

Prepared for delivery at the
**International Conference on
Public Participation and Information Technologies**
Research Center on Information Technologies and Participatory Democracy (CITIDEP)
New University of Lisbon, Department of Environmental Science and Engineering (UNL)

Lisboa, Portugal, 20-22 octubre de 1999
Topic 2 = PP-IT and new democratic models and expressions

**“New models of social participation in an authoritarian
environment: mass media, technology and democratization
within regional societies in Mexico.”**

Luis Miguel Rionda, Ph.D.¹
(Universidad de Guanajuato & CITIDEP Mexico)

I. INTRODUCTION

The decade of the 80's was characterized by the accelerated political changes within the authoritarian Latin-American societies, especially Mexico. In parallel, new information technologies and growing communication media contributed to build a new civic identity that abandoned the rigidity of the prevailing regional ideology, and the rode the wave the 90s global democratization. Mexico arrived a little late and reluctantly to this process, in comparison to other Latin-American societies, almost coinciding with the Eastern European countries. The Mexican electoral rebellion began at the municipal level, but was clearly defined by the 1988 federal elections that signaled the beginning of the end of the authoritarian and centralized regime of Mexico's post-revolutionary era. In the 90's this tendency has evolved towards a more open and participative society supported by a wider access to global information and democratic models. This includes models of East-European and Latin-American countries. Moreover, the regional consciousness has been redefined and the democratization is accompanied by a bigger heterogeneity into the regional and local political experiences replacing the second authoritarian ingredient: the centralism.

¹ I should thank to Eduard (Buck) Buchanan by its helps in the revision of the translation of this paper.

The construction of a viable nation has occupied the thoughts and consumed the energies of Mexico's leading classes since at least the 19th century. Being an ex-colony of a European power that had suffered the oppression of a foreign occupation that dominated the rich and diverse expressions of local culture, the population of the area that today we know as Mexico (originally the name of a city, not of a country) experienced many restrictions of language and religion. In short, some very different customs to the ones that had been prevalent and fostered by the geographical spaces before the arrival of the Europeans. This conquest was the first repression of the original local identities. The forced imposition of a new canon of homogenization would generate cultural and idiomatic conflicts that would move it away from its Spanish metropolitan matrix. Soon to be constituted as the base of the *criollo* and *mestizo* identities, the cornerstone of the Mexican national character.

Communication is the key to the feeling of identity. In that sense, its effect upon the collective imagination, to include the commitment to nationality, is proportional to the level of efficacy to which they reach sense of community. In other words, their linking strength, their potential to unite across distant regions or overcoming difficulties with access among them.

The hypothesis to define is that in the first moment of the arrival of new Information Technologies (IT), they served to reinforce the sense of unity inside the group diversity, opening the door to the definition of a new integrated nationalism. In a more advanced phase that, with IT, are practically instant and extraordinarily influential, the globalizing and homogeneous tendencies are accompanied by a simultaneous movement back toward the local and regional identities that are expressed in and by the struggle for the decentralization and against the authoritarianism of the prior regime.

A centralized country such as Mexico experiences this phenomenon in a very tangible form when the regions regain a local identity that had been historically denied them by unifying and nationalist tendencies. The Mexican democracy was born fairly recently, and it is linked to political and civic movements of sovereign and regional character, particularly at the municipal level that became the front line in the fight against the stifling and authoritarian centralism. We will reflect upon this and I will link it with the fight for democracy that was born in one of the states of central Mexico, Guanajuato. A kind of

region with particularities so interesting that they will be able to shed some light on the discussion about the relation among democratization and new Information Technologies.

II. MEXICO: THE SEARCH FOR A NATION

What today we call "Mexico" was a geographical area where cultural and social assemblies live side by side but were deeply differentiated. The Mexican nation was product of an "invention", as was America itself, according to Edmundo O' Gorman. A cultural base did not exist that was more or less homogeneous permitting itself to extend loops of identity in so vast a territory. The Spaniards, in search of guaranteeing their colonial control, contributed the lingua franca that replaced the Mexican *Náhuatl*. They also supplied the religion, the political organization and the control of the transportation of persons and goods as well. For it was of enormous importance that the roads and byways were watched by *postas* or military "presidios". The one that has more interest to me, by its function alone as the integrated axis of a vast, practically empty territory, was the Spanish Royal Road of the Silver, that was extended from Mexico City to the prosperous Santa Fe, in what today we know as the American state of New Mexico. That road, whose construction began early in the 16th century and it would culminate in the 18th century, united what is now the state of Guanajuato and the rich mines of this territory with those of the more distant excavations of Zacatecas and Chihuahua to its colonial vice regal headquarters of the New Spain, the centralized city of Mexico.

