

The Anatomy of Strategic Communications in the Modern Mexican Presidency

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To my wife and child(ren): the loves of my life.

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Since its inception, this thesis stood on the shoulders of giants—the way I see those who helped me shape and think about the content and those that actually provided the content in the form of interviews. I feel exceptionally privileged to have been temporarily offered those shoulders to stand on, and I only hope that the horizon I saw from those heights is accurately portrayed in the pages that follow. To the extent that I capture the voices of the experts that were involved in some way (mainly through in-depth interviews) in the project, I am confident that the thesis has a good chance of being successful in achieving its objectives.

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Perhaps my view should not be a surprise considering how this work came into fruition, but I think it should be made explicit at this point anyway: the more those of us who are pursuing careers in the strategic communications/public affairs field are able to understand the experiences of those who have been involved in the practice at the highest, most demanding level, the better-off the practice of public affairs will be in Mexico. If we succeed in doing this, we will have a government that is better equipped to materialize the vision which got it elected in the first place while remaining true to the democratic pillars of responsiveness and accountability.

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Abstract

The Anatomy of Strategic Communications in the Modern Mexican Presidency

Despite its obvious relevance, surprisingly little is known from a scholarly perspective about Mexican presidential communication, the way it functions, and the way it is thought about by its own practitioners. Drawing on over 30 interviews with senior officials (and advisors) from the last five presidential administrations, this thesis discusses the responsibilities, priorities, daily activities, and decision-making of the communications offices, the analysis offer an in-depth look into Mexican presidential communication.

The sheer complexity and fast-pace of the processes described in the thesis serves to illustrate that gone are the days when the presidency had the last word (and often, also the first and only word) in public affairs. While the presidency still holds (and might continue to hold) an institutional advantage over any other political organizations in terms of communication, it has increasingly approached communications as a strategic and multidimensional endeavor. One dimension of strategy deals with which issues to push on (or attempt to pull from) the national agenda and which issues to pull close to or distance from. Another dimension deals with how to best approach or frame each issue in terms of communication. But, as the thesis will argue, it is hard to separate one dimension from the other—sometimes even in conceptual terms. Thus, an effective strategic presidency has to consider the effect of its communicative actions on the debate about specific issues and on the overall national conversation, as well as the implications for the popularity and influence of the presidency in an ever changing public sphere.

Moreover, the way communications officials work clearly shows that, rather than secretive craftsmen, they are highly skilled and professionalized managers that lead the most complex communications apparatus in the country. As top managers and leaders, they oversee multifaceted processes and multidisciplinary interactions that, with their strategic guidance and inputs, ultimately produce the visible parts of the president's message. Thus, while the individual skill and talent of the officials is important, the architecture of the processes that govern the presidential communications apparatus—the anatomy of strategic communications—is even more important.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

One thing that surprised me when I first visited the White House in Washington, D.C. is how easy it is to look into it. Standing outside the see-through fences of the White House, you can get a glimpse of something as seemingly personal as the windows of the rooms in which the president and his family sleep. In contrast, the presidential residence and office in Mexico, called *Los Pinos*, is not nearly as visible. On the two main entrances, both heavily guarded by a checkpoint operated by officials from *El Estado Mayor*, just a long, cobbled driveway is visible, separating a long wall at the left (or right, depending on which entrance is being used), from a woody area at the right with lots of ever-green trees that justify the name *Los Pinos* (The Pinecone Trees). Behind that wall and some additional security checkpoints, completely out of sight to an outside observer, lay the several casas (houses) and buildings in which the official residence of the president has been housed for several decades now.

Likewise, leaving some brief temporal exceptions aside, the American people have been able to tour the White House, including parts of the world-famous West Wing, for several decades now. *Los Pinos*, in turn, has been typically more of an off-limits address to the Mexican people. It was just in the Fox presidency (2000-2006) that tours of *Los Pinos* were instated—a practice which the Calderon administration (2007-2012) continued and the Peña Administration (2012-2018) reversed.

These facts, of course, could be dismissed as unimportant. But they seem to find echo in the level of understanding about both presidencies from the societies of each country.

Several U.S. presidents, chiefs of staff, secretaries, and assistants (and special assistants) to the president, as well as external advisors have written memoirs in which they disclose how their offices operated, what challenges they faced, and how they undertook them. In

contrast, not all Mexican presidents have written memoirs, and it is more of an exception than a common practice for a secretary or a senior official from *Los Pinos* to write a memoir--or even participate in panels aimed at understanding how the office or institution he headed operated.

In terms of journalism, a 2006 article by the magazine *Líderes* claims to be the first ever journalistic attempt of describing how the Mexican presidency worked on a day by day basis. While it is certainly a step forward in the matter, it is a 6-page story with large pictures taking up most of the space in each page. To be fair, several Mexican outlets have more recently run in-depth stories on the president's senior advisors and how they operate. But the level of scrutiny and depth of analysis can hardly compare to what it has been in the U.S.

In terms of popular culture, I am not aware of any popular Mexican TV series like *The West Wing* that portrays some aspects of the daily work at the Presidency. Unsurprisingly, even highly educated and political-savant Mexicans don't know what the Mexican equivalent of the Oval Office is.

Overall, as Mexicans, we know very little about our presidency: how it is staffed, how it works, and how it could work better. For all the rhetoric about the importance of (strong) institutions, we have spared so little of our time to discuss the most powerful of all our institutions.

The result is a highly mystified institution—a suboptimal scenario for practitioners, analysts and, hence, the public alike. Practitioners (including presidents) don't get the benefit of open discussions that add to their own understanding of the role they are playing or the one that they will. They have few, if any, tools that are specific to the Mexican case and help them determine how to best conceptualize their own offices and

engineer the processes around them. They have to rely solely on private opinions that, while useful and learned, may lack a broader comparative framework—or even a bigger sample size. Analysts are also ill-served by the scarce in-depth information scenario. They often get to praise or criticize actions that come from the presidency without even knowing what the decision-makers dashboards really look like. While there are, of course, a few exceptions, the rest of them are limited to expressing opinions of decisions that come out of processes that they are largely unfamiliar with. And the public is clearly not better served by any of this. With the most important institution of the country having big blind spots, and those observing and commenting about it having even bigger and more numerous ones, it is not hard to see how the public could be misguided about what the presidency is, what it does, and how it does it.

**

Consultants, officials, and pundits like to say that, in the modern era, “*gobernar es comunicar*” (to govern is to communicate). And commentators and politicians alike seem to be fond of saying that a government can fail in its objectives because of an inability to communicate with the public or due to the choice of a poor communications strategy. The implication, of course, is that communications have become indispensable and inextricably intertwined with “the art of governing.” Given the very nature of democracy, these statements hardly require any explanation.

Yet, despite its obvious relevance, we know surprisingly little about Mexican presidential communications, the way it functions, and the way it is thought about by its own practitioners. Judging by this fact, it could well be that the wall at the end of the cobbled pathway at the entry of *Los Pinos* from the offices is insurmountable—that practitioners and former practitioners are so secretive about their craft that it is hard to understand what is it exactly that they do.

But such is not the case. This thesis is built upon a remarkably candid and generous discussion with the majority of the officials who have been tasked with managing an aspect of the president's message in modern times. Here, I discuss the officials' self-disclosed priorities, concerns, obstacles, solutions, critiques, insights and even some of the examples they used to illustrate their more abstract points—offering an in-depth look into the mostly uncharted Mexican presidential communications apparatus.

From this new exploration, several trends emerge. The way communications officials work clearly shows that, rather than secretive craftsmen, they are highly skilled and professionalized managers that lead the most complex communications apparatus in the country. As top managers and leaders, they oversee multifaceted processes and multidisciplinary interactions that, with their strategic guidance and inputs, ultimately produce the visible parts of the president's message—those that have an impact on, and are judged by, experts and laymen alike. Thus, while the individual skill and talent of the officials is important, the architecture of the processes that govern the presidential communications apparatus is even more important. Hence, answering where each of the processes of each individual office (several of them are involved in managing the president's message) is geared to and what the overall process aims to is a big part of the thesis.

The sheer complexity and fast-pace of the processes also serves to illustrate that gone are the days when the presidency had the last word (and often, also the first and only word) in terms of public affairs. While the presidency still holds (and perhaps will forever hold) an institutional advantage over any other political organizations in terms of communications, it has to approach communications as a strategic endeavor—and a multidimensional one. One dimension of strategy deals with which issues to push on (or attempt to pull from) the national agenda and which issues to pull close to or distance

from. Another dimension deals with how to best approach each issue in terms of communications. But, as the thesis will argue, it is hard to separate one dimension from the other—sometimes even in conceptual terms. So, as the presidency interacts strategically within the public sphere, it thinks in terms of these distinct dimensions both separately and together. It has to consider the effect of its communicative actions on the individual debate of an issue and on the overall national conversation, with the implications it will generate in terms of popularity and influence for the presidency in an ever changing public sphere.

It is within this complex decision-making environment—one which will be explored in greater detail throughout the thesis—that officials in charge of presidential communications operate.

If it is true that “*gobernar es comunicar*”, governments that understand the possibilities and limits of communications as well as how to overcome communications obstacles in a way that is aligned with the democratic values of openness, transparency, and candidness which the Mexican public is beginning to cherish so deeply can only become more successful. So will analysts. And so will the public.

To be sure, just as not being a doctor does not disqualify anyone from detecting good or bad medical practices, I am certainly not disqualifying opinions that don't have the benefit of insights coming directly from the inside of the presidential communications operation. But I do believe that filling the current gap in scholarly knowledge about what Mexican presidential communications are and how exactly do they work can point criticisms and praises alike in the right direction. And, perhaps more importantly, I am certain that filling this gap can point the communication practices of the presidency towards mechanisms in which they can achieve their policy and political objectives in a

way that maximizes accountability, responsiveness and deliberation—all key components for a country striving to become more democratic.

**

Before beginning this exploration, it is important to note that, just as communications don't occur in a vacuum, it is impossible to address issues that deal with political communications without a basic understanding of the particular media politics environment and mass communications theory as it applies to the presidency. Hence, the first part of this thesis consists mainly of a review of scholarly literature. It begins by analyzing what scholars have found about the Mexican media politics system, and how it has evolved. Next, it moves on to answering the second question of how presidential communications work—drawing mainly from a wealth of examples and findings from the U.S. and explaining how they apply (if so) to the Mexican case.

The second part of the thesis, in turn, describes the anatomy of strategic communications in the modern Mexican presidency. Once it became clear that, in Mexico, presidential communications have become a multidisciplinary endeavor in which several presidential offices participate, the need to look into the responsibilities, priorities, daily activities, obstacles, and decision-making dilemmas of each office became unavoidable. And, given the scarcity of published material on the subject, the only way to achieve this objective—the only way to go across the wall that separates the cobbled driveway at the entrance of *Los Pinos* from the casas and buildings where the most important political and policy decisions in the country are made and take the reader with me—was to talk to the communications officials themselves.

Thus, I conducted in-depth interviews with several senior officials and external advisors who were directly involved with strategic communications processes at the presidency.

The officials whom I interviewed include chiefs of staff, secretarios particulares, chief pollsters, coordinadores or directores de comunicacion social, and coordinadores de estrategia y mensaje gubernamental, as well as head speechwriters¹. Together, they span the 5 most recent Administrations and the last 26 years. Party-wise, they represent incumbencies from both the PRI and PAN, 2 of the 3 major political parties – and the only parties that have occupied the presidency. Besides the sheer wealth of information that this approach generated, engaging with officials from several administrations and several officials from each administration guarantee that a more detailed and accurate picture of the workings of each office can be drawn. It also allows for comparisons between different perspectives among officials, which are often useful to illustrate the decision-making dilemmas that communications officials face.

Drawing from the interviews, the second part of the thesis first describes how each of the four offices involved in presidential communications work. Then, it describes the key mechanisms through which all of them come together to collaborate. Finally, it offers conclusions, which summarize the thesis' main findings and offer some brief suggestions on how to improve presidential communications.

**

Before beginning this in-depth look at presidential communications in Mexico, it could be useful to alert the reader on what this thesis is and what it's not. Although the views of several high-profile individuals and officials are given voice in this work, the purpose of my analysis is not to generate controversy around individuals. This explains, in large part, my decision to conduct the interviews on "background" rules, without identifying who exactly said what. Nor is my thesis geared towards assessing whether a particular

¹ Or Coordinadores de Campañas or Coordinadores de Imagen y Opinion Publica, depending on the presidency that is being analyzed.

speech, media campaign, TV appearance, slogan, or any other communications vehicle has been successful or effective. While some principles can be distilled from the analysis I conduct, this is not a guidebook for tactics. Moreover, although the literature review part touches upon crucial theoretical concepts, such as the media effects literature, this thesis is not geared towards assessing whether theoretical communications concepts applied to the U.S. hold in the Mexican case. The exploration of theoretical concepts is only relevant to the degree with which these concepts either find echo or contrast with how communications officials at the Mexican presidency think about communicating strategically.

To the extent that this work could spark discussion, I would wish it to be centered on decision-making, organizational structure, and executive branch processes geared towards gathering and disseminating information strategically *and* candidly. Such an approach to the analysis of communications is particularly useful because it addresses the roots and causes, rather than just the visible outcomes of communications. And, after all, presidential communications are nothing but the product of processes managed by the offices in charge of crafting and disseminating the president's message.

**

For centuries, western medicine has assumed that the study of human anatomy is necessary not only to understand human life better, but also to make practical recommendations about how and when to intervene to improve the many processes that make it possible. My thesis is rooted on a similar belief: at its heart, this thesis is about understanding how different organs in the presidency interact to bring the abstract concept of presidential communications to life. Just like the doctors that study human anatomy, I assume that becoming familiar with the anatomy of presidential

communications is a necessary condition to understand how to make them better as a whole.

Part 1:

The theoretical and institutional context for presidential communications: a review of the literature

Introduction to Part 1

The U.S. presidency and political communication are themes that have attracted the attention of numerous distinguished scholars. Although the specificity of their intersection reduces the number of available academic studies, U.S. presidential communication has been widely studied (e.g. Neustadt, 1960; Kernell, 1993; Hart, 1987; Baum 2004, 2005; Miler & Krosnick, 2000; Edwards, 2006, and several others). The richness of these studies lies not only in the different time periods that have been analyzed, but also in the diverse analytical and methodological lenses that have been used.

Mexican presidential communication, in contrast, has received significantly less attention. While there are several remarkable works on Mexican politics and the Mexican presidency (e.g. Saenz, 2006; Carpizo, 2002; Cosío Villegas, 1974; Espinosa, 1996; de la Madrid, 1998, 2004; Weldon, 1994; Nacif, 2004; Romero, 2005 Hurtado, 2001; Marcos, 1975; and several others), and several significant studies on political communication for electoral processes (Gomez, 2005; Moreno, 2003; Dominguez & McCann, 1996; Bruhn, 2007; Dominguez & Lawson, 2004; and several others), scholarly studies that focus specifically on Mexican presidential communications remain quite scarce.

Hence, some groundwork is needed. Considering that presidential communication strategies do not occur in a vacuum, it is necessary to begin by considering the context. Therefore, even if this work focuses only a subset of Mexican presidential communications, it must deal with the broader Mexican political communications environment. It must describe the “media politics” arena: the public space that joins politicians, citizens, and the media together (Zaller, 1999). This task entails dealing with two different types of studies simultaneously. On the one hand, the relationships, processes and effects that shape political communication must be examined. Because of

the abundance of the studies that explore these workings in the U.S. case and their relative scarcity in the Mexican one, a significant portion of the theory and empirical studies that will be cited are related to American political communications. Whenever this path is followed, the analysis will offer arguments explaining how the communicational phenomenon being studied relates/applies to the Mexican context.

On the other hand, the basic forces that shape Mexican politics must be accounted for. This requires a comprehensive analysis of the political system and its participants, which ranges from the incentives grounded in laws and institutions to the organizations and people that give shape to crucial decisions. Fortunately, the copious work by several scholars of Mexican politics has paved the way for this exploration.

The first chapter deals with the historical political and media background, which is crucial to understand Mexico's modern presidential communication context. The second chapter describes the main characteristics of the Mexican media landscape. Based on these two elements, the third chapter evaluates the purpose and strategic relevance of presidential communication in Mexico. The fourth chapter explores the main mechanisms and effects through which presidential communication can shape and influence public opinion. The final chapter of part 1 summarizes the findings based on the literature review. Throughout the entire first part of the thesis, the theoretical framework that holds the discussion together and keeps it on track is largely based on political communication theories, which have been conceived and tested mostly for the U.S. case.

Chapter 2: Mexico's road to democracy and press independence

This brief historical account contextualizes Mexican presidential communications. As such, it serves two main purposes. First, to emphasize that Mexico's democracy is a young one. Second, to show that political communication in a competitive arena -- a minimal requirement to be slightly comparable to the US and other advanced democracies -- has only existed since 1997. Together, these two factors explain why this thesis will only analyze the five most recent *sexenios*².

But, rather than jumping directly on the history, it seems only fitting to start any account dealing with a modern presidency by citing the work of the most influential Presidential scholar. Neustadt (1960) changed the focus of the studies of the presidency from authority to persuasion. "Public prestige", rather than sheer command, began to be studied as one of the sources of presidential power. As a result, attention to the President's public approval as a powerful governmental mechanism in scholarly studies has soared.

However, Neustadt (1960, 1997) never argued directly for a mass communications strategy as a source to conserve or expand presidential power. In fact, his idea of persuasion being equal to bargaining seems deeply rooted in the idea of *institutionalized pluralism*³ (Kernell, 1993). Under this power arrangement, which dominated American politics before the 1970's, one-on-one negotiations with key stakeholders was privileged over *going public* to communicate directly with constituents that would, in turn, pressure the stakeholders (i.e. Congress members).

² In Mexico, a Presidential term is 6 years long.

³ The defining characteristic of institutionalized pluralism is that crucial political decisions are made by a fixed, small number of political actors.

Yet, that “presidential power is the power to persuade” (Neustadt, 1960, p.8), whether it is through bargaining or mass communications, is not true everywhere, all of the time. It was certainly not the case for the several decades of Mexican history that have been called the *imperial presidency*—perhaps more justifiably so than when Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (2004) called the American presidency by the same name—and the *perfect dictatorship* (Krauze, 2002 & Vargas Llosa, 1990). Before Mexico’s democratic transition, which will be described later in the chapter, presidential power in the country was more similar to command than to persuasion. The powers of the presidency extended beyond the executive, legislative, and judicial powers; local governments, the media, unions, business chambers were all subservient to an all-powerful Mexican president. In other words, just as in Schlesinger’s description of the American imperial presidency, up until the 1990’s, Mexican presidents exceeded their constitutional limits (Weldon, 1994). Presidential secrecy abounded (Carreño, 2007)⁴. Presidential staff, including cabinet members and other appointees only answered to him, resembling a “royal court”. But, compared to the U.S., there is at least one marked difference that makes Mexico’s presidency during those years even more *imperial*: free and fair elections, the only brief moment in which an *imperial* President and his team seemed to become accountable to the public and vulnerable to Congress and the press, did not take place in Mexico.

The PRI’s pervasive control and unchecked power in all levels of the Mexican political system during the first five decades of its existence made it almost impossible for a free press to rise and for the opposition political parties to win elections at any level – local or national, legislative or executive. It only seems logical that presidential communications in Mexico during such period were approached as opportunities for propaganda. One

⁴ Access to information laws were non-existent until the 1980’s

example of this communications style is President Cardenas' (1934-1940) creation of the Office of Publicity and Propaganda (Dirección de Publicidad y Propaganda) within the Ministry of Government (Secretaría de Gobernación) officially intended to “boost government legitimacy” and “ensure loyalty from the masses”. (Lomelí, 1995, p.59). This office later became the (independent) Department of Publicity and Propaganda, which functioned as the “government’s propaganda lab” (p.60). The Department was short-lived: soon (at the beginning of the 1940s) it was replaced by offices of *comunicación social*, responsible for managing the relationship with the press, proliferated within every cabinet agency. Yet, despite these organizational changes and some minor subsequent ones, between the 1930’s and the 1960’s the overall propagandistic approach to presidential communications remained.

Under such a system, a close, mutually beneficial relationship between most media owners and the political elite was formed (Aguilar & Leycegui, 2013). Most Mexican publishers, broadcasters, reporters, and information disseminators were part of the system of rent-seeking, which benefited them as well as the country’s political leadership. In fact, because of the close relationships between media owners and government officials, the selective allocation of broadcasting concessions, the generous subsidies that the government handed in the form of cheap newsprint (through PIPSA, the government-owned monopoly of such supply) and streams of advertisement, as well as the corruption of media outlet’s rank and file through *chayos* (bribes), the overt and sometimes brutal methods of media control found in most autocratic political systems were largely redundant or unnecessary in Mexico (Lawson, 2002). To be sure, this does not mean that repressive mechanisms were not used in some occasions in which independent or semi-independent media chose to disseminate damaging information. In fact, the punishment for such behavior could be anything from shutting down the supply of newsprint to the disobedient outlet, and stopping official advertising—typically, at that

moment, any media's main source of income --to harassment, and, on very rare occasions, overt repression or *mano dura*. Yet, the relationship between the government and the media can be better described as a *culture of collusion* than a *culture of repression*.

In any case, the result was media subservience to the government. This is illustrated by the fact that these decades rarely witnessed sustained pressure from the traditional media to investigate controversial topics and publish sensitive information. Instead, media coverage tended to be dominated by "official" public discourse, with the accompanying partisan bias in favor of the PRI during election times, and a selective silence on issues of particular vulnerability for the government (Lawson, 2002).

It is interesting to note, however, that semi-independent media could often operate without official interference if they refrained from directly challenging the foundations of the political system (Lawson, 2002). Altogether, this "loosely" authoritarian system of managing press relations with official outlets—which, by the way, also included enough official and "officious" outlets from different political ideologies to clearly outnumber independent ones in terms of print media as well as broadcast—creepily resembles the one that Maurice Joly's (1999) modern incarnation of Machiavelli in *Dialogue aux enfers entre Machiavel et Montesquieu* (dialogues XII and XIII) describes.

However, unlike the permanent domination that Maurice Joly predicts for "the prince" as a result of such practices, Mexico would not remain forever authoritarian. Nor would all of its press tolerate being subservient forever. Following the massacre of 1968, in which protesting students were killed by Mexico's military, the 1970's and 1980's marked the beginning of change in Mexico—in politics as well as in the media environment. Deep political reform was enacted. The first opposition *diputados* (deputies) were elected. Access to information became a constitutional right (Carreño,

2007). After the government's coup on the newspaper *Excelsior*, which under the leadership of Julio Scherer, had become increasingly independent and critic of the government's activities, the magazine *Proceso* and the daily *UnomásUno*—both pioneers in adversarial journalism—were founded (Lawson, 2002). The offices of comunicación social and crónica presidencial at the executive office of the president were created, perhaps as a reaction to a political environment with slightly more contestation (Lomelí, 1994). But the vanguard of public-focused, non-propagandistic, highly professionalized journalism in Mexico continued and quickly spread to other newspapers, like *El Norte*, *La Jornada*, and *El Sur*. (Hughes, 2006, 2008). Following the 1985 earthquake that caused massive damage in Mexico City and generated a spike in the demand for accurate information, hardly the one that the government was feeding the press, broadcast radio, under the leadership of Gutiérrez Vivó and other newscasters, began to adopt a more independent voice (Sanchez Ruiz, 2005; Lawson, 2002).

In 1988, the PRI won, again, the presidential elections. But this time, the process was tainted by claims of fraud. The ensuing discussion brought about a new wave of deep electoral reform, removing the Ministry of Government as the arbiter of electoral processes. In 1989, the first opposition Governor was elected (Shirk, 2005). In the beginning of the 1990's, PIPSA stopped being the sole supplier of newsprint (Lawson, 2002). The media started to gain more autonomy (Medina Viedas, 1999; Careño, 2007; Lawson, 2002) and voices that criticized the government both in broadcast and in print had begun to be massively heard. In 1993, a new TV channel that could effectively compete with Televisa was put in private hands, effectively creating market-driven competition for the first time.

Yet, it was not until 1997 that the PRI, the ruling party in Mexico for nearly 70 years, lost its majority in Congress (Klesner, 1997). Suddenly, as scholars and analysts had

predicted, the meta-constitutional powers of *presidencialismo* ceased to exist (Weldon, 1994). Divided government became the standard (Magar & Romero, 2008; Lujambio & Vives, 2000). The President stopped being the *de facto* only source of new legislation (de la Madrid, 1999). Although with different purposes than in the US, the Mexican president now had to persuade others; to fulfill its objectives, the Mexican presidency, just like Neustadt argued for the U.S., now had to bargain (Lujambio & Vives, 2000). Furthering the rise of an independent media, by the beginning of the electoral process of 2000, the market-driven logic that Televisa adopted to compete against TV Azteca caused the PRI to lose the most powerful TV network in all of Latin America as a subservient ally (Fernandez & Paxman, 2013).

In the year 2000, Vicente Fox from the opposition party PAN was elected president of Mexico, signaling the end of the PRI control of the presidency for seven decades.

Chapter 2: Mexican media landscape under democratic rule

As Lawson (2002) and Wallis (2004) have concluded from their studies of Mexican media, changes in the press and changes in the political system have had a reciprocal relationship. Media independence has played a crucial role in Mexico's evolution toward democracy, but the political movement toward democracy has also played a crucial role in media opening. Together, political liberalization, the rise in market competition and the establishment of journalistic norms, as well as individual human agency (for instance, the initiative and leadership of Scherer, Gutierrez Vivo, and others) and the catalyst effect of natural disasters and economic and political crisis explain the rise of an independent press in Mexico, regardless of how incomplete and imperfect this process has been (Lawson, 2002).

Today, that Mexico has come a long way since the demise of the PRI hegemonic rule is undeniable. Access-to-information laws have been enacted and professionalization of the media has progressed significantly—both of which are crucial for watchdog journalism and freedom of the press to exist (Waisbord, 2000).

This, however, does not mean that the media in Mexico has reached the pluralist-liberal ideal, in which the press serves as a catalyst for a robust, vigorous, and objective discussion about public affairs (Norris, 2010). Freedom House, for instance, still ranks Mexico as not free in its annual press freedom rating (Freedom House, 2012). Some of the most common structural problems that have been identified in Mexico are “a) oligopolistic or monopolistic private media and advertising markets, b) local (state-level) media lacking editorial insulation from political control, c) digital media access reaching only about 33 percent of the population (and less than 10 percent of the population with quality, (or high-speed) access), and d) community media that are controlled by local cliques or outside funders, are repressed by state actors, or in most cases lack a large

reach” (Hughes & Prado, in press, cited in p.370). Violence and threats against journalists are also a significant, ongoing problem (Waisbord, 2007; Hughes & Lawson, 2005).

Just as threatening to the democratic ideal, the once subservient media has been replaced, in large part, with a powerful, often capricious media filter, which has been repeatedly accused of monopoly and undemocratic behavior. For instance, Carreño (2007) argues that, ever since 2002, the power balance between government and the media started to shift in favor of the latter. Although his analysis of media power centers on the passage of legislation and regulations favorable to the media (like the so-called Ley Televisa of 2006) rather than on slants and biases in terms of coverage, it seems quite plausible that the influence that media corporations have accrued has been used not only for lobbying but also for favoring some political projects or alternatives over others through its portrayal of politics. However, I am not aware of any scholarly studies that address this research question in particular for the Mexican case.

Despite this gap in the political and mass media literature, it seems undisputable that, in Mexico, the media has become emancipated: government officials no longer have the ability to determine what news is and how news should be communicated to the public (Lawson, 2002). In the face of such a filter and stronger political opposition, the difficulty for the President to communicate with the public in his own terms has risen exponentially. The enlargement, specialization, and multiplication of communication-related presidential offices and staffers, which will be detailed in part 2 of the thesis, is compelling evidence of the increased complexity of this task.

At the same time, the fact that Mexico’s government has been divided since the 1997 elections, that elections are now competitive in a majority of the states of Mexico, and the greater degree of civic participation and involvement in politics make strategic

political communication a more indispensable task than ever. As a result, publicity and governing are becoming more intertwined.

For the U.S. case, Cook (2005) has persuasively argued that media strategies become increasingly useful means for political actors to pursue governance – and become an increasing focus of their attention and activities – as the disjuncture between the power of these actors and the expectations placed on them grows. Thus, it is tempting to conclude that the fact that divided government has become the norm in Mexico means that governance and media strategies are just as intertwined and effective as they are in the U.S. But, as the next section will show, some characteristics of the Mexican political system have prevented this from happening.

