

MEXICO

THE NEW MODEL OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF THE FEDERAL ELECTORAL INSTITUTE OF MEXICO: DESIGN AND FUNCTIONING

Doctor Leonardo Valdes Zurita
President Councillor of the Federal Electoral Institute
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Introduction

In 2007, the Mexican Parliament carried out an unprecedented reform on electoral matter. This legal reform modified the Mexican electoral system and renewed conditions for the electoral contest in our country, particularly for the dissemination of political advertisement of candidates and parties on radio and television during political campaigns.

This model is a novelty. The Federal Electoral Institute of Mexico has become the only electoral management body in the world responsible for the management of state airtime on radio and television. This time is allocated to political parties and other electoral authorities. No other individual or organization in Mexico is allowed to purchase airtime to disseminate electoral messages on radio and television. No broadcast of this kind is allowed in the Mexican territory, even if purchased abroad.

Therefore, the relation with the mass media in previous elections (2006, Presidential election) changed completely. There were important modifications in the rules and the relationship between the IFE and political parties, electronic mass media, local electoral authorities, government agencies, and public institutions which use massive

communication, as well as with any individual participating in the electoral campaign on the media throughout the country.

Before the reform, political parties and candidates were able to purchase airtime on radio and television for their campaigns and political advertisement. Sometimes this model produced a lack of equity in the access to mass media, as well as the apparition of bashing campaigns between contenders in their attempt to obtain a larger number of votes.

Under the new model of political communication, conditions for the electoral contest have been modified. New opportunities are now in place to guarantee the presence of political parties in all the media, with full equity. Therefore the political influence of mass media is now restricted, in the best interest of citizens. Other types of advertisement by the different levels of government no longer exert influence on the electoral contest.

In this paper I will try to present an overview of the design and functioning of this new scheme, which favours equity and true competition between candidates and political parties in Mexico.

Design

In order to fulfil this huge task, the Federal Electoral Institute developed a series of policies, internal rules and new institutional schemes, in order to achieve a successful nationwide electoral process in 2008 and 2009.

The highest steering body at the IFE is the General Council, which is responsible for overseeing relevant issues regarding the access of political parties to radio and television. A special Committee for Radio and Television was created as a surveillance body, with the powers to approve media schedules for the broadcasting of political parties' messages. This Committee is formed by three Electoral Councillors (one of them acts as chairperson).

Representatives of political parties also participate in this Committee but are not allowed to vote.

In short, the design of the new model of political communication in Mexico had to fulfil the following attributions for the 2008-2009 electoral process, and will have to do the same for the next Presidential Election in 2012:

1. Guarantee that all electoral advertisement on radio and television is broadcast using state airtime.
2. Prohibit and sanction the purchase or hiring of any other airtime to broadcast messages with electoral purposes.
3. Establish media schedules following equitable rules for the allocation of airtime in electronic mass media.
4. When officially requested, to sanction denigration or defamation of candidates and parties.
5. Verify the broadcast of messages on radio and television, in order to make sure that the law is enforced.
6. Put in place a system to monitor news programs.

Functioning

In order to fulfil all the constitutional and legal mandates, the IFE performed several activities comprised in the following lines of action:

- 1) Establish institutional relations with mass media (radio and television) during the federal electoral process throughout the national territory.
- 2) Put in place a vast technological infrastructure (150 points in the country) in order to make sure that the mass media comply with the rules regarding electoral messages.
- 3) Establish expedite procedures to sanction people or entities

violating the legal mandate.

Consequently, the Institute looked for a technological solution which is unprecedented in electoral terms, but also an engineering and computer systems novelty. The required dispositive with the specific requirements did not exist in the international market. Thus, an *ad hoc* system was developed by the IFE in order to comply with the law.

The Institute developed a specialized system with the purpose of managing files containing radio and television materials, and also to verify that broadcasts of political advertisement were made in due time and form.

By using this innovative infrastructure, the system automatically produces the media schedule, following the equity criteria established in the law. (All political parties and candidates are guaranteed access to radio and television). The system also grades technical quality in audio and video, sends spots by satellite or Internet to radio and television stations, and then detects broadcasts, records them and files them in order to verify compliance with the law. Finally, the system generates reports on broadcasts.

This was an enormous task that had to be carried out in a few months. We had to use large human, technical, and material resources in order to put in place all the technological equipment, as well as the knowhow of procedures that up to that moment were not known by our staff, and not even by political parties themselves. All this was required in order to efficiently manage the daily 48 minutes of airtime that the IFE is legally mandated to allocate in each radio and television station.

I will try to illustrate the magnitude of this operation with an example. The management of the daily 48 minutes of state airtime on radio and television during the 2008-2009 federal electoral process, required the broadcast and monitoring of up to 33 million spots

from political parties and electoral authorities between January 31st (primary elections, called pre-campaigns) and July 5th (Election Day).

By the end of the process, in August 2008 we received 563 requests regarding supposed non-compliance with the broadcasting of electoral spots. These requests were the result of the verification process conducted by the IFE. Out of the 563 requests, 376 were related to radio stations and 187 to television channels.

General Results

In Mexico we have undergone a collective learning process and we have also made the necessary changes in order to enforce the new constitutional rules regarding radio and television access.

One of the most successful and evident results was the progressive regularisation of the electoral broadcasts by electronic mass media, reaching a level above 95% fulfilment during both pre-campaigns and campaigns.

In April 2009, an unexpected phenomenon occurred in the midst of the electoral process. There was an outbreak of the AH1N1 virus, an epidemic which was unknown before. This represented a major challenge for the IFE, since it was already acting as the regulation authority for radio and television access. The organization of the election had to coexist with the needs of coordination with health authorities for the use of state airtime in the media.

The Federal Electoral Institute as the single authority to allocate state airtime on radio and television provided the Ministry of Health with sufficient airtime to inform the Mexican society on the behaviour of the virus, and to reinforce sanitary actions and protocols, with the purpose of addressing the risks of the health situation.

Following the verification process, we were able to have a clear image of the behaviour of the electronic mass media throughout the country.

The monitoring of the IFE was able to show irregularities in radio and television broadcasts, which served as proof to sanction people who violated the law. All complaints were supported by the results of the verification process.

The Integral System for the Management of State Airtime on Radio and Television worked effectively in the past election, but we are still in a stage of consolidation and adjustment. Experience has shown the need to make some changes and particular modifications in order to make this system more flexible and simple.

The system is being improved every day, and the aim is to arrive to the 2012 elections with a system that can be of use to government agencies, public and private universities, as well as all international bodies requiring verification and assessment of the spots' impact on specific issues. This collaboration can be made possible by establishing specific agreements.

In 2010 there will be local elections in 15 states. The monitoring and verification of broadcasts is fundamental in order to attain the same positive results achieved in the 2009 election.

The search for equity in the contest, as a result of the presence of political parties and candidates in radio and television has become a fundamental element in the process of democratic consolidation in Mexico.