The forging of the nation continued through the 19th century, but with interruptions related to the frequent foreign invasions and the internal political anxiety. The absence of a Mexican national feeling was painfully evident in the war with the United States of 1847-1848 when some regions and even whole states offered to be join with the invaders in exchange for the recognition to its local sovereignty. The liberals did not have a clear policy toward the need to unite the dispersed regions around a national ideal. The federalist tenet accentuated the centrifuge tendencies and weakened the central government.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) was a social movement that assumed as one of its rallying points the creation of Mexican nationalism. This federalism was substantially

weakened by a centralist political practice that left under the ferrous control of the President all decisions that affected the country and/or its regions and entities.

The central strategy to establish the basis of the Mexican nationalism in an social background where it did not exist or it was very diluted was to establish an official nationalist speech by means of public education governed by a unique program of studies. That is what the Mexican government did in 1921 by founding the Public Office of the Secretary of Education. An organization that federalized and centralized for the first time education in the country. Up till then the educational activity was left in the hands of the municipalities, the religious congregations or the individuals with the inevitable consequence of a great dispersion and diversification of the educational offerings. The educational centralization , to replace the more traditional and conservative sectors they were opposed to, permitted the implementation of a cohesive educational program, with strongly nationalistic and revolutionary contents, the ones that consciously ignored the rationality and religious undercurrent to concentrate on the common environment of the Mexican people.

Again, the mass media and the new Information Technologies served as a driving force on the nationalist speech and they search to forge an homogenized national identity. The mediums of radio and the cinema unified the collective consciousness and through them circulated images, popular idolisms, symbols and nationalist iconography.

The Mexican Revolutionary State developed stability during several decades, but of authoritarian form and only yielding marginal symbolic power to its opponents. The nationalism had an enormous internal and external legitimacy that passed for a sovereign government, allowing it to enjoy a great prestige by its autonomous and progressive international politics that from time to time, symbolically at least, faced the large powers of the world.

III. GUANAJUATO: A REGION SEARCHING FOR SOVEREIGNTY AND DEMOCRACY

The state of Guanajuato –located in central Mexico- has been the setting of many popular struggles that contributed to the birth of Mexico as a nation. The present identity of this

country is based on many symbols come out of the history of Guanajuato. The civic fights have been always linked to communication and to information. The 1810 rebels took their ideas from the French example, that traveled by the sea and the printed letter. The roads toward the north carried the ideas and the thought to the people of Guanajuato.

Guanajuato has always been a land of citizens opposed to tyranny. That has continued unabated throughout this century. As with the rest of the country, the citizen's rebellion against the decadent authoritarianism of the post revolutionary governments from the ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) reached its climax in the decade of the eighties. They began, at this time, to recognize some electoral triumphs of the opposition, but still others they were dismissed or denied with the complicity of most of media. Finally in 1988, the triumph of the central-right wing National Action Party (PAN) was recognized in the most important industrial city of the state of Guanajuato: Leon. From that day forward, the opposition expansion has been unstoppable.

The then ruling party, the PRI, knew how to utilize in its favor the information technologies available at the time. Now it ignited the shift to the opposition. The PAN has learned, since assuming power in Guanajuato, how to take advantage of the new Information Technologies and has projected the image to the national and international forefront as an innovator and communicative party that serves society and seeks dialogues with it. Several NGO's have been seen benefits, including economic, of this policy. The information, that in an authoritarian government did not flow or when it did, it was altered or partial truths, has constituted in one of the rewards of a new democratic experience, bring to the table some issues that before not were discussed before. Issues either repressed by fear, lack of information or simply not made public.

Mexican regional societies are garnering a growing importance through an unconventional information source, at the same time the conventional media is reinventing itself and is more open to the free discussion. The regions, the federal states and the municipalities have realized substantial advances in the recuperation of an abducted sovereignty and advancing upon new areas of responsibility. This is accompanied by a new civic attitude of free wheeling debate without obstacles.