Chapter 4: Purpose and importance of strategic presidential communications in Mexico

As it has been discussed, persuasion, instead of command, gained increased significance after the rise of divided government in Mexico, which took place in 1997 (Nacif, 2006; Lujambio & Vives, 2000). In this new context, Neustadt's concept of public prestige (or popularity), became relevant as one of the sources of presidential power. Yet, it would be misleading to assume that popularity in Mexico can be used in the same way that it is in the U.S.

Besides personal legacy purposes, U.S. presidents seek popularity for three strategic reasons: 1) to win reelection, 2) to gain more seats in Congress for its party, and 3) to build support for their policies. Their communication efforts are built accordingly. But, do these two purposes hold for Mexican presidential communications?

The short answer is *no*. In Mexico, the current Constitutional prohibition for reelection binds the pragmatic/strategic uses of popularity. Hence, Mexican presidents can only use their popularity to turn it into more seats in Congress or build support for their policies.

Moreover, the use of popularity is significantly more indirect than it is in the U.S.: in Mexico, there are strict legal restrictions that shun the president from openly campaigning in anyone's name (Aguilar & Leycegui, 2013). Besides, the now classic presidential strategy of *going public* that Kernell (1976) coined may be a lot less effective in Mexico than in the US, since the prohibition for legislative reelection in Mexico reduces the pressure that legislators feel from their constituents. Instead of depending upon their constituents for their next job through reelection, the political future of Mexican legislators (and municipal presidents, and governors) is frequently at the mercy

of their party leaders will. As a result, party discipline is strengthened. Therefore, while going public may raise support for the president's policies, there is no direct mechanism that explains how this support can be turned into Congressional votes in favor of his policies, because there are no incentives that bind the congress member to his specific constituency. To be sure, a president *may* use support from the public for a policy he is championing as leverage to negotiate with the opposition. But it is crucial to consider that such an approach puts bargaining—rather than going public, which entails “drawing a line on the sand” and limiting the bargaining options—at the forefront.

Altogether, the electoral characteristics of the Mexican political system increase the relative importance of bargaining, as in institutionalized pluralism, while reducing the importance of a mass media strategy, which, according to Kernell (1976) is most efficient under individualized pluralism. The successful *Pacto por Mexico*, for example, signed at the beginning of President Peña Nieto's administration by all 3 major parties to enact reforms in key sectors, suggests that bargaining or going private may be more effective for reform enactment. This presidential achievement contrasts starkly with what Lujambio and Martinez (2012) have described as President Fox's ineffective strategy of *going public* to pursue economic and political reforms similar to what the *Pacto por Mexico* was able to negotiate and sign into law. While there are, of course, other reasons that impacted the effectiveness of both strategies, the different use of communications (and political bargaining) may have been a central one: one president went public through the media to signal his political posture and preferences and try to force others into agreement by influencing public opinion; the other went private and had more room to bargain and reach an agreement before communicating with the public.

More generally, because of the lack of mechanisms to translate public opinion considerations into Congressional votes, as well as the often lacking citizen engagement

and participation, presidential communications in Mexico have frequently been ascribed an auxiliary role, rather than a central one—in which governing and publicity become one and the same, as in the U.S. (Cook, 2005)

To be sure, this does not mean that the president disregards public opinion. The very fact that a full-fledged office at the presidency tracks and studies public opinion, as part 2 will show, proves otherwise. But it does mean that the president frequently overlooks whether, through publicity, he can garner enough political support for an initiative to succeed. Instead, political decisions are made based on the potential of bargaining to secure political support and, only afterwards, communication experts are charged with the task of creating strategies to convey them to the public. Although this distinction seems slight, its effects in how presidential communications offices operate and, much more importantly, their end results are considerable—as part 2 of the thesis will discuss.

Going forward, the enactment of political reform in 2013 that allows for legislative reelection at the federal level from 2015 will, undoubtedly, change the incentives generated by Mexico's political system. By making legislators more responsive to their constituents, reelection will make public opinion more relevant in the calculations that legislators make when voting. Therefore, presidential communication strategies that effectively sway public opinion both at the national and regional levels will now be able to compete with bargaining at the leadership level as a mechanism for securing congressional votes. If all else remains equal, Mexico may suddenly find itself no longer as an institutionalized pluralist system, but as an individualized pluralist one. When that happens, the importance of strategic communications for the Presidency will experience another sudden increase. Governing and publicity would then become more intertwined and “governing with the news” would become indispensable. As this brief picture of the

future shows, understanding the forces at work in political communications in Mexico can only become more relevant.

Chapter 5: Presidential communications in the US and Mexico

As previous chapters suggest, the history of presidential communications Mexico and in the U.S. is quite different. Their power allocation is different. The political system they are embedded in is different, too. Consequently, their pragmatic purposes, and even the strategic importance granted to them, are not the same. Does this mean that none of the findings from the U.S. political communications system apply to Mexico? How does the way communications operate coincide or contrast between the U.S. and Mexico? Which insights can be extrapolated to Mexico take into account which caveats?

Before moving on, it is important to consider that the U.S. president does not advertise directly, like the Mexican executive branch does. Thus, the literature-review based analysis of presidential communications will appear to be heavily slanted towards communications which are directly mediated by the press (earned media). The second part of the thesis, however, will remedy this gap and address the advertising capabilities and operations of the Mexican presidency. But, in any case, rather than follow a completely different pattern than press-mediated communications, advertising usually complements, accentuates and emphasizes the presidential narrative which is also reflected in its press outreach strategy. Hence, it is useful to understand how mediated communications in general operate, and what its limits and potential are—a task to which I now turn.

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In the U.S., to reach a large mass of citizens, and even to communicate effectively with opinion leaders (Kumar, 2010), a significant part of the president's message has to go through the news media. This is challenging because journalists, as Zaller (2000) argues, aspire, individually and collectively, to maximize their independent and distinctive voice

in the news. In other words, in the U.S., the President's message goes through a powerful filter, which not only also broadcasts dissenting voices regularly, but also prides itself in producing and disseminating its independent analysis. Because Zaller's arguments rests on journalistic professionalization and the fact that the media has become a powerful actor in the political game—and both conditions hold for the Mexican case, albeit to different degrees—it seems safe to assume that the argument can be extrapolated to the modern media politics landscape in Mexico. First, as previously argued, ever since the foundation of independent news outlets such as *Proceso*, *La Jornada*, *unomasuno*, etc, professionalization in the Mexican news media has steadily risen and eventually spread out to a majority of news outlets (Lawson, 2002). Consequently, journalistic norms have become key elements in determining what news is and what it is not. Second, the media has become an increasingly powerful actor—even to the point that some leading scholars like Carreño (2007) claim that the television duopoly, acting as a cartel, is becoming more powerful than the divided and fragmented government that Mexico has. While it could be argued that the fact that the Mexican presidency and executive branch can advertise directly undermines this conclusion for the Mexican case, it would be hard to sustain that the most substantive form of communications from the government to the public (at least with the informed, news-tracking part of it) takes place through advertising, which is an inherently brief form of communication. Thus, this essential model remains the cornerstone for the larger part of presidential communications.

But, once it passes the media's filtering, the President's message still has to overcome at least two obstacles. The first obstacle is the avalanche of information and stimuli that constantly compete for the audience's attention. Even as early as the 1940's, Schumpeter (1942) had argued that "the problem, if there is one, is the system of media politics itself, a system that demands more attentiveness from citizen-voters, on issues

from health-care reform to presidential nominations, than it is individually sensible or in many cases possible for them to give.” (cited in Zaller, 2000, p.35). This situation, of course, has only grown more difficult with time. Today, “the president communicates with the public in a congested communications environment clogged with competing messages from a wide variety of sources, through a wide range of media, and on a staggering array of subjects” (Edwards, 2003, p 25). Again, this obstacle can be partially circumvented through direct advertising, but radio and TV spots are not the principal form of communication—and they also have to compete with other communications and activities which compete with the media consumer’s attention. The very fact that the Mexican presidency still relies on a huge press office apparatus (100+-people strong (Aguilar & Leycegui, 2013)) shows that no modern administration has deemed advertising a substitute of engagement with the press.

The second, perhaps more challenging obstacle, is persuasion itself. Influencing others by modifying their beliefs, values, or attitudes is no easy feat. Various models, such as the cognitive dissonance theory, the elaboration likelihood model, or the social judgment theory – the leading scientific explanations for persuasion – suggest that changing other people’s minds’ to influence their behavior is quite a challenge (O’Keefe, 2002). For example, the social judgment theory emphasizes the notion of latitudes of rejection, a range of ideas that a person sees as unreasonable or objectionable and cannot be persuaded at all to accept (Griffin, 2003).

But, even in the face of such trans-boundary challenges, Presidents sometimes manage to be successful in their messaging, bolstering public (and private) support for their policies and retaining a high public approval. How?

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Edwards (2009), who has famously argued that the President's words usually fall on deaf ears, nonetheless concedes that presidents can increase their chances of success by acting strategically. Doing so successfully requires a deep understanding of how the media portrays the President and how it affects citizens' opinions.

It is important to note at the outset that the president's potential for influencing citizen's opinions, one of the main goals of presidential communications, is characterized as limited, but significant by Grossman & Kumar (1980) and Edwards (2003; 2009). Whether the purpose is to persuade, mobilize support, or even divert attention from an issue (Miles, 2013), knowing the possibilities and limits of mediated communications has become indispensable. Failing to do so may result, on the one hand, on missed opportunities. On the other, it may cause self-inflicted political wounds.

So, what is the Presidency's communication power once it undergoes mediation? What are the effects of its communication efforts? And how does this relate to Presidential communication strategies?

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Agenda setting

The media, in a political environment, is neither all-powerful nor weak. News can matter⁵ (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Cohen (1963) described this accurately: "the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its (audience) what to think about" (p.13). He may have missed that the media is also sometimes successful in telling its audience how to think about the issues, an argument which will be explored in upcoming sections. But his quote still

⁵ Although they only prove that TV news matter, their broad argument can be extended to news in general.

provides an unmatched framework to start the discussion of media effects through agenda-setting.

As mentioned in the previous section, private citizens are confronted by what Lippmann (1927) called “a swarming confusion of problems” (p.14) and they are not particularly adept at or interested in tracking public affairs systematically. Hence, the rational citizen, who does not want spend all his time researching public affairs issues (Downs, 1957) relies on the news media to tell him what the most important issues are (Zaller, 2000),.

Although I am not aware of a systematic study that shows this, it seems safe to assume that, just like Americans, ordinary Mexicans depend upon information and analysis provided by the mass media for their knowledge about public affairs. More specifically, it seems reasonable to say that they rely, either consciously or unconsciously, on the media’s judgment of which issues deserve their attention and which do not. As a result, extensive media attention to an issue is a powerful clue: it increases its perceived national importance (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). In other words, the media has agenda-setting powers. The copious, diverse and authoritative array of research regarding this media effect has shown that, even when its strength may vary depending on who is on the receiving end⁶, agenda-setting is detectable under a wide variety of circumstances and contexts and that its effects, while not permanent, are not momentary (Benton & Frazier, 1976; Blood, 1981; Chiang, 1995, Iyengar & Kinder, 2010; Shaw & Martin, 1992; McCombs & Reynolds, 2009; McCombs, 2013).

Considering this, it should be no surprise that, in the U.S., the President’s staff typically uses events, such as the State of the Union address (Peake & Esbaugh-Soha, 2008a), to

⁶ Typically, education, partisanship, and political involvement of the audience have been found to be interfering variables in agenda-setting strength

try to define the agenda of the media. Furthermore, their day-to-day interaction with the media – through press releases, informal conversations, the briefing, and the gaggle -- also shows the White House’s inclination to strategically emphasize some issues and minimize others, in the hopes that the media will do the same (Kumar, 2008). The results of these actions are often successful. Empirical research has confirmed that, by either speaking out publicly on an issue or, alternatively, avoiding the public spotlight in favor of quiet diplomacy, a president can increase or decrease the likelihood that the public will be attentive to that specific issue (Baum, 2004; Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993). Although scholarly studies had typically focused on the issues the president catapulted to the public agenda, Miles (2013) has recently shown that, by doing something that the media deem newsworthy, a president can divert the attention of the national media from topics that had previously dominated the news cycle toward new or different issues.

This does not mean that any President can automatically set the agenda anytime. Presidential command of the national news agenda seems to require substantial sustained effort (Eshbaugh-Soha 2006; Cohen 2008; Eshbaugh-Soha & Peake 2011). Edwards (2008) has summarized the limits to presidential agenda-setting. Some of them are inherent to presidential communications and have been mentioned above. But, because of their direct relationship to agenda-setting, they are still worth repeating briefly here. The most relevant among them are: the media has its own agenda, and may influence the President’s agenda; the White House sometimes competes with itself and the Executive Branch in setting the agenda. In other words, it’s hard to stay on message considering all the functions that the White House must fulfill; a huge portion of the citizens are usually disinterested in public affairs (also, Sears & Kinder, 1985), and, because of media fragmentation, people can now avoid listening to the President’s message; external events and issues may force the agenda upon the President – and the

media, and Congress. This explains why Edwards & Wood (1999) have been able to show that it is false that Presidents can unreservedly dominate agendas. But, even in the face of these limits, it seems safe to agree with Kingdon's (1995, p.23) now classic conclusion: "no other single actor in the political system has quite the capability of the president to set agendas." In other words, while the media may tell citizens what's important, the President, in turn, frequently defines for the media – and the rest of the political system -- what's important.

As part 2 of the thesis will extensively show and discuss, the efforts of the Mexican president's staff in setting the agenda are also both frequent and strategically planned. I have no awareness of academic research that systemically measures whether these efforts are likely to be successful. But none of the characteristics in the media politics system would indicate that, contrary to the US, the Mexican President is not the most powerful political actor in influencing the media's priorities, and thus, the national agenda.

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Priming

While quite powerful by itself, agenda-setting's impact is further enhanced when priming enters the scene. A close relative to agenda-setting, priming is based on the insight that when judging or choosing, people usually do not take into account all reasonable considerations. Instead of exhaustive analysis, people usually employ cognitive shortcuts (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1990). One such shortcut is relying upon information that comes to mind spontaneously when a judgment must be made (Tversky and Kahneman 1981). By building accessibility and retrievability -- the necessary

characteristics for information to spontaneously come to awareness -- the media plays a key role in influence an individual's opinion.

For example, when asked to evaluate a president's performance, citizens generally do not consider everything they know about him and his tenure (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Instead, they focus on whatever issue is dominant on the media agenda at the time (see, Romero, 2000 for the Mexican case). Therefore, the more attention the news pays to a particular issue—the more often the issue is primed—the more weight viewers should attach to it when judging the overall opinion of the president (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). In general, empirical research has shown that priming is a robust effect: the media can influence the information and criteria people use in making judgments of the president (Roskos-Ewoldsen, & Dillman, 2002; Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, and Krosnick, 1984; Krosnick & Brannon, 1993).

Perhaps more than any other, this line of research has had deep repercussions for the understanding of political communication in general and presidential communications in particular. As I have discussed in a previous section, whenever powers are effectively shared by many institutions or organizations – whenever the President needs to persuade -- public prestige, approval or popularity, becomes one of the sources of presidential power (Neustadt, 1960). Therefore, approval matters to presidents (Simon & Ostrom 1989; Cohen 2000, 2003). And, because of this, Edwards (2008) shows that campaigning – which, according to Kinder & Iyengar (2010), is an exercise mostly in priming—has become a crucial, and permanent, activity for governing (see also Ornstein and Mann, 2000). While this does not mean that the White House publicity machine is talking in terms of priming all the time, it means that, by affecting the chronic accessibility of an issue, through events, interviews, press conferences, press releases,

etc., the White House makes conscious efforts to shift the public's perception of the President (Kumar, 2010)

But, just as any other media effect, the impact of priming is bounded. A Presidency trying to nudge the President's popularity through priming has to overcome obstacles such as the inattentiveness of the public to the media, which thwarts its ability to build chronic accessibility. Additionally, the President's overall approval is composed of two elements: competence and character, or likeability (Kinder & Abelson, 1981). Therefore, a specific issue may alter the perception of the President's competence through priming but not his integrity or likeability leaving his overall approval rating unmoved. Besides, by following a different agenda and covering different issues than what the President would like, the media may prime the public to unflattering aspects of the President. In the light of priming, this can be quite problematic for the White House; even when the President is not to blame, his extraordinary visibility may cause citizens to attribute fault to him.

Before moving on, it is important to note that there is still an ongoing debate regarding news priming. Going forward, whether priming is found to happen under conscious control or not (Kahneman, 2003) will be key in determining whether people who are more politically involved are more (or less) prone to be swayed by this effect than the politically apathetic (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). Perhaps more alarmingly, whether credibility of the news is relevant to priming—and thus, to persuasion—seems to be at stake. Miller & Krosnik's (2000) explanation, for instance, puts a premium on credibility: “politically knowledgeable citizens who trust the media to be accurate and informative infer that news coverage of an issue means it is an important matter for the nation, leading these people to place greater emphasis on that issue when evaluating the President. Thus, news media priming does not occur because politically naive citizens are

"victims" of the architecture of their minds, but instead appears to reflect inferences made from a credible institutional source of information by sophisticated citizens." (p. 301). Yet, the answer to this debate is not yet definitive (Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). And it will have a profound impact in the way strategic presidential communications should be approached—more specifically on who should be targeted by presidential communications more frequently. For example, Baum (2005) has argued that presidential candidates appear on talk shows because their audiences, which typically have a big share of politically inattentive people, are not only usually not reachable through traditional news (because they do not consume news) but also more persuadable. The heart of his findings is that TV talk show audiences are typically politically unengaged citizens. While some of identify as either Democrats or Republicans, they have less knowledge and predispositions that make it likely to find the candidate from the opposition (and his stance on issues) disagreeable. Therefore, talk show audiences are more likely to cross party lines to vote for him. But, candidates are not the only ones that have crossed the line into entertainment shows. President Bush made TV and radio appearances on fishing and hunting shows. President Obama has also appeared in traditionally non-political talk shows such as Oprah, and even on Funny or Die's (a comedy video website) "Between two Ferns"—which hardly qualifies as a "soft news" show.

As the next chapter will show, the efforts of the Mexican President's staff in influencing the public perception of the President through priming are also substantial. Similar to the case of agenda-setting, I have no awareness of academic research that systemically measures whether these efforts are likely to be successful in the Mexican context. But, since priming is rooted in 1) the limited cognitive capability of persons who therefore apply cognitive shortcuts to judge, 2) the fact that the media constitute the channel through which public affairs are learned about, and 3) the fact that citizens are

chronically exposed to media – and all three conditions are present in Mexico – priming in Mexico is likely to be as a robust effect as in the US.

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Framing

In essence, to frame is to invite the audience to think about an issue in a certain way (Tewksbury and Scheufele, 2007). This is done by making some aspects of a perceived reality more salient, “promoting a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p.52)”. Therefore, it is quite clear that how a political issue is framed will have deep repercussions.

Psychologically, framing is rooted in the notion that “all perception is reference-dependent” (Kahnemann, 2003, p.459), which means that the judgment of a person regarding an issue depends not only on the issue itself, but also on the interpretive schema being applied. More significantly from a strategic communications perspective, different interpretive schemas can be invoked by framing the same message in different ways (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2007).

How an issue is framed entails great political power. Presidents have known this even before the electronic media rose in importance, as strategists and professional writers were employed in previous eras to create a powerful, appealing messages that would portray him and his politics in the best possible light (Kumar, 2008) Today, public polling, both in the U.S. and Mexico, is frequently used to construct an optimal political message and the notion of framing is widely used in the offices of professional political communicators. In other words, frame-building has become a routine for political actors.

However, contrary to the cases of agenda-setting and priming, the effect of elite communication on the way an issue is framed in the national media is inconsistent, at best (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2007). The possibility for frames to be rejected on a cultural basis that may be unique to each person, competing frames built by other powerful actors, media independence, and even the notion of journalistic objectivity, serve as counterbalances to presidential framing. In fact, aggressive attempts from the Presidency at managing the news – that is, at controlling the way their actions are framed – are typically accompanied by more negative coverage (Zaller, 2000). Besides, presidents have been known to complain about news bias against them. And, although defining and measuring bias is problematic, Groeling & Kernell (1998) have been successful in showing that, at least in presenting polling results, there is such a thing as anti-presidential bias among American TV networks.

From the presidential communications perspective, the strong, independent voice of national media represents an obstacle to getting its message across on its own terms. In the face of it, Presidents have started to “go local”, placing more emphasis on securing positive coverage from local media (Kumar, 2008; Cohen, 2008). On this type of media, the President has been able to garner more positive coverage than from the national media, although with outstandingly mixed results across different outlets and regions (Eshbaugh-Soha, 2008; Cohen, 2010). Furthermore, Presidential TV and radio appearances of the President on non-political talk-shows that were described in the last section can also be viewed from a framing perspective: in such shows, the President has an opportunity to broadcast his message without facing intense criticism and counter-framing that comes from traditional media (Baum, 2005).

Aside from the strong frame-filter that the media represents, presidential framing efforts face other significant obstacles. Among them are competing frames from other political

sources -- which, in Mexico, since the end of the 90's have mainly been opposition political parties, and, more recently, civic groups and issue experts -- and the fact that frames can be rejected by the audience either on cultural or psychological basis. Regarding frame rejection, it could well be that the existing schemata on the minds of the audience fail to grasp the frame's applicability, rejecting its message and rendering it ineffective (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2010). Based on this insight, understanding how different political groups think (Lakoff, 2008) and which words work to persuade them has become a necessity. After all, for framing purposes, what matters is "not what you say, it's what people hear" (Luntz, 2007, p. 6).

As it could be expected and the next chapter will show, the efforts of the Mexican President's staff in influencing the public perception of the President through framing are considerable.

Integrated communications models: how the Presidency (and other actors) influence media coverage

The media effects literature summarized above allows us to understand how it is that presidential communications, after going through the media, affect the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of citizens. However, this literature is not particularly adept at describing the interactions between different political actors and the media. In other words, it says nothing about how media coverage is influenced by the messaging efforts of the Presidency, other political actors. A good way to start this discussion is by introducing the concept of indexing.

Indexing begins with the premise that journalism is "source-driven..., with the media tending to ape the frames and agendas of elites -- especially elected officials" (Aday, 2014). Therefore, the indexing hypothesis states that news content on about a political or

policy issue will generally be as critically wide as the disagreement of elite debate (Bennett, 1990, 1994). In other words, those issues in which political elites (such as the Presidency, Congressional leaders, party leaders, etc.) disagree are more likely to receive highly critical coverage that reflects the opposing views. In contrast, issues in which the elites do not dissent receive less critical attention. Whenever consensus is adopted, the Presidency will tend to completely dominate the agenda and the framing of any issue – that is, until the opposition dissents and offers a suitable alternative. One powerful conclusion of the indexing model is that failure to offer critical coverage cannot be solely attributed to journalists; it may also be attributed to the opposition for failing to piece together and coherently express an effective criticism of the government and its narrative.

It is important to note that the indexing hypothesis has been widely used to explain media coverage of U.S. foreign policy but not domestic policy. This slant towards foreign policy, however, does not mean that the framework cannot explain media coverage of domestic policy. The focus on foreign policy is simply because foreign policy is a simpler political arena than domestic (particularly in the US, which has many levels of policy making on issues such as taxes, education, abortion policy, etc.). There is no reason why indexing would not work in domestic policy. Having established the applicability of indexing in all domains of policy, it seems plausible to expand this hypothesis to explain media coverage in any country where the press is at least partially independent – such as Mexico within the last decades. While, I am not aware of any scholarly work that has analyzed the indexing concept for the Mexican case, it seems safe to conclude that it would hold significant explanatory power.

Using the “cascade network activation model”, Entman (2012), has also characterized the chain of influence in media politics as elite-driven. According to this model, even

when the first-mover (typically, the Presidency) is restrained by “the culture” (i.e. schemas in minds of elites and publics and frames in literature, film, news, education, etc.), its communicational initiatives set the terms of the debate with Congress and other official elites that compete to advance strategic frames. This debate, in turn, cascades down to the media which introduces non-strategic frames, mainly by trying to turn a profit and, at the same time, fulfill its watchdog role. The final stage of the cascading process involves public opinion being shaped by the messages filtered through the first three stages of the process (Entman, 2012). Even when the conclusions of the model can be similar in some cases, the cascade model allows for more nuance than indexing in several ways. In fact, Aday (2014) has listed several significant of the additions of cascading to indexing. First, the cascade model posits that “frame contestation occurs at various levels of the cascade and ultimately shapes the message environment to which the public is exposed through media coverage”. Second, according to the cascade model, frame contestation is altered or otherwise accounted for (e.g., through rebuttal) by actors in earlier stages through “feedback loops”. This concept captures the possibility of the White House responding to the opposition’s frames by repositioning themselves and modifying its initial framing. Just as important, it allows for the notion of public opinion shaping media coverage and elite discourse, primarily through the surveillance function of opinion polling. Finally, Entman’s model “doesn’t assume that all messages are created equal”. The communication skills of elites and institutions, such as the Presidency, are crucial. Effectiveness in political communication is not only dependent upon the cultural resonance of their crafted messages with the public, but also on the capacity of to respond to counter-frames (narratives from the opposition and the media), and to stay on message.

Although the cascade activation network model was initially conceived for the foreign policy arena, Entman has recently used it to explain domestic issues: media bias in

campaign coverage (2010) and coverage of Presidential scandal in the media (2012). Again, I am not aware of a scholarly work that applies this theoretical framework to Mexico. But, as the next chapter will show, the notion of trying to understand the “culture” to develop messaging, responding to counterframes, trying to enforce message discipline, and systematically gauging public opinion to assess the impact of communications on the public – all crucial activities within the cascading model -- have become indispensable activities for those responsible of managing the Mexican President’s message.

Another powerful theoretical concept for understanding the interaction between the Presidency, other elite actors, the media, and the public is what Baum and Potter (2008) named “elasticity of reality”. While this concept echoes several notions of indexing, it is particularly useful to understand how the influence of political actors over frames or narratives changes over time. According to Baum and Groeling (2009), the public’s lack of information early in a conflict – Baum and Groeling’s work is focused on war – makes its perception of “reality” very elastic or malleable. As a result of its significant information advantage, the Presidency, the first mover, gets the chance to advance its frame or narrative with little resistance. As events unfold, other elite actors develop and disseminate alternative frames challenge the Administration’s preferred frame. Consequently, the public gathers more information and the “elasticity of reality” recedes. In other words, “over time the marginal impact of elite rhetoric and reality will decrease, although a sustained change in events may eventually restore their influence”, (p. 443). The concepts of both “elasticity of reality” and “framing windows” have yet to be applied to analysis of domestic politics. However, it seems plausible to expect the same logic to apply in this arena. Perhaps the elasticity or framing window would be more limited in domestic policy than in foreign policy, since citizens presumably have access to first-hand information in the domestic arena. While this may not be true for all types of

domestic policies, the leadership advantage there, on average, should be smaller and should tend to dissipate faster.

Once again, this theoretical concept has not been used to explain Mexican media politics or public opinion dynamics. But, as the next chapter will show, Presidential communications teams go to great lengths to define an issue first compellingly. They also avoid leaks that, among other things, could give the opposition or the media a head start to prepare a counter-frame or alternative narrative to the Administration's preferred narrative. In other words, Presidential communications teams are aware of the first mover's advantage. And, consistent with the depictions of "elasticity of reality" and "framing windows", they are also aware that this advantage is not permanent.

Together, indexing, cascade activation, and elasticity of reality are very useful concepts for the discussion of presidential communications. Although most practitioners are not aware of these concepts, they frequently seem to act in ways that these theories would prescribe. When they fail to act according to the insights that these theories advance, it seems that it is at the Presidency's loss.

Chapter 6: The direction to which the literature review points

In the modern Mexican media politics context, whoever wishes to lead must persuade. As a result, understanding presidential communications – who participates, with what purpose, through which physical channels, psychological mechanisms, and with what effect – will become even more crucial.

The rapid changes in the Mexican media politics landscape have, all of a sudden, created a rapid demand for political communication strategists. Professionals have been quick to adapt to the new context. From the creation of the *Coordinación de Estrategia y Mensaje Gubernamental* at *Los Pinos*⁷, emulating the Office of Communications at the White House, to the rise of political consulting as a successful and highly professionalized industry that has followed the American political consulting tradition, the transition from disregarding communications as a mere tactic to approaching it as a key component of political decision-making at the highest level is underway.

But, today, the political effects of communication remain constrained. As the analysis has shown, no reelection favors political *bargaining* over *going public*. This effectively limits the need to take into account communications considerations (like, how the presidency could alter public opinion through a communications campaign in order to make its policy and political goals feasible). As the next chapter will show, communications officials usually have broader goals, like enhancing and securing presidential approval and popularity, than supporting and advancing particular policy objectives.

