

# Mexico in the face of globalization: audiovisual policies to promote and protect its cultural diversity

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- *This article analyzes the audiovisual policies adopted in Mexico to preserve, promote and protect its cultural diversity. The starting point is Mexico's position in the face of globalization, cultural diversity and the impact of cultural industries on the marketplace. It goes into detailed study of basic matters such as trade agreements, where Mexico's problems arise because of trade agreements based on financial and technological inequality. Another question of great importance in the matter of cultural diversity concerns social movements such as the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army). The EZLN highlights the need to integrate ethnic groups within the Mexican nation and at the same time confront the globalization of international markets in a participative, respectful and plural way. These questions are framed within a network of international trade agreements (WTO and NAFTA) where cultural industries play a leading role.*

## Mexico in the face of globalization

Cultural diversity is a fact and the question raised in this article is how to respect and preserve each country's culture. The market economy and the exchange of products, goods and services affects our daily lives on an ongoing basis. Each country experiences this phenomenon in both its institutions and individuals. Trade exchanges have become extremely important, as have the symbols attributed to them and taken on when these goods and services are acquired. These market dynamics include the migratory movements of individuals from one region to another, whether within a country or out of it.

Technological development and access to the media and sources of information, such as radio, cinema, television and the Internet, are factors that impact and modify the behavior and feelings, ways of thinking and aspirations of people who consume and use messages present in the broadcast media. They and their content are cultural products that circulate from one place to another in different ways. They also impact differently both within the country where they are produced and abroad.

With this as the starting proposition, we would raise the following questions: 'What parts of a country's culture should we care for and preserve?', 'How do nation states contribute to the regulation of their audiovisual industries in the context of the globalized world?', and, 'To what extent should nation states be forced to be responsible for them?'

This article lists basic points needed to understand the situation that is occurring in Mexico with regard to its audiovisual policies in the context of a diverse national culture and the globalization of the market.

Mexico has a cultural diversity based on its pre-Hispanic history, with ethnic groups whose traditions, languages and forms of social organization are still present today. This

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cultural diversity has been redrawn by particular historical circumstances, such as the conquest and colonization by the Kingdom of Castile. The situation is currently determined by Mexico's geographic position to the south of the technological and industrial powerhouses of the United States and Canada. This was the situation in place when the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed in 1994. It was aimed at developing a free trade zone and from the beginning was unequal in financial and technological development. This consequently led to a series of disadvantages in the exchange of products involving audiovisual cultural industries.

A number of different definitions of globalization are set forth in this paper to begin to explore this complex modern-day phenomenon. We will go into further detail with regard to the problems Mexico is up against when it comes to preserving and spreading its culture, expressed through audiovisual material, in the context of the global market.

### **Globalization and trade agreements**

Francisco R. Dávila (2002, pages 28, 29) writes that the idea of globalization is based on the general theory of economic integration and emphasizes the need to articulate the global economy in a harmonious setting. The legal instruments for this integration are international agreements on trade exchanges. Mexico is involved in two large-scale agreements of this type: the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, the US and Mexico, and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The general theory of global "integration" or "globalization" assimilates important elements of trade theory, especially with regard to exchanges on an international scale. They are usually developed efficiently and speedily, leaving modifications in the socio-political and cultural fields trailing in their wake. Giddens (2000, page 25) defines globalization as a complex series of processes rather than a single one, which operate in a contradictory and anti-ethical manner. He adds that some nations lose a degree of their economic power, but that there is also an opposite effect. Globalization not only adds upward pressure, but also downward pressure, creating new pressures for local autonomy. He goes on to say that globalization is the reason

behind the resurgence of local cultural identities in different parts of the world. Local nationalism sprouts in response to globalizing trends at the same time as the weight of older nation states loses force. Dávila (2002, pages 45,46) says the situation of nation states in the face of "global economic integration" involves a political commitment but also represents giving up a degree of sovereignty, which may be compensated for by the possible benefits of economic integration.

In the framework of globalization (Sinclair 2000, pages 146,147), some governments have chosen to protect their cultural industries while others have chosen not to. Countries such as the United States, with enormous comparative advantages over other nations, may not have any need to protect their markets, while at the other end of the scale there are countries that do not even have their own cultural industry to protect. Countries that have taken steps to protect their cultural industries, including Mexico, have run up against pressure from many fronts. The GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs) was established in the wake of World War II as an international organization to promote the ordered coordination of international trade. However, it never covered cultural industries. We understand the term "cultural industries" to include the critical and empirical study of the production and consumption of audiovisual products, involving not just how they are produced and distributed but also how they are received. Sinclair (2000, page 145) adds that nation-state intervention in the sphere of cultural industries is due to the fact that these industries concern ideas and images (i.e., culture) and that it questions not only the legitimacy of governments but also social control in fields relating to sex and religion and the ability to develop national culture and protect ethnic variety, regional variations and historical influences.

