
📌 **CURRENT ISSUE — Volume 7 Issue 1 – 2013**

Narrative, Commercial Media and Atenco: Mexican Television Corporations and Political Power

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between Mexican media corporations and government, and explores the consequences of the commercialisation of the news in the depiction of a social movement. Qualitative analysis is used to examine the narratives deployed by the Mexican television network TV Azteca in the reporting of the confrontation between the social movement People's Front in Defence of the Land, FPDT (Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra) and the police in San Salvador Atenco in 2006. I suggest that the commercialisation of news has ideological consequences that privilege the economic and political interests of both the television corporations and the state. I argue that TV Azteca's narrative portrayal of the FPDT criminalised the social movement in order to legitimise the violent repression by the police.

Introduction

The Mexican political environment in the last three decades has seen the emergence of anti-neo-liberal social movements. Since 1982, governments in power have had a neo-liberal agenda that has been marked by cronyism and corruption (Semo, 2012). Far from being a critical force, television media has actively participated in supporting the neo-liberal agenda and marginalising organisations that are against it. The case of San Salvador Atenco is an emblematic example of struggle against the consequences of neo-liberal policies and involvement of the Mexican media in supporting the execution of the government's agenda.

In May 2006, the community of San Salvador Atenco was violently repressed by the Mexican police who used excessive force and committed many human rights abuses (Organizacion Mundial Contra la Tortura [OMCT], 2006: 19). The confrontation originated when the riot police impeded florists from selling their goods on the footpath outside the local market. The florists

were supported by members of the social movement, People's Front in Defence of the Land, FPDT (*Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra*), who previously negotiated with authorities to permit the florists to sell on May 3. Early that day, the authorities broke their promise and the conflict between protestors and police began. The repression that followed, "one of the most violent repressions in the nation's history" (Hinegardner, 2009: 175), involved a raid on the community of Atenco by the Mexican police who entered houses by force and detained people indiscriminately.

This article examines the portrayal by the Mexican television corporation TV Azteca of the confrontation between protestors and the police in San Salvador Atenco in 2006. By working with a qualitative analysis of narratives I consider the role they played in the depiction of the FPDT and the possible political implications of these narratives: do the narratives used by commercial media contribute to legitimise state violence?

In the first section of this article I describe the emergence of the FPDT and give an account of the confrontation in 2006. In the second section I work with Helen Fulton's concept of news as narrative and her criticism of commercial news to consider how commercial imperatives affect the production of news.

The third section of this article focuses on the relationship between media corporations and the Mexican government by offering an account of the privatisation of state-owned media that failed to introduce competition and effectively created a television media duopoly. I argue that this has led to the ongoing complicity between Mexican media and government. This context is important because both major television networks, (Televisa and TV Azteca) were involved in inciting and supporting the repression of the people of Atenco by the government of Mexico.

The fourth part of this article analyses the narratives that TV Azteca used in their portrayal of the confrontation between the FPDT and the police in 2006. This analysis focuses on two news reports from TV Azteca. The first occurred on the 3 May 2006 and reports on the confrontation between the people of Atenco and the police that happened on that same day. The second report occurred on the 30 June, 2010 after the release of the last twelve members of the FPDT who were jailed in 2006. In my analysis I demonstrate that even though these two broadcasts occurred four years apart, the narrative used to describe the initial confrontation remained the same.

The FPDT and the events of May 2006

Located adjacent to Mexico City, San Salvador Atenco is a community where subsistence agriculture is still widely practiced. This community was previously involved in a land dispute when the government of President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) expropriated their *ejidos* [communal land] in order to construct an international airport in 2001 (Russell, 2003). In response to this decree, the inhabitants of Atenco and 13 other communities formed the social movement of the FPDT who fought for their land until the project was cancelled (Camacho Guzman, 2008; Ortega Bayona, 2005; Russell, 2003). Since then, this organisation has been a reference point in the struggle for land rights and against neo-liberal policies (Hinegardner, 2009: 174). It has also been active in supporting and mediating with other communities affected by authoritarian decisions from all levels of government.

The police operation held on May 3-4, 2006 was in response to a protest against the local authority's resolution to remove florists from the footpath outside the market in Texcoco (a town neighbouring Atenco)[1]. The FPDT had taken on a role as a mediator between the florists and the local authorities. On May 2, 2006 the authorities of the state of Mexico consented to the florists setting up on the sidewalk on May 3 [2] (ProDH, 2010: 15). However, on May 3 this agreement was not respected by the authorities of the state of Mexico [3] and a confrontation ensued (OMCT, 2006: 6; Williams, 2012: 11).

