parties.

Today, the audiovisual market in Mexico is marked by the television duopoly of Televisa and TV Azteca, the former with five national networks and the latter with two. About 98% of Mexican population have access to over the air TV and about 20% have access to one of the available paid TV systems (cable and SKY, primarily), a percentage that reaches 40 to 50% in large cities like Mexico City, Monterrey, and Guadalajara.

Have the patterns of concentration, deregulation and privatization experienced in the last 25 years in Mexico affected the quantity and quality of the supply of films and television programs local audiences are receiving? Has the high concentration of media ownership decreased the diversity of the genres and contents of television contents? In order to answer these questions empirically, data about the supply of television were obtained through a content analysis of the TV listings in the official web pages of Televisa and TV Azteca. Four chronological weeks, one for each trimester of 2005, were selected as a sample of dates to account for any fluctuations throughout the year. Every day of the four weeks was content analyzed from 6:00 a.m. to 12:00 a.m. for the four main national networks: Channels 2 and 5 of Televisa and 7 and 13 of TV Azteca. TV programs were classified according to their geographical origin and genre, among other variables.

Findings

According to Napoli (1999), diversity in the content of media messages can be studied according to three different subcomponents: Format or program-type diversity, demographic diversity, and idea-viewpoint diversity (p. 10).

Format or program-type diversity refers to the category designations given to individual television programs. It addresses the range of different types of television shows from which a viewer can choose during an hour of television time (p. 18). Programs should provide comprehensive and factual coverage of the different opinions relevant in society, and the various social and cultural groups must be allowed to voice their opinions (Hoffmann-Riem, 1987, p. 61). The assumption is that the greater the scope of genres and different types of programs, the greater the satisfaction of information, entertainment, or education needs of diverse audience groups. Some genres appeal to women, some to men; some to particular groups of youngsters, some to old people; some to one particular ethnic minority, some to another ethnic group. Several previous studies in Mexico, however, have documented the reliance of Televisa and TV Azteca networks on a few repetitive genres designed to appeal to all kinds of audiences making diversity in program and genre type extremely low (Covi & Vilar, 1995; Huerta & Lozano, 2001; Sánchez Ruiz, 1995; Lozano & García Nuñez de Cáceres, 1995). While this makes sense in commercial terms, it represents the worst possible strategy for fostering diversity. A study of four weeks (one for each trimester) in 1999 by Huerta & Lozano (2001) corroborated this conclusion: Only three genres (fiction, children, and information) accounted for between 70 and 80% of total time, a very high concentration of genres¹. Genres like sports, variety shows, documentaries, game shows, comic shows, talk shows, cultural and educational programs appeared only marginally. Martínez and Lozano (2005) reached exactly the same conclusions in their vast longitudinal studies of 12 weeks (one for each month) of 2003 and of 4 weeks in 2005 (one for each trimester): Concentration of genres was extremely high in Mexican open national TV whether the content originated in Mexico or in the U.S (Table 1). Within the specific genres in the first three places, there was very low diversity: The U.S. accounted for 80% of all films transmitted on television and 72% of all cartoons, while Mexico accounted for 81% of telenovelas and 100% of news programs and magazines (Table 2). These findings, thus, tend to support the assertions of political economists about concentration of ownership associating itself with a lack of real diversity in program and genre type. Televisa and TV Azteca, the Mexican television duopoly controlling the four main national networks with a total of 572 affiliated stations (322 to Televisa and 250 to TV Azteca).¹

But what about diversity within programs in the same genre? Have scholars found significant differences in the characters, topics, stories, locations, and ideas presented within a single genre? Current research shows this is highly unlikely. Commercial programs tend to rely on repetitive formulae, using very similar situations and characters in order to be attractive to the widest possible audience (Hoffmann-Riem, 1987; Van Cuilenberg, 1998). Recent findings at the Center for Communication and Information Research of the Tecnológico de Monterrey show local and imported television content in Mexico lack meaningful diversity when looking at characters and images portrayed in each category of genres (see Flores & Garcia, 2005). In the U.S.,

¹ In Mastrini and Becerra (2006, pp. 217-218).

White, male, adult characters are the rule (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994). In Mexico, Flores and García (2005) found that White, adult male and female characters were much more frequent than “mestizos” (brown, dark skin, hybrid features of White and Indian mix), and that Native Mexican Indians are almost non-existent in the world of TV. Consequently, local and foreign programming in Mexican television seems to be very weak in diversity within programs of the same genre.