Overall, one key conclusion of this section is that, while criticisms and arguments of Mexican presidential communications are common, there is still a limited understanding

⁷ Los Pinos is the official residence and office of the President of Mexico.

of what managing the President's message through a strategic perspective really means. Furthermore, there is a limited understanding of what an effective communications strategy is, what it can achieve, and what, because of the very nature of political communication, is beyond its possibilities.

By analyzing the operations and strategies of presidential communications – what practitioners actually think about and do – while keeping a firm grounding in the political communication research that has been explored in this section this thesis seeks to provide some answers that shed some light into presidential communications in Mexico.

As the first part of this thesis has shown, managing the president's message is a complex endeavor. While the presidency typically has some advantage in setting the media's agenda and framing the most important issues, there are sizable obstacles to success on the media politics front, as well as inherent limits to the degree that the presidency, going through the media, can ultimately influence public opinion. This explains the need for a complex, multidisciplinary organization that manages the president's message. I now turn to the task of describing that organization.

Part 2:

The anatomy of presidential communications in the modern Mexican presidency

Introduction to Part 2

As the last chapter showed, several scholars have analyzed US presidential communication. While most of these analyses are rooted in the media effects tradition and look at the effect of specific strategies, others (Kumar 2008) -- have focused on organizational issues.

The latter is the approach taken here – an analysis of the organizational side of Presidential communication and how strategies are built. This does not mean, however, that concepts as important in the strategic communications research tradition as framing, agenda-setting or priming are disregarded in this chapter. In fact, these concepts are clearly considered in the context of the planning, strategizing, and implementing presidential communications.⁸ While they are mentioned throughout the chapter, I am not interested in quantifying or proving the effects of presidential communication in the modern Mexican media politics landscape. Presidential communications strategists believe that these effects exist, are sizable, and most claim that their own polling data give enough proof to believe so. None of them express doubts about their existence or about the potential for their communication efforts to have an impact on public opinion. This is an interesting insight in itself since it clearly shows that practitioners regard their work as crucial to the success (or failure) of the President they serve—at least in terms of popularity and legacy. However, it is important to emphasize at the outset that, because my focus is on describing how the strategies are built, this work will not discuss the impact of the communication strategies.

⁸ These effects were discussed both directly and indirectly throughout the interviews with Presidential staffers which I conducted, frequently introduced in the conversation by them – hardly a surprising fact given that strategic communicators want to dominate the conversation and want to do so in their own terms.

Before moving on, it is important to clarify that my focus is not merely the description of the organization of Presidential Communications offices. If such was the objective, listing the Internal Rules of the Presidency under each Administration (Reglamento Interior de la presidencia), in which the faculties of each area are defined, along with some organizational data published in the IFAI (transparency) website, would be not only necessary but also probably enough. I am interested, rather, in explaining the decision making processes and daily activities of the presidential communications team – what I have termed the anatomy of strategic communications.

As mentioned in part 1 of the thesis, the work that most closely approximates my objectives has been conducted by Aguilar (2006, 2007) and Aguilar & Leycegui (2012). They have described in detail the functioning of the office of *comunicación social*. However, their focus on just one of the three communication offices and on the broader, more theoretical communications objectives fails to fully capture how communication strategizing takes place within Los Pinos and how strategists think, decide, and act in communication-related matters. Another previous work that has similar objectives to the present one is Saenz's (2006) study of the modern Mexican presidency. However, its broad focus on the entire Presidential office as an institution misses some nuances that an analysis that zooms in on the communications side of the Presidency may provide. Through this chapter, I intend to fill these gaps.

This part of the thesis describes the structure, objectives, obstacles and day-to-day operations of each of the following offices: *comunicación social* (chapter 9), *estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* (chapter 10), *opinión pública* (chapter 11), and the speechwriting unit (chapter 12).⁹ Each one of them has been, at least during some point

⁹ While the Coordinación of Estrategia Digital (Office of Digital Strategy) also plays a crucial role, it was not created until the beginning of the Peña Nieto Administration. An analysis of its roles, objectives, and

of the analyzed period of time, full-fledged office overseen by a presidential aide with the rank of Coordinador – equivalent to Undersecretary in other cabinet agencies and similar to the rank of Assistant to the President in the White House.

The organizational structure of the communications operations at the presidency, however, has been altered significantly throughout the years. Some changes have been merely administrative, leaving broader strategic considerations and objectives untouched. As long as they lack a significant impact on how communications strategy is thought about and arrived at—which is the focus of the chapter—this type of changes will not be discussed individually. However, while describing the evolution of the fundamental activities of each office, this chapter also reviews the most significant transformations that have taken place within each office over the last 26 years. Interestingly yet unsurprisingly, these transformations illustrate broader changes within the entire media politics ecosystem.

In line with the objective of explaining how the President’s message is managed, chapter 12 describes how the different offices collaborate in terms of both developing a strategy and implementing it. Chapter 14 summarizes the main findings from the thesis and draws conclusions.

operation would be more episodic than systematic. Because of this, I have chosen to leave out the formal discussion of this office from this thesis. Nonetheless, this chapter and the next will touch upon some social media strategy and tactics, which have been handled at some point by this office.

Chapter 7: Methodology

The aim of this thesis is to provide the first detailed, behind-the-scenes description of the management of presidential communication in modern Mexico.

Information reported on this thesis comes mainly from in-depth interviews with more than 25 key people who were/are directly involved in strategic communications for the Mexican presidency. They include chiefs of staff, chief pollsters, coordinadores or directores de comunicacion social, and coordinadores de estrategia y mensaje gubernamental¹⁰. Together, these individuals span 5 Administrations and 26 years. They represent incumbencies from both the PRI and PAN, 2 of the 3 major political parties – and the only parties that have occupied the presidency.

The semi-structured interviews I conducted with officials were held on “background”, meaning I could use all the information but not identify the sources directly in the thesis. Some sources were interviewed a number of times, sometimes with a significant interval of time between interviews. This allowed me to address new information or investigate a new understanding I had obtained. Most interviews were conducted in person. Some were conducted via conference call. Two sources preferred to answer a written questionnaire.

Most interviews included questions on the priority of the work the officials were responsible for at Los Pinos, their typical workday, the way information was obtained, validated, and used, their main obstacles and challenges, ways in which they sought to overcome them. But, rather than following a rigid interview format, some issues were explored spontaneously, based on previous comments by the official. Thus, what was lost

¹⁰ Or coordinadores de campañas or coordinadores de imagen y opinion publica, depending on the presidency that is being analyzed.

from the potential to compare almost 30 interviews based on the same questions was gained in the depth of the answers and issues that were explored.

I have attempted, to the best of my abilities, to give voice to the thinking behind each of the individuals that occupied each office. The fact that at least two persons who headed the office during each presidential administration were interviewed was particularly helpful to avoid over-representing a single perspective. While describing the core parts of their jobs, a majority of strategists seemed to have similar views. When their perspectives diverged, I did my best to represent both sides accurately and fairly.

The amount of information I obtained through the interviews is far greater than the thesis allows for. The duration of some interviews exceeded 3 hours. The average duration of in-person interviews is between 2 hours. Phone interviews averaged between 1 and 1.5 hours. None of the interviews lasted less than 50 minutes.

With the exception of the two interviews that were submitted in writing, I did not record the interviews. Instead, I took extensive notes during them. It is based on those notes that I quote the sources. Since all the interviews were conducted in Spanish, it is possible that the translation into English is different than the one that the source would have preferred. But I have been particularly careful in reviewing the context of each quote to guarantee that the original sense and intent has been left untouched. Some of the real-life examples used to illustrate theoretical points in the thesis were suggested by the sources themselves – as is acknowledged in the text. However, a number of other examples were chosen by me because they were particularly fitting to exemplify a specific situation. Given the relative lack of literature (both academic and non-academic) about Mexican presidential communications, in preparation for the interviews, I heavily relied on understanding U.S. presidential communications, particularly the work by Martha Kumar, as well as the revision of the literature that is included in part 1 of this thesis.

I also read as many memoirs from U.S. presidential communicators— particularly useful were the books by Scott McClellan, Karen Hughes, Karl Rove, Dick Wirthlin, Michael Deaver, George Stephanopoulos, and some others. I also interviewed in-depth two former senior officials from the Clinton White House. Insider accounts from the outside, such as Bob Woodward’s *The Agenda* have also been helpful. Some chapters of Iyengar’s *Media Politics*, Tim Cook’s *Governing with the News*, George Edward’s *Governing by Campaigning*, and Jarol Manheim’s *Information and Influence Campaigns* helped me identify the key issues and discussions – which, in turn, structured some of the questions that I asked during the interviews.

For the specific case of Mexico, the memoirs of President Fox (2007) and President Salinas (2000) were also useful, as well as the book by Aguilar and Castañeda (2012). But, unfortunately, reflecting publicly about the time in public service and writing memoirs, has not become a widespread tradition in Mexico, as it is in the U.S. While certainly departing from the memoir style, Saenz’s study of the modern Mexican Presidency and Aguilar’s published notes on comunicación social were also quite helpful in both preparing for the interviews and providing important background research that informs the results.

Together, the preparation *and* the interviews themselves provided me an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of presidential strategic communications. In the pages that follow, I draw on this research to describe the anatomy of strategic communications in the modern Mexican presidency.

Chapter 8: The genesis of modern Mexican presidency's communications operations

As the last chapter showed, as early as the 1940's, *comunicación social* offices that dealt with the press, basically by spoon-feeding journalists, were created throughout the Executive Branch.¹¹ However, the lack of press independence and the absence of political contestation from a strong, truly adversarial opposition resulted more in monopolistic messaging (focused on controlling the vast majority of media outlets and force-feeding the content to the media, and, thus, to the population) than competitive messaging (focused on crafting a message strong enough to resist inquiries and counterarguments from other political actors and still be persuasive). The fact that, up until the late 1980's, the President and his staff did not concern themselves with coordinating the government's communications strategy illustrates this lack of emphasis on responsive and strategic messaging at the highest level. It was not until adversarial media outlets such as *UnomásUno* and *Proceso* started to give voice to opposition groups and political parties with increasing influence that the Mexican Presidential office absorbed the office of *comunicación social*. Until then, it had been handled by the Ministry of Government. While this transformation occurred in 1982, during the de la Madrid Administration (1982-1988), the Presidency's *comunicación social* office still functioned with the logic of monopolistic messaging, rather than having a strategic approach (Lomelí, 1992). At that time, the PRI still held the Presidency, all local governments at the state level, and had majority in both chambers of Congress. In other words, the superiority of their sheer political and media force was still uncontested.

The Salinas Administration (1988-1994) marked not only the creation of the modern Presidency (Sáenz, 2006), but also the first time the PRI regime experienced a major

¹¹ Throughout this section, the terms *comunicación social* and press office will be used interchangeably.

legitimacy crisis. In this context, Presidential communications experienced a major overhaul.

President Salinas received a seriously impaired Presidential office, at least from the communications perspective. The old PRI regime had relied on media subservience and lack of political contestation to dominate the public sphere. Its communication tools were unsuitable for the competitive environment that, as I have shown earlier, was emerging at the moment. Dealing with adversarial voices and outlets demanded more planning and strategy from the Presidential office.

To cope with the new political environment, President Salinas reorganized and strengthened the Presidential office. Among the crucial changes to the Presidency, which also included restructuring policy-oriented offices, a key one was starting to treat communications as an important instrument to achieve policy and political outcomes. As one of President Salinas aides explained: “the President envisioned the importance of communications but only as a strategic means, not an end. (During the Salinas Administration) we used communications as one of a set of political tools to materialize his vision”. In organizational terms, the renewed vision for communications meant giving the *Coordinador of comunicación social de La presidencia*¹² the reins of a vast majority of the communicational resources of the government, which included Notimex, PRISA, and the comunicacion social offices, among others,. Although these offices and organizations retained their independence on paper, the fact that the press secretary designated “a huge majority of the people responsible for these roles”¹³ immediately

¹² The head of Comunicacion Social will also be referred to as press secretary.

¹³ For stylistic purposes, exact quotes will be marked by quotation marks without mentioning every time that “a communications officer of the Presidency” or a “Presidential aide” mentioned/explained. All quoted phrases that do not include further citation were obtained through the personal interviews I conducted. A complete list of the persons that were interviewed for this study can be found in the appendix of this work.

generated a hierarchical structure that answered directly to a coordinador at *Los Pinos*. The office of omunicación social would now plan, strategize, and oversee the implementation of the part of the president's message that was communicated through the news.

At the same time, President Salinas sought to, as one government official explained, “free communications from being a prisoner to published opinion”. To that end, he brought in Dr. Ulises Beltrán as the head of the newly minted “asesoría técnica” office, which is independent from the office of comunicacion social—marking the advent of modern political polling in Mexico. While the office of comunicación social would still closely track what journalists and pundits said publicly about the government, Presidential aides would now have access to systematic research to help them determine whether the citizens – not the political elite – deemed that the government was doing well on several different fronts. A few years later, President Salinas would also separate the comunicación social coordinator from the responsibility of crafting the content of the most important advertising campaigns. As an external yet official advisor¹⁴, Isaac Chertorivsky oversaw the highly innovative Solidaridad advertising campaign, along with some other major campaigns. Chertorivsky did not coordinate all the advertising campaigns of the Salinas Administration and he did not officially oversee a team of staffers at Los Pinos. Yet, his role in planning, crafting, and coordinating “non-news” communications – along with its notable success -- added a fundamental strategic dimension to the presidential communications team. Today, the person in charge of coordinating publicity campaigns, the *Coordinador de Estrategia y Mensaje*

¹⁴ Isaac Chertorivsky served as external yet official advisor (he was CEO of Bacardi at the moment). This role was unique, at least in the timeframe that was analyzed.

Gubernamental, on top of advertising, oversees the production of Presidential events, and manages both the institution's and the President's image.

Besides the changes that occurred strictly within the communications team, the creation of the figure of *Jefe de la Oficina* (Chief of Staff)—whether in paper or de facto—allowed for central planning and coordination between policy and communications teams. The evolving roles of Beltrán and Chertorivsky (pollster and coordinator of governmental advertising campaigns during the Salinas Administration, respectively), and those who would follow in managing those responsibilities, will be discussed in more detail in this chapter. The role of the Chief of Staff will only be mentioned in relation to communications operations, as some of its political and policy functions clearly exceed the scope of this thesis.

For now, it suffices to note that, with these changes during the Salinas administration, communications in Mexico would be for the first time considered a multidisciplinary, multi-office endeavor and would entail careful planning and strategizing. The press secretary would increasingly focus in handling news-related matters, instead of also coordinating all the publicity and messaging planning, which would now be a responsibility of the campaigns coordinator with significant inputs from the polling office.

At first glance it could seem as if the creation of parallel offices that dealt with communications issues weakened the figure of the press secretary. But this deduction is distorted. The changes were not intended to diminish the figure of the press secretary but to strengthen it through specialization. In the new context, the press secretary's role had become more demanding than ever: he would have to deal with a press that was increasingly independent from the government in an increasingly competitive political environment, which meant having and increasingly visible and vocal opposition.

Chapter 9: Office of comunicacion social (press office)¹⁵

It seems only logical to begin the journey into the casas and buildings that lie behind the walls that separate *Los Pinos* with the analysis of the largest, and most visible, yet still highly misunderstood comunicacion social office. As the chapter progresses, it will become clear that being the press secretary to the president is not only an incredibly demanding and complex role, but also one that is not as Machiavellian as some believe it to be. This is not so much a result of whatever personal and professional ethics press secretaries may profess: as this chapter shows, it is crucial to consider that press secretaries have to inform and persuade in a media politics environment which is competitive, fast-moving and increasingly diverse and adversarial.

The guiding principle for the structure of this chapter is that the press secretary's role entails two distinct yet intertwined actions: obtaining information and communicating it strategically through the press. To explain the role of the modern press secretary in Mexico, this section describes how the press secretary obtains information and uses it strategically.

Information Gathering

Otto Granados, the first press secretary of the Salinas Administration, has publically declared that, "given the electoral precedent, (the office of comunicaci3n social launched a communications strategy) that supplemented public policies and generated legitimacy"¹⁶. The "electoral precedent", is a reference, of course, to the widespread fraud allegations which were described on the previous chapter and constituted an unprecedented challenge to the Mexican Presidency. Indeed, within the context of

¹⁵ Because of its similarities with the functions of a press secretary, the Coordinador of Comunicaci3n Social will also be referred to as press secretary.

¹⁶ <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2013/05/09/politica/016n1pol>

diminished Presidential credibility and the opposition's new-found access to the press, one of the primary tasks of the press secretary was, as one official remembered, "to restore legitimacy to the President through his message". In the face of an increasingly independent press, this mission called for – more than ever -- securing accurate, relevant, and up-to-date information. Not only had all the significant policy processes and decisions being made by the Executive Branch started to be fair game for media inquiries; any other public issue that could be deemed newsworthy by the national news media potentially required an opinion from the Presidency. In the context of modern Mexican media politics, an effective press secretary must understand and be as informed as possible about both.

Of course, the need for the press secretary to be equipped with accurate information was not unique to the Salinas Presidency. In fact, in the presence of louder political contestation, divided governments, and public access to information laws, this need has only grown stronger. And satisfying it is no easy task. As one press secretary correctly explained, "the executive branch is the largest, most powerful organization within the country". So, how does the press secretary gather relevant, accurate, and up-to-date information?

During the Administrations analyzed in this work (from President Salinas to President Calderon) press secretaries have had the rank of senior aides – the selected few who are closest to the President. As such, they attend senior staff meetings¹⁷, which are a particularly important source of information. While there has been variation in who gets invited, the periodicity, and content of these meetings between each Presidency – and sometimes even among different periods of a Presidency -- they have usually taken place at least once a week. Typically, there are also two different tracks of meetings: one in

¹⁷ These meetings will be described in detail later on in the chapter.

which the President is present for the discussion, and another one in which just the chief of staff and senior aides attend. In any case, among some of the common discussions that take place in those meetings and are useful for the press secretary are: what the President will be doing in the next days; which issues are the most relevant to the message the Presidency is trying to get across and which are problematic; which policy and political decisions are being (or are expected to be) controversial; what the Administration as a whole is doing to stay on top of critical situations, etc.

In addition to attending Presidential staff meetings, some press secretaries explicitly mentioned that they operated on the assumption that they could sit in on any decision-making meeting in the Presidency unless they were specifically asked not to. While it may seem better to have a more informed press secretary across all issues, there are politically sensitive decisions and matters which the President and his team don't want the press to know about at all. Concerned that their "ambassador to the media" might unconsciously share some of this information with journalists or editors, some Presidents may limit the access to information of their press secretaries. National security issues, where most of the information is highly classified, are natural candidates for such treatment. The phenomenon of unwanted disclosure, however, is less likely to be a source of concern in Mexico than it is in the U.S. With the exception of Rubén Aguilar's tenure, Mexican press secretaries have not held a regular on the record briefing with the press. This makes it less likely for press secretaries to—under the pressure of the cameras, the spotlight, and the reporter's tough and tricky questions, to disclose information that was never meant to be published—either consciously or unconsciously. Therefore, while some "compartmentalization" of the information exists, preventing all senior aides to have the same information regarding all issues, it should be in a smaller degree than it is in the U.S. Still, whether the press secretary is kept out of

the loop on an issue depends upon the President's style and his understanding of the media.

Through their staff, press secretaries also regularly send out frequent information requests to cabinet agencies throughout the entire federal government. This too, as one official remembered, is useful to gather information about the technical aspects of policies or a statistic about a particular industry, sector, or group, etc.

Together, these three mechanisms (staff meetings, policy and decision-making meetings, and information requests) constitute the Mexican press secretary's primary source of information. For handling routine information requests from the press and putting out routine statements, which constitutes a high percentage of the total volume, these sources are often considered sufficient. But, in the case of developing stories with high visibility, or in dealing with matters that are deemed delicate by the presidential press operations, relying just on their primary source of information is usually not enough.

Press secretaries also frequently reach out to the heads of each agency or ministry (secretaries, undersecretaries, etc) and other high-level policy-focused officers at Los Pinos, such as the *coordinador de asesores* or *coordinador de gabinetes* to double-check information, obtain a broader, more strategic perspective of the issue, ask for their feedback regarding the response (or potential response) of key influencers within their sectors to a particular issue, or even ask for guidance on handling a particular issue within the cabinet agency's portfolio. This type of collaboration, though, is highly dependent upon the strength of the relationship of each particular press secretary with each particular presidential appointee. The better the press secretary is at cultivating those relationships, the more collaboration and, better information and advice he can expect to get. And, given the intense pressure of news deadlines, the difference between having strong relationships or not may also mean getting their message out in time to

respond to a pressing matter, or ceding the airwaves to an adversarial voice on the issue. Another important benefit of establishing working collaborations, particularly in the case of issues that are dealt with by multiple cabinet agencies, is allowing the press secretary to identify who has data with better quality and a more valuable way of explaining the issue. One press secretary put it this way: “within each strategic sector, understanding who from the government knows what and with what level of detail can be very helpful, especially when swift, consequential decisions need to be made.” As a result of having this understanding, for example, the press secretary can, at some point, choose to attach more weight to the inputs of the CEO of Pemex, CFE, the Energy Regulating Commission, or of a particular undersecretary over the inputs of the Secretary that heads the entire energy sector – which includes Pemex and CFE, and all the energy regulatory organisms.

As with any relationship, the relationship between press secretary and cabinet officials is a two-way street. Press secretaries may encounter resistance from senior Administration officials not only as a result of any failings in their cultivation of the relationship, but because of the other’s inherent mistrust of any dealings with the press. Thus, not all cabinet officials are equally open when dealing with the press secretary. The problem can be significantly compounded when cabinet level officials have a personal agenda, which conflicts with the President’s best interests. Some press secretaries remembered individual Secretaries of a particularly salient Ministry which gave them a hard time when asking for information or frequently left them blindsided on important issues. While high-powered officials usually do not openly refuse to share information with the press secretary, they may omit important facts from the information they disclose or answer to queries rather narrowly, based on irrelevant question-wording technicalities. These difficulties, as a press secretary remembered, are the exception rather than the rule. And they can be solved, as one official suggested, quite easily by creating or

imposing a disciplined governmental culture. In his view, the fact that someone would not fully requested information to the press secretary only reflects inexperience at governing. But, in any case, discussing these difficulties illustrates the complex political and interpersonal environment in which press secretaries operate.

The press secretary also meets frequently one-on-one with the President. In the case of President Salinas, for example, the press secretary frequently met with him almost every weekday morning during his protocol-mandated physical examination and walked with the President from his residence at Los Pinos to his office. He was sometimes the last aide to meet with him at the end of the workday, as well. The morning meeting entailed briefing the President on the most important stories and headlines from the press from the previous afternoon and the morning national newspapers, along with a brief explanation on what the press secretary deemed the optimal course of action for dealing with the most press issues/stories of the days. This analysis was rooted on the relevance of each issue and the press secretary's calculations of the impact of the story across several constituencies, groups, media outlets, and sometimes even specific journalists. The afternoon meeting, when there was one, was frequently centered on predicting what the upcoming headlines would be and providing relevant updates. Another press secretary, of the Zedillo Administration, mentioned meeting with the President at *Los Pinos* less frequently. But, during all car and helicopter travelling within Mexico City, he was always on the seat on the left side of the President. Considering the numerous events that the President has to attend, this mechanism provided the press secretary ample one-on-one time with the President. During his conversations, however, the focus was similar to the one described for the case of Salinas' Administration (news analysis, forecasting, recommendations, etc.).

Although every President has a personal style of handling media-related issues, and some press secretaries have more access than others, regular meetings with the President to analyze press matters were common throughout the Administrations here examined. Some press secretaries mentioned frequently going into the President's office between meetings to ask the President for his take on a particular issue that needed to be dealt with through the media. This shows a level of access which very few other government officials have.

To be sure, the press secretary's meetings with the President cannot be catalogued uniquely in the information gathering function of his office. During this type of one-on-one meetings, the press secretary discloses more information than what he receives from the President. In fact, one press secretary mentioned that he intentionally avoided asking the President how he should handle an issue unless it was a personal matter that involved the President or his family. In his view, this would have defeated the very purpose of having him as press secretary, which meant that the President could delegate news-related matters to him. Furthermore, most Presidents usually defer to the press secretary's judgment on handling the press. However, given the importance of mediated communications, it is not uncommon for Presidents to question the course of action suggested by the *Coordinador of comunicación social* and suggest an alternative strategy. On these instances, which are usually related to highly visible developing stories and delicate matters, the meetings with the president allow press secretaries to acquire a perspective of the bigger picture and pieces of data than through their inquiries which formal mechanisms and informal inquiries with the heads of cabinet agencies may have missed. But, even more importantly, they gain insight into the President's thinking and style. Their familiarity with the President's decision making process can prove very valuable when explaining the President's actions to the press and advocating for his policies – even if it is mostly through press releases rather than daily briefings. Thus,

while they are clearly not the main source of their information, the press secretaries' meetings with the President are crucial to success at their job.

Powerful, complex, and extended as it may be, the executive branch is not the only source of information for the press secretary. He is in a unique position to understand the interests of different media outlets and, as one communications official put it, "get the pulse of what journalists are working on and what their priorities are". For this purpose, the press secretary also has two key mechanisms. First, he has a team in charge of analyzing the news every day. Frequently with the help of an external organization (proveedor externo), the analysis team within the office of comunicación social produces the "Síntesis Informativa", which summarizes the most relevant stories reported by the news media. This document, which is shared with high-level officers at *Los Pinos* and with the President himself, provides the basis for the previously described daily briefing that the President gets from the press secretary. But, just as the formal channel of data gathering within the government is not enough, synthesizing and analyzing published information is often insufficient, particularly when dealing with scandals and highly visible developing stories. Therefore, press secretary's cultivate relationships with reporters, journalists, editors, news anchors, and even media owners. Knowing them on a deeper level, understanding how they operate, how they perceive the current state of affairs, and inferring how much they know about a specific issue or breaking story can give an effective press secretary the edge. Put differently, purposeful interactions with members of the press may result in better foresight as to how a story will unravel, how different outlets will react to specific information, and what could constitute weak communication flanks in terms of presidential strategy. In fact, these data gathering efforts are so important that they can end up shaping not only the communications tactics used to advocate for an issue, but also policy and political decisions themselves. To illustrate this, one communications officer of the Salinas Presidency remembered

that, prior to the enactment of NAFTA, the press secretary's meetings with editors from influential U.S. newspapers revealed their deep concern with the un-institutional way Mexico was handling human rights issues and with the appointment of Miguel Nassar as Police Chief of the Distrito Federal. Soon enough, President Salinas created the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) and Miguel Nassar was asked to step down. To be sure, the same official was emphatic in explaining that the concerns from the press were not the only rationale for that decision -- and probably not even the most influential one. But he also said that this information gathered through the press secretaries meetings with influential U.S. media outlets was carefully considered by the President in a context in which negotiations between the U.S. and Mexico were in a historical high point. This particular example is quite insightful: it suggests that the President, under specific conditions, may be highly sensitive to the concern of a particular group of media outlets that exert influence in the target audience that the Presidency is trying to sway -- in this case, US policy makers. Considering that the Salinas administration initiated an aggressive outreach strategy to the international press by establishing, as one official remembered, comunicación social offices in 14 embassies and consulates, the heightened sensitivity to the opinion of US news outlets seems a logical consequence. In contrast to the deference to international press during this period, several press secretaries mentioned that they systematically paid less attention to national news outlets whose editorial line was unabashedly adversarial to the government. In their view, they catered only to a specific audience whose lack of support was understood as a given and did not make a significant difference in terms of achieving the President's policy goals.

The relationships the press secretary builds with members of the media is also relevant on another dimension of information gathering. Press secretaries often launch trial balloons to gauge the reaction of the political elite to an upcoming decision that will be made in the Presidency. Yet, the only way to avoid hurting their credibility (the next

section discusses credibility in more detail) and their relationship with editors and journalists, is to make them accomplices. One press secretary specifically mentioned using this mechanism to gauge the reaction of the upcoming appointment of a cabinet-level secretary and an undersecretary. But, instead of feeding the press misinformation, he relied on two particularly friendly journalists. He disclosed to them what he was trying to do and they consistently agreed to help him. And the results of the trial balloon were later used to reshape the decision and the announcement. This, of course, suggests a more collaborative relationship than what is frequently understood in presidential communication studies and even raises some questions about the ethics of journalists which were willing to print misinformation in order to further their relationship with such a powerful source by helping him. The frequency with which this practice has taken place throughout several administrations and the nature of the stories that have been “planted”—which seem like key factors to determine how concerning this practice is, at least when contrasted with a transparent democracy ideal—was not disclosed.