After this initial confrontation and the arrest of several protestors, including three FPDT's leaders, FPDT's members blocked the highway that connects Texcoco with Mexico City. Hundreds of police tried to remove the demonstrators, who in turn, repelled the police, eventually forcing them to back down. The confrontation escalated, both sides took prisoners and several people were injured. Later that night some demonstrators were blockading the entrance of San Salvador Atenco out of concern that there would be a major raid by the police. Many supporters from other social movements, NGOs and journalists began arriving in Atenco to document what was happening and to show their solidarity with the community.

On 4 May, 4,000 state and federal police entered San Salvador Atenco (ProDH, 2010: 16). Houses were raided without warrants, and the police destroyed belongings and arrested 212 people (Supreme Court of Justice of Mexico SCJN, 2009: 117). Supporters, observers and local residents were brutalised and piled up in trucks. During the journey to jail, the detainees were tortured and at least 26 women reported being sexually abused or raped (OMCT, 2006).

The report of the Human Rights Center Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez [ProDH] presented to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against women [CEDAW] [4] (2006) recorded the humiliating treatment and torture, concluding that the police intervention aimed to criminalise the social protest (ProDH, 2010: 16). The Supreme Court of Justice of Mexico [SCJN] confirmed this conclusion in their resolutions three years later (in 2009 and 2010), however no authorities involved were investigated. Denying all cases of abuse, including the women's formal complaints of sexual abuse [5], the government has hindered judicial processes and has failed to deliver justice in response to the violence perpetrated by the government and police in Atenco in 2006 [6]. I now consider the theory of news as narrative before returning to the importance the women's search for justice in my analysis of the 2010 TV Azteca report.

News as narrative

Some media studies scholars consider news accounts as stories since they structure events in a narrative form (Bird & Dardenne, 1988; Fulton, 2005; Hammond, 2004). Using this definition, my approach to commercial media news draws on the work of literary and critical theorist Helen Fulton. Fulton considers news to be information structured into a story and points out that in the construction of news a number of different discursive techniques are used. She explains:

Contemporary work in discourse and cultural theory [...] starts from the assumption that both hard and soft news stories are types of narrative, although they are likely to be structured in different ways (2005: 227).

Fulton highlights this distinction in response to the debate around the separation 'information' from 'narrative' which assumes that hard news is informative and factual (Bird & Dardenne, 1988: 69) and soft news is of human interest and hence belong to the narrative realm (Dunn, 2006: 145). For both Fulton and Elizabeth Bird et al this distinction is problematic. Bird et al argue that this distinction:

Blinds us to the way narrative devices are used in all news writing, maintaining the illusion that the structural devices used in hard news are merely neutral techniques that act as a conduit for events to become information, rather than ways in which a particular kind of narrative text is created (1988: 69).

The story told about a particular event then involves the deliberate shaping of information and its possible meaning. Fulton says in this respect "news narratives [...] are distinctively narratives in the sense of being shaped into stories or myths about the 'way things are'." (2005: 242). Bird et al agree on this point and remark that news stories "do not 'tell it like it is', but rather, 'tell it like it means'" (1988: 71). This is particularly important due to the ideological consequences of how narrative is used in reporting the news and, as Fulton argues, how those uses are linked to the commercialisation of news.

Commercial Media and News

A large proportion of news production works within the commercial model and is profit-driven, a fact that influences the production and presentation of news (Fulton, 2005: 224). Fulton argues that:

Commercial media organisations commodify their news services in order to attract the advertisers who support them. Television news bulletins are less about 'news' as a public service than about attracting and retaining a diverse demographic that can be 'sold' to advertisers (Fulton, 2006: 224).

As a result of the importance of this economic model, news production has employed different strategies to attract wider audiences such as the use of "formulaic stories packaged into recognisable genres" (Fulton, 2005: 225). One of these is the genre of "infotainment" which in Fulton's words,

is marked by the use of popular narrative formats *that foreground conflictual and dramatic plots* involving characters representative of media-specific categories" (Fulton, 2005: 242) [My emphasis].

