

# MEXICAN JOURNAL of COMMUNICATION

## **A selection of Mexican mass media research**

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ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN MEXICO:  
NOTES FOR A REFLEXIVE BALANCE SHEET

*Raúl Fuentes Navarro*

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SOME OF THE CHALLENGES FACING MEXICAN COMMUNICATION  
RESEARCH ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW MILLENNIUM

*Enrique E. Sánchez Ruíz*

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA AT THE  
END OF THE CENTURY

*Javier Esteinou Madrid*

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COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL RESEARCH  
THE CULTURAL PROGRAM

*Jorge A. González*

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WOMEN AND THE COMMUNICATION MEDIA IN LATIN AMERICA

*Mercedes Charles Creel*

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NEW COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES:  
CHRONICLE OF EXPERIENCES AND  
CHALLENGES OF RESEARCH IN MEXICO

*Carmen Gómez Mont*

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PANORAMA OF RESEARCH INTO THE GLOBALIZATION OF  
COMMUNICATION IN MEXICO, WITH SPECIAL  
EMPHASIS ON TELEVISION

*Claudia Benassini Félix*

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UNDERSTANDING THE INTERNET AS A MEDIA EXTENSION

*Fernando Gutiérrez / Octavio Islas*

# *revista mexicana de* **COMUNICACIÓN**

The *REVISTA MEXICANA DE COMUNICACIÓN* (spanish-language edition) is published bi-monthly in Mexico City under the auspices of the Manuel Buendia Foundation, a non-profit association dedicated to the study, analysis, discussion and organization of human resources for social communication. The magazine is sold on a subscription basis and through individual copy sales. In Mexico, it is read in 90 journalism and communication departments at universities and is available in 300 bookshops. In addition, individuals and institutions receive the magazine in Canada, the United States, Guatemala, El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, Perú, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Spain, Great Britain and Germany.

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*RMC* publishes articles on theory and practice, reviews, interviews, analysis, reports and guest columns. Its focus is mainly on Mexico, but original collaborations from other countries are welcome.

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# Table of contents

Presentation .....	13
<i>Omar Raúl Martínez / Carmen Gómez Mont</i>	
Panorama of research into the globalization of communication in Mexico, with special emphasis on television .....	15
<i>Claudia Benassini Félix</i>	
Audiovisual industries in the framework of NAFTA: The Monarch Project.....	29
<i>Delia Crovi Druetta</i>	
Women and the communication media in Latin America.....	37
<i>Mercedes Charles Creel</i>	
Communication research in Latin America at the end of the century .....	53
<i>Javier Esteinou Madrid</i>	
Academic communication research in Mexico: notes for a reflexive balance sheet .....	59
<i>Raúl Fuentes Navarro</i>	
New communication and information technologies: Chronicle of experiences and challenges of research in Mexico .....	79
<i>Carmen Gómez Mont</i>	
Communication and cultural research the cultural program .....	93
<i>Jorge A. González</i>	

Understanding the Internet as a media extension .....	107
<i>Fernando Gutiérrez / Octavio Islas</i>	
Media and new technologies for education-from-afar in Mexico .....	121
<i>María Antonieta Rebeil</i>	
Conducting communication research in Mexico: old problems and new realities .....	133
<i>Cecilia Rodríguez Dorantes</i>	
Some of the challenges facing Mexican communication research on the threshold of a new millennium .....	141
<i>Enrique E. Sánchez Ruiz</i>	
Brief comments on informational law as a topic to be studied in Mexico.....	153
<i>Ernesto Villanueva</i>	
SIDELINE THOUGHTS:	
The role of mass media in the construction of democratic societies.....	159
<i>Miguel Angel Sánchez de Armas</i>	
INSTITUTIONAL PROFILES:	
Cultural program.....	167
ITESO's Socio-Cultural Studies Department.....	169
UNESCO Telecommunications and Society academic studies program.....	171
BOOK REVIEWS.....	173
NEWS FROM THE MEDIA:	
Space 97: a dialogue between television and Mexican university students.....	181

# Communication research in Latin America at the end of the century

Javier Esteinou Madrid\*

## I. The "laws of the market" and the new cultural tendency

The transformations experienced by Mexico and Latin America since the 1980s to date –particularly with the consolidation of the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada, the Central American Common Market and Mercosur– is producing profound changes in the region's economic, political, social, agricultural, technological, mental and legal structures, among others. At the same time, this change is modifying the systems of life, organization, work, education, production, competition, etc., of the majority of Latin America's population.

The repercussions of these modifications are not only affecting the economic and political base of Mexican society, but, above all, the hemisphere's cultural and informational structure. At the same time, these transformations have had a profound impact on the region's policies in education and communication research. As a result, it is now imperative that we analyze how

the application of market laws in the epoch of cultural globalization is transforming the fabric and dynamic of our national and regional forms of communication.