Before moving on, it is important to note that technology has greatly accelerated the demand for information. The speed with which information was acquired and processed during the Salinas Administration is hardly comparable to the Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations. A more independent news media, with an increasing number of sources demands more information and more detail, inevitably means that the information is harder to obtain and vet. But, at the same time, technology has accelerated the information acquiring and processing capabilities of the press secretary. This makes it possible to gather information and respond as quickly as the new environment demands. It is also easier to go back and forth with the staff from other cabinet agencies or other presidential offices to revise a document meant for immediate release, asking for specific additions, edits, and vetting. For ongoing newsworthy situations, press secretaries can get the most updated information from any officer at the field they choose to call. So,

while the demand for information has increased in both volume and speed, the sources from which press secretaries can gather information and the speed with which they can do so have also augmented significantly. Still, the faster the pace, even when new information gathering tools are pondered, seem to add a considerable difficulty for the press secretary: not only in terms of strict information gathering, but also in terms of appropriately vetting it.

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As this discussion of information gathering has showed, there are essentially three sources for the press secretary: cabinet agencies and policy offices within the Presidency, the President himself, and the media. I have argued that the personal relationship that the press secretary establishes with the people who make key decisions within these 3 sources is crucial to securing quality information. The state of these personal relationships is fluid and highly dependent on the press secretary's interpersonal skills and, perhaps more importantly, what the press secretary chooses to do with the information that the sources have disclosed – which directly affects the level of trust that government officials place on the press secretary. For example, framing a press release in such a way that shifts the blame in dealing with a toxic issue from the President to the head of a cabinet agency may, under some circumstances, be an effective tactic to protect the President's image and reputation. However, it is only logical to think that this may hurt the press secretary's chances of getting prompt information or quality feedback from the Secretary's office again. Likewise, it seems clear that failing to transmit concerns from the press to the President or acting unresponsively to their information or political requests may undermine the press secretary's relationship with the press, reducing its effectiveness as the president's ambassador to the media. And disclosing information in a way that the President deems to hurt his interests, even when the tactic

may receive praises for its transparency from the press, is clearly dangerous for a press secretary that wants to keep unfettered access to the President – an important asset for information-gathering -- and ultimately his job. In other words, an effective press secretary has to successfully balance competing pressures from at least three different constituencies. Clearly, the degree of influence each one of the constituencies holds over the press secretary differs between them – it is clear that the President holds more power over the press secretary than the rest of the cabinet or the press. Yet, a press secretary that fails to keep any of them minimally satisfied can no longer be effective. Interestingly, the final decision on whether the press secretary is still effective or not falls directly on the shoulders of the president, who may or may not be aware not only of the conceptual existence of these delicate balance, but also of where exactly the press secretary stands in terms of it. None of the press secretaries addressed this point.

Considered altogether, the description of the information gathering activities of the modern Mexican press secretary has shown how fast-paced and complex is the environment surrounding presidential press secretaries in Mexico. Albeit indirectly, this description has hinted a high interrelation between the press secretary's activities and those of the rest of the Presidential team, other cabinet agencies, and the President himself. And it has also suggested that the ability of the press secretary to gather information is determined by how he uses the information or has used it in the past. So, although I have separated the information-gathering function from the information-disseminating role for analytical purposes, in reality they are closely intertwined. Before I turn to a discussion of how the information gathered by the press secretary is used, it is crucial to answer what is the chief purpose of the communications that emerge from the press secretary's office.

Inform AND Persuade

Comunicación social offices are the main source of information from the government to the press. Therefore, in theory, they are—at the very least—partly responsible for public access to governmental information. During the interviews I conducted with presidential communications officials, the ethical, democratic mandate of the press secretary's office to accurately inform the public of the president's activities and decisions was frequently mentioned. But, even assuming that the main function of press secretaries is to inform, not to persuade, it is hard to separate the two functions.

During the interviews, all press secretaries claimed that the timing, wording, and focus through which they communicated an issue had an impact on the way the media would construct and report a story. This, in turn, would have an impact on how people thought, talked about and acted upon the issue. While a lot more simplistic than Entman's (2008) cascade activation model, the explanation of several practitioners followed the same basic logic as the theory, in which the presidency constitutes the first mover in an elite-driven communications process. From this description, it is not a stretch to affirm that press secretaries are well aware of the communication power of their position.

The awareness of their communication power, combined with the personal loyalty and professional obligation press secretaries feel towards the President, certainly creates incentives for the press secretary to attempt to portray the President and his actions in the best possible light. But, contrary to popular depictions that tend to exaggerate the manipulative side of media and image management (see, for example, the upcoming movie *La Dictadura Perfecta* by Luis Estrada), these incentives are hardly unchecked.

In the modern Mexican media politics landscape, there are significant restrictions—both ethical and pragmatic—which counterbalance the potential tilt toward spin. A central

one was summarized by a communications official in a very interesting way. Here is how he put it: “communicating information that *can be proved to be false* usually ends up backfiring” (emphasis added). Press secretaries have significant autonomy to shape what gets reported to the press and how. However, the existence of an independent press and a proactive opposition--which act as imperfect watchdogs, yet watchdogs nonetheless—means that exaggerating, manipulating, or fabricating information to make the President look good can actually harm the President’s image and reputation. But how exactly would getting caught spreading inaccurate information harm the Presidency? One press secretary offered an explanation that summarized two of his crucial operating assumptions: inaccurate information can, in the short run, create a scandal and, in the long run, undermine the credibility of the Administration -- and thus its ability to influence the national conversation.

The long-run overall impact of disseminating inaccurate information for a press secretary and the Presidency itself is debatable, as the huge bulk of it is not regularly scrutinized. Fact-checking information disclosed by the government is a practice intensive in both time and money. As a result, in Mexico, no organization systematically fact-checks information disclosed by the Presidential press office which means that the majority of the press secretary’s claims go uncontested. Thus, only high visibility, politically-charged information or statements which appear dubious from the outset are prone to elicit further questioning. Moreover, news outlets are highly dependent on government as a source of information. Therefore, even if the press stops believing the President and his press secretary, they would have nowhere else to go to for immediate official information. While a similar point has been raised for the U.S. case, where Bennett et al (2008) have declared the press to be “semi-independent”, the same “dependence” phenomenon could be significantly more sizable in Mexico. Some of the factors which contribute to such deduction are that, compared to its U.S. counterpart: 1)

the level of press independence in Mexico, while on the rise, is still more constrained (Lawson, 2002); 2) Mexican investigative journalism in general tends to be less common (Marquez, 2010); 3) the level of emphasis on strategic communications from organizations other than the Presidency seems remarkably less—for example, not all Mexican congress members have a staffer whose position could be comparable to a communications director; 4) media coverage of narratives which are adverse to the Presidency are less likely to be sustained over time – a necessary condition to have an impact on public opinion (Entman, 2012).

Besides what the theory suggests, most press secretaries believe that there are long-run consequences of repeatedly misinforming the media and the public, such as sparking a scandal and causing more adversarial coverage to ensue. One press secretary added a particularly interesting distinction at a “micro” level. He explained that, quite frequently, journalists call the office of the press secretary to test the accuracy of pieces of gossip they have picked up. How the press secretary handles those inquiries will have an impact on the level of collaboration journalists will later show “at the micro level”. Whether they agree to run, as previously described, trial balloons or pick up strategic leaks hinges on this credibility. To illustrate this point, suppose there is a rumor that the President will ask a Secretary to renounce. Suppose, additionally, that the press secretary knows the rumor to be true but that he has been cleared by the President (or chief of staff) to make the announcement. When a journalist calls him to verify the information “off the record”, he essentially has two choices: 1) say that he does not know, he is not commenting on the issue (which, of course, feeds the speculations) or evade the question or 2) mislead the journalist (“of course that is not going to happen”). Under the misleading scenario, the journalist may report that there is very little chance that the Secretary will be asked to renounce. Obviously, when the Secretary renounces, the credibility of the journalist will suffer – both with his editors and his readers. In the future, the chances that such

journalist will help out the press secretary to launch a trial balloon, or something similar are slim to none. If the press secretary was ever to bargain with him to drop a story (more on this in agenda-setting section), it seems unlikely that that particular journalist will comply.

Whether from “macro” level concerns, or because of “micro” ones, the perceived risks of losing credibility affect the behavior of press secretaries. They act – at least publicly -- as if credibility was crucial to their jobs. In an interview published by the newspaper *La Jornada*, spokesman Rubén Aguilar claimed: “I have never lied. In two or three occasions, I could have lied to avoid a scandal. But that was not a possibility given my ethical condition. It would delegitimize my function.”¹⁸ Whether the pressure to maintain their credibility comes from personal, ethical motives or from believing that their credibility matters in terms of their long run effectiveness makes little difference in terms of the end result.

The pragmatic incentives to provide accurate information may seem even more powerful when immediate consequences -- rather than long-term credibility -- are considered. In the short run, the risk of an immediate scandal is a powerful deterrent for press secretaries to keep them from misinforming the press. The following paraphrased comments from different press secretaries illustrate the tension between aggressively or manipulatively trying to manage the news: leaving journalists in the dark on a damaging (to the President) yet important issue, rather than making the issue disappear, may strengthen their interest in it; trying to push an irrelevant issue into the public sphere may be ineffective; suggesting an unfitting frame may generate strong opposition to it – and thus, spark unflattering news coverage; lying or hiding information during a scandal may actually magnify its proportions once the truth comes to light. One communications

¹⁸ (<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2005/12/30/index.php?section=politica&article=010n1pol>)

official put it in more general yet powerful terms: “the best way for a government to look good is by staying true to its core values”. For our purposes, this means that if the government stands for democracy, honesty, openness, any behavior from the press secretary which contradicts those values will undermine the government’s core *raison d’etre*.

Of course, this does not mean that no Mexican press secretary ever lies to the press. It means that they perceive the risks of providing inaccurate information on the record – even unintentionally -- as being significant. On the other hand, voluntarily disclosing unflattering information that has a negative impact on the Presidency is clearly a bad strategy—it hardly merits further discussion.

Clearly, finding an appropriate balance between providing accurate, truthful information and conveying it (or retaining it) in a way that benefits the president constitutes one of the most challenging aspects of handling the office of *comunicación social*. Besides being unethical, manipulative or inaccurate, news management comes with a high scandal risk attached to it.

The discussion in this section leads to the conclusion that it is not the press secretary’s job to be a neutral information broker. But neither is it to overtly manipulate the information. Instead, communication officials try to balance advancing the President’s agenda on the news media while remaining truthful and accurate. This tension sits at the core of the strategic decisions that press secretaries make. And it adds significantly to the complexity in which press secretaries operate. But I still haven’t discussed how press secretaries decide when, how, and whether to make the information gathered (described in the previous section) available to the media and to what extent. As a result, the discussion of the role of the press secretary so far seems distant from the discussion of media effects on the last chapter. As I describe the actual communicating part of the

press secretary's role, however, it will become clear that the press secretary makes decisions that can be understood using parts of the media effects framework.

Disseminating the information

The press secretary's approach to agenda setting: do we want the issue to go up or not?

The first assessment a press secretary's office makes regarding an issue is usually whether it is positive or negative for the Presidency in terms of public relations. As one press secretary put it, "the first question we ask ourselves is: 'do we want it (the issue) to go up (e.g. get the issue to rise in the agenda) or down?'". Answering this question may seem like a simple task, but the unpredictability of a competitive political environment complicates it. The presence of potent adversarial voices within the media politics landscape, as well as the lack of absolute control over issues, means that the Presidency cannot know for certain what the final frame or narrative of a particular issue will be. The case of RENAVE during President Zedillo's administration illustrates this point clearly. In 1998 President Ernesto Zedillo sent a bill to the Senate that would create the National Registration of Vehicles Agency known as RENAVE. By creating a national database, outsourced to a private agency, that linked every vehicle to a serial number and a chip, the Administration claimed that it would be easier to track down stolen vehicles, potentially reducing the incentives for car theft. The fact that they had held the initiative on the issue clearly demonstrates that it was something that they wanted to emphasize. The bill passed through Congress. But when the time of implementation arrived (2000) and the agency announced that a small fee would be charged (\$38 dollars on average), political chaos ensued. A small group of taxi drivers who sparked a protest movement were soon joined by several state governors, several from the President's own political party, which openly protested against RENAVE. By now, an issue which was supposed to

reinforce a positive image of the Presidency (fighting crime theft), had become a symbol of the abuses of the government. Amidst the controversy, the media started investigations which revealed that, as a former Argentinian military member, the director of RENAVE (a private agency) had actively participated in the genocide under the dictatorship of Carlos Menem. On top of that, corruption charges emerged and sparked further investigations. The story has a terribly tragic ending. Carvallo was found guilty and imprisoned. Amidst the investigations, the undersecretary at SECOFI responsible for overseeing the program killed himself. As for the government, instead of a crime-fighting public policy which it wanted to emphasize, RENAVE became an emblem of irregularities, scams, and shams.¹⁹ The program was suspended and later renamed, restructured, and quietly re-launched. Clearly, the blame here does not lie on the press secretary's handling of the issue. Rather than communication incompetence, the controversy had to do with political calculation – raising taxes on vehicles at an unfortunate moment -- and vetting issues within the responsible Ministry that failed to realize that the appointed agency's director had such a history. As such, it emphasizes how policies that a Presidential press secretary advocated for at first, can end up being incredibly toxic and negative for the Administration. Just like one of the cited articles for this brief example suggested, advocating publically for an issue without considering absolutely all the facts—a clear impossibility—can be like opening Pandora's box.

The analysis of whether it is desirable for the presidency to make the issue “go up” in the national conversation, while helpful, only sets a rudimentary direction for the communication efforts of the Presidency. Making it actually happen is a lot more complicated. As the last chapter discussed, even when the Presidency may nudge the

¹⁹ <http://laprensa-sandiego.org/archieve/september15/renave.htm>
http://hemeroteca.proceso.com.mx/?page_id=278958&a51dc26366d99bb5fa29cea4747565fec=286221&rl=wh

media's agenda in a particular direction, it does not exert absolute power over it. Nor is it the only force that is trying to capture the media's attention. A communications official from the Salinas' Administration explained that this loss of agenda-setting power from the Presidency became quite evident during the first days of 1994. The rise of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, a leftist revolutionary group that declared war on the Mexican State, was clearly an issue that hurt the president's popularity. Yet, it received extensive news coverage. And, paraphrasing him, there was nothing that the Administration could do to make the issue go away – at least in it in terms of communications.

A press secretary from more recent administrations echoed this sentiment, while adding a valuable nuance. He explained that if the Administration he served under remained silent about an issue, it did not inevitably make it go away from journalists' minds. In fact, it could spark their interest. Paradoxically, he went on to explain, toxic issues may make press secretaries reluctant to discuss them, expecting them to go away. However, in the face of a communications crisis, it may be better to disclose as most information as possible, and as quickly as possible, framing it as positively as possible. This tactic, as discussed by communications officers, has two main benefits: it creates the impression that “there is nothing to hide”, and it consumes the entire fuel of the crisis at once, potentially shortening its lifespan. The main assumption here – one that is consistent with U.S. news production literature (Graber, 2014) -- is that there is a novelty bias: having nothing new to report about the issue, the media will be less likely to continue covering it. However, this tactic also generates significant difficulties for the press secretary: it reduces the amount of time available to validate and “package” the information (discussed later on) and it may result in the disclosure of information that at first seemed innocuous but further spans the crisis – information which the opposition may otherwise not have had access to.

The lack of explicit control of the Presidency over the media's agenda is illustrated by the indirect and highly complex approaches that press secretaries employ to make an issue go away. When just one journalist or outlet has access to information that can become a damaging breaking story for the president, the press secretary can attempt to persuade the journalist or editor to not run the story or to postpone breaking it. Under such cases, the press secretary frequently argues why running the story would be harmful for the journalist not only in terms of reputation – by suggesting that the reporter's story is inaccurate and misleading – but also in terms of the news outlet's relationship with the President. While this was not discussed explicitly during any of the interviews, one communications official did acknowledge that the press secretary has control over two commodities that are very valuable to journalists: access to the President, which could be turned into exclusive interviews; and access to either unpublished or unnoticed information that can be turned into exclusive stories. Therefore, the fact that, under some circumstances, journalists are willing to comply with requests from a press secretary should not be surprising. Although the adversarial nature of the press/government relationship is frequently emphasized and theorized about, the reality is, as one communications official explained, that the press secretary's team interacts and collaborates with the Los Pinos press corps and the editorial team of news outlets almost on a daily basis. This finding echoes Kumar's (2008) and Hess (1992) about the highly collaborative nature of press/White House relationship. While press conferences may seem adversarial, Kumar emphasizes the permanent backstage collaboration between the two groups. Given that Mexico has usually lacked a daily news conference, it seems likely that journalists adopt an even friendlier stance towards the source they cover. The assumption here is that press conferences, by putting journalists repeatedly on the spot and on the record, in a way, pressure them into showing to whoever is watching their non-subservient stance to the Presidency. Thus, while Mexican

journalists, in general, have the same dependency on official sources (or, perhaps, more because the public sphere is not as vigorous due to the youth of its democracy), they have less incentives to inquire incisively, which potentially results in a more one-sided relationship. This notion, of course, is balanced by the notion that some media outlets have partisan predispositions that pit them against the presidency and induce a more adversarial relationship. However, I am not aware of any studies that have looked into this issue.

One press secretary, however, complained that the approach of negotiating with journalists to “kill stories” or reframe their stories may be somewhat questionable on ethical grounds. Hence, whether this tactic gets employed or not may depend on the personal style of the press secretary. But, as long as the tactics employed are not coercive, it seems that bargaining with journalists is both fair game and in the best interests of the Presidency—this view seemed to find echo either explicitly or tacitly by the majority of press secretaries who were interviewed.

But it should also be considered that, most of the time, reporters assigned to the Presidency move in pack (Hess, 1981; Bennett, 1996). This finding from the U.S. can be easily extrapolated to Mexico because it rests on the notion that journalists are assigned in beats—a condition holds for the Mexican presidency. The fact that journalists from different media outlets who are assigned to the *Los Pinos* beat interact constantly with each other and inevitably talk about the stories they are writing results in an often homogenous version across several different news outlets (see Crouse, 1975) Thus, when the press as a group has been attracted to an issue that may be damaging to the President, press secretaries attempt to emphasize another highly newsworthy issues, hoping that the press will drop the previous issue in pursuit of the new one. In contrast to one-on-one negotiations with reporters, in which the bargaining skills of the press

secretary may play the decisive role, the crucial skill for the press secretary to have under pack situations may be his ability to sell the newsworthiness of the diverting issue to the press. And, going back to the previous discussion of information accuracy, if the degree of credibility of a press secretary makes a difference, it should be under these circumstances -- in which he has to make a “tough sell” to the press.

The availability of other newsworthy issues in the moment plays a crucial role in expanding (or shrinking) the set of tactical options for the press secretary seeking to divert the attention of an individual journalist or of the press corps as a whole. This reliance for tactical options on events over which the press secretary has no control shows, once again, that the need to not be proven wrong or openly insincere serve as a powerful constraint in the face of the objective of obtaining as positive press coverage as possible. In other words, even in the face of crises that they would want to divert, press secretaries know that fabricating a powerful diversion could effectively turn away the attention of the press. But, because of the ethical and pragmatic concerns previously discussed, may conclude, as one communications official put it, that this option is not really an option.

Another alternative for the Presidency to attempt to limit the scope of an issue in the news is to have it announced through cabinet agencies, rather than the Presidency itself. As one press secretary put it, “not all the news that the Administration has to communicate is good news.” Typically, news which shows that the Administration has not accomplished a goal is pushed unto cabinet agencies. When asked about this observation, one press secretary mentioned that this approach has two related benefits. First, it may make the issue less newsworthy. Second, in case the issue still attracts significant news coverage – as in the case of the announcement of reductions in the economic growth forecast –, it places some distance between the issue and the President.

Therefore, although the issue is salient in news coverage, the more immediate association for the reader/viewer that becomes concerned or frustrated because of the situation is the secretary. Conversely, all major good news reports are usually announced by the President. There are, of course, limits to this practice. Issues which have become dominant in the news sphere may have to be addressed directly by the President even if they are unflattering for him. A communications official remembered that, sometimes, preventing the President from addressing a major issue may result in press mentioning repeatedly the President has refused to give an answer or confront the issue. As noted above, this could make him appear as evasive or detached and be even more harmful to his popularity than being perceived as responsible for the issue from the outset.

A significantly more contentious issue is the fact that press secretaries have also had control – albeit unofficially and indirect – over the entire government’s advertising budget. Although each cabinet agency officially buys its own airtime and advertising spaces in newspapers through its own *comunicación social* offices²⁰, the fact that the press secretary has an important say in who gets appointed press secretary of what institution generates a hierarchical structure which de facto reports to the Presidency. Control over advertisement budgets is a powerful tool. A report by Fundar and Article 19 claims that the government’s advertising expenses during the first years of the Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations have amounted close to 250, 400, and 330 million dollars, correspondingly (Fundar & Artículo 19, 2014). This, according to the study, is particularly troubling since criteria for governmental spending in advertising in Mexico is still obscure, and lends itself well to corruption, camouflaged censure, and press pressuring tactics. The claim made by Fundar and Article 19 goes both ways: a) the favor of individual journalists and/or outlets can be bought through generous ad buys,

²⁰ When official times are not being used.

and b) rebellious journalists and/or outlets can be punished by simply discontinuing the generous ad buys. While the evidence of the rise of media independence seems to undercut the notion that this practice is pervasive, the argument advanced by Fundar and Article 19 suggests that at least some news coverage, rather than being subject to competitive messaging and journalistic values, and editorial decisions, is negotiated in backrooms—more similar to an autocratic public sphere than a democratic, competitive one.

However, the plurality of the voices and media outlets that occupy a space within the media sphere, as well as the complexity of the Presidential communication operations (particularly of the press office) suggest that these types of practices are not the main focus when managing the President’s message. This discussion is far from being resolved. As one official explained, buying time or space in the media is far from being an exact science, in which a statistical regression or an optimization problem can yield a unique, uncontestable result. This fact makes it hard to argue that the Presidency does not deviate from the optimal mix to engage in dubious practices. But, as the same official recognized, it also makes it hard to argue that the actual mix is the inevitable result of the dubious practices.

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Although the press secretary’s office is the main conduit of information from the Administration to the press, it is not the only one. Therefore, if the press secretary is to nudge press attention in the right direction, he must effectively coordinate spokespersons within the entire executive branch. One communications official of the Fox administration complained that sometimes, while the press secretary was disregarding an issue to get the press to drop it, other Administration officials – even within the Presidency itself – were talking to reporters about that issue, inadvertently

fueling the fire he was trying to put out. This, in his view, inevitably reduced the overall effectivity of the press secretary. At first glance, it is tempting to blame the press secretary for allowing this situation to take place. However, it should be noted that, while the press secretary was officially in charge of handling press relations, the officials who talked to the press had the same or higher rank within the government,. Therefore, without explicit orders from an even higher-ranking member in the Administration, the press secretary had a hard time in solving the problem. In other words, if the press secretary is to be effective, he must be granted enforcement capabilities to guarantee that the Administration puts a coordinated front on the press. Unsurprisingly, most modern Mexican presidencies, as communications officials across several administrations noted, have sought to impose a high degree of discipline within their teams and cabinet. They have clearly established who the official conduit of information to the press is and designated authorized spokespersons to go on the record about specific issues. One senior aide from the Zedillo Presidency, who was not part of the press secretary's office, recalled that his only direct contact he had with the press was while travelling with the President abroad. Even then, it was more of a byproduct of their being in the same place that led him to "attend them, exchange viewpoints, and clarify some points" than a strategically purposeful or on-the-record interaction with the press. In a modern media landscape, these type of measures that strengthen message discipline are indispensable to have an effective communication and shape the media's agenda. As the example above suggested, not all of the press secretaries were successful in adopting a disciplined approach to determine who got to speak to the press about which issues and when. But, even when then they did, as one press secretary put it, it just takes one off-topic comment, one contradicting remark, or one gaffe to lead the media astray from the intended message.

As it has been briefly but repeatedly suggested throughout the discussion, one significant difference between the U.S. and Mexico in terms of the Presidential press offices is the absence of a daily, on-the-record press briefing – except during the tenure of Rubén Aguilar -- and the more informal daily gaggle. This difference, because of its multiple consequences, merits further attention in the following pages. But, for now, it suffices to note that it makes it easier for the press secretary to avoid journalists; he can simply avoid answering their calls or refuse to receive them at his office. The lack of a daily briefing may reduce the amount of pressure on the press secretary and his team to disclose information. Moreover, it reduces the risk of the press secretary unconsciously or involuntarily sharing more information on the record than planned in the heat of the moment. In any case, while it could still be argued that the overall effect of keeping significant information from the press could still attract negative coverage, not being required to answer questions on the record every day hardly seems inconsequential in terms of the decision of what gets disclosed, what doesn't and when.

As the first part of my thesis argued, there are no formal studies to determine who has more power in setting the agenda in Mexico: the Presidency, the media, Congress, political parties, or some other actor. Yet, the heavy reliance from the media on the Administration to obtain information, the Mexican *presidencialista* roots, the fact that the executive is headed by only one person (the president), and that it is often the “first mover” regarding political issues and discussions constitute powerful evidence of the presidency's significant agenda setting power. Altogether, they suggest that, just like Kingdon (1986) has shown in the U.S., the Mexican Presidency has more agenda setting powers than any other actor within the media politics system.

To be sure, this does not mean that the Presidency has absolute control over the agenda. As a result, Presidential press secretaries, as the discussion in this section has shown,

have to be not only strategic but tactically savvy in their handling of every issue. A newsworthy announcement of a breakthrough from the Administration can attract less attention than might be expected, only to be overshadowed by a seemingly irrelevant issue or gaffe. Some examples of this can be seen in the memoirs of President Fox. In his memoir, President Fox describes a similar situation: “Of course, the best laid out plans of presidents nearly always go wrong. When Bill Clinton was president, he balanced the budget for the first time in decades, but the media focused on a two-hundred dollar haircut he got in Los Angeles. Our team (President Fox’s) learned our lesson when a staffer paid four hundred dollars for a monogrammed set of bathroom towels that I never saw. Faced with taxing tortillas to keep the government solvent, the last thing you want is a flap over the price of linens in Los Pinos” (Fox & Allyn, 2007, p. 220). Suggesting a more malicious intent – “the Mexican media sought to hurt a popular chief executive by going after his spouse” --, President Fox also complains about systematic media “mudslinging” on the First Lady and her sons. From alleged corruption charges that did not hold up in courts to the highly-commented and denounced pillowcase influence that the media sustained the First Lady held on President Fox, these issues painted the President in an unflattering light to the public opinion (cf. p. 249-250). But, perhaps more consequentially, they distracted attention from substantive issues that the Presidency wanted to highlight.

In terms of the discussion of presidential communications, the moral of the story is that, even when the press secretary’s team has done an impeccable strategic and tactical job, communicational success is hardly guaranteed. Unforeseeable situations, oppositional political forces, or even media political interests, can divert the attention of the news from what the Presidency is attempting to emphasize at the moment or attract them to an issue that the Presidency is trying to deemphasize.

Overall, determining which issues the Presidency will actually discuss with the media is a highly complex decision that, unless the President directly intervenes, usually rests on the press secretary's shoulders. It depends upon the communication and political priorities of the Administration and, among other things, the press secretary's assessment of whether the issue's narrative, once it is exposed to adversarial messaging, will remain positive for the President. Therefore, the better a press secretary understands the kind of narrative journalists and the opposition will construct around an issue, the better suited he will be to make this decision. As one press secretary explained, in ongoing situations, this assessment requires planning and recalibrating according to new developments, as well as the impact of their actions and the actions of others on the press, the consequent reply from all parties, the likely new response from the press, and so forth. The iterative interdependence and responsiveness to the actions and expected actions of other political actors – not unlike the cascade activation model -- clearly show that, even as modern press secretaries have lost their initial monopoly in crafting communications campaigns and long-term planning, their roles have retained highly complex strategic components.

As complex and nuanced as this discussion may seem, it only covers one of the steps in disseminating the President's message. It has dealt with the Presidency's perspective on just one of the three media effects that the previous chapter detailed: agenda-setting. Yet mediated communications, as I have discussed, do not only tell people what to think about. They also try tell them how to think about it. I now turn to the task of describing how the presidency attempts to frame the conversation.

The press secretary's approach to framing: "How do we want to word it? What do we want to emphasize about the issue?"