### **Globalization and cultural industries**

One historical moment in Mexico was the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, in the southeast of the country, where a great many ethnic groups live. The movement took off at the same time that NAFTA was signed, in January 1994, under the presidency

of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, and discussions about indigenous groups and globalization have been present on the national agenda ever since. Néstor García Canclini (1999, pages 45 and 75) says that globalization is a series of technological and trade changes that only take on global forms when international communication and financial markets are established. He adds that globalization obscures its cultural targets, generating profound symbolic changes through a process of regional economic integration, such as in the case of NAFTA. In order to understand the trends of current-day Mexico, we therefore have to analyze the issues behind the conquest and colonization of America, modern relationships between Latin American and European nations following independence in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the remains of 20<sup>th</sup> century exchanges and the partial replacement of these economic and cultural ties with a new dependency on the United States.

In general, the presence of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Latin America to resolve unbalances that stem from paying trade debts was not as important in the past as it is now (Ferrer 1999, pg 77). Today, the IMF, together with the World Bank, has become a permanent player in shaping economic policies in a number of Latin American countries, which have seen their policies conditioned and monitored from abroad. Globalization, particularly in terms of finance, is influential in all the countries that make up the global order and limits the freedom of domestic policies. There are many question marks and a great deal of confusion hanging over this aspect of trade agreements and the economy concerning how our society's cultural and communicational bases will be affected by NAFTA (Esteinou 1995 in *Comunicación y Globalización: "Communication Processes in the Face of Trilateral Integration"*, pages 177,178). This is because in some cases the State said that cultural industries and related areas would be included in the terms of negotiations, and in other cases it said they would not. For example, the signing of NAFTA opened the way to 49% of cable TV shares being able to be owned by foreigners. This had previously been a sector reserved for Mexicans or Mexican companies with a clause excluding foreign ownership. The same thing occurred in the film industry: before NAFTA, 50% of screen quota was reserved for Mexican films; after

NAFTA, this figure was reduced to 30%.

An illustrative example was the purchase on 20 June, 2002 of the Cimex group (*Mexicana de Comunicación* magazine, Sept-Oct 2002, page 1, section "Bitárcora"). Canadian firm Onex Corporation and the US's Oaktree Capital Management took full control of Cimex, one of the leading cinema chains in Mexico with 31 movie complexes and a total of 349 screens. Cinemex held 25% of the domestic market and 50% of the market in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. The operation was estimated to be worth 286 million dollars.

### **Cultural diversity, modernity, the media and telecommunications**

It is clear that within the national context in Mexico there are important indicators that signal "modernity" and "globalization", especially in terms of investment in telecommunications, cable TV and radio. However, it is also true that the integration of indigenous culture as part of the Mexican nation is present on the agenda both within the national context in Mexico and also with regard to its place in the global economy. We can give important dates and figures to support the relationships between Mexico's audiovisual cultural policies in the context of globalization.

- Mexico has a total population of 97,483,412 and an indigenous population registered in INEGI (the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics) and CONAPO (the National Council of Population) of 12,707,000, of which 5,995,636 speak an indigenous language.

- On 12 October, 1992, as part of the celebration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the discovery of America, indigenous organizations held protests in Mexico City and San Cristóbal de las Casas (Chiapas), as well as other parts of the country. This was considered to mark the beginning of a new indigenous movement.

- On 16 February, 1996, two years after the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, the Federal Government and the EZLN signed the San Andrés Larráinzar Agreements, which included a commitment to approve constitutional reform on indigenous law and culture.

- On 1 December, 2000, Vicente Fox took over as

president of the country for the 2000-2006 period. Fox promised to send the indigenous reform bill to Congress. The Office for the Development of Indigenous Peoples was also created and Marcos Matías became the first indigenous person to head up the National Indigenous Institute (INI).

- On 15 August, 2001, the constitutional reform on indigenous law and culture was published in the Official Journal. The Zapatistas, who had appeared before Congress for the COCOPA project, had previously rejected the approved text.