In this way information is simplified to fit into the hero/villain format, a fact that can be seen in more detail in the case study of TV Azteca that follows.

One of the consequences of using this formulaic narrative is the creation of "content that can be binary and reductive" (Kenix, 2010: 92). Communication scholar, Anne Dunne, makes an argument along similar lines:

The pattern of the 'binary oppositions' identified by Lévi-Strauss as paradigmatic in narrative is [...] found in television and radio news stories [...] Binary oppositions can be seen in the routine use of conflict to frame stories and as part of the tendency of news to personalise issues, groups and events as heroes or villains. Such narrative oppositions as Left v. Right or East v. West continue to appear in news stories in all media (Dunn, 2006: 145).

The implications of the use of this sort of narrative is that the story is simplified as an antagonism that is isolated from a deeper context that is needed in order to understand the interconnectedness of the social, economic and political dimensions of everyday life. Fulton argues that the use of narratives in political and economic reports makes it easier to explain "complex material" (2005: 243). However, Fulton also points out:

The public might be informed in a mode that is easily comprehended, but it is also routinely denied access to the complexities of political, economic and cultural negotiation that generate many news events (Fulton, 2005: 243).

Such complexities are certainly at play in the reporting of Atenco by TV Azteca, which can only be fully understood in the context of the media landscape that dominates in Mexico. This context is needed to see how media and political power in Mexico have a symbiotic relationship where the economic elites that control the media are privileged in exchange for their support for the policies and actions of the government. In my case study I argue that the endorsement of the repression of Atenco by TV Azteca can be seen as a clear example of this collaboration between media elites and government.

Background: Media corporations in Mexico

While Mexico has some small public broadcasters, the television system is effectively a commercial duopoly. Two private companies control 97 percent of the TV concessions – Televisa with 66 percent of the 465 television concessions, and TV Azteca with 31 percent of those concessions (Villamil, 2005). Public television is limited to two educational and culturally oriented channels and one for the activities of the Congress with minimal audiences [7].

Televisa, the main television network founded in the 1950s, held 90 percent of TV audiences until 1994 when the public television network Imevisión was privatised to become TV Azteca (Gómez, 2004). This change in the TV system was part of the privatisation of important public industries and the implementation of neo-liberal policies by the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) [8] (Gómez, 2004; Villamil, 2005). The political rhetoric of this period propagated the belief that these measures would accelerate the modernisation of Mexico, creating more jobs and leading the country to the prosperity of the first world (Gómez, 2004; Orozco, 1998). However, in the process of privatisation, the government favoured the domestic economic elite, which gained control of key sectors of the economy [9].

The privatisation of the public television network was more an act of looking after the interests of media corporations and securing their support for the government than it was about increasing competition. In 1993 the government sold 152 concessions for broadcasting frequencies, 90 to the newly formed company TV Azteca with the rest given to the already established Televisa. This fact shows the government's continued support for Televisa as the dominant television corporation (Villamil, 2005: 41). Televisa has had an ongoing connection with governments in power [10] (Gómez, 2004; Orozco, 1998; Villamil, 2005); the auction of the state channels and the granting of further concessions to Televisa strengthened this connection. In fact, this corporation influenced other aspects of this process. Jenaro Villamil's research (2005) documents how Televisa's owner encouraged the government to exclude the one bid that would provide genuine competition for Televisa (2005: 43) [11].

The way that this privatisation was managed has serious repercussions for the Mexican media landscape. Instead of increasing competition, privatisation has created an effective duopoly and excluded further commercial interests, public broadcasters, and community voices from Mexican broadcasting. As communications scholar Guillermo Orozco points out:

The history of Mexican television programming can be summed up as the simulated competition of alternatives. The crucial element has been not an innovative differentiation, but a reassurance of the government that its preferred self-image will be presented to the viewing audience, while the owners of Televisa[and TV Azteca] have been assured of the maximum possible profits (1998: 129).

The privatisation of the public television network can be seen to exemplify this "simulated competition of alternatives" and, as a result, the opening-up of competition did not seriously affect Televisa. The emergence of a new television network created the expectation that competition might lead to better quality in the programming (Orozco, 1998) and there were some hints of this occurring. However, TV Azteca quickly moved towards the commercial model that Televisa has adopted since its origin, creating programming centred on soap operas, spectacle and light entertainment (Villamil, 2005: 22).