An often repeated mantra commands strategic communications practitioners to "know your audience". So, before explaining how press secretaries think about framing or wording, it seems only natural to describe who the press secretary talks to.

The communications that the press secretary produces and oversees are not transmitted directly to the public. They go *through* the news media., as Zaller (2000) suggested – and the interviews I conducted unsurprisingly confirmed , this entails going through a powerful filter of journalists who wish to make their own voice, not the politicians', be heard. Moreover, as Presidential pollsters (discussed later in this chapter) frequently mentioned during their interviews, most people do not follow public affairs news regularly – at least not attentively. One illustrative example came from a communications official of the Zedillo Administration. During his interview, he showed me a chart displaying that the death of Lola Beltrán, a beloved Mexican artist, was the third most remembered piece of news during the Zedillo Administration²¹, surpassing several other news that were clearly more consequential to the country.

As a result of the filtering function of journalists and the media as well as the public's relative inattentiveness to the news, several press secretaries acknowledged that their main task is to deal with "el círculo rojo" (the red circle) -- the small fraction of Mexicans that is highly politicized, and regularly follow the coverage of the news media. This is illustrated by the fact that most press secretaries considered press coverage – and not polls -- in any given day the most important indicator of *their* success.

²¹ Measured through the percentage of "unassisted" mentions in the weekly poll commissioned by the Presidency on the same week that the poll had been conducted.

To be sure, several press secretaries mentioned concepts related to the idea two-step flow of communications. This makes it safe to assume that they operate on the assumption that, even if a majority of the population is not regularly attentive to the news, the more important issues – particularly those that spark controversy -- percolate to the public. This notion is congruent with what leading public opinion research has concluded for the US case (Popkin, 1994). Their main concern, however, remains the highly politicized and informed domain of *el círculo rojo*.

In any case, since press secretaries must first go through the news media to reach either the red or green circles, they should package communications as attractively for the news media as possible. One press secretary claimed, however, that the Presidential comunicación social office has not always acted upon this insight, even at the most basic level. This was something that, during his tenure, he attempted to overturn. As he put it, “when you speak to them (the media) in their own language, you are giving them solid gold”. This entails the not-so-simple task of translating what the policy areas of the Executive Branch are saying. Even when comunicación social offices from other cabinet agencies usually pitch-in for this endeavor, one press secretary mentioned that the material they come up with tends to be more geared towards a specialized press corps (for example, the Ministry of Finance’s press corps) than the reporters and journalists that cover the Presidency. From their role as real time explainers of policy to the news media, it is easy to see how a press secretary with a team that does not have enough professional experience in the intersection of policy and mediated communications can be crippling to a Presidency. In fact, for the U.S. case, Kumar (2008) mentions that some commentators believe the most effective press secretaries have had previous professional positions within the news media sector. Mexico may not be so different in that aspect: the press secretary role demands a sophisticated understanding of politics, policy and media.

Press secretaries understand that not all of the information released through their offices will be used by the media in the stories they report to the public. Even press conferences from the President himself are seldom reproduced in their entirety by any news outlet. Yet, some communications officials explained, even material that's left out serves the purpose of "educating" and familiarizing journalists or specialized audiences of the President's actions, their context, and their impact. Off-the-record and background sessions facilitated by the press secretary in which journalists get to interact and ask questions to cabinet members, senior Administration officials, and sometimes the President himself, serve this specific purpose. While some communications officials said that, during their tenure, background and off the record sessions were widely used, others claimed to have clearly privileged on the record sessions. In fact, one of them recalled that one of the journalists who participated during the first off-the-record session with the President which took place within his tenure breached the off-the-record status. During that press secretary's tenure, the President no longer held off-the-record sessions. Instead, he relied heavily on on-the-record briefings from Secretaries to the press. Another press secretary echoed this point. He remembered making an arrangement with the presidential press corps to distribute the speeches from the President one or two days in advance to make their news story writing easier. In exchange, journalists promised not to write about in advance and not to speculate about potential changes. "We had a very comprehensive, well thought-out disclaimer", the press secretary who oversaw the initiative explained when interviewed. On one major speech, he recalled the President decided to eliminate an entire section of the text. Disregarding the agreement, one influential outlet devoted an entire story to analyze why the section had been dropped. When the press secretary complained to the editor, he replied that the agreement was with the journalist, not with the outlet. Under that press

secretary, speeches were no longer distributed in advance to the press corps. And he remembers the story as an example of “lack of seriousness” from some reporters.

To be sure, as I have discussed, presidential press secretaries, while seeking to communicate accurate information, have also adopted a persuasion role. “Whenever you discuss the president’s policy with the press”, one press secretary explained, “you are always talking about its “goodnesses”, as much as possible”. As I have explained, this persuasion role is counterbalanced by the need to supply, at the very least, “information which cannot be proved to be false”.

This is consistent with the fact that, rather than emphasize the persuasive power they held, several press secretaries pointed out that an unfortunate phrasing – or framing – of an issue, could politically derail an initiative or start a scandal. For example, making the cost of a Presidential initiative salient, rather than its expected benefit, may give journalists or the opposition powerful tools to criticize it. Therefore, press secretaries and their teams spend a lot of time deliberating to find the best way to approach, and eventually phrase an issue, considering potential stakeholders across a wide spectrum of sectors and ideologies. In such instances, a press secretary remembered, their teams are looking for language that downplays potential criticisms. This is hardly a simple task. When the press briefing was transmitted every day live from Los Pinos, a communications official recalled that the spokesman had a special meeting every day with his senior staff to predict potential questions from reporters during the upcoming briefing and go over his answers – sometimes word by word. This method of preparing for a press conference – held across all Presidencies, albeit on an irregular basis -- seems fairly similar across all Administrations and the tenure of all interviewed press secretaries and it shows, once again, the relevance of information gathering for a press secretary or spokesperson. Although the skill of the spokesperson in handling

unanticipated questions is very important, one communications official claimed that most questions were anticipated. And even for the unanticipated questions, having a thorough preparation, which in some occasions has included mock questioning from staffers posing as journalists, is regarded by many of the press secretaries as the key to success. Although the process is different when releasing written statements, the same level of attention to detail to the wording is observed. Even when they are communicating with the media via press releases, press secretaries try to anticipate and answer potential questions from the media. The idea, of course, is to give them a full picture of the initiative, its purpose, scope, and its basic operation criteria while emphasizing its “goodnesses”.

Some criteria that Presidential advisors use to tackle the issue are the following:

Do we absolutely know every bit of information we are disclosing to be certain? If not – and the Presidency still wants to get the message out -- the language must be precise and express this uncertainty

Will someone take issue with this phrasing? If so, who? Do we want to publicly cross him?

Are we using the best information out there to support our position/argument?
Can we use more information to support it? Are there any external validators for our opinion/position who may be worth mentioning?

Is our position clear? Does it lend itself to misunderstandings?

Are we making our best case about this issue?

This list – which was constructed from examples and answers to different questions from the interviews -- is clearly just a tool to better understand Presidential communication.

In fact, it is non-exhaustive and Presidential aides seldom ask these questions as an ordered process. Just like math students in grade school can skip steps after some practice, communications officials at the Presidency usually do not have to go through all this questions to double check the material about to be released; they just automatically do so.

The importance of carefully wording a statement cannot be understated. One communications official remembered that, in 2010, when Alejandro Poiré, National Security spokesman at the moment, was to announce the alleged death of a powerful druglord, he was particularly cautious in constructing the wording of his statement. Since there was no dead body to confirm the statement, rather than announcing plainly the death of Nazario “El Chayo” Moreno, the spokesman stated that “diverse intelligence sources coincide in pointing that... Nazario Moreno was presumably killed (the actual terms was cayó abatido, which suggests killing without explicitly mentioning that word)”. Instead of explaining in detail the evidence, he embedded the announcement in an overarching narrative of the Mexican government’s efforts to combat drug trafficking. In 2014, the Peña Nieto administration announced that they had just killed Nazario Moreno. Unsurprisingly, the media and the PRD were quick to criticize and even criminally denounce Poiré for having disclosed misleading information which was related to President Calderon’s highly criticized war on drugs. The response from Alejandro Poiré was quick. He released a press statement that praised President Peña Nieto’s abatement of Nazario Moreno. Through the statement, he recognized that “elements in the information his office had Access to in 2010 were not sufficiently precise”. Still, he argued that his statement was strictly in accordance with the information he had available. In closing, he remitted the press to his original press

conference, in which he clearly did not claim that Moreno had been killed²². If his wording of the original statement had been different, perhaps trying to frame the issue in a more aggressive way – by claiming the distinct killing of the drug lord – it seems likely that the scandal would have been bigger, longer, and more consequential. His original position would have been harder to defend. Perhaps the criminal investigation that the PRD tried to spark against him would have caught on. The faulty intelligence, as his statement suggests, is not defensible. But the accuracy in his wording made his performance as spokesman highly defensible.

Despite constructing carefully worded statements, press releases or speeches²³, the framing of an issue may go astray. Although it is likely to be reproduced by the press, there is no guarantee that the frame – the perspective -- the Presidency offers regarding an issue will be mimicked by the media. On such occasions, the press secretary, as the Presidency’s ambassador to the media, clarifies the Administration’s position to news outlets: “that is not what I/the President/the secretary said”; “that is not the angle of the issue we are trying to push”; “on our view, this perspective is more relevant or has more merits than the one you published”. One press secretary mentioned that such discussions are always easier when the discussion is about facts and figures – where you can say to the editor “you’re wrong; those figures are inaccurate; please use the correct ones instead”. However, perceptual matters are harder to argue successfully. For instance, when press secretaries complain to journalists and editors that they are overplaying “the other side of the coin” (the opposition’s voice), it should not be surprising that editors/media directors deny it. For such situations, one press secretary remembered

²² http://www.milenio.com/policia/Reconoce-Poire-impresion-anunciar-muerte-del-Chayo_0_259174442.html

²³ On some occasions, the press secretary’s office included speechwriting as part of its portfolio. In any case, presidential speeches, even if handled through a different office, are frequently covered in the news.

that the thorough analysis of the coverage of each media that his office produced was particularly useful. It gave him tools to say “you are covering our side of the story with this intensity, while you are using the opposition’s information with much more intensity.” When editors argued back saying there was more merits or newsworthiness on the opposition’s view, the press secretary used comparative analysis. “This is the intensity with which other outlets are covering us. And here is what you are doing”. Even so, the press secretary remembered, media directors would argue that “one square inch” in my outlet is worth “a thousand” square inches in the outlet’s you are comparing me to. If the issue was still unresolved after the conversation, the press secretary could stop inviting that media’s correspondent to, for example, national Presidential tours where only a pool (a subset) of Presidential correspondents was invited. If the directors of the outlet complained, they could be told “your media is clearly not interested in what we are saying, so we figured you would not be interested in covering what the President would say there”. Of course, not all press secretaries may agree on implementing such practices –and just one of them disclosed doing so. But again, rather than show censure or collusion, these practices illustrate that frame building and controlling is hard. They show that the interests of the government and the press sometimes diverge – which is hardly an antidemocratic finding. While it may seem an incendiary finding for Mexico, the fact that the press secretary negotiates or heatedly argues with the representatives from media outlets is widely understood in the U.S. as part of the job. Even the highly idealized *The West Wing* tv series by Aaron Sorkin repeatedly showed the Presidential press secretary arguing with -- and even “disciplining” -- reporters because of an unflattering story.

Responding to antagonistic messages picked up by the media is another crucial responsibility of the comunicación social office. Although I have already analyzed how press secretaries decide to go on the record about an issue or not, this decision is hardly

independent of the content and the packaging of the message. In 2006, the impeachment trial started by the Federal Government against presidential contender Andrés Manuel López Obrador had heated an already hostile electoral landscape. In this context, an official from the Fox administration remembered, the press office determined that his office would only respond to an attack by López Obrador if “the democratic agenda” was assailed. Therefore, he purposefully avoided speaking about personal controversies and issue differences between the President and the candidate. When López Obrador uttered the (in)famous words “cállate chachalaca” towards the President (literally, “shut up, chatterbox”), the President’s press secretary did not comment on the disrespectfulness of calling the President names. Instead, he defended the democratic agenda. “In a democracy” the press secretary stated, “no one has the right to tell anyone to shut up. Whoever invites (his opponents) to silence only reveals his authoritative character and (belonging to) a political culture of the past, which should no longer have place in Mexico.”²⁴ This statement was widely reproduced through the news media, and even other influential actors, such as the Episcopal Conference of Mexico used very similar wording to criticize Lopez Obrador’s outburst²⁵ -- which would have been arguably improbable if the press secretary’s response had focused on the personal grievance on the President. Given the significant amount of negative coverage that the incident brought to Lopez Obrador, commentators and analysts still believe that the chachalaca incident -- which was eventually used in President Calderón’s presidential campaign advertisement to portray López Obrador as a “danger to Mexico” -- was determinant for

²⁴ <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/337116.html>

²⁵ <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2006/232236.html>

the outcome of the 2006 presidential elections. Lopez Obrador lost to Calderón by less than 0.6% of the popular vote²⁶.

As it should be clear by now, frame building efforts go beyond just highlighting the benefits of the policy at hand over its negative aspects. It is precisely because of the inherent complexity in handling complex issues from such a wide range of policy and political portfolios as well as the volume of demands placed on the press secretary's office that managing the President's message is not a unilateral effort from the press office. When determining wording for a key issue or a political position, more often than not, the heads of the offices of *estrategia y mensaje gubernamental*, *opinión pública*, the speechwriting unit, the chief of staff, and/or sometimes the president himself contribute, along with a number of advisors, cabinet officials, consultants, and other presidential offices get involved. In fact, even when the press secretary's team is the only one involved in developing the wording to make an announcement or respond to an inquiry, they rely on the regular inputs from the polling office as well as the *estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* office. One press secretary explained that the heads of *comunicación social* usually do not have time to test (through the polling office) their response to an issue – although, for particularly sensitive issues, as I will discuss later, they usually commission “flash” polls. However, thanks to their constant exposure to previous polling and focus group results obtained by the polling office, as well as the cumulative experience in handling issues with the press, they usually have a good idea of how the press and the public will react to a statement by the Presidency or the press office. Moreover, the overall narrative for the Administration—a collective effort in which all senior communications officials are involved in one way or another—frequently sheds

²⁶ (<http://www.adnpolitico.com/2012/2012/03/12/a-6-anos-del-callate-chachalaca-una-frase-que-marco-2006>; <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/columnas/59053.html>)

light into how an issue will be handled. Rather than crafting a position out of thin air for each issue, understanding how a specific issue or piece of news builds upon this overall narrative seems like the better strategic approach.

Although this approach sounds well in theory, a press secretary contended that, in practice, it is not always plausible. Because of the incredibly wide scope of issues that the press office handles, the constraining deadlines to which they are subject to through the press, the multiplicity of potentially adversarial voices with which he must interact in the media sphere, and the fact that there is seldom sufficient accurate information to deal with the issue comprehensively, many breaking issues are handled separately; they are not related, at least at first, to a master narrative. Therefore, how the press secretary frames an issue is usually not strategic in a static, step-by-step planning kind-of-way. The role of strategy in the comunicación social office resembles the role of strategy in a soccer game more closely than the role of strategy in a chess match: rather than having time to pause and consider all the options to go forward, the press secretary frequently has to strategize while acting at the same time.

So far, I have described the overall purpose as well as the information gathering, and agenda- and frame-building efforts within the press secretary's office . All of them have shown how complicated and tricky the media and political environment in which the press secretary operates is. Rather than a place for fixed recipes, the Presidential press office is a place for frequent strategizing, recalibration, and fast thinking. I now to turn to the description of how a presidential press secretary pushes a message out.

Pushing the message out

Press secretaries, as this discussion has shown, are perhaps the most indispensable communications officials in the modern Mexican presidency. Yet, his office does not

have absolute content control over the majority of communication texts and events that are disseminated by the Presidency. The final form and content of speeches, for example, is controlled by the speechwriting shop²⁷. Likewise, advertising content is controlled by the *Coordinación de Estrategia y Mensaje Gubernamental*²⁸. On the other hand, the office of the press secretary has final say over the control of press releases, presidential press conference scripts²⁹, answers to press conferences held by the press secretary, and interview scripts. The widespread use of these public relations tools makes it unnecessary for this work to define each one of them separately. My focus here, rather, will be on the difference of the effects each of these tools produces – from the perspective of presidential press secretaries.

Public relations experts typically suggest that the choice of the channel for pushing a message out should be determined by the audience that the message is intended to reach. In other words, strategists should first determine which audiences they want to engage. And then they should speak to the media outlets that their target audiences typically consume.

While this approach is certainly desirable, one press secretary of a recent presidential term mentioned that it is seldom the main criteria for the press office – although the *coordinacion de estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* uses it more frequently. One reason for this finding is that press secretaries typically see themselves as reaching the narrower red circle. But this idea, of course, does not mean that the press secretary and his team disregard audience characteristics. In fact, the distinctions they make in the interviews between media outlets, media types, and even specific tv shows, radio shows,

²⁷ Only during Ruben Aguilar's tenure did speechwriting was included in the press secretary's work portfolio.

²⁸ During Zedillo's Presidency, *comunicación social* controlled most aspects of advertising.

²⁹ Scripts, as used here, refers to the "guide" of suggested answers which the press secretary usually develops for presidential press conferences and interviews.

and editorialists reflect their profound knowledge of the content of each one and an overview of who the audience is. For example, several press secretaries mentioned that, because it lacks the vividness of images, radio shows are more opinionated and even aggressive in their editorializing. “Just listen to Lopez Doriga (one of the leading news anchors from Televisa) in his radio show” one of them explained. “His opinions -- and even his words -- are sharper in radio. He’s just giving his audience what they want”. As a result, press secretaries would be more concerned by a sharp criticism on television than on radio. To generalize this finding, it seems that, quite frequently, rather than evaluate a message on absolute terms, press secretaries analyze it by comparing how it deviates from the norm of messaging from that outlet, that newscaster or the technology. Then, of course, audience size is a crucial element to consider -- a criticism by a little known newscaster is not the same as one from a leading one. To be sure, this analysis and focus on the micro does not mean disregarding the macro trends. Press secretaries do concern themselves with the entire mix of how the Presidency and its actions are being portrayed. But most, if not all of them³⁰, know that some negative coverage is to be expected on an almost permanent basis, especially coming from some journalists and outlets – although their expectation may differ based on the part of the term they are in, the president’s popularity ratings, and the type of policies they are pushing. Deviations from the expected trend, on the positive side, could be understood as an achievement for the Presidency. On the negative side, they can be an indicator of trouble – especially if they are sustained for long periods of time.

But, if audience targeting is frequently not the main criteria for choosing the communications vehicle, then what is? One press secretary mentioned that the very

³⁰ A majority mentioned it during the interviews and none expressed an opinion that would contradict this statement

vehicle you choose causes an effect in terms of communication. For instance, if the Presidency wants a message “to go up” (this concept has been described in a previous section), a press conference seems like a logical choice. It certainly has more impact and visibility than a press statement, and thus is more likely to set the media’s agenda. But this visibility comes at a price. According to one press secretary, because of its very structure, journalists will usually delve deeper into the issue, asking harder questions. Alternatively, reporters may lead the press conference astray by focusing on their own agenda – instead of on what the President or press secretary is trying to say. Therefore, the increased agenda-setting power may be offset by the decreased framing power. And, when journalists have their way, agenda-setting power may even turn itself on the Presidency. In any case, success to keep the press conference in the preferred presidential terms depends on at least two factors: 1) the deftness of the press secretary (or President) in, as one official put it, “verbal fencing”; and 2) whether the issue is deemed by the press newsworthy enough not to dwell on other issues.

Two press secretaries mentioned that the journalists that comprise *Los Pinos* press corps are not as professionally sophisticated as the White House one. This, they complained, results in their frequently betraying their agreements with the Mexican presidential press secretary. But, on the other hand, they recognized that this may work to the Presidency’s advantage. As I have argued, press conferences and live, recorded press briefings are typically scarcer in Mexico than in the U.S. Still, whenever they take place, the questions posed there may be, in general, less hard to answer than in the U.S. Despite these attenuating factors for the Mexican context, press conferences are -- because of their live nature which may prompt unscripted remarks – considered by practitioners as high-stakes communication situations.

The visibility of press conferences lies, in part, on the notion that the President will be asked tough questions. The stakes (and visibility), therefore, can be raised by having highly critical or adversarial voices ask the questions. One such example comes from the Calderon Administration. Perhaps the most notable critic of President Calderon's war on drugs was Javier Sicilia, a poet who turned to activism when his son was killed by violence related to drug trafficking. His son, the police determined, was innocent and unrelated to criminal activities. Sicilia's caravan – the March for Peace -- strongly criticized President Calderon's drug policy and gained widespread media coverage both in Mexico and abroad. In fact, Sicilia had asked the president to stop the war on drugs several times.³¹ Surprisingly, when Sicilia challenged him, President Calderon agreed to hold a live broadcast public dialogue with him (and others) – a very adversarial town hall. Unsurprisingly, several outlets were eager to cover it and even broadcast it live. The unscripted nature of such a debate seemed irresistible. And even while some criticized the President for his “stubbornness”³²– as expected, he declined to call off the war on drugs – the event did give the Presidency the chance to emphasize its democratic values by bravely listening to critic voices. Even Sicilia himself seemed to appreciate the President's consent in publically dialoguing with him. At the conclusion of the “Diálogo por la Paz”, the poet embraced the president. Although image-making and event-staging are not the focus here (they will be discussed in the next section), it is unsurprising that the news, on the days before and on the days that followed the event, featured the dialogues and the embrace prominently.

Interviews are also highly visible communication vehicles, particularly if they are held with leading journalists. For press secretaries, they are also easier to control than press

³¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/14/world/americas/14sicilia.html?pagewanted=all>

³² <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/06/27/opinion/020a1pol>

conferences. As one official explained, it is easier to agree (and enforce) the scope and limits of the questions with one journalist than with several -- even more so when interviews are granted to journalists who are friendlier to the Presidency. Therefore, interviews may be preferred by politicians and press secretaries than press conferences: while they also convey the notion of subjecting a president or press secretary to questioning, they occur on a more controlled environment. In other words, interviews may give presidential operatives improved control over framing. But it comes at a loss of agenda-setting power of interviews. Because the nature of interviews implies exclusivity at breaking the news, only one outlet will typically report on the interview fully. One press secretary explained, however, that one of the most effective tactics that his team implemented was producing a transcript of the interview and distributing it to outlets that, because they relied on other technologies, did not directly compete with the interviewing outlet. For example, if the interview was granted to a TV journalist, his team would distribute the transcript to print and radio media – and vice versa. Although the transcript was also made available to competing outlets (TV in the example above), they were, as the press secretary recalled, highly unlikely to use the transcript for the story.

Interviews are also very useful for “going local”. As the preceding chapter showed for U.S. cases, Mexican presidents – at least since the Salinas Administration – have understood that there are significant opportunities in engaging the local media. This is evidenced by the fact that local media is a full-fledged area within the comunicación social office (the other comparable ones are media analysis, national radio and TV, national print, and international media). When asked about why it is useful to engage local media, some officials mentioned that a significant proportion of citizens only read or watch local media and that local media are usually more deferent on the president – especially when covering Presidential travel and events in local communities. President Fox and his team, for example, sought to leverage the pro-presidential bias of local

media by granting interviews to local journalists. This tactic specifically emphasized exclusive interviews to local radio talk-show hosts just after visiting their home states. The use of similar tactics by the U.S. Presidency has been described by Kumar (2008) and Cohen (2010). Perhaps even more revolutionary has been the recent appearance of the President Peña Nieto in non-news talk shows, such as *Hoy*, to discuss the energy reform and how it benefits ordinary Mexicans. Just like Baum (2004) found for the U.S. case, engaging this type of audience is attractive for two reasons. First, talk show hosts are more likely to be more friendly (or at least less adversarial) in their questioning. This results in “easy interviews” in which the president dominates the agenda and the framing without much struggle. Second, talk shows allow the President to take his message directly to a group of citizens that only read/watch entertainment media. In sum, the logic for “going local” is echoed by the logic for “going soft” (as in soft news). And it makes sense. In a polarized media politics environment in which the average citizen is tuning out of the national news more and more, it would hardly be surprising to see the Mexican President placing more emphasis on local and entertainment news shows.

So far, the focus has remained on the President and his press secretary. But another (sometimes complementary) way to increase the visibility of an issue is to develop an inter-institutional media plan. The use of cabinet-level officials as surrogates is a powerful mechanism not only to advance an issue. Because of their more “technical” engagement with issues, Secretaries are well equipped to defend the merits of a policy. This may be particularly useful when a policy, like the scandalous RENAVE (described above), is being questioned. Rather than expose the President and have him be more closely associated with the issue, Herminio Blanco, the Secretary of Commerce and Industrial Development (SECOFI) at the moment, took the heat. But, besides facing criticism, using surrogates is quite useful in the battle for the framing of an issue. In this sense, press secretaries echoed the notion that Entman (2012) finds: the only way to

sustain strategically directed news coverage on an issue (or scandal) is by having political elites engage with it. Having Secretaries grant interviews may also sustain an issue longer in the media's attention, increasing its likelihood of having an impact on public opinion. One official of the Fox Presidency remembered "media matrixes" (more like schedules) of the press secretary, in which he arranged which official was going to talk to which outlet or journalist about which issue. For highly visible situations, not only were media appearances of senior officials scheduled through the central planning of the presidential press secretary's office, they were complemented by talking points which unified the message which they would be pushing out. Here, the issue of governing and message discipline comes to the forefront once more. One official suggested that not all Secretaries wanted to participate on the centrally planned media blitzes – and, again, this may be problematic since the press secretary does not outrank cabinet level officials. The way one press secretary solved this problem, as he remembered, was by using the President as witness during cabinet meetings or staff meetings in which the Secretary of interest was invited. He would tell the Secretary, in front of the President, that his office would send him the interview schedule. But, according to the same official, not all press secretaries were equally successful in finding an equivalent mechanism to coordinate and effectively schedule media appearances cabinet-level officers. Just as the description of the information gathering roles of the press secretary suggested, interpersonal skills play a significant role in determining the overall success of the press secretary in pushing the message out.

Finally, press releases are very useful to provide relevant information to the media with absolute control over the framing/wording of every single phrase. The downside is, as one press secretary commented, that press releases are the type of communication vehicle that least invites dialogue and is clearly the less visible one. However, their sobriety, institutionalism, and control over wording may make releases appropriate for

giving a punctual response to adversarial allegations – without making them more salient than they already are. They are useful to put information that does not merit a more visible statement openly on the record. And they can also serve to underscore the most relevant facts – according to the Presidency -- of an event in which the President participated. In a way, the complete collection of the press statements show what the Presidency wished to emphasize about each issue that it advanced and each challenge that it tackled.

To be sure, pushing the President’s message out is not a unique responsibility of the press secretary. Agenda and frame-building efforts are not exclusive to the press secretary. As the next sections will show, speeches, events, advertisement campaigns, and even the president’s schedule must come together if the message is to be coherent and impactful. This is a discussion that is best understood through an understanding of the entire Presidential communications apparatus. This discussion will be held after discussing the offices of *estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* and the office of public opinion (research).

Concluding thoughts

This detailed discussion offers an in-depth look behind the walls that guard *Los Pinos*. As such, it should serve to demystify one of the most heavily referenced and highly misunderstood communications offices of the presidency—which is also the largest communications and probably the most important (or at least visible) one in terms of communications. The length of the discussion of this office does not only reflect the importance of the office, but also the fact that there have been more press secretaries or spokesman over the last 5 administrations than chief pollsters, *coordinadores de estrategia y mensaje*, or head speechwriters. Thus, I had the opportunity to interview more officials from this office. An additional factor that explains the longer discussion

granted to this office is the fact that there is more theory on presidential communications mediated by the press than there is on speechwriting, presidential advertising, or polling.

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At the heart of the discussion has been the notion that press secretaries do have a persuasion function built into their roles, but that such function is inextricably intertwined with their information function. Both the press and the red circle with which the press office seeks to communicate on a permanent basis are moved, not so much by the beautiful words or emotional framing that a press secretary could provide, but by the substantive information that the office provides. The key, then, to the press secretaries success seems to be the dissemination of timely, accurate, and abundant information that, at the same time, ties well to the overall narrative that the presidency is constructing.