- The above events led to a reform of the law on audiovisual matters, under the section of Indigenous Media and Communities. On 24 March, 2002, the initiative for an Act on General Forms of Communication and an Act on Radio and Television was launched. This double legislative initiative was aimed at enabling indigenous people to operate radio stations, without being awarded a license but in recognition of basic human rights, and for indigenous communities to be able to establish cultural broadcasts.

The interpretation of the situation in Mexico in the framework of the audiovisual industry, politics and the economy was summed up in an article by Enrique Sánchez Ruiz (*Etcétera* magazine, July 2001, pages 50 to 52) entitled, "Ah, Production! Concentration and Laws on the Audiovisual Industry", in which he listed three important trends in Mexico: firstly, the transition to democracy, when the media played a very important role. Secondly, globalization, the current phase of the international capitalist system, with its subsequent redefinition of national sovereignty, even though nation states have yet to disappear. Thirdly, changes in the fields of technology and business and the convergence between the computer and other IT sectors involving telecommunications and the cultural industries sector.

It is also important to mention the Federal Competition Commission, created in the sixth year of the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, which has begun to exercise a number of actions to control mergers that could translate into situations of monopoly control. Finally, the Telecommunications Confederation (CONFETEL, a Mexican government organization) is charged with defending Mexico's sovereign right to regulate its telecommunications industry. CONFETEL works directly

with the General Coordination Commission on International Affairs to position Mexico as one of the main players in negotiations about international telecommunications in a multilateral sphere in order to suitably take advantage of technological advances with quality and diversity in aid of the country.

In the specific case of the audiovisual sector, television began a deregulation and privatization process and opened up to foreign investment (Sussman, in *Continental Order?* 2001, "Telecommunications after NAFTA: Mexico's Integration Strategy", pages 136 to 138). Sussman says that Mexico was pressured into signing the agreement by the United States, who is its biggest supplier of technology, especially in the telecommunications sector. In fact, this point was to be key to the success or failure of NAFTA. It is important to point out that the US is responsible for providing around 60% of the International Development Fund.

In television, deregulation and privatization strengthened the monopoly position of Televisa and the second biggest station, Televisión Azteca. These are the two most important private consortiums in Mexico and they opt massively for North American broadcasts, especially series. It is calculated that 40% of broadcasts are North American in origin. These series are dubbed into Spanish for the free-to-air television stations.

The Televisa group is the biggest media company in the Spanish-speaking world. The Televisa Foundation promotes knowledge about national culture and history and aims to promote artistic creation in our country, encourage knowledge of the Spanish language, promote Mexican arts, humanities and sciences and provide a dialogue between Mexico and the world. Televisión Azteca has no such project of this type.

In the opposite corner to the privatization of the broadcast space we can find "public service" channels that aim to complete the television offer. The Mexican Government awarded a license to Canal 22-Televisión Metropolitana, managed by the National Council for Culture and Arts of Mexico and the Department of Public Education. Its purpose is to bring audiences into contact with programs from the main audiovisual providers around the world and to produce programs about issues that are not given enough attention by Mexican channels. It is considered to be a public television station. Canal 11, run by the National Polytechnic

Institute (an educational institution for advanced tertiary studies), also defines itself as educational and cultural. However, these two television stations do not have the same scope across the national territory as Televisa and TV Azteca.

There is no indigenous or community television station. The National Indigenous Institute and the Office for Indigenous Affairs indicate a shortfall in this respect. The chapter on culture and rights in the National Program on Indigenous Settlements 2001-2006 notes that cultural diversity in Mexico is absent both in the public and private media. We can therefore see the difficulties cultural diversity in Mexico faces when it comes to projecting its identity and forging its own space. Looking beyond the situation of indigenous Mexico, we find that the mass audience channels (Televisa and TV Azteca) mainly broadcast US-made content. This situation limits Mexico's identity to a great extent and raises questions about the country's national culture.

Both the State and private sectors are facing complex dilemmas for integrating, preserving and promoting national cultural diversity. John Sinclair (2000, page 101) says that local, national and global media all play a key role in promoting symbolic content in accordance with dominant interests. We can therefore say that the media in Mexico serve contemporary globalization interests in which large and medium-sized enterprises try to enter international markets.

In this context, we can find a sometimes labyrinthine network of international trade agreements. Cultures will only be able to survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and project themselves onto the world if they have a market able to support a domestic industry that generates domestic content. National cultural policies will therefore become increasingly linked to the international trade agreements that each country takes part in. If we want to preserve our ability to make decisions on cultural questions that affect national integration, we will have to be very aware of the fact that culture should not be treated as simply another good but as an instrument that can drive social symbols and values.

Translated from Spanish by Lynda Trevitt

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