In considering this reality, we can state that to consolidate this developmental model in Mexico and Latin America, the presence of new legislative, productive, technological, work-place and juridical conditions –among others– has been indispensable. Moreover, this process has required the irreplaceable existence of a new and massive modernizing consciousness that supports and guarantees the above-mentioned actions. On a mass level, this mentality, created by the electronic communication media, has produced the subjective conditions necessary for our societies' functioning within the context of the new competitive relations of the world market.

The presence of this modernizing consciousness means that today we are entering the stages of national development, which indicate that given this new globalization, it is necessary to

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accept the proposal to indiscriminately assimilate the principles of "informational laissez faire" in the communication or cultural arenas in order to be efficient, particularly in the sphere of communication. This is the same as assimilating the notion that "on the cultural level, anything that doesn't make money is worthless." Taken to their ultimate consequences, in practice these postulates pose the danger that instead of strengthening our national mental and educational structures within this period of cultural opening, these structures become more pliant. Furthermore, at times the values of these structures are further eroded in order to efficiently incorporate us as marginal societies, and without restrictions, into the new structure of competition and accumulation of world markets.

In other words, with the rise in our countries of the modernizing thesis based on the propositions of belt-tightening, privatization, withdrawal, deregulation, globalization and the multinationalization of everything in the public domain, it is increasingly asserted that *the development of culture in Mexican and Latin American societies should not be guided by the intervention of policies planned by the state, but rather, by the "natural" and perfect equilibrium produced by the action between producers and consumers based on free market laws. Thus, to accommodate Mexican society's cultural spaces within the new necessities of the market, the traditional concept of communicative activity is altered, making the transition, with increasingly velocity, from a social product to a simple piece of merchandise governed by the principle of supply and demand.*

With the extensive introduction of the principles of the laws of the market

into the communication and cultural arenas, it has been officially put forth in Latin America that these activities will become more productive, that traditional monopolies in these spheres will be eliminated with the promotion of free cultural competition, that the quality of the thus elaborated products will be enhanced, that new spaces for social participation will be opened in these spheres, that the efficiency of cultural dynamics will be elevated, that communication production will be streamlined, that the modernization of information will be accelerated, that sources of financing from cultural enterprises will be broadened and made more versatile, that the opening of our mental structure to the world flow of information will be accelerated, that a more advanced form of informational research will be created, etc. In short, that these activities will be enhanced by linking them to the modernizing processes.

All of these modernization tendencies, and others that have arisen in the region's cultural and communication arenas, have had a substantial impact on the field of communication research — leading to a new stage in this domain in Mexico and Latin America.

## II. Communication research in the epoch of the free market

Due to the highly mercantile and pragmatic nature of the free market model in Mexico and Latin America during the last part of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, humanistic and social communication research has been left unprotected, and has virtually disappeared. Latin American governments have excessively promoted scientific and

educational policies fundamentally based on the precepts of technology, pragmatism and efficiency in the field of information.

For example, this region has seen a sharp rise in studies of the physical characteristics of new informational-related technologies: the broadening of direct television, the introduction of Internet, the expansion of satellites, the use of new computers, inter-textual analysis, cyberspace, the interaction of the latest generations of informational equipment, organizational communication, interconnectiveness, etc. Forgotten or drastically underestimated are the elemental analysis of the processes of democratization of the communication media, employing new technologies for the promotion of social development, the use of informational infrastructures for the defense of the environment, food production, reducing crime, the rehumanization of urban centers, conservation of the biological chains that maintain life, defense of human rights, recycling of communication structures for the creation of a culture of social survival, for rescuing indigenous cultures, for increasing social participation, etc.

In this way, *the strategic role of the market in this new model of modern development, which directs and shapes Latin America's social and educational processes, has become the conditioning and detonating factor in the origin, meaning and objective of cultural and communication production in our countries, particularly in communication research. In other words, within the context of Latin America's new neoliberal growth model, there has been no true reactivation of the project of socially oriented research into communication and national cultures, as traditionally demanded by social groups to resolve the population's most urgent social necessities for survival and reinforcing local*

*identities. On the contrary, the result has been the accelerated incorporation of the world market into our societies, which is nothing more than the reactivation and intensification of the super-multinational project in the developing countries.*

From a humanist perspective, this means the market is increasingly becoming the authority that determines the value of people and of life itself, instead of the social processes and forces through which people and life move. In educational terms, this implies that market technology is the parameter that increasingly shapes the orientation and action of our region's cultural and communication institutions, not the framework of the social and spiritual development of our communities. That is to say, *neoliberal modernization has basically reduced the state's communication and cultural project in our societies. It hasn't expanded and reinforced the more open, democratic and participatory processes that large sectors have demanded for so long.*