This is a particularly daunting task if we consider the complexity of the entire executive branch, the diversity of media outlets at both the national and regional levels, the increasing demand for immediate information that the rise of digital media has brought with it, and some other factors. In order to deal with a similar situation, the White House has separated what in Mexico is called comunicacion social into two offices: the press office that handles the day-to-day interaction with the press and the communications office which deals with the longer, more strategic focus of how to best convey a message using the entire communications apparatus and resources at the disposal of the presidency. In Mexico, the communications office—as the next chapter will show—does deal with the longer term but by handling a communications portfolio of its own: advertising, events, and (in some administrations) online communications. This leaves the possibility of stepping back and looking how to best communicate an issue strategically through the press by leveraging the entire communications apparatus in the

shoulders of the same person who is responsible of handling everyday interactions with the press. To be fair, some press secretaries have demonstrated outstanding skill in putting on those two hats simultaneously (media operative and communications strategist). But it seems that separating the two roles in the organizations structure could go a long way in guaranteeing that the presidency's entire communicational resources are used in a way that advances the policy and political priorities of the president while guaranteeing that the way communications are operated are aligned with democratic values such as access to information and openness to dialogue. Perhaps this reorganization could be useful to push the press secretary into adopting a daily press briefing, which would not only signal increased transparency but it could also give the presidency an expanded set of tools to inject more information into the (sometimes starved) public sphere. I will return to this point at the conclusion of the thesis.

Once I describe how the Presidency uses different communication vehicles and channels in a coordinated way, and expand on the role of other presidential offices, the image of complex strategizing and inter-institutional, interoffice, and interpersonal interdependence should come full circle. For now, even from the compartmentalized view of handling press affairs I had offered, it should be clear that managing the presidential message has become a complex effort that can only be successfully tackled through team work. I now turn to describing the office of communications.

Chapter 10: Office of Estrategia y Mensaje Gubernamental

Compared to the press office, the office of *estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* is relatively less visible. In his analysis of the modern presidency, Saenz (2010) barely touches upon it. In their analysis of strategic communications at the Mexican presidency, Aguilar & Leycegui (2013) don't even mention its existence. But its work, as this chapter will detail, is directly broadcasted into the televisions, computer screens, and radio receivers of the country most certainly on a daily basis. *Estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* is an office that, through its work, often speaks directly to the *circulo verde*—the public.

Unsurprisingly, the difference between the approaches of *comunicacion social* and *estrategia y mensaje* is significant. “The red circle has to be convinced”, one official claimed. “The green one has to be enamored.” While this certainly does not mean that *estrategia y mensaje* officials disregard logic, reason and facts, it does illustrate the more intense focus of *estrategia y mensaje* on generating the right visuals, the right image, and the right emotions.

As the chapter will also show, *estrategia y mensaje* focuses on the longer term. But it does so in a different way than what the communications office does in the U.S. The White House communications office is geared towards strategizing about the best ways to leverage the entire executive branch communications apparatus to further policy and political goals while communicating through the press. In contrast, the coordination of *estrategia y mensaje* devotes itself completely to, as one official put it, non-news communications. To illustrate this non-news focus, one communications director acknowledged that, during most of his time in office, he did not follow the news regularly.

The chapter discusses briefly the beginnings of the office of *estrategia y mensaje*. It then discusses the overall approach of the office in fulfilling its duty and its focus on the long term. Next, it details the two central communications vehicles: advertisement campaigns and staged events. While it is obvious that *estrategia y mensaje* gathers information and spends it like the press office does, the different pace set by its focus on a longer term and more foreseeable activities would make the information gathering and spending framework an unfitting one. The chapter ends summarizing the findings and offering some concluding thoughts.

The discussion in this chapter adds complexity to the description of strategic communications. Even if the public can be “charmed or enamored by the government”—which an official mentioned as the role of communications when communicating with the general public (green circle)—this is a daunting task. Exactly which type of citizens should be targeted, how, and for how long the effect can last is, at best, unclear. How to reach them, how to capture their attention, how to persuade them, and how to actually move them to action is far from being a science.

The genesis of the office of communications³³: modern advertising for a modern presidency

“Don Beto, Don Beto..., we finally have a new road!” a young man excitedly claims. “No me cotorrees, Jacinto” (stop kidding with me) the older one replies in disbelief. “Do you remember the Solidaridad committee we started at the community? All the work we put into it? Tomorrow we see it come true”, Jacinto exclaims... “Tomorrow we inaugurate our new road”, Don Beto replies slowly and visibly proudly. “But, why are you crying, Don Beto?,” Jacinto asks. “I’m not, Jacinto, I just have something in my eye -- ‘una

³³ From hereafter, *estrategia y mensaje* (the Coordinacion de Estrategia y Mensaje Gubernamental) will also be referred to as the communications office.

basurita'... But *you are* crying, Jacinto.” “No, Don Beto, I also have *basuritas* in my eyes”, Jacinto, visibly moved, claims. The camera fades. “Solidaridad, Unidos para Progresar” (solidarity, united to progress) a voice-over says.

The Solidaridad campaign is still well remembered in Mexico. It marked a clear departure from boring, bureaucratic advertising campaigns that “were not credible and did not connect well with people”, as one official put it. Constructed around the most ambitious social spending program (at the moment) in which the government provided funding while the local committees organized and provided the labor to improve their communities, the advertising campaign itself became a trademark of the Salinas administration. And it also marked a clear withdrawal from the traditional formula of advertising produced under the supervision of the press secretary.

“The President wanted to retain the most talented people in advertising”, one official remembered. Against this backdrop, Salomon Chertorivsky, the CEO of Bacardi in Mexico and the president of the National Publicity Council (CNP), was recruited in the early 1990’s. As President Salinas remembers in his memoirs, his mission was to oversee “government campaigns” (Salinas, 2000). Although he served as an official advisor, Chertorivsky never oversaw an office at Los Pinos. In fact, throughout his service in the Salinas Administration, he continued as CEO of Bacardi and as president of the CNP. But, at the same time, he was an integral part of the team. He had constant access to the President and the liberty to choose the “best advertising agencies in Mexico” to craft key government campaigns, which include Solidaridad, CONSAR (national retirement fund), and the removal of three zeros from the Mexican peso.

The figure of an external “advertising campaigns advisor” was short-lived. It disappeared during the Zedillo presidency, when *comunicacion social*, as one official remembered, became responsible again for the content and actual implementation of advertising

campaigns. In the absence of a separate campaigns coordinator, the *secretario particular*--who, during the latter part of the Administration operated as a *de facto* chief of staff--also assumed some of its responsibilities in managing communication campaigns.

The Fox presidency, on the other hand, saw the importance of having what an official termed a “political marketing in-house team” ever since the campaign. While the antecedent of Chertorivsky was weighed, “the campaigning experience was much more influential in the decision to create the coordinacion of imagen y opinion publica.” It was initially headed by Francisco Ortiz, who was the marketing coordinator in the Fox campaign. Its portfolio included advertisement, event staging and planning, public opinion research, and overseeing the Presidency’s internet portal, which was starting to be a relevant communications issue. Because the Salinas, Zedillo, Calderon, and now Peña Nieto administrations have all handled public opinion research through a different office, however, polling will be discussed in a different chapter. During the Calderon administration, the coordinacion de imagen y opinion publica was rebranded estrategia y mensaje gubernamental, housing for several years the speechwriting unit.

Despite the variations in the role and organization of the office, handling advertisement campaigns and being responsible for event managing are the two key functions that have remained untouched by the reorganizations in the office. Thus, this chapter will focus on the two. But first, considering that this office deals more with the long run than the day-to-day focused office of the press secretary, it is important to show how communications directors plan for the future.

“Work your way back”: planning for the long term

One recurring theme of this thesis is that the modern Mexican presidency has vast communications resources. Yet, a modern Presidency has to handle too many issues and deal with too many different constituencies through a complex bureaucratic apparatus. “Each of the cabinet agencies has several policies and programs which they consider vital”, one communications official remembered. And, while some of the president’s cabinet members may be reluctant to engage the press, they are usually interested in communicating their activities through advertising. “If it were up to them, each Secretary would want more TV and radio advertisements for his programs”.

Managing the president’s message, however, necessarily entails emphasizing some programs and policies over others, and accentuating some of its characteristics over others. Several communications officials explained that being effective in the communications arena requires resisting being pulled in the many directions that the multiple stakeholders attempt to pull you. “If you speak about everything, if you broadcast and advertise about everything, you end up emphasizing and communicating very little”, one communications director explained.

To avoid being cast adrift, identifying the priorities of the president – which may include helping the president identify or rediscover them in the first place -- is absolutely crucial. One communications official offered a particularly useful explanation of how to do this: “you start at the end, (by identifying) where you want to be in a few years, and you work your way back”. The same official remembered sitting down with the President and asking him what he wanted his legacy to be and how he wanted to be remembered overall several one-on-one sessions at the beginning of his tenure. Once the purpose and overall themes of the presidency were clearly distilled, it became easier to determine which programs and policies to prioritize through communications.

For some officials, the most important thing was coherence between the different components of the president's message. "The key to success", one of them suggested, "is making sure the most frequently communicated and emphasized programs fit into the overall narrative of what the president and his Administration stand for". So, besides having a clear, communicable purpose, modern Presidencies usually come up with broad themes that exemplify the President's platform. President Calderon's condensed purpose, for example, was summarized in the phrase *Vivir Mejor* (Living Better). Its key concept was sustainable human development. The five key themes that illustrated and sustained it, according to an official that referred to the National Development Plan, were 1) rule of law and safety; 2) competitive and job-creating economy; 3) equality in opportunities; 4) environmental sustainability; 5) effective democracy and responsibility in foreign affairs. The Salinas Presidency, in contrast, chose modernizing the country through neoliberalism as its main purpose, as one official explained. But, partly to offset the negative connotations of neoliberalism, it also focused heavily on social spending. The latter allowed the president to connect with ordinary Mexicans. Thus, communications-wise, "solidaridad" (solidarity) (social development) and "acts that generate progress" were the two key themes of the presidency, as one official remembered. This essentially meant that everything that the Presidency communicated, especially if it was through TV and radio advertisements or staged events, had to fall under one of these two message themes or "umbrellas". To add even more complexity, another communications official from the Salinas administration remembered even more specific guidelines: "we wanted to generate pride among our team, hope among the needy, and confidence among the rest." Hence, every piece of communications, besides being branded under *solidaridad* or acts that generate progress also had to generate pride, hope, or confidence – or all three of them. Together, both the substantive

guidelines and the emotional ones guaranteed that the presidents communicational portrait could be turned into a coherent picture.

While all communications teams remembered having broad themes and stellar policies and programs, not all mentioned having specific emotional guidelines. All had condensed slogans but not all of mentioned the centrality of the purpose (“the why behind everything they do”) as being the anchor of the President’s message. Moreover, the degree to which they fitted every communications piece into the broader, overall themes and purpose varies not only across but even amid Presidencies. One senior official suggested that, at the outset, Presidencies tend to have more diffused communications objectives. “Having resources to advertise about anything you want can be tempting and begin to lead you astray” he explained. Additionally, the structure through which advertisement resources are originally allocated across cabinet agencies, as I will later show, generates pressures against message discipline. Although these obstacles can certainly be overcome, the official suggested, it is typically some years into the Administration that the Presidency realizes that it needs more focus in its communications.

Overall, the description of the planning process of the office of *estrategia y mensaje* emphasizes the importance of the long term for this particular office. It also hints the importance of generating the right emotions, which contrasts with the need of the press office to obtain massive amounts of information and disseminate it appropriately.

While not all presidencies seemed to focus on which emotions they wanted to generate among whom, it is certainly at their loss. The more clearly thought-out the guidelines for constructing a narrative are, the less chance the result will deviate from it. Given that repetition is crucial, it makes sense to first have as much accuracy in the aim as possible.

As it should be clear by now, the differences between *comunicacion social* and *estrategia y mensaje* are stark. Contrary to the office of the press secretary, which has no official control of what the press will report, the office of communications has almost absolute control over its communications vehicles – advertising campaigns and staged (or managed) events. I now turn to the task of describing them.

Advertisement campaigns

Press management, as the last chapter showed, requires catering to the needs and values of journalists to get a message across. Advertising, on the other hand, provides a much more direct route to the hearts and minds of voters. In other words, advertising is unfiltered. The notorious advantage that this characteristic entails, however, may come at the price of reduced credibility. I am not aware of scholarly research that measures the credibility gap between news and advertising. Yet, except for one, all communications directors seemed little concerned about potentially reduced credibility. His concern, however, centered on the lack of credibility and “excitement about what the government is doing”. His strategic response was to make “government advertising sound less governmental”. The advertisement campaigns under his supervision avoided, as much as possible, using the word government and only called the policies or programs by name, not even mentioning which cabinet agency was responsible for the implementation. This marks a stark contrast with other modern Mexican presidencies, whose advertisements have readily and explicitly emphasized the role of the federal government.

The tone of advertising, at least some of it, is also markedly different from other, more sober, presidential communications vehicles – particularly that of the press office. The Solidarity campaign, for example, typically mentioned very little statistics or “policy information” – if any at all. Instead, it was orchestrated around short stories of likable, everyday characters (Salinas, 2000). Although the logical structure and clarity of its

message indicates an attempt to convince intellectually, the storytelling component shows a clear aim for memorability through emotionality. Several studies that focus on cognition, including the pioneering work of Bruner (1986), suggest that considerations that are coupled with affect (emotion) are, in fact, more accessible for an individual. Therefore, the theory seems to agree with the practice on the notion that emotional components may significantly add value to a communications campaign.

Other administration's officials also mentioned emotional approaches, although based on different premises. Several communications directors mentioned that they considered "good visuals and emotional appeals" indispensable. The notion that the Presidency had to communicate on an upbeat, optimistic yet presidential tone was pervasive among almost all communications directors. This is consistent with Brader's (2009) conclusion that political advertisements aim for both "hearts and minds" through the use of images and symbols that trigger emotions. Although his study focuses on electoral campaigns, the overall emphasis on emotional appeals that he finds applies well to how officials discuss Mexican government advertising. The emphasis on emotion means that every little detail of an advertisement, particularly TV advertisements, is carefully considered and constructed. So, for example, in the Solidaridad campaign, "every character that appeared had to have a very short but moving story and every one of them had to have something endearingly funny". For Don Beto (the character with which the chapter started) it was refusing to acknowledge that he was crying out of excitement. This, along with the carefully selected music and visuals, comes nicely along to generate the desired emotions in the viewer. While not all campaigns have used storytelling, and all administrations have come up with different formulas, the core insight of trying to generate the desired emotions for each message through advertising seems to hold across administrations and communication director tenures.

Surely, the focus on emotional appeals does not mean that advertisement campaigns disregard the facts. In his memoir, President Salinas remembers that a central consideration of his communications strategy was that all messages should be supported and substantiated by real, tangible actions (Salinas, 2000). A senior official in his Administration explained this concept in more evocative terms: “without chicken, there’s no chicken broth”. Returning to the Solidarity campaign example, President Salinas (2000) claims that the campaign was successful (credible) only because it communicated demonstrable facts. And several other advertising campaigns, while still retaining compelling audiovisual components, have clearly more “hard” information, like the evolution of indicators, a description of completed actions by the federal government, and so forth.

Given their visibility, the facts presented in advertisement campaigns are carefully selected and double-checked. To further lend support to the notion that data gathering in the executive branch can be a difficult endeavor (discussed in Chapter 8), one communications director mentioned that different governmental entities often have different facts and figures. Confronted with this challenge, his solution was to ask his team to only use information that came from either the *Coordinación de Asesores of the President* or the *Coordinación de Gabinetes*, two of the policy-oriented offices at *Los Pinos*. He also proposed that all the information that the Presidency published should come from this sources “to show a unified front to the press and the public”. However, officials from other communication offices – for example, the press office and the speechwriting team – mentioned that they were not always able to cope with the high demand for information by using one source alone.

The general focus on emotional appeals, however, is also consistent with the fact that news and advertisements may reach -- and be intended for -- different audiences than

news. As a consequence of media fragmentation and the expanded set of choices that it has brought along, “entertainment-seekers” can more easily avoid news consumption (Prior, 2005). But, even if they are not actively seeking news, the Mexican government has a powerful communications tool which not all governments have: it can speak directly to groups of people that are not prone to be exposed to news. Speaking to an audience that is poorly versed in public affairs is particularly challenging. Again, the key to success, as one official put it, is for the communications team to find simple yet memorable messages that can be constantly repeated directly to the public. In 2008, for example, the Calderon Administration was determined to reform the energy sector, particularly the oil & gas industry. Although the technical aspects of the administration’s proposal involved several complex and highly technical components, a senior official remembered that the key message with which the Calderon administration launched its appeal to the public was “we have to dig up our buried treasure”. Besides being a simple metaphor that could be understood by the majority of the people, who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of energy policy, the official explained that it downplayed the nationalistic logic of those opposed to the reform. By emphasizing that the Administration intended to go find the buried treasure (oil reserves) within the Gulf of Mexico, it evoked positive images for the Reform, while downplaying the negative notion of “handing out Mexican oil riches” to private hands. Foreign capital, under this formulation, was recast as a necessary (and un-protagonistic) ally that would help Mexicans recuperate the hidden treasure. Unfortunately for the Calderon Administration, the energy reform of 2008 was significantly watered down in their passage through Congress in 2008 -- to the point where the oil sector could not be significantly opened to private investment³⁴. However, two senior officials of the

³⁴ Although full service contracts became lawful under the new regime, the overall impact of this policy on

Calderón Administration claimed that their internal polling results suggested that they had been effective in persuading a majority of Mexicans to support their initiative. In other words, the communications objective was fulfilled – even if it did not translate to sufficient votes in Congress. It is important to note that, given the stakes and visibility of the 2008 energy reform initiative, all the communications offices of the presidency, along with several cabinet agencies were deeply involved – not only in terms of policy but also in matters of politics and communications. Advertisement was complemented by political negotiations, intense press outreach, and staged events. But it is fitting to use this example in this chapter because it illustrates how communications officials think about building the core message of an advertisement campaign.

While the above example suggests a change in people’s minds about energy reform, one communications director expressed doubts about being able to persuade anyone through advertisement campaigns. “No matter what a president does or stops doing”, he explained, “there will always be a group of people that will find fault with his actions and decisions”. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that a strong partisan of the opposition will be swayed by an advertisement campaign from the government. This insight, compounded with the notion that the government’s advertising resources are finite, led one administration to develop an attitudinal model of targeting, drawing upon its sophisticated polling apparatus. Within this model, citizens were identified as being supportive of the President and his party, supporters of the opposition, or undecided/unpartisan through statistical inferences based on demographics, polling, socioeconomics, and other factors. While the presidency continued communicating through channels that “would reach everyone”, the advertising messaging efforts were geared towards swaying the independent/undecided group. An official from another

foreign direct investment and oil and gas production was limited.

administration echoed this point: “if you try to find the wording or communications strategy to convince your harshest opponents, you will never succeed. You will, however, end up alienating your base and the indifferent who could have otherwise leaned your way”.

This is particularly true because negative or contrast advertisement has no place in governmental advertising. While the office of comunicacion social may engage in setting the record straight or confronting accusations, governmental advertising in Mexico has focused, as one official put it, “in explaining the achievements and advances to the public – what the government is doing to improve the quality of life of Mexicans”. In electoral campaigns, communication strategists have long since used negative advertising to reduce the opponent’s share of votes. And scholars have documented the effectiveness of this practice (Iyengar & Ansolabehere, 1995; Brader, 2006). But the idea of a democratic government advertising against its political opponents using public resources is clearly untenable. No interviewee gave even a slight hint of using advertisement to “go negative”.

Before moving on, it is important to note that advertisement is a highly collaborative effort. For instance, the office of Estrategia y Mensaje seldom, if ever, has produced by itself the entire final script for an advertising campaign. Similar to marketing departments in major companies, it provides the guidelines that external agencies execute. Drafting the guidelines themselves is a cooperative effort in which the polling office provides indispensable inputs. The final product is also, in most cases, tested by the polling office through focus groups. This interrelationship highlights the complexity of the endeavor of managing the president’s message through advertising.

Just like effective press secretaries have to excel at public relations techniques and handling the press, successful communications directors must be outstanding marketing

professionals. They must also be exceptional in handling several major campaigns at the same moment without losing focus on the presidential priorities. They have to look for ways to repeat the same core message in fresh, new ways that prove to be memorable, but, at the same time, do not distract from the real purpose of the communication.

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Before moving on, and because several governments across the world don't have similar advertising capabilities (including the U.S.), some clarifications regarding the magnitude and limits of this practice in Mexico are in order. Unlike its U.S. counterpart, the Mexican government has control over both "free" TV and radio air time and budgetary dispositions to purchase advertising spaces. Chapter 9 mentioned a study by Fundar and Article 19 that claims that the government's advertising expenses during the first years of the Fox, Calderón and Peña Nieto administrations have amounted close to 250, 400, and 330 million dollars, correspondingly (Fundar & Artículo 19, 2014). But absolute figures are seldom vivid enough. To put the advertising power of the Mexican government into perspective, one official described it as being anywhere "from two to four times" that of "Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble, or any other leading advertiser in the country".

Over time, there have been important changes in advertising expenditure, mainly because of modifications to the mix between official and paid-for times in electronic media or spaces in print media. One official of the Salinas Administration, for example, mentioned that that Presidency's advertising strategy on electronic media relied solely on "official" (free) times – which, in TV, used to amount to 3 hours (12.5% of the total air time). In 2002, through an executive decision that has been critically called "el decretazo", President Fox renounced to a huge portion of the official times that had been in place for more than 30 years. Instead of demanding 12.5% of the total air time of each

one of the radio and TV broadcasters as a fiscal tax of sorts, he accepted 1.25% of total TV air time (18 minutes each day) and 2.5% of radio (35 minutes every day). Had the presidency lacked the capacity to buy air time, this decision would have severely undercut its advertising power. But, in reality, the most profound change occurred in the mix between “official times” and media buys. The communications power that the advertising volume of the presidency entails has remained remarkably high. In fact, the quote of the advertising power of the presidency being greater than Coca-Cola’s refers to the “post-decretazo” era.

Instead of legislating against governmental advertising in general, regulations have sought to restrict its electoral impact. Although describing the nuances of the legal framework clearly escapes the purpose of this thesis, it should be noted that it adds significant complications and restrictions to governmental advertising. Among the most salient are the fact that the president cannot personally appear in the advertisements, unless it is during the weeks before his “Informe” (comparable to the State of the Union address).

One way in which communications directors offset this recent restriction, as one official suggested, is by generating a unique graphic identity for each presidency. So, for example, the slogans “vivir mejor” (live better) of the Calderon presidency or “mover a Mexico” (move Mexico) of the Peña Nieto administration have been used as trademarks of each presidency. The official symbol of each Presidency, although it has always been based on a variation of the official Mexican symbol, has had distinctive traits between each administration. By directly linking his “trademark”—but not the President himself - - to the advertisement, each president is, in a way, claiming the achievements reported their as their own, while still fully complying with the regulation, as one official explained. Because it is a central communications symbol that will be used not only in

advertising but also in stationery, official events, and almost any text, presentation, or publication that contains visual elements, the process of coming up with a graphic identity is deemed highly important at the outset of the presidency.

Other communication regulations cannot be offset, and the President does not even attempt to do so. For example, the law mandates the President (and any other government or elected official) to remove any advertisements that broadcast achievements in the months before an election. Consequently, to avoid controversies, in the first years of his administration, President Peña Nieto has decided not to advertise during such periods regardless of whether it is a state with electoral processes. This regulation on official advertisement can be justified by the fact that public resources should not have an impact on electoral processes. But the fact that the President cannot hold public events that emphasize his achievements (including, for example, inaugurating important infrastructure) seems to be, as one official from a previous administration put it, and several others echoed, an “unnecessary strait jacket that undemocratically thwarts liberty of expression from the President himself.” Perhaps the price of having the power to advertise is too high, particularly in the face of electoral processes, where communications become particularly important. But, then again, considering that the advertisement power of the presidency can be “several times that of Coca-Cola”, the “closed season” perhaps is just a small price to pay.

Overall, the way presidential advertising is approached by practitioners shows that officials not only are convinced that it has powerful effects, but that it has become a crucial strategic component of governing in a competitive democracy. Presidential events, as the next section will show, are approached with the same strategic rigor.

Before moving on to describe how event staging is thought about by practitioners from the strategic communications perspective, it is important to note that, as one official

explained, digital components (web portal and, recently, social media) have been handled more like direct advertising than like press relations. The key notion here is that both the official web page and social media accounts are used to talk directly to the public and cater to its preferences. Although this seems like an obvious choice, it should be noted, as one practitioner mentioned, that social media and the web page (along with other microsites) can also be used to draw the attention of journalists and other members of the political elite and provide them with more substantive information than what press releases allow. Compared to the U.S. presidency, however, it seems that the emailing list (used to push out contents which are frequently housed in the official web page and microsites) has not been used as much by the Mexican presidency. Once again, this suggests a stronger emphasis on *marketing* than on *strategic communications*—which would prioritize making sure that the relevant stakeholders are thoroughly informed of the positive aspects of presidential decisions and that relevant groups of influential supporters are activated (Manheim, 2011).

Staging events

Staged events constitute a hybrid form of communication. On the one hand, they, as one official explained, “give the president the chance to address his audience directly”. At first blush, this description sounds like a fantastic chance for the President to advocate for his policies and decisions in person. But not all officials were as enthusiastic about the overall impact of this form of direct communications. “Although it could have a significant impact, the reality is that most of the people that attend such events are already in the president’s camp”, one of them explained. “In some events, moreover, a significant portion of the attendees are government employees which are asked to support the president by showing up”.

But direct, face-to-face communications are only one component of most presidential events. One official explained that presidential events are not intended—at least not completely—for the physical audience of the event, but for the far more extensive and diverse media audiences. “When you design a presidential event”, one official explained, “you are always thinking about how it will be reported and broadcast-- how people at home will perceive the event”.

Communications directors seem to be acutely aware of the fact that, as one official put it “nothing can ‘not’ communicate”. Therefore, every little detail about an event – for example, the venue, the backdrop, who gets to speak, the order of the speakers, the time of the day, the number and profile of the people in the audience, where the cameras are located, etc. – is carefully considered in hopes that the event will meet its strategic objective. The key idea here, as one official explained, is to “align, as much as possible, the content of the announcement or message that the President with its visual components”.

One crucial element to successful event planning, as one official mentioned, is to recognize that “a picture is worth a thousand words”. He further elaborated that television news shows or newspapers typically do not reproduce the entire President’s speech. And, even if they do reproduce a significant portion of it, he explained, regular people will not pay attention to it. Regular people, he explained, often get their news when flipping through channels, using the TV as a background for other activities, or even walking on the street and coming across a newsstand. Even those that read the newspapers or watch news everyday usually do not pay undivided attention to every single story. “The opportunity to communicate with them through the media”, he continued, “is basically through a snapshot – a picture, a 15 seconds video footage, or a powerful *soundbyte* that encapsulates everything”. While sound bites fall under the

responsibility of the speechwriting unit, photo opportunities have been part of the portfolio of the communications director ever since the creation of the office of imagen y opinion publica under the Fox presidency. Therefore, communications directors spend significant amounts of time, effort, and resources to guarantee that the overall image of the event will be favorable. Some examples that communications officials mentioned were: using a large work of infrastructure as the backdrop of its inauguration to magnify its dimensions, surrounding the President by people to make him seem connected to the everyday Mexican (perhaps also without tie and jacket), and using a large military group as backdrop to show the strength and might of the Mexican army.

One communications director took this concept of striking visuals further. He mentioned that the key to success in handling an event's image was to come up with a "symbolic action". Under this standard, an image of President Calderon reviewing the damages that a hurricane had caused in Veracruz, walking through a street with the inundation water up to his knees, is particularly striking -- although one official explicitly mentioned that that particular picture was not staged but the result of President Calderon's spontaneous actions. It certainly conveys a lot more than what a regular press conference, speech, or thoughtfully crafted backdrop could have. For almost any event, therefore, the communications team has to think through the entire event: when will the president arrive? What his main activity will be (for instance, just giving his speech or breaking ground for the construction he is announcing)? What kinds of photo opportunities will there be?; how will he be dressed?; What is the backdrop going to be? Will the press get a chance to ask questions to the president. One communications director mentioned that being in charge of the event's image also meant making sure the president himself was in the right mood to convey the right message with the right tone. Since most presidential events convey a positive message, he remembered, he wanted to make sure that the president would remember to smile to the people hearing him while he was

giving a speech. He came up with an unconventional but effective tactic: he would make sure that a photo of the president with his wife and children was attached to the first page of the president's printed speech. Thus, every time that he approached the podium to read his printed script, "you would see him smile and really get in the right mood before starting to speak". Other officials echoed the notion, while tying it back to the importance of conveying the right mood especially in recorded messages.