The relationship of the media corporations with the government has ensured the protection of their commercial interests in legislative matters and prevented the opening up of further competition. In the 18 years since TV Azteca's formation no other media enterprise has been allowed to enter the free-to-air market (see Posada García, 2011; Villamil, 2005; 2009). This relationship, which in the first instance is driven by economic factors, has had consequences that are reflected in the production of news. This is a similar situation to the one that Fulton describes:

Mass-market and market-driven news characteristically conforms to existing conventions of news values and agendas, with the result that minority issues and alternative viewpoints are marginalised, and the public interest is subordinated to commercial imperatives (Fulton, 2005: 225).

This is reflected in TV Azteca in two ways: firstly, advertising occupies 25% of the prime time news bulletin (Gómez, 2004: 76). Secondly, TV Azteca's news production is based on infotainment relying on spectacle and biased editorials (Gómez, 2004; Villamil, 2005: 157). It is all the more important to consider these commercial imperatives given the fact they are

intertwined with political power. From a perspective of theories of political economy in communications, Rodrigo Gómez (2004) points out the ideological consequences of this model of television:

The media development, guided by large corporations and under capitalism's logic, *limits the range of representation of points of view and information* and of the cultural production altogether, slanting it toward the commercial and *ideological interests* of the owners and transmuting information into infotainment and cultural production oriented by the logic of commercialising audiences. (Gómez, 2004: 54 emphasis added). [My translation]

In the context of the Mexican media the close relationship with the government strengthens the consequences of the commercialisation of news described by Fulton and Gómez. The government's support of the commercial interests of media corporations is related to the protection of their own political interests. News production reflects this symbiotic relationship where media corporations through their news programs, support government policies without criticism and dismiss alternative voices to the dominant discourse. Fulton describes of the consequences of this for impartial journalism:

The impartiality of the news media is seriously compromised by their relationship with other areas of institutional power. The prevailing viewpoint of this sector is the result of what Stuart Hall has termed a 'structured preference given in the media to the opinions of the powerful', who then become the 'primary definers' of news topics and issues (Fulton, 2005: 231).

This assertion reaffirms Gómez's remarks, that the commercial media not only marginalises alternative viewpoints but that political and economic powers also set the agenda creating a dominant view. It is important to consider this point in relation to the involvement that both Televisa and TV Azteca had in the repression of Atenco, particularly with regards to the TV Azteca coverage that is the focus of my case study. Gómez's analysis of TV Azteca shows how the corporation's news agenda reveals the complicity between media and political power:

TV Azteca, through its news programs, has shown its political preferences on various occasions, especially during electoral times, in favour of those parties that endorse neo-liberal policies – PRI and PAN – and against left wing groups such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the PRD governments in Mexico City. [My translation] (2004: 75–76).

The reporting of Atenco is then another example of TV Azteca's stance towards social movements or other organisations that disagree with the political elites.

Media, Government and a Social Movement

In order to understand how Mexico's commercial television networks reported the conflict of 2006 in Atenco it is useful to place it in the context of the formation of the FPDT in their mobilisation in 2001-2002 against the government's project to build an international airport. This background helps us to understand how the media, especially television, interpreted the presence of *campesinos*, (subsistence farmers) with their symbolic use of machetes, as an irrational and violent mob with no intentions to negotiate. This and the escalation of the confrontations, in response to the government's denial of dialogue, made this conflict a media spectacle (Hinegardner, 2009). The commercial television networks highlighted the means of resistance by the movement such as blockades, marches and even the taking of hostages, but it did not consider the movement's legitimate demands.

The television corporations and conservative newspapers depicted the *campesinos* of Atenco as a radical social movement without reporting the reasons behind the mobilisation (Hinegardner, 2009). Their machetes were seen as primitive weapons that were threatening the governability and "social peace" [12]. And from then on, the activists of the FPDT were called the *macheteros* [13] with connotations of being an irrational and violent organisation. This

depiction continued in the reporting of TV Azteca in 2006 as I analyse in the case study later in this article. This contributed to the justification of the disproportionate use of state violence against the activists, supporters and inhabitants of San Salvador Atenco.