Geographic location is another category where Mexican television supply is not doing a good job. Instead of locating their information and fiction stories everywhere in the country, so that they can depict and represent the widest range of situations, events, cultural traits and characters, fictional and no fictional TV programs, whether Mexican (67% of total programming) or U.S. (30% of total programming), focus their attention on the central powerful cities, like New York, Washington, and Los Angeles (in the case of U.S. content) or Mexico City (in the case of Mexican content). There is no available research on this topic in Mexico, but it can be argued that current content transmitted on Mexican TV is far from the ideal of including local, regional, national, and international locations. News programs, telenovelas, game shows, and so on, with some exceptions, tend to be located in Mexico City. Again, political economists’ fears of highly concentrated markets not providing enough diversity (in this case geographic diversity) seem to be well founded.

Idea diversity, unfortunately, has not been studied consistently either, despite its relevance. It is a possible outcome of source diversity and program-type diversity; it may also come from within a particular program. For democracy to be reinforced and cultural diversity to hold in a society, idea diversity in television content should be actively and permanently promoted. Methodological and operationalization problems, however, make the measuring of idea diversity in television content difficult, which explains why research in this line of study is so rare.

Discussion

Mexican audiovisual industries have moved toward a more deregulated and market oriented system in the last 25 years. The creation of TV Azteca in 1992 opened commercial competition for Televisa, but it was not followed by more networks and regulations needed to make the Mexican television market more plural. Today, both networks can be considered a powerful duopoly controlling practically all television stations in the country and most of the ratings. They have influenced current legislation to maintain their control of the existing system and be the main beneficiaries of the transition to digital signals. Concentration of ownership and control of the Mexican television system is, consequently, extremely high.

An empirical study of the supply of Televisa and TV Azteca main national networks shows a very low degree of program and genre type diversity as well as within type of program diversity and geographic diversity. These findings are consistent with assertions by political economists about high degrees of concentration of ownership being correlated with low degrees of diversity in the supply of media messages. Despite the existence of a significant flow of U.S. imports in Mexican national networks and even stronger locally produced programs, the overall television programming is concentrated in only three types of programs: fiction, news and children. In addition,

characters and sources on the specific contents are very homogeneous and stories and plots are based mostly on the bigger and better known Mexican or U.S. cities.

These findings tend to support the arguments of political economists about the consequences of not having a more plural and diverse media system and provide cultural studies scholars with important information about the reduced degree of content and program type diversity in the case of over-the-air television in Mexico. Although they may find activity and negotiation in Mexican audiences when they watch television, they could discuss the implications of members of the public receiving systematically only a tiny fraction of the types of genres and contents which could be available for them.

Table 1

Genre of programs transmitted in Mexico's four main national television networks:
2005

| Macro-genre | % of total time GLOBAL | % of total time PRIME TIME |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Fiction | 31 | 63 |
| Information | 24 | 13 |
| Children | 19 | 8 |
| Variety | | 10 |
| Other | 26 | 6 |
| Total | 100% | 100% |
| | | |
| Genre | % of total time GLOBAL | % of total time PRIME TIME |
| Cartoons | 16 | 5 |
| Magazines | 15 | |
| Films | 12 | 11 |
| Telenovelas (Soap Operas) | 12 | 38 |
| News programs | 7 | 13 |
| Infomercials | 5 | |
| Games and contests | 3 | 1 |
| Talk shows | 3 | |
| Sports news and commentary | 3 | |
| Comedy | 3 | 10 |
| Sport games | 3 | 2 |
| Drama | 2 | 3 |
| Children | 2 | 3 |
| Reality shows | 2 | 3 |
| Music shows | 2 | |
| Sit coms | 2 | 4 |
| Series (action, adventure) | 2 | 2 |
| News analysis, interviews | 1 | |
| Other | 5 | 5 |
| Total | 100% | 100% |

Table 2

Genre of programs transmitted in Mexico's four main national television networks by origin: 2005

| TELEVISA AND TV AZTECA | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Genre¹ | % of total time MEXICO | % of total time USA | % of total time OTHER | Total time (hours) |
| Cartoons | | 83 | 17 | 277 |
| Magazines | 100 | | | 267 |
| Films | 13 | 83 | 4 | 211 |
| Telenovelas | 95 | 5 | | 203 |
| News programs | 100 | | | 132 |

Note. Only the five major types of programs represented in the programming of the four national channels is included in the table.

Table 3

Genre of programs transmitted in Mexico's two main national public television networks: 2005

| Macro-genre | % of total time |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Culture and documentaries | 24 |
| Educational | 21 |
| Variety, magazines | 17 |
| Fiction | 15 |
| Information | 9 |
| Children | 12 |
| Other | 2 |
| Total | 100% |

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