In the age of social media, one official suggested, this part about image-staging also means selectively and strategically choosing images that allow "followers" to get a sneak peek into the private life of the president to connect with the audience at a more personal level—although this is presently handled by a separate office: the *coordinacion de estrategia digital*. So, for example, the presidential team may choose to broadcast, through the Twitter and Facebook accounts, a photo of the president about to blow the candles of his birthday cake, a video of the president congratulating the head coach of the Mexican soccer team by phone or a photo of him celebrating with the closest members of his team. The degree to which they do so, however, is constrained by the president's personal style.

But, just as some images can have a positive communications effect, others can be damaging. In 1995, President Zedillo gave a speech announcing a master plan to make the *Barrancas del Cobre* a popular tourist site. The event was strategically staged to show the majestic canyon—the key tourist attraction—as a backdrop. But, rather than commenting on the natural beauty of the place, commentators made the location of the president a metaphor of what was happening to the government amidst the economic crisis of '94, one of the harshest ones in modern Mexican history. So, as one official remembered, the message soon became: President Zedillo, *al borde de la barranca* (literally at the edge of the cliff). The rise of social media has made this risk even bigger,

as social media users often produce memes that make fun of awkward or poorly chosen presidential pictures.

Other tactics for event image management seem less remarkable but are equally effective. Early during the Fox presidency, for example, the communications office realized that the podium that the president was using could also be used for communicating with newspaper readers and television viewers. By including a short phrase, either on the podium or on the backdrop, the presidential communications office could contextualize—or frame—the picture to fit into one of the broader communications theme. The launch of a drug rehabilitation center, for example, would include a phrase such as “rehabilitating our social tissue”. No matter how the press decided to cover the story, including the image inevitable meant transmitting the presidential phrase in an unfiltered way.

Managing the president’s events is a time- and labor-intensive endeavor. The President, as one advisor remembered, typically has public appearances daily—sometimes as much as two, three or four in just one day. Although the Presidency does not design all events from scratch, the communications office is responsible for the image of the President and the institution he heads during each of these events. Hence, for example, it will closely coordinate with the offices of other cabinet heads (typically through their chiefs of staff) to make sure the events with presidential attendance which they are organizing (and paying for) are communicating the right things. One advisor remembered that, in the light of the logistical challenge that this represents, “standardizing the information” became crucial. Therefore, for each event, the cabinet agency was asked to fill out a very detailed form that, in a way, forced them to think in the same terms that the presidency did. Examples of questions that the cabinet agencies had to address are: what is the main impact of the policy/program/infrastructure work we are announcing or inaugurating,

how many people will benefit, how will they benefit, how much is the total investment, what would be an appropriate title, how would you communicate the event in just one phrase, what are its antecedents, what problem does it solve, etc. One communications official remembered that this “standardization” was also helpful to determine which events the president attended and which ones he did not—a task that is usually approached collectively by the senior staff.

To be sure, a president’s events are not just handled by the *estrategia y mensaje* office and require the collaboration of many offices. As one official remembered, there are many things that have to come together for a major presidential event to be really successful: the right build-up to the event, where expectations are set by proactive management of the media by the press office—handing journalists details to build anticipation and get people talking without giving out the announcement; the right political tone and timing, which is typically a concern of the office of the chief of staff or of the *secretario particular*; the right speech with the right tone, words, sound bites, overall message, and, of course, the right staged image. To make the job even more complicated, one communications official explained, “you can have all the elements lined up, you can successfully deliver for each one of them, and still have modest success”. On the other hand, “if any of these elements goes wrong, everything will go wrong when the message is passing through the media”.

Conclusion to the chapter on the office of communications

Overall, the discussion of the communications office shows that managing the president’s image is a highly complex endeavor. It shows an aspect of strategic communications that entails careful long-term planning and execution: an accurate distillation of the president’s purpose and themes, the development of an institutional image that becomes both a personal and institutional brand, and the implementation of

communication campaigns, through both advertising and staged events, that constantly reinforce the positive—everything that the president is doing to improve the life of all Mexicans.

While the role of staging events is one that has also been typically ascribed to the communications office in the U.S., overseeing the federal government’s advertising campaigns is a unique function to the Mexican presidency. Interestingly, this responsibility has pushed the office of *estrategia y mensaje gubernamental* into long-term planning and strategizing. But it has done so in a very different way than what the White House communications office. While the White House communications office considers how to leverage the government’s communication resources to achieve policy objectives (this includes, for example, thinking about what the message of the day is and how to best get it across, who should carry the message, when and in which terms or framing, who should be deployed as surrogates, how factsheets and messages of the day should be deployed, how counter-frames could be minimized, when a major presidential speech is warranted, in what terms, and under which conditions, etc.), a significant amount of the time of the Mexican communications director is consumed by handling advertising campaigns. This, of course, limits its potential to interact on a daily basis with the press office and offer strategic insights and longer-term support into the management of the president’s message. The conclusion of the thesis will draw upon this finding at greater detail.

But, in any case, the discussion of the communications director’s role also serves to illuminate the collaborative effort in managing the president’s message. Advertising campaigns often entail joint efforts with other cabinet agencies and inevitably with advertising agencies as well as the internal polling office. Event staging often entails cooperation with other cabinet agencies. And, even when it does do not, it does demand

collaboration with the press office, the speechwriting unit, the office of the *secretario particular*, and some others. As I move on to describe another crucial communications office in the modern presidency—the office of public opinion—it should become even clearer that good communications are more about harmony, cooperation, and logistics than just about having a shrewd press officer, a brilliant speechwriter, or an outstanding “visuals” or marketing official. Thus, the importance of understanding the responsibilities of each office and its place among the broader structure—i.e. understanding the anatomy of strategic communications in the modern Mexican presidency—becomes undeniable.

Chapter 11: The office of opinión pública

A central theme for this thesis has been that the foundation of the Mexican modern presidency was marked by a reorganization of the presidential office – one that, among other consequences, made communications a truly professionalized, interdisciplinary effort. At the core of this new vision for presidential communications lied the transformation from a “gut-driven” approach to communications to a fact or research-driven one.

The existence of the communications office, as the last chapter showed, was intermittent over the analyzed period. After an external yet official advisor held a primordial role in the advertising campaigns of the Salinas presidency, the Zedillo administration chose to dissolve this figure. And, even when the Fox administration revived and strengthened the figure organization-wise – formally creating the office of communications – some officials mentioned (as the last chapter showed) that the position owed more to the campaign experience than the Salinas administration precedent.

This was not the case with the office in charge of public opinion research. Its creation marked the advent of professionalized polling in Mexico--a movement that, once it was set in motion, has not stopped. And its impact goes clearly beyond presidential communication. From the early wave of pollsters that Ulises Beltran headed in the presidential office, a new “industry” was born.

In terms of the presidential office, Beltran himself would head the polling office during two presidential terms (under Presidents Salinas and Zedillo). The Fox administration pollster would, according to one official, build on the groundwork that Beltran had laid. Calderon would appoint a chief pollster that had begun his carrier under Beltran’s

leadership. And Pena Nieto's administration has continued the tradition of employing an in-house pollster that heads an office of around 20 persons at Los Pinos.

Nor was the influence of Beltran's initial efforts limited to the management of the president's message. Soon after the creation of the public opinion research office, the media would begin to track public opinion on a regular basis. Today, the use of polling for political communications has become widespread in Mexico, not only for the presidency and the media, but also for most political parties, governors, senators, municipal presidents, and congressmen (*diputados*).

This chapter describes the beginnings of presidential public opinion polling. Then, it describes how the modern office of presidential polling works. In contrast with the press office and the communications office, the products of the polling office do not interact directly with the public. Yet, its influence in shaping how an administration interacts with the public is paramount.

Before starting the description, however, it is important to note that not all presidential offices across the world have an in-house polling office. For example, even though the White House has relied upon polling for its messaging efforts for several decades now (Wirthlin, 2004), U.S. presidential pollsters have usually been either subcontracted or remained external advisors. This explains why Kumar (2008), in her thorough and seminal analysis of the White House communications apparatus, mentions public opinion research only briefly. Because pollsters in the modern Mexican presidency have frequently held a similar rank to press secretaries or communications directors, this work has the advantage of describing (as a full chapter) what it means to be the president's pollster.

The beginnings of modern polling in Mexico

One official remembered that at the outset of the Salinas presidency, Ulises Beltrán—a PhD in economic history from the University of Chicago—was assigned the task of launching a modern public opinion research office within Los Pinos. This marked, as several officials remembered, not only the first time the presidency used polling systematically in Mexico, but also the first time public opinion would be tracked systematically by a Mexican political institution.

Several officials attributed the delayed launch of polling in Mexico (in the U.S., for example, it started as early as the 1930's) to the hegemonic nature of the PRI from 1930 to the latter years of the 1980's. Whatever the reasons were, the fact is the presidency itself saw in this endeavor a revolutionary one – perhaps so revolutionary that, although not secret, the polling program was not actively made public. In fact, even the initial name of the office illustrates this point. Concerned that its public opinion research activities could be portrayed by adversaries and the media as an activity that had the goal of manipulating the public, the presidency decided that the ambiguous “asesoria técnica” (technical advisory) was a better name than anything with the words public opinion on it—although public opinion research was clearly its focus.

Interestingly, at its beginnings, the office did not even have a strategic communications focus. In fact, one official explained that the initial polling that the presidency conducted could be more accurately characterized as geared towards government evaluation. He added that, rather than a message crafting tool, polls were used early-on to assess how the government was doing in each of the 31 states and federal districts on a wide variety of issues: from economic to political and social ones. But the focus of those polls was not solely president-centric. Torres Reyna (2013) mentions that the initial presidential mandate for Dr. Beltrán was also to focus the polling efforts on measuring electoral

preferences and the performance of local authorities. In fact, exit polling, as one official explained, would contribute to the credibility of the electoral process and rise of the democracy in Mexico. Amidst fraud allegations that tainted the reputation of the elections in Mexico, exit polls became a way to externally validate an electoral outcome--such as the results of the gubernatorial race in Baja California in 1989, where the PRI lost a governorship for the first time.

But perhaps even more interesting (yet alarming) is the fact that polling was also used to analyze the performance of governors. One official, in fact, suggested a correlation between this type of polling and the fact that 19 governors did not finish their constitutional terms during the Salinas administration. Yet, whether a low degree of constituent satisfaction with their governors – and a presidency that decided to police governors through public opinion indicators in a meta-constitutional way – were really the driver behind these decisions clearly escapes the scope and purpose of this thesis.

The trend of public opinion being used for government evaluation purposes solely continued for the first years. As one official recalled, the turning point occurred once the idea of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was conceived. Chapter 9 detailed that the passage of this treaty played a key role in the transformation of the press office in several ways. But it also transformed how public opinion research was used in Mexico.

As I argued in chapter 9, the passage of NAFTA meant going against the usual PRI rhetoric which exacerbated nationalism—and frequently blamed the U.S. for any problems in the country. In terms of communications, this was a big gamble: leaving behind the discourse that had been culturally resonant over several decades and adopting a new, untested one. And here is where public opinion research came in.

Contrary to what could be expected (and a key theme that the next chapter explores), one official explained that the Presidency did not use polling to decide whether to go ahead with NAFTA or not. That decision, according to the official was made completely independent of what the public—which, at the moment, was mostly unacquainted about what the treaty would mean—thought. In other words, no pandering was involved. But, as some officials remembered, the presidency did identify the importance of “selling” the idea correctly—communicating the policy in the most effective terms. As one official explained, rather than a quantitative, generalizable analysis of what the public thought, the presidency opted for a deeper understanding of how to craft the message (what to emphasize and what to avoid, and how) through focus group sessions. And it was through the focus group sessions that the head of the *asesoria tecnica* got to work closer with the president. Through the NAFTA-initiated focus groups, the inputs of the head of *asesoria tecnica* to the President—which, before NAFTA, were characterized by an official as “mostly through reports” which were delivered to the (de facto) chief of staff—became much more direct and communications-focused. Soon, the reliance of the president upon this technique expanded well beyond NAFTA. In fact, in the last half of the six-year tenure of President Salinas’ tenure, one official stated that most major speeches were tested through focus groups. And, perhaps as a testament to its effectiveness as a strategic tool, communications-related polling would never abandon Los Pinos.

It is important to emphasize once more that public opinion research is not just a strategic communications tool. For example, in his doctoral dissertation, Torres Reyna (2013) also identifies another use for Mexican presidential polling: “provide a source of independent, reliable, timely and accurate information that helped deal with interest groups, party leaders, candidates, state and local authorities”. As important as this or other political and technical uses for polling might be (for example, for the technical

design of public policies), this thesis will avoid their discussion in favor of a greater emphasis on communications.

Do presidents pander?

All of the communications officials whom I interviewed had one response in common: presidents don't pander. Although Shapiro & Jacobs (2001) warn that the consequences of "not pandering" are "political manipulation and the loss of democratic responsiveness", communications officials saw this completely differently. One of them explained in particularly distinct terms that attempting to follow the public is a recipe for inevitable failure because the majority of the public does not get all the facts and is frequently unequipped to understand the implications and consequences of policy and political decisions. I do not know (and did not explore in interviews) the degree to which other communications officials would agree to that statement, but more than three-fourths of them mentioned, in one way or another, that the public was frequently uninformed and unengaged in public affairs. In any case, most of them explained that it was the responsibility of a president to make tough decisions and to actually lead the public. So, what Jacobs & Shapiro may have perceived as lack of responsiveness, the communications officials saw as the hallmark of a true leader and a statesman.

This finding is not unique to the set of interviews I conducted. Torres Reyna (2013) also states that "(none of the presidential staffers) argued that public opinion polls were used for policy design; on the contrary, polls were used to advance as much as possible the presidential agenda" (p.29). But, quite interestingly, when looking at other administrations (not the one(s) under which they had served), several of the officials which I interviewed were not so sure that the "non-pandering" concept held. Therefore, it could be a mistake to conclude from interviews that polling was never used for policy

design. More research that employs different research methods on this issue is needed before a definitive conclusion can be offered.

Most communications officials did agree, however, that public opinion research is used for message crafting. In other words, once the “tough” decisions were made, public opinion research was used to discover the best strategy to communicate them. One communications official explained that the proper way to think about public opinion research was through a “hypothesis- testing” model. In his view, public opinion research is only useful in strategic terms if a hypothesis—“an initial, opinionated message”—is developed first. Then, through polling and focus groups, the hypothesis is honed until it is ready “for publishing”. In other words, going to the data first without a guiding hypothesis is suboptimal, not only because it fails to provide direction for the effort but also because it lacks something meaningful to test.

The finding that presidents don’t pander—or, to be more precise, that top presidential aides claim that they don’t believe that pandering is desirable—is quite interesting. On the one hand, it suggests strong presidential leadership—ready to implement policy solutions no matter what the cost in terms of public approval could mean. On the other, however, this finding could be understood as confirmation of the relegation of communications to a secondary or auxiliary level. It could well be that, since there is no mechanism that translates public opinion into Congressional votes (such as Congressional reelection), politicians “pander” to other politicians, but not directly to the public. To this point, several communications officials concluded that how an issue was communicated, in fact, was constrained by political considerations—which is a completely different approach from “going public”, an approach in which the communications strategy actually constrains the bargaining options.

Presidential popularity

Several communications officials mentioned that the degree of popularity of the president and the percentage of people that believed that the country was moving in the right direction were the most frequently asked questions in the public opinion research that the presidency conducted. While these questions are clearly inadequate to determine the wording for a presidential advocacy or advertising campaign—and they do not fit the hypothesis-based model described in the previous section—officials of some administrations mentioned that they were crucial to determine the overall presidential attitude during a given period of time.

Rather than message-crafting, this use of polling fits the “political capital” framework. This mindset equates popularity with political capital—currency which serves as leverage for political negotiations, either through bargaining (*a la* Neustadt) or the more adversarial alternative of “going public” (*a la* Kernell). In line with this way of thinking, one official said that a key use of public opinion polls was to figure out how much political capital the president had. According to him, to President Fox, popularity meant “bargaining power to push his policy agenda through an adversarial Congress”. Another official from a different administration, however, warned that this way of thinking might be misleading in the Mexican case. “Without any type of reelection”, the official explained, “popularity plays a slightly differently role than what it does in other political systems, such as the U.S. democracy”. Hence, according to the official, while popularity does matter, it does so through the interpretation of the party elites—instead of the interpretation of their constituent’s presidential approval. And even more importantly, “party and congressional leaders may consider—although they not always do so—a high level of presidential approval a necessary condition for them to seat at the bargaining

table with the president.” But the direction of public opinion is seldom sufficient to influence the direction of votes in Congress, as the official explained. Thus, presidencies that have relied upon a combination of their own popularity and significant levels approval of their proposed policy by the public for their legislative strategy, just like the Fox administration did during its fiscal reform attempt (see Castañeda and Aguilar, 2007), could have failed by choosing the wrong tool (communications) to advance their policy goals. As one official with ample involvement in scholarly research put it, “Neustadt is a far better model to understand the Mexican presidency than Kernell—although not everyone has understood that”.

Fine-tuning the message

Despite their similarities (i.e., using public opinion research for message crafting and as a way to measure political capital) not all administrations conduct public opinion research in the same way. To clarify what public opinion research from the communications perspective entails, this section lists several of those differences.

First, compared to 1988, public opinion research techniques have evolved significantly. As one official explained, “now, you don’t have to wait for two weeks for the results of nationally representative polling”. Phone surveys can be completed in one day and improvements in route designs for field surveyors has made it possible, combined with an increased manpower, has made it possible to complete door-to-door surveys in just a few days. Moreover, pollsters have come up with “flash polls”, “tracking polls” and other techniques that allow them to infer how the public feels about a specific issue, message, or image in a very short period of time. Considering the fast-paced and always-moving media politics landscape in which *Los Pinos* operates, the new techniques have enabled them to adjust their communications strategies almost in real time.

Given their nature, these changes in public opinion analysis seem most relevant for the crisis, or event-driven, mode of presidential communications, where planning ahead is, by definition, impossible. This distinction is useful to describe how the office operates: one official explained that the everyday work of the office of public opinion—usually comprised of 15-20 officials—can be categorized into two: systematic public opinion analysis (which included weekly, monthly and quarterly reports) and event-driven polls. Although the systematic tracking of public opinion includes some questions regarding recent political events, deeper public opinion analysis of the specific issue are commissioned whenever a crisis emerges. In these latter cases, one official explained, having the results come in as quickly as possible is crucial because it allows the presidency to operate “according to facts” rather than “according to hunches”.

Second, the specific mix of tools that public opinion researchers use seems like a personal choice. For example, even while discussing the current environment, officials from the Salinas administration explicitly stated that qualitative analysis (such as focus groups and in-depth interviews) were a much better way to fine tune the message. In fact, one official went as far as saying that most quantitative studies were useless for message crafting; in his view, they should only be employed to analyze the broader political context, track the performance of crucial indicators (such as presidential approval or popularity), or target more efficiently an already crafted message. Officials from the Fox and Calderon administrations, on the contrary, described using a “50-50” mix of qualitative and quantitative tools for message crafting. Rather than show a strict evolution on professional practices, these differences seem to emerge from personal experiences and preferences over which techniques yield more useful results for which particular part of the project. But, in any case, officials from all the administrations discussed using a wide array of techniques—both quantitative and qualitative.

Third, the degree to which specific presidential messages are fine-tuned varies greatly between each administration. Officials from the Salinas administration, for example, remembered that, in the post-NAFTA era, several recorded messages in which the President participated were often submitted to 3 different rounds of qualitative testing. The findings from each round, both in terms of content and of form, were incorporated into the new message, which was recorded again and submitted to a new round of testing. Although this process resulted in significant and progressive fine-tuning, it demanded a considerable amount of time from the President. Officials from other administrations mentioned that only the most important messages, such as key points of *Informes* (the Mexican equivalent of a State of the Union), major advertising campaigns and decisions that involved the administrations institutional image were tested through focus groups and that they did not go through several, progressive rounds of testing.

Fourth, not all administrations develop targeting criteria for their messaging efforts. Even as early as the Salinas administration, presidential speeches were crafted to cater to local needs and preferences. This practice has continued throughout all the subsequent administrations. And it was recently expanded to include advertising. But these practices of geographic targeting at such an aggregate level hardly require sophisticated targeting. Only two officials from the Fox administration mentioned attitude-based targeting (described in a previous chapter), but the implications of the use of that model are interesting: it could mean an overall slant towards a specific group of the political spectrum. And only officials from the two most recent administrations mentioned the potential of digital communications to reach specific groups with very specific characteristics through online advertising. As targeting and micro-targeting techniques from the electoral campaign permeate the governmental arena, it is likely that messages will be fine-tuned for several different segments rather than the entire population.

Fifth, the degree to which polling (external) consultants become key advisers varies significantly depending on the style of the head of the office of public opinion. Some officials mentioned specifically setting periodic meetings with the heads of the consulting companies which were hired to do the fieldwork or qualitative analysis because they considered them crucial sources for insights. Others mentioned external consultants only as the companies or groups which carried out the fieldwork. This is a crucial distinction because the head of the public opinion office is typically the interface through which outside pollsters interact with the presidency. For example, as one official remembered, the Fox administration counted the highly renowned Manuel Rodriguez Woog, Gaby de la Riva, and Guido Lara as external advisors through its polling office, then housed in the *Coordinacion de Imagen y Opinion Publica*. During the final part of the administration, they had weekly meetings with the head of that coordinacion as well as the heading of polling and that mechanism improved the chances that the insights they offered flowed to the president himself as well as the rest of the communications apparatus. In other words, they were recognized as important advisors to the presidency. But, as one official explained, not all presidencies—at least during their entire periods—have adopted a similar mechanism. Thus, the insights and perspective that outside pollsters offer may not always be fully taken advantage of, relegating some of them to being mere service providers.

Sixth, the public opinion analysis can be focused anywhere in a continuum between, as one official called them, inputs and outputs. More pragmatic communicators, who focus on outputs, believe that the key to success is discovering which are the benefits from a policy that the public cares most about. Thus, for example, an administration that discovers that reducing the prices of commodities as a result of a proposed reform is one of the benefits that the public deems most important will choose reduced prices as a key selling point in its communications campaign. That this is a good communications

strategy would be supported by a quantitative analysis that compares the support for the policy given that different sets of benefits are communicated. But focusing the research of public opinion on a different point of the input-output continuum might yield an entirely different communications campaign. For example, moving towards the “input” side of the spectrum, another campaign to communicate the same reform could emphasize more ideological or abstract concepts such as the need for more fairness, competitiveness, or modernity. Although the soundness of this strategic could also be confirmed by a similar quantitative analysis that compares the options, one official explained that qualitative analysis (not only focus groups, but also ethnographic studies, in-depth interviews, and other more modern tools) is better equipped at finding deeper, more abstract reasons that sway the public. Interestingly, the perspectives of officials from different administrations were at odds on what it is best to communicate: some believe that people only care about tangible results while others believe that the president “should never sell outputs, only inputs”.

Conclusion

Altogether, the discussion of the differences in approach across the tenure of several officials reflects that, although the office of public opinion research is the more “scientific” of the communications offices of the presidency because of the nature of the methodology it employs, it still depends upon the principal’s judgment, personal preferences, and style. In other words, public opinion research is as much a science as it is an art. And, even if presidents truly don’t pander, public opinion research has become an indispensable yet incredibly complex activity for an institution that strives to become better at, as one official put it, “communicating its actions and educating the public”.

The discussion also hints the importance of establishing clear communication goals. Using communications as a tool to advance a specific policy makes it easier for pollsters

to suggest specific routes to obtain the support. In contrast, just looking at keeping the president's approval high or strengthening it may be too broad a goal—one in which research offers little concrete guidance.

In terms of structure, the discussion suggests the importance of establishing strong collaboration mechanisms between the public opinion office and the rest of the communications offices. It is only through this office that the presidency obtains a representative and nuanced view of what the public thinks, and how to best construct a message. However, there were some senior officials (particularly press secretaries) in some presidencies that mentioned only a weekly meeting or a written report as the way they came to know about public opinion. For some presidencies, it was actually unclear how insights from polling landed into the communication vehicles of the presidency. Again, putting someone in charge of communications strategy in the long term could go a long way in guaranteeing that the insights of public opinion are *always* used in all the communications vehicles of the presidency—whether they are news-related or non-news-related.

Chapter 12: The speechwriting office

In contrast with the other three offices described in previous chapters, the speechwriting unit did not go through significant changes as the result of the modernization of the presidency. In fact, although it has been housed in several different offices headed by *coordinadores* (i.e. the press office, the communications office, the office of the secretario particular and the office of the coordinador de asesores) and it has also existed as an independent office, the essential way in which the speechwriting office operates has not undergone major changes over the last 26 years.

Although the speechwriting office ghostwrites most of the texts that will be attributed to the president and the first lady during his tenure, it is hardly a surprise that the most important ones are his speeches. This capability of putting words into the mouth of a president, as one official explained, is a responsibility that none of the other communication offices have. And the importance that presidents themselves attribute to it is illustrated by the amount of time that the president spends with his chief speechwriter. As some officials across several administrations remembered, the chief speechwriter, or whoever is ultimately responsible of the speechwriting office, often spends more than one hour everyday with the president revising and editing the president's speeches.

The operation of the speechwriting unit also illustrates the magnitude and complexity of the executive branch. Not only specialized writers but also researchers and officials in charge of gathering information, validating it, and generally coordinating with other cabinet agencies are employed in the unit. The Fox administration, for example, had a speechwriting unit of, as one official remembered, “approximately ten” officials—most of them with a relatively high pay grade or rank—plus the administrative staff.

Although writing speeches is certainly more art than science, it is important to consider that the presidential speechwriting shop usually writes more than 3,500 speeches over a six year period. This figure averages to more than two speeches for every weekday. In fact, as one official remembered, there are days in which 5 or even 6 speeches are needed. Some of these remarks are just 1-5 minute short speeches. But an official explained that most of them are usually between 20 to 40 minutes in length, with some (such as the *Informe*) easily running over 90 minutes. While none of the officials offered an estimate in terms word count, one of them accurately described writing speeches as “an enormous undertaking”. Hence, the speechwriting shop has been organized in such a way as to benefit from what could be called a writer’s version of “mass production”.

The writing process

Just as the data gathering functions of the press office are crucial to its success, the ability of the speechwriting office to secure accurate, up-to-date information is essential. One official explained that, long before a single word of the speech was written, researchers within the speechwriting unit obtained previous speeches from the president on the topic, any key documents, such as the *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo* (National Development Plan, a public policy blueprint which is developed at the beginning of each presidency), the sectorial development plans, as well as (sometimes) key policy documents by relevant influential organizations—this, of course, besides any other popular or cultural references that the researchers deemed relevant. At the same time, the official in charge of inter-institutional coordination reached out to the offices of the heads of cabinet agencies to ask for “talking points” and relevant updates on the policy, infrastructure work, or program that the speech was set to mention. Depending on the administration, this outreach could also include the presidential offices in charge of policy coordination, such as the *coordinacion de gabinetes*. Although this sounds like a

very straightforward process, it is important to keep in mind that key ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance or the Ministry of Government, may be asked for “talking points for 5 or more different events on a given week”. Moreover, the outreach may include several governmental institutions at the same time: for example, a speech may include components from the Ministry of Finance, of Economy, of Energy, and of Environment and Natural Resources. Therefore, as one official remembered, scheduling can either make the speechwriters’ job easier and more predictable by planning ahead and sticking to the original plan as much as possible—although “unforeseen events at the presidency always keep popping up”. Other interesting parts of the research include looking for a personal anecdote that the president could use to connect to the audience of the speech, interesting quotes, or stories that relate notable figures to the program.

All this information is then put together to come up with the first draft of the speech. Depending on the theme of the speech, one official explained, it is assigned to a different writer. Usually, writers, depending on their background are categorized into either the economic team or the social one. This helps, as the official explained, not only to make sure that the writer understands the policy and political implications of what he is writing, but also to ensure that he becomes familiarized with how the situation is progressing and the nuances of the policy or program over time. In other words, just as a mass production line, the speechwriting shop relies heavily on specialization.

One official explained that another key point of the writing process is that, although every speech is different, the essential structure remains the same. For example, during the Fox administration, the structure that was chosen essentially required a diagnostic of the problem in the beginning, followed by an explanation of the solution that the presidency was adopting, and a call to arms at the end. This standardization of the information, while it is ambiguous enough to allow for the artistic and creative part of

writing speeches, immediately limits what sort of information fits into the speech and which information does not. It also reflects the need for speechwriters to get their point across as clearly and simply as possible. A particularly interesting addition to the structure is that, during two administrations, variations of the phrase “ladies and gentleman” (*mexicanas y mexicanos* or *amigas y amigos*) were used after a long pause to signal the beginning of the peroration of the speech. One official explained that, for reporters covering the speech, this tacitly signaled that they had to turn on their voice recorders precisely at the moment because a good soundbyte was next. The implication for the writers, of course, was that whatever came after that phrase had to sum up the essence of the message in particularly aesthetic or powerful terms.

