



Vol. 11, No. 1, Fall 2013, 402-410

Review/Reseña

Celeste González de Bustamante, *“Muy Buenas Noches”: Mexico, Television, and the Cold War*. University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

Modern Mexico, Media Studies, and the Cold War

Michael A. Krysko

Kansas State University

Celeste González de Bustamante’s *“Muy Buenas Noches”: Mexico, Television, and the Cold War* offers a fascinating account of the rise and growth of Mexican television news from 1950 through 1970. When the first Mexican television stations went on the air in the early 1950s, the authoritarian Mexican government had good reason to believe television news would report favorably on its policies and programs. The government granted the first television station concessions to prominent media moguls such as Romulo O’Farrill Silva, Emilio Azzcarraga Vidaureta, and Guillermo González Camarena, whose ties to the ruling Partido

Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and close relationships with the party's leading figures seemingly ensured that television news would not challenge government priorities. That faith seemed especially well placed in 1955, when the three men joined forces by establishing Telesistema Mexicano as the parent company that presided over their individual and a growing number of other stations. Consequently, this new conglomerate provided the news content to the country's most powerful and far-reaching television outlets into the 1970s. Moreover, with Mexican television receiver ownership growing from a few hundred sets to 4.5 million between 1950 and 1970, the potential influence the medium could wield appeared to be increasing exponentially over a short period.

PRI-friendly coverage was indeed a frequent by-product of an arrangement whereby news coverage tended to reflect government priorities while also promoting "a specific form of national identity, a *mexicanidad* that promoted modernity and consumer values broadcast from above" (xxvi-xxvii). Yet tensions also infused the relationships between the PRI, Telesistema Mexicano, and viewers. As such, González argues, there were also limits to the PRI's influence over how the major Mexican television stations reported the news, while the viewers themselves possessed their own agency to interpret the news they received in ways that was not always consistent with the agendas of the government or broadcasters. González, a former reporter and news anchor who earned her Ph.D. at the University of Arizona, where she now teaches in the School of Journalism, concludes that "by the second half of the twentieth century, it became evident on the street and on television that more than one vision for the nation's future existed and at times these *tele-visiones* (tele-visions) competed and conflicted" (xxvii).

This seven-chapter account, the title of which is derived from the typical greeting offered by Mexican anchors at the beginning of their broadcasts, begins with two chapters that explore the rise of Mexican television and its news programs. González explores how the early newscasts "promoted national celebrations to solidify a sense of nationhood among citizens" (xxxiii). In an attempt to develop a connection with viewers, news programs worked to create what the author calls "tele-

traditions,” in which longstanding cultural traditions such as the celebration of certain national holidays and the inclusion of popular sports as part of the newscasts became part of establishing a particularly “Mexican” flavor to the newly emerging practices of Mexican television news. At the outset of the book, the role of foreign, especially American, business interests in establishing the foundations of Mexican television (which were built on many pre-existing links to the radio industry) also receives particular attention. However, just as the PRI could not fully impose its will on Telesistema Mexicana, and just as Telesistema Mexicana and the PRI could not control how viewers received and interpreted the newscasts, the United States was also limited in its ability to dictate how Mexican television developed. That dynamic speaks to the central theme of the study: the limits of cultural hegemony. From 1950 to 1970 powerful American and Mexican media actors and interests confronted the limits of their abilities to dictate the actions and reactions of presumably less-powerful ones. Covering a period that saw the PRI at the apex of its influence over Mexico and the United States at the height of its international influence, neither could impose its will without facing effective resistance. Subordinate groups can and do, this account emphasizes, maintain their cultural autonomy even when confronted by a supposedly stronger and more influential actor.

The case studies that follow in the five remaining chapters provide González with the opportunity to further develop this theme. She documents the news stories about striking railway workers during 1958-59 that disparaged those workers and in the process sought to promote a pro-government and pro-business perspective complimentary to the ruling PRI; those stories often ran alongside the more favorable coverage provided to the Cuban Revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power by 1959. During that same period, the coverage of various state visits in 1959 by U.S., Mexican, and Soviet leaders to Mexico, United States, and Cuba reflected Mexico’s allegiance to the United States within the larger Cold War framework. The period of the U.S.-Soviet “space race,” spanning the Soviet Union’s 1957 *Sputnik* launch through to the United States’ 1969 moon landing, also allowed television news to underscore Mexico’s Cold War ties

to the U.S. At the same time, these events presented opportunities to emphasize the Mexican nation's successful embrace of technological modernity (for example, by drawing attention to the efforts of Mexican scientists to develop rockets and other Mexican contributions to the American space program). Mexico's hosting of the 1968 Olympics and the 1970 World Cup offered two more opportunities to broadcast an image of Mexico as a modern and successful nation to the country and across the globe.