The new IT has had an important expansion in Mexico during the last years. The country's slow economic recuperation has facilitated the arrival of advanced technologies that are received in an enthusiastic way by the middle class. A middle class that has become more conscious and participative and always are prepared to find an efficient use of the same. There are even wars that are taking place in the cyberspace of communication. The Zapatista rebellion for example, that although has not fired a shot since 1994 has reached the arena of the Internet.

At the popular level, the IT should be provide through official canals that subsidies the access of the poor to these resources. I refer to the access by means of the national educational system -the Mexican Educational Network TelSat for example. Also here the new IT is facilitating the alternate establishment of channels through which flows information not controlled by the state or any joint media. The interactivity and the possibility of establishing two way communication conduits eases the democratization of relations among the different, the confronted or the indolent.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Mexican national formation is a product of social communication. This communication includes posts, mail, telegraph, railroad, press, radio, movies, television, telephone, satellite or Internet. The establishment of interpersonal and intergroup loops establishes the basis of the common identity, the solidarity among persons that perceives and shares concepts the life, religious beliefs, moral convictions, language or similar customs. A nation is established from prior constructions, only then are they are assumed like substantial and integrated communities to a people's ethos.

The Mexican regional societies have been founded on a spontaneous basis of these loops of solidarity and groupal adscription, in short, its identities. However, historically they have been subordinate to the "national" project. Together with its centralized and authoritarian character, that has manipulated the popular imaginary and the manifestation of its culture to create and feed the development of the nationalist speech, united and unstereotyped.

The increasing access to growing fonts of information, thanks to cheap and massive technologies such as radio and television, has opened two different roads to the regional

societies: to be linked with supranational settings and the global links, however alien and distant they may seem, and by the other hand to local roots, particular and concrete. In a globalized world of instant information, the regional links take refuge in the security of its immediate context, always recognizable and manageable.

The new Mexican democracy is tied to the new IT, although still in a partial and subaltern way. They are the self organized groups of the civil society, the ones that are putting to growing use the new resources to project their activism by means of effective, cheaper and accessible resources. The self organization will receive a strong impulse with the access of technologies that promote the equability and the dialogue among its citizens and uses them to move toward an advanced the global community.

REFERENCES

AZIZ NASSIF, Alberto

1985 “La coyuntura de las elecciones en Chihuahua 1983”, en Carlos MARTINEZ ASSAD (coord.), *Municipios en Conflicto*. México: IIS/UNAM.

BRADING, David

1983 *Los orígenes del nacionalismo mexicano*. México: ERA, Col. Problemas de México. 2ª edición.

1988 *Mito y profecía en la historia de México*. México: Ed. Vuelta. Col. La Reflexión.

CHOMSKY, Noam y Heinz DIETERICH

1995 *La sociedad global. Educación, mercado y democracia*. México: Joaquín Mortiz.

ESPINOZA, Víctor, Yemile MIZRAHI, Jorge REGALADO y Luis Miguel RIONDA

1998 “Liberalización política y gobiernos de oposición. Baja California, Guanajuato, Chihuahua y Jalisco”, en *El Debate Nacional*, vol. II *Escenarios de la Democratización*. Editorial Diana, pp. 325-351.

GARCIA CASTRO, María

1993 “Identidad nacional y nacionalismo en México”, en *Sociológica*, México: UAM-A, Año 8 N° 21, dedicado a Identidad nacional y nacionalismos, enero-abril, pp. 31-41.

KOHN, Hans

1979 “Nacionalismo”, en David L. SILLS, *Enciclopedia Internacional de las Ciencias Sociales*. Madrid: Aguilar, pp. 306-311.

LISS, Peggy K.

1986 *Orígenes de la nacionalidad mexicana, 1521-1556. La formación de una nueva sociedad*. México: F.C.E.

RIONDA, Luis Miguel

1996 “La democracia inducida: cambio político y lucha partidista en Guanajuato”, en Héctor Tejera Gaona (coord.), *Antropología política. Enfoques contemporáneos*. INAH - Plaza y Valdés, México, 1996, pp. 189-217.

1997 “Guanajuato” en Silvia Gómez Tagle (coordinadora) *1994: las elecciones en los estados*. México: CIICH/UNAM y La Jornada ediciones, serie La Democracia en México, Vol. I, pp. 273-303.