To be sure, throughout the interviews I conducted, there was not one comment that would have allowed me to conclude that, in the broadcast and narrowcast eras, speechwriters only care about coming up with good sound bites. In fact, the speechwriters I interviewed showed engagement with not only the form of the entire speech but also its substantive content. That they were aware of the power of the sound bite in no way means, as it is often implied, that substance or structure are disregarded—at least as far as I could tell from the interviews.

Once the first draft is concluded, the revision process begins. One official explained that, if the speech was drafted by a junior writer, a senior writer often goes through the first round of edits. Otherwise, the chief speechwriter will often do the revision. An interesting variation of this process occurred during the Fox administration. Rather than individualized revision, the senior writers along with the chief speechwriter would collectively engage in constructive criticism of each speech. This, according to a speechwriter, was particularly useful because it allowed several voices and perspectives to be heard. For example, one of the writers could express his concern that the speech

could be perceived as an attack to a particular group, while another may be concerned about the speech being too bland in the way it was approaching a different issue. Moreover, it allowed the speech to be “linguistically enriched” from several fronts. The downside to this practice is the fact that it may add to an already quite hectic workload in the speechwriting shop. Returning to the mass production metaphor, it would certainly slow down the production line.

After the draft is revised to the complete satisfaction of the head speechwriter or whoever is ultimately responsible for the unit, it is usually sent to the technical areas (cabinet agencies) for vetting. One official mentioned that this could be characterized, on most cases, as an internal fact-checking process, rather than an in-depth revision of the structure or political message that the speech is sending, although Ministries like Government or Foreign Affairs can sometimes add to the revision on that front. More important speeches, like the *Informe*, are also circulated among the presidential senior staff for additional inputs.

Once the speech is deemed to be ready for delivery, it is taken to the president, either by the head speechwriter or by the head of the coordination in which the speechwriting shop is housed. As officials remembered, some presidents try to build a daily speech revision one-on-one meeting with the official in charge of speechwriting. One official, in contrast, mentioned that whenever he had a small bulk of speeches ready, he would ask the *secretario particular* for a meeting with the president. No matter how experimented his speechwriters are, one official remembered that it is unusual for the president to accept the speech exactly as it is proposed. “The president took his speeches very seriously”, one official remembered, “so he would usually have suggestions on how to improve it, where to tone it up or down, and which additional information to look for”. This, of course, triggers more research and editing into the speech. As one speechwriting

official explained, the meeting he held with the president everyday was usually from 6:00 pm to 7:00 pm, but doing the post-meeting research and editing often extended into the early hours of the next day.

Emphasizing the same point, another official remembered that sometimes the additions that the president suggested were not “approved” by the areas through the usual vetting channel (through one of his deputies who contacted the office of the cabinet agencies). It took either the head speechwriter or the president himself to call the secretary by phone and ask him whether that “could be said” to get the area to write off on the information. To be sure, this does not mean that cabinet agencies have ultimate control over the president’s speech. But it emphasizes that presidents want to get the facts right. On a different level, it shows that the flow of information may vary from what secretaries have access to and discuss with the president to what their staffers have access to and propose through the traditional channels for proposing talking points.

For more important speeches, another round of presidential revision and editing might take place. Otherwise, as one official remembered, the speechwriter is trusted to do the editing with his team. The president usually receives a printed version of the speech on his way to the event where he will pronounce it—unless he asks to see it sooner. And most officials remembered that, although the main ideas of the speech were kept, the president often added last minute edits to the speech or improvised some parts during the actual delivery.

Before moving on, it is important to mention that presidents are seldom the only speakers at the public events they attend. But they are the most important ones, which means that they get to speak last. Because of this tradition, public officials speaking before him could “rob” the president of an important announcement or mention the same facts, attracting the attention of the audience or the sound bite for themselves

rather than the president. As I have discussed in other sections, this would go against the notion of priming—which, for more practical terms means that the president wants to make the positive announcements himself (and distance himself from the negative ones). To prevent this from happening, the presidential speechwriting shop has made it a regular practice, as one official remembered, to ask any executive branch public official for their speech in advance of the event to identify phrases, announcements, or even facts and figures that would give away the president’s message before he got a chance of conveying it. They would then ask the staff of the agency to remove those parts from the speech of the public official. Thus, a more choreographed event in terms of governmental messaging—one in which the president plays the leading role also in terms of message substance—is guaranteed.

The speech of the day

As several officials mentioned, Mexican presidents usually have at least one public event every day. But there are days in which the president holds, as one speechwriter remembered, “5 or 6 events where he will not only attend, but will give a speech”. And, as another official put it, in a day tour of a state in Mexico, the president may “inaugurate a road, inaugurate a small health center, inaugurate a wind power plant, and visit a local primary school.” This can be problematic in terms of mediated communication: too much activity can distract from the main message of the day.

The solution in terms of speechwriting, as one official remembered, is to choose one of the events as the main one. During the Zedillo presidency, for example, the speech for the main event was longer and was also the one on which the head speechwriter himself worked on. The other shorter ones were completely delegated to his team. And during the revision process, it was unsurprisingly the main speech that received the most attention. If any important announcements were to be made, one official suggested, they

were to be made during the main event of the day. Besides the press office letting the reporters know in advance which even was more important, the fact that the president's speech was longer, more carefully crafted, and included the relevant announcements made it easy for them to decide where they should focus their reporting. Not all the administrations were successful at implementing such a mechanism, however. While officials from the Fox and Calderon administrations, for example, remembered that the speechwriter advocated for adopting such a mechanism, both presidents believed that it would be rude for them to do a short speech or message to any one of his audiences in favor of mediated message clarity. Under this view, people that had come to hear their president speak deserved nothing less than a full address to them.

Conclusions to the chapter of the speechwriting office

It seems particularly fitting to conclude the section on speechwriting by mentioning something personal from a president, as the last paragraph did. Other communication offices speak *for* the president, either through advertising, press conferences or releases. But the speechwriting unit speaks *as* the president.

This insight conveys a particular truth. While the president, although usually involved in all aspects of communication, typically delegates the details to his press, public opinion, and advertising experts. But his speeches are a different story. Although the president relies on his speechwriter and his team to produce the bulk of the writings that will eventually become his words, the president usually revises every single word of the texts. As one official put it, it is incredibly rare for a president to be comfortable giving a speech he didn't edit and revise thoroughly. Hence, presidential speeches need not only be clear and rhetorically powerful, and perfectly aligned to a strategic objective. They also need to be aligned to the president's particular style, preferences, and even way of speaking in a way that no other communication vehicles are. And they also need to keep in mind that

speeches are, as one official put it, “the more newsworthy form of communications” because the words are coming “from the president himself”. Compounded with the fact that sometimes “5 or 6 speeches” are needed within a single day—and that some event- or crisis-driven speeches have to be crafted, as one official remembered, in “less than 30 minutes or an hour”, this paints the picture of what it means to be the president’s chief speechwriter.

Before moving on, it is important to note that speeches are an incredibly powerful communications vehicle, as they will often secure press coverage. Some presidencies have been better in keeping an eye on the long run for the way they schedule events and speeches. But it seems that giving the responsibility for long-term (news and non-news) communication strategizing to a single individual would guarantee that the president’s messaging evolves completely aligned with what the broader communications strategy directs. Otherwise, the chance for the president to interfere with its own agenda-setting powers and confuse the media (and the public) as to what is really important at the moment (or period) seems remarkably high.

Chapter 13: Managing the president's message collectively

The last four chapters have detailed how the press office, the communications office, the polling office, and the speechwriting office/unit work. They have illustrated not only the challenges that they individually face but how the officials that have headed them strategize and think about communications to overcome them. But, as detailed as the account may be, it is incomplete.

As the last chapters have showed, the communications offices do not work singlehandedly. For instance, for a major announcement, the polling office conducts the research that serves as the basis to craft/hone the messaging strategy for the issue; the speechwriting unit is responsible for the speech; the press office will facilitate information to the reporters, build anticipation, and ultimately shape the stories that portray the announcement; the communications office will stage the event, look out for the overall image at both the institutional and personal level and maybe produce TV or radio advertisements to amplify the message. While not all of them work on all events and all communications vehicles, they do have the shared goal of, as one of the previous chapters concluded, informing the public under the best possible light for the president. Perhaps the phrase that best captures this collaborative essence of the communications work at *Los Pinos* is, as one official put it: “collective decisions, individual responsibilities”³⁵.

To be sure, this hardly means that everything runs smoothly at *Los Pinos* all the time, as all officials attested. In fact, some officials mentioned that reaching a collective decision can be a source of conflict among the senior staff. On the other hand, individual

³⁵ The magazine *Lideres* also employed this phrase in their initial story on the Fox presidential staff.

responsibilities mean that many factors and offices have to align for success, leaving a big front for mishaps.

This chapter outlines the mechanisms, both formal and informal, that presidencies have used to coordinate the internal communication apparatus³⁶.

Formal Mechanisms

The essential way the presidency has established internal coordination among its different offices is through “staff meetings”. For some administrations, this has meant that the senior staffers (from 5 to 10 officials) gather weekly, once among themselves and once with the president. One official, in fact, considered, that more formal meetings would amount to “juntitis” (“meetingitis”)—a waste of time.

Other administrations, in contrast, considered daily coordination meetings indispensable. Some officials of the Zedillo administration, for example, mentioned that the meeting that the *secretario particular* held on Sundays was particularly useful. In it, they discussed what would be the focus of next week, what challenges laid ahead, and how each area would contribute to the overall strategy. The fact that the meeting was held on Sunday was particularly useful to “free” the officials from the daily routine of the weekdays and be completely devoted to strategizing, as one official remembered. But they also considered that weekday meetings were useful to see how each area was progressing with the assignments and overall know what each office was up to and identify, as one official put it, “yellow lights” before they turned “red”.

The variations seem to reflect more the personal leadership style of the president and/or his chief of staff rather than a partisan difference or an evolution over time. In fact, when

³⁶ Coordination with other offices of the executive branch has been described mainly in the press office chapter.

discussing how the office coordinated, almost all of my interviewees mentioned that it was crucial to consider that the personal style of the president sets the tone for the way the office works.

Moreover, even the core coordinating meeting was conducted in different ways across administrations. Officials who participated in two different administrations described the same type of meetings for the two administrations in very different ways. According to them, one administration had a very clear agenda for each of the staff meetings and favored reaching consensus whenever possible. The other administration approached staff meeting as more informal opportunities to get together, in which everyone had the opportunity to voice their opinions about whatever topics were pressing. Although both officials favored the meetings from the administration described first, it is important to note that one of them also said that the other type of meetings (more flexible and informal) would not have worked under the other administration, and *vice versa*.

No matter how the staff meetings were conducted or how frequently they were held, they were crucial for operating the presidency in general and presidential communications in particular. They not only defined the priorities for each area, but allowed officials that focus on different constituents to exchange their perspectives. As such, these meetings constitute a direct way in which communication considerations can influence policy. It is quite possible that, even when “presidents don’t (intend to) pander”, the fact that communications officials have a seat at senior staff meetings influences how primordial and urgent an issue is considered and even the way it is approached. One communications official explained that having someone who was thinking about how the press would interpret an action in the meetings was particularly useful to avoid committing to policies that “looked good in paper” but were “unsellable to the media”. While this insight could tilt the balance towards the notion that presidents follow, rather

than lead, public opinion, it is important to consider that, as one official put it, that senior staff meetings, although important, were not the place where the most delicate issues were resolved. For that, he suggested, the President often consulted privately with the chief of staff and (sometimes) with a couple of key cabinet members. Therefore, these meetings probably affect policy just at the margins. While it is hard to generalize (some crucial decisions could have been made during these meetings), the conclusion seems consistent with what studies that analyze presidential decision-making have concluded for the U.S. (Sorensen, 2005) and for Mexico (Saenz, 2006): that presidents take the most important decisions often by themselves or in private consultations with a few officials—the most trusted ones.

In contrast, the meetings were more influential in determining the way an issue was communicated. But, rather than meddling with technical communications recommendations, non-communications officials frequently offered inputs on the policy or political aspects of the message. One official mentioned that the principle was crucial to maintain order among the senior staff. Hence, when political or policy staffers tried to overstep into territories that clearly belonged to one of the communication shops, the president or chief of staff usually gave primacy to the advice from the communication official (and vice versa). Officials from one administration in particular mentioned that the president often assigned “special” responsibilities on “a project by project or crisis by crisis” basis—usually during staff meetings. Sometimes this caused some uncertainty in terms of where the usual responsibilities of each office had to give way to the coordinator of the project with expanded responsibilities for the case. Interestingly, this same administration was also perceived by officials that formed part of it, and even officials from other administrations, as the most conflictive team that had occupied Los Pinos in the modern era.

The feedback or advice was either done at the moment or as a follow-up. One official from the Fox administration mentioned, for example, that communicating the administration's support for the day-after pill was deemed a very delicate political issue that may alienate the majoritarian Catholic households. Hence, at a staff meeting, they resolved that an official which had a particularly warm relationship with the most influential Mexican archbishop was the most appropriate channel to get feedback on the way the thorny issue should be handled. As another official remembered, the response from this official was particularly influential in determining the communications route that the presidency followed. Other examples of feedback on messaging, as one official put it, included the fact that "framing an issue X way would invite criticism from Y community that cares about Z" or that "this approach sounds good but it may be inaccurate in technical terms—how about this alternative?"

In terms of the actual organization of the meetings, the variations between administrations and time frames make it hard to identify unchanging components for staff meetings. But perhaps the indispensable ones are a public opinion and political briefing (on a weekly basis) that, as one official explained, put officials on the same page about what was driving not only the political elite but also the public in general. This is a crucial mechanism because it represents an important way--sometimes the only one--as one official stated, in which the analysis from the public opinion office trickled into speeches, press releases, press conferences, advertising campaigns, and other communication vehicles. It also allowed the different offices to operate under the same (or at least similar) assumptions of what was important and what could be delegated or left for later.

Even more changing have been the formal mechanisms through which the presidency deals with crisis. Some officials remembered having several ad-hoc meetings to deal with

pressing issues every week. Others, sometimes within the same administration, mentioned that very specific criteria were constructed to determine when a “war-room” type of operation had to be created. Although the definitions of “war-room” from officials varied significantly from case to case, the one that seems to capture all the ideas was that a war room was a platform in which several offices collaborated in rapid-response efforts to solve the problem. In any case, the interviews conducted unfortunately prove insufficient for an in-depth analysis of how the roles of different offices change/expand in case of crisis, how it is defined, etc. What does seem clear is that senior officials across several administrations convene more frequently, with and without the President, when the stakes are high (for example, during a media scandal) than when business is as usual.

It is important to mention that, although the meetings usually cover communication issues, few administrations had meetings that the senior staff attended and were only devoted to communications. In fact, one key difference between *Los Pinos* and the White House has been the absence of a daily meeting to discuss, at least during a part of it, “the line of the day”—what would drive the day in terms of communications (Kumar, 2009). Interestingly, some Mexican officials saw value in such a mechanism when discussed in the interviews; they claimed that establishing such a mechanism would have been helpful. Others claimed that it would have been redundant, that the most important events/crisis *were* covered by meetings that discussed communications, usually through war-room mechanisms. Yet, it seems that having a 20 minute meeting to make sure that everyone is aligned in terms of communications, and that the coordination with the larger executive branch (also in terms of communications) runs smoothly is different from what a rapid-response platform in the face of a crisis usually focuses on. Thus, the adoption of such a practice in Mexico could be a powerful addition to the management of the president’s message. It could also align perfectly with the suggestion of this thesis of

creating an office that thinks in terms of long-term strategy both for the “newsy” and “non-newsy” parts of communication.

One type of meetings that seems to occur both in the U.S. and in Mexico is scheduling committees. The driving idea for this type of meetings is that the president’s time is his most useful resource and has to be allocated strategically. Hence, senior officials gather (usually weekly) to discuss which of the events being proposed the president should attend. Here, the *secretaria particular* plays a key role in putting the materials together and making sure that the senior staff has enough information about each event and its context to make an informed recommendation to the president. Again, as one official explained, the presence of communication officials in these meetings guarantee that the way an event will be perceived by the media and the public at large is considered when the decision is being made.

Interestingly, officials of just one administration mentioned having a long-term calendar of events that allowed the Presidency to lead the agenda. And some of them mentioned that the calendar only looked “one or two” months ahead. Since it was the office of the chief of staff or the *secretario particular* that are responsible for this type of planning, interviewed officials could have just been uninformed about the process, making it sound more limited than it actually was. But, in any case, the lack of familiarity of the officials that headed the communications operations with the process would have made the practice one limited in effectivity. In any case, the absence of a long term planning platform with which all senior officials were familiar contrasts with the White House that, under the leadership of Michael Deaver, established a 6 month calendar that allowed for planning what “the next 6 months would essentially communicate” (Deaver, 2009) This practice has become pervasive in the White House—a useful way that forces officials to come up with a proactive approach to messaging and political engagement

(Kumar, 2010). This responsibility could well be delegated to someone who handles both news and non-news communications strategy.

Informal mechanisms

At the outset of an interview, one official suggested: “if you want to understand how the presidency works, you just have to understand the personal relationships/exchanges between the president and the senior officials, as well as among the senior officials themselves”.

This statement has to be taken with a grain of salt. Formal deliberation mechanisms like the meetings described above do matter. But the statement from the official is useful for introducing another crucial element in managing the presidency—and, hence, its message. Intangible elements, such as organizational culture, play a key role in determining what managing the president’s message as a group means.

As the beginning of this section discussed, presidential communications regarding almost all events and issues require inputs and actions from offices across the entire communications apparatus. This means that close collaboration and effective coordination is needed—not only at the principal’s level, but also throughout the entire command chain. If officials know their peers from other offices and are comfortable asking them for information and even inputs, for example, overall performance may increase, as one official explained. But, on the other hand, an interaction among offices with no clear, fixed channels may become mayhem—undermining the presidencies capacity to distinguish from “good, accurate” information and plain gossip or hearsay. Hence, some principals have established only a few officials as the interoffice interaction channels, while keeping the others (at least in their official role) more isolated from other flows of information.

It is important to note that the presidential communication apparatus as a whole inevitably performs just as well as the links do. For example, if only the staff meetings and weekly memos constitute the link between the speechwriting office and the office of public opinion, it is highly likely that a lot of the inputs from polling and focus groups will fail to find their way into the president's speeches.

Perhaps the better practice is to establish a culture of openness and trust among the other offices, while still having clarity about where the information came from and whether it was validated or not. Officials from one administration in particular mentioned a weekly informal meeting between deputies across the entire presidency. As it could be expected, these meetings were referred to as incredibly effective, as it allowed insights to flow into the actual production of materials rather than "staying at the principal's heads" for the revision process. And principals from some (but not all) administrations mentioned that they felt perfectly comfortable with another principal calling someone from their staff for help with any given issue, without having to discuss it among principals first.

While it would be hard to isolate the factor that ultimately determined whether the presidential team had become integrated at such a level that the principals were comfortable with the notion of the reduced control that fluid interoffice interactions meant, one official suggested that presidential leadership has a lot to do with it. The more the president favors consensus and team building among his senior staff, the easier it will be for them to share information and ultimately credit for the successes. On the other hand, the more the president checks one office against the other and sizes one official in comparison to another, the more competitiveness (and divisiveness) will likely ensue. While this latter alternative may result in better individual results from each

office, the collaborative nature of the work will likely suffer, undermining the capacity to construct and implement a truly unified strategy.

Conclusion to the chapter on collaboration

Previous chapters had hinted the importance of leadership and management in handling the president's message. They had mentioned that the complexity of determining and implementing presidential communication strategies makes the endeavor more of a team effort than an individual enterprise.

This chapter, in turn, has approached the issue directly. It has discussed both the formal (staff meetings) and informal mechanisms (direct collaboration among deputies and staffers) that make coordination and collaboration possible. As such, it has argued that both good management practices and good leadership practices are needed for good presidential communications. Management best practices will make efficient collaboration and decision making possible—an indispensable component for coping with the colossal workload that a presidential office has to handle. Leadership best practices, in contrast, will create a positive collaborative culture at *Los Pinos* that allows officials to make the most out of the work of their peers in other presidential offices.

One good management practice, as the thesis has argued throughout, would be the creation of someone in charge of communications strategy that thinks not only in terms of news or non-news as isolated features, but who strategizes about how to best leverage the entire federal government's communications apparatus to further policy and political goals. This figure, similar to what a White House director is responsible for, could guarantee a better coordination among the different offices without "taking from" either of the existing ones. It would allow someone to think about messaging not only in terms of framing, agenda-setting, and priming but also in terms of logistics: how to ensure that

the intended message reaches the intended audiences in the best possible way to guarantee that they either use it (if they are allies or the media) or accept it (if they are the message's targets).

But perhaps the most important takeaway from this section is that, along with the technical skills that each individual office demands, management and leadership skills—not only at the aggregate level, but also inside each office—complete the collage of what it takes to optimally handle the president's message. By now, it should be more than clear that the presidential communication apparatus is no place for amateurs.

Chapter 14: Conclusions

As our journey into the walls that separate the office of the president of Mexico from the rest of the city, it would be hard to disagree with a communications official that claimed that working at *Los Pinos* is an experience like no other. No other institution in Mexico has the communications capability and influence that the presidency does. At the same time, no other institution faces the difficulties and complexity in a communications endeavor that the *Los Pinos* communication apparatus does. This inevitably means that the demands, pressures, workload, stakes, urgency, scrutiny of the work at the presidency are hardly comparable—except to other presidential offices across the world.

Although it has a central position in contemporary politics, presidential communications has have received little attention in Mexican scholarly studies. While “communication strategies” from *Los Pinos* are a popular conversation topic among pundits, politicians, analysts, and even the general population, the complexity of the communications work at *Los Pinos* has been underexplored and its nuances are seldom understood. This has created a pernicious disconnection between how the presidential communication apparatus is perceived and how it actually works. Manipulation is often assumed as the norm without considering how that would actually look like, how it would actually work across the different offices, and how it would be sustainable across time.

By describing the routines, the practices, the strategy, and the tactics that intertwine in the construction of the presidential message, this thesis has attempted to fill that knowledge gap and portray at least some of the actual complexity in handling the president’s message. As this account has shown, technical knowledge of the communications craft that each office handles is indispensable. But so are management and leadership capabilities to ensure that the much needed collaboration inside each office, across the presidency, and across the entire executive branch is possible. To be

sure, this thesis discusses the persuasion role of the entire communication apparatus of the presidency. But it shows that presidential communications are usually rooted in substantive information—one that it's hard to obtain, process, and transmit assertively with the speed that the modern communications environment demands. In this environment, while manipulation is certainly possible, it is highly unlikely that it could come to constitute something other than an exception.

The latter conclusion is particularly clear throughout the description of the press office, which requires credibility if it is to have an expanded communications capability (receiving “intel” from key reporters, having the ability to launch trial balloons, and developing the capacity to ask independent reporters to drop a story or an emphasis in favor of another—all described in previous chapters). Thus, the press office goes through great lengths to obtain, validate, and process information—almost on a real time basis.

Given these ongoing efforts, it is quite surprising part that most presidencies have avoided having a permanent spokesman that goes on the record on a live briefing every day. It seems that this would be a great way to feed information (which is gathered and processed anyway) to the reporters in a newsworthy way. Although the background information that is currently handed to the reporters is useful, establishing (or reestablishing) a more public and visible channel of communication would go a long way not only in displaying more transparency in the presidency's interaction with the press but also in putting information—particularly one that is tied to the official point of view—out there. Moreover, practitioners should not lose sight of the fact that, in the context of the modern presidency, withholding information and putting barriers between the presidency and the press may be less effective than flooding the media politics environment with information that effectively proves or supports their point of view. While both practices may nudge (or, for the first case, starve) press coverage in one

direction, one sends a symbolic message of openness while the other displays secretiveness. It is not difficult to guess which one of the two will spark enough interest in journalists and the opposition to dig into it.

Interestingly, the current architecture of the presidential communications apparatus in Mexico does not seem to include provisions to produce and push out content strategically in a massive scale. In the U.S., for example, the White House communications office strategizes about how to push out information to allies, journalists, and sometimes directly to citizens, while tying it back to political goals and, perhaps more importantly, to the “master narrative” of the presidency (see Kumar, 2008). In Mexico, in contrast, communications directors have focused in coordinating the government’s advertising strategy, staging events, and (some of them) in handling digital strategy³⁷. The massive undertaking of handling advertising for such a large organization as the executive branch has resulted in the fact that not all Mexican communications directors have adopted the role of communication strategist—which thinks not only about the narrative but also about the logistics of how different entities and actors interact to block or amplify different messages in different phases of the communications plan. In fact, several seem to fall more clearly under the marketing or (even more limited) advertising way of thinking. Although these latter approaches are useful, they will prove to be even more insufficient in helping the presidency navigate the ever-moving digital communications environment in which we now live in. Thus, another important recommendation that comes out of the analysis in this thesis is the creation of an office dedicated to “messaging and messaging logistics”—something similar to what the communications office of the White House has had during several

³⁷ As mentioned earlier, digital strategy is now an independent office.

administrations. Ideally, this office would coordinate both press management and the activities which the Estrategia y Mensaje Gubernamental office currently includes.

In terms of the speechwriting and public opinion research units, there is little that could be changed in terms of organization to improve the way it has been handled over the years. But, in any case, the easier it is for these offices to understand the broader messaging and messaging logistics effort that the presidency is undertaking, the more effective these units will be in providing either the best rhetorical content, or the optimal research input, respectively. Once again, this supports the argument for creating an office in charge of messaging and messaging logistics, which should have a strong, ongoing collaboration with the speechwriting and public opinion office.

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One crucial theme of this thesis has been that the Mexican media politics landscape is growing increasingly competitive and complex. Not only have communication technologies evolved, but also political and electoral competition seems more pervasive, press independence seems to be still growing, and more and more actors are starting to have a voice in the public sphere. While political negotiation is (and will remain) a powerful way to influence policy and political outcomes, communications seem to be gaining importance. Moreover, changes in the political framework, such as the possibility for reelection, can push Mexico further into an individualized pluralism era, in which mediated communications effectively compete (and sometimes defeat) closed-door negotiation tactics to determine political and policy outcomes.

In this new landscape, the Mexican presidency still needs the best wordsmiths, advertisers, pollsters, “media operators”, image gurus, and social media specialists. But, as the new communications era unfolds, what I have called “messaging logistics” should

inevitably become the most important part of managing the president's message. Only by linking crucial pieces of information with the relevant stakeholders, validators, and amplifiers, and producing specifically tailored information-rich contents can more communicative substance be injected into the national conversations. Only so can the demand for information be adequately met while still fulfilling the strategic objectives of any Mexican president.

As this thesis has argued, the professionalization of presidential communication is closely linked to the changing politics and media environment. Responding effectively to a new environment was a crucial rationale for the establishment of a modern communications operation in 1988. And some of the changes that have taken place since then have also responded to changes in the media politics landscape. Thus, as the Mexican political and communications context continues to change and evolve—for example, through the adoption of legislative reelection that could transform Mexico from an institutionalized pluralism to an individualized one—communication practitioners will likely respond with even more professionalization.

But, at the same time, it would be hard to argue that such change is automatic. Just like several of the professionals interviewed for this thesis have been crucial to the transformation of the communications apparatus, it would be hard to argue that the next wave of adjustments will “just happen”. It will again take vision, leadership, and a broad understanding of the current communications and political context to come up with new mechanisms that allow the presidency to satisfy the growing demand for information in a way that advances democratically-aligned governance.

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Appendix: List of Mexican officials or external advisors who were interviewed

- Otto Granados
- José Carreño
- Ulises Beltrán
- Oscar Torres Reyna
- Isaac Chertorivsky
- Fernando Lerdo de Tejada
- Liébano Sáenz
- José Luis Barros
- Marco Provencio
- Martha Sahagún
- Francisco Ortiz
- Ramón Muñoz
- Rubén Aguilar
- Roberto Mourey
- Benjamín Salmón
- Tomislav Lendo
- Guido Lara
- Manuel Rodríguez Woog
- Horacio Vives
- Santiago Creuheras
- Héctor Escalante
- Alejandra Sota
- Rafael Giménez
- Alejandro Poiré
- Gerardo Ruiz Mateos
- Andrés Massieu