And yet, as González also demonstrates, for each of these efforts to use news coverage to present a specific and officially sanctioned image of the Mexican nation to viewers within Mexico and beyond, the ability to control the totality of that message and how it was interpreted was far from absolute. The striking Mexican railway workers of the late 1950s had other means and methods to get their message out to a wide audience, even if Mexican television news derided their position and muted their voices. Moreover, the fact that Fidel Castro and his successful revolution in Cuba received largely favorable coverage during this same period of labor unrest put television news in the ironic role of heralding Cuba's calls for equitable treatment and social justice, which in fact were comparable to the disparaged strikers' demands. In 1959, Telesistema Mexicano's favorable coverage of the American and Mexican presidents' state visits to each others' countries juxtaposed against the more tepid response to Soviet vice premier Anasta Mikoyan's visit to Mexico did indeed reflect Mexico's allegiance in the Cold War. However, that the PRI did not speak with one voice regarding foreign or domestic affairs became apparent in the coverage afforded that same year to the Cuba trip of the popular (and populist) left-leaning former Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas' legacy, it should be recalled, was the successful expropriation of American oil and agricultural properties during the 1930s. His 1959 trip to Cuba was part of the former president's resurgent political activities that pitted him against the sitting president, and in the process threatened to complicate relations with the United States. González also shows how the ultimate falling out between the United States and Cuba following Fidel Castro's ascension to power, epitomized by the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and the 1962 Cuban

Missile Crisis, complicated how television news covered the era of the space race. In that context, Telesistema Mexicano confronted the tensions between its (and wider Mexico's) previously favorable disposition toward the Cuban Revolution against concerns that playing to those pro-Cuba popular sentiments (and the latent anti-Americanism in Mexico it reflected) could jeopardize important relationships with U.S. business interests. The problem was that popular antagonism toward America's Cuba policies was rising in Mexico by the early 1960s. Rather than completely disregard its audience's sensitivities, Mexican television news reports attempted to paper over the divide by covering foreign protests against the United States' actions in Cuba rather than Mexican ones. In so doing, Mexican television news reports left room for the Mexican audience to embrace perspectives and policies not formally advocated by the government.

The 1968 Olympics provides González with her most compelling case study to underscore the limits the PRI and Telesistema Mexicano faced in their efforts to control the flow and meaning of information, despite all the power they wielded. On the eve of the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, the government massacre of student protesters at Plaza de Las Tres Culturas (the Tlatelolco massacre) undercut the official efforts to present an image of Mexico as a modern, orderly, peaceful and democratic society. With so much of the world's and the nation's attention on Mexico during a period when the development of satellite communications and video tape allowed for the rapid transmission of information and images across the nation and the globe, Telesistema Mexicano could not simply ignore the carnage. To be sure, the company's coverage attempted to deflect blame and attention from the government by keeping dissident voices off the air, emphasizing in its reports foreign influences that allegedly motivated the protestors, and by using descriptive language (such as "terrorists") to discredit them. At the same time, González convincingly demonstrates that viewers did not necessarily accept this version of events. González effectively conveys this sense of viewer dissatisfaction with several quotes from disaffected viewers who saw the coverage and who wondered, in the words of one, "what really happened, if

the media negates the truth” (171). With alternative sources of information about the protests available and increasing skepticism about the honesty of Telesistema Mexicano’s coverage, “citizen viewers developed an awareness of events and began to notice cracks in the façade of modernity and order” (175). At the same time, Telesistema Mexicano also faced increased government pressure in the aftermath of the massacre, as key officials blamed television for the unrest and sought to exert even greater control over the flow of information. Such officials were apparently unappreciative of the lengths Telesistema Mexicano had actually went to infuse its coverage of the bloody massacre with a somewhat PRI-friendly perspective and unaware how ineffectual some of those efforts actually were.

González’s last case study, an exploration of the news coverage surrounding Mexico’s hosting of the 1970 World Cup and the presidential elections of that same year, explores those behind-the-scenes and largely out-of-sight tensions between the government and media executives that emerged by the end of the 1960s. The World Cup and the international attention it once again directed toward Mexico provided another opportunity to present the country as a modern and orderly democratic nation. Given the simmering political tensions that plagued Mexico and the PRI, still mired in the shadow of the Tlateloloco massacre, television news devoted more time to covering the World Cup than the elections. However, when the election did receive coverage, Telesistema Mexicano “towed the PRI line on the air” (178) and devoted far less attention to the opposition candidate. Despite these efforts, viewer skepticism toward this reporting remained strong, with one viewer (and former activist from 1968) noting that it was important when dealing with the news to “read between the lines” (168, 206).