With culture increasingly guided by the "invisible hand of the market", the neoliberal research project carried out by cultural institutions in our region has become increasingly characterized by the following principles:

Firstly, compared to previous decades, communication research has been geared toward profit, and increasingly toward short-term profit. The shorter the time period in recovering the intellectual investment, the more attractive the research project. As a result, most of the investment in the terrain of communication research has been defined by rapid monetary profit, and not by the more humanistic and equitable standards of social gains previously introduced by the benevolent state.



d) The establishment of this productivist context aimed at responding to the market has brought about a type of research in academic institutions of an increasingly individual, isolated and fragmented nature, and has not been the result of the reflection and dynamic of collective intellectual work. In this way, communication research that has emerged in the context of the neoliberal model has been notably individualistic and has not contained the wealth of group reflection. Collective investigations today are rare exceptions.

Fourthly, just as in the productive terrain, in order to conserve the prices of products, the market law of supply and demand permanently requires wasting thousands of tons of products in our countries, which are at the same time plagued by vital scarcities. The application of market principles in communication research has led to pressures on centers of cultural reflection to produce more profitable and lucrative investigations for the expansion of the market, and not those that enhance our communities, our collective memory or our nations. That is, in a society exclusively or overwhelmingly guided by the principles of supply and demand, the invisible hand of the market is "naturally" doing away with all those investigative projects that do not efficiently support the process of excess accumulation and super social consumption, while at the same time fomenting those that do permit material expansion.

For example, in the field of the formation of knowledge, the application of market laws in Mexico in education is eliminating careers in philosophy, anthropology, sociology, political

sciences, history and other academic fields in the humanities, based on the assertion that they aren't profitable or necessary within the context of modernization because they aren't productive. This situation obliges us to ask: *What will happen in a society that progressively cancels the existence of specialized academic fields geared toward society's self-awareness?* Faced with this reality, one can conclude that the application of such pragmatic and short-term policies is forming the basis of a "social blindness" of immense proportions, since market principles are aborting the areas of specialized human knowledge in the analysis of our own communities. Consequently, we should also ask: Where is a society that sees everything except itself headed?

It is imperative to recall that the market, in itself, lacks ethics and feeling, and does not concern itself with humanistic or social issues. Its objective is the rapid and growing accumulation of wealth at the expense of everything else. Consequently, it is a law that to the degree that it functions autonomously, without the solid counterbalance of planning, the market can introduce a social relation of savage communication into our communities.

In fifth place, this neoliberal process of the extreme mercantilism of communication research has unfolded based on the tendency to increase capital accumulation, particularly at the mega-multinational level. It has also marginalized the development of organic investigative policies urgently required to generate projects aimed at strengthening natural development. We can therefore assert that as we approach the 21st century, the neoliberal project introduced in Mexico and the region is

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intensively creating a new "Junk Culture" based on the expansion of capital and a reduction of the "Culture of Life and Humanity" that is so necessary for our national and regional survival. This is because the promotion of life-affirmative research is not a lucrative activity that merits promotion, in the short term, due to the dynamic of the market, unless the evolution of the social dynamic were to reach a critical phase in which human and social deterioration were so acute as to enter into contradiction with production levels and the concentration of wealth.

That is to say, if the 20th century is concluding with communication research in Mexico and Latin America fundamentally guided by market principles and not by more rational and balanced social policies, as societies we run the enormous risk of adopting systems of savage communication. This communication process will be characterized by prioritizing the superfluous over the essential, the flashy and superficial over intellectual depth, avoiding reality instead of increasing our levels of consciousness, promoting consumption instead of participation, financing lucrative and not humanistic projects, categorizing of our senses instead of the humanization of our consciousness, the communication of a parasitic culture instead of the dynamic of sustainable communication, etc.

We should consider the premise that "the lack of concern for knowledge that comprehends and transforms social reality constitutes a criminal academic and intellectual act."<sup>1</sup> Thus the enormous strategic importance during the final years of this millennium to decree an intellectual halt to the frenetic, delirious cultural dynamic of

Latin America's modernization, which has us fast rushing toward a terrain of which we know nothing. From the elemental condition of conserving our lives, we have to rethink the priorities in the field of communication that must be researched in order to survive as independent, democratic, balanced, sustainable and humane societies in Latin America. ●

#### NOTE

1. The lack of concern for the comprehension and transformation of reality constitutes a criminal academic and intellectual act, a poster produced by the students of the School of Communication and hung on the walls of Sao Paulo University (USP), Brazil, in 1996.