One of the strengths of González’s book lays in her ability to paint a vivid picture of the behind-the-scenes machinations that defined the relationship between Telesistema Mexicano and the Mexican government. That picture owed much to the author’s research into Telesistema Mexicano’s archives in Mexico City and interviews with principal actors. Additional archival research in Mexico City included work at the Archivo Historico de la Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, the Biblioteca

Nacional, the Hermitage Nacional, and Biblioteca Mexicana Fundación Miguel Alemán. Research at the National Security Archive in Washington, D.C., and the Vanderbilt Television News Archive in Nashville, Tennessee helped González situate the development of Mexico's television news in the larger context of Mexico's relationship with the United States in the context of the larger Cold War. It is on the strength of this archival research that González convincingly demonstrates that the Telesistema Mexicano was not, contrary to the contentions of previous scholarship, simply an obedient mouthpiece of the PRI.

If there is a particular weakness in the study, it is one that bedevils many media scholars through no fault of their own. Sources that allow for a close analysis of the audience's perspective and reactions are notoriously difficult to find, particularly from the early days of radio and television history. What makes the chapter on the 1968 Olympics and the Tlateloloco massacre so compelling is that the surviving record includes a more robust accounting of various viewer perspectives that González weaves into the analysis. In other chapters, a dearth of sources accounting for the audience reactions frequently puts González in the position of having to speculate about how viewers "may" or "most likely" have reacted to a story or program.¹ To her great credit, González, however, is largely successful in navigating through the challenge of conveying an audience perspective in the face of limited documentation. In those instances where the surviving sources do not explicitly document the audience perspective, González compensates through the insightful and convincing application of media studies approaches to infer how viewers from different political, cultural, social, and economic perspectives engaged with and interpreted the news stories they encountered. Thus, her application of the concept of "hybrid framing" (whereby viewers' interpretations of a story diverge from the intentions of the producer who framed it) is convincing even in the absence of specific audience reactions and confirmed when such sources are indeed available (as is the case in her treatment of the 1968 Tlateloloco massacre). Consequently, González succeeds even in the face of those limitations of

¹ Two representative examples can be found in the author's discussion of how railway strikers of the late 1950s and indigenous peoples living in Mexico City of the early 1970s engaged with the news stories they encountered. See 75, 187.

demonstrating that viewers of Mexican television news were not passive and malleable recipients of information, but active and engaged participants who themselves bestow meaning and significance to the information they received.²

In addition to her skillful construction of the Mexican audience as active, engaged, and independent-minded consumers of information, González also does an excellent job of situating the development of television news in the larger historical context of modern Mexican history and prior mass media development. For that reason, it is curious when every so often she seems to overstate the singular significance of television's impact on its audience, especially with regard to processes of identity formation. In so doing, the author at times implicitly diminishes the roles historical context and viewer agency played in such processes, roles that she had emphasized elsewhere in the account. "Television programming, including news, allowed the majority of citizens to see themselves as part of the nation" (44) reflects one such claim. Later, González asserts that "through informative programming, such as television news, as well through entertainment programming, such as *telenovelas* (soap operas), a sense of nationhood took root" (144). In another instance, the author claims that "television caused viewers to reconceptualize their connection to the world" (109). Such statements, so closely focused on the supposedly primary impact of television, might give too much credit to the very young medium of television at the expense of more longstanding and deeply rooted processes of Mexican national identity formation, which predated 1950 and also included older mass media such as the radio and newspapers that preceded television's arrival. Such statements, to be sure, are rare. They are noticeable in large part because they are not, in fact, reflective of the more multidimensional analysis that otherwise runs through the book.

² Given the propensity of U.S. officials stationed abroad to send their evaluations of a country's domestic media environment to Washington, additional research into the relevant Department of State and Department of Commerce files at the U.S. National Archives might yield a detailed documentary record of American official perspectives on Mexican media. Such a record, if it can be unearthed, offers a promising avenue through which another scholar might apply González's notion of the "hybrid framing" of significant television news stories by a diverse and engaged audience.

Such quibbles, however, are not intended to overshadow the overall strengths of this compelling study. Celeste González de Bustamante has produced an outstanding account of the first two decades of Mexican television news. Her illumination of the tensions that infused the connections between Telesistema Mexicano, the PRI, Mexican viewers, and the United States during the Cold War succeeds in underscoring the limits of cultural hegemony. In the process, this well written and solidly researched monograph will be of interest to both scholars and students of modern Mexico, media studies, and the Cold War.