In this context it is important to consider how the outcomes of the conflict in 2001-2002 can have different readings and can be seen as influencing media reporting of the 2006 conflict. On the one hand, for a large proportion of the population the FPDT became a symbol of the mobilisation against neo-liberal policies (Ortega Bayona, 2005). On the other, for the political and economic elites it was seen as having defeated the government's plans and diminished the state's authority. For this reason those elites came to consider the FPDT as a threat to neo-liberal economic reforms in that they might be seen as an example for other movements (Orozco, 1998). The support of the commercial media for neo-liberal governments is one reason they have sought to discredit the social movement FPDT.

Many critical journalists and authors agree that the repression of the FPDT in 2006 was to a large degree a response to the FPDT's audacity in challenging the government's plans for "development" and what was to be the most important private investment of Vicente Fox's presidential term (Almeyra, 2006; Camacho Guzman, 2008; Hernández Navarro, 2006; Ortega Bayona, 2005, 2005; Rocha, 2009; Sánchez Miguel, 2010). We can understand this logic of revenge in relation to Berenice Ortega Bayona's explanation of the state's repression of social dissidence. She considers how the neo-liberal system is not just an economic rationale but is also an ideology. Under this logic the state's role is to provide the conditions for economic development, looking after the interests of private investment. For that reason any disagreement is considered an obstruction to "progress". In her words:

The neo-liberal thought, then, does not necessarily propose the withdrawal of state intervention in the economy, but the withdrawal of support from those who are considered a burden for increasing profits. For that purpose, it sets out to keep the role of the repressor state as a means for social control towards those who resist integration in this model and also as a guarantor of the encouragement and protection for those that integrate. [My translation] (Ortega Bayona, 2005: 9–10).

Under this logic, the FPDT social movement represents one of those obstacles and as such it had to be disarticulated. This argument has implications for the television networks' role in discrediting the FPDT and its supporters and later in encouraging and justifying the repression.

TV Azteca's narratives

While the following narrative is isolated from the previous reports early on May 3, it clearly shows the stance that TV Azteca took towards the FPDT through its reporters and newsreaders. Early on May 3 a confrontation occurred when the police impeded florists from selling their products, some protestors were arrested by the police, including three FPDT leaders. As a protest against this action, other members of the FPDT blocked the federal highway that connects Atenco with Mexico City.

The following report comes from *Hechos meridianos*, [Meridian Facts] the midday news program with Jorge Zarza and Gloria Pérez-Jácome as newsreaders. The live images show the landscape for the confrontation between protestors and the police; the empty highway with barricades on fire. Miguel Aquino reports from a helicopter:

There we have images that truly tell us what is happening, the pressure that is being exerted [pause]. The people are making the police run away, Gloria! These people are making the police run away, and well, simply because they [the police] have moved closer [to the protestors] as I said to you. [The police] are coming from different streets and [the protestors] see themselves surrounded [pause]. There ... [the police officer] has been knocked-down, he is under a bridge

and [pause] we can see the magnitude of how they hit them, one of the subjects even has a machete in his hand. These are completely live images where a police officer fell down (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios, 2006) [My translation].

The images show the violence from an already heated confrontation; in this case, the demonstrators furiously repelled the police attack, and effectively, a group of them vent all their anger beating the police officer. Here, the reporter is establishing the roles villains and victims in this story, where the focus of attention is centred on the violence of the protestors. The violence is not seen as a consequence of the police intervention, but as part of the portrayal of the members of FPDT. The reporter emphasises the use of machetes as a weapon, even though it was not used to harm the police officer. The ambiguity of the meaning of the machete is present, on the one hand their symbolic use as a tool for farming by the FPDT; and on the other hand as a weapon of a violent group which dares to defy the police. This designation of protestors as Villains and police as Victim is reinforced in the following comment from the newsreader Jorge Latapí,

It is a disgrace what we are watching on the television, I don't know what the government is waiting for to give a stronger, more effective, more precise order to finish off with these [pause] men that are attacking the police. [The government] is being disgraced, the [federal] government and the government of the State of Mexico is in question ... I insist to the governor, to the police authority, if dialogue is insufficient for the moment, [they should] send more police reinforcements to finish this issue once for all" (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios, 2006) [My translation].

The newsreader's call for action can be thought of as activating what linguist George Lakoff describes as the rescue narrative and its associated roles of Victims and Villains. Lakoff argues that within this cultural narrative the Villain "upsets the moral balance" which has to be restored by the rescuing of the Victim and the punishment of the Villain (2008: 24). The newsreader activates this narrative by focusing on the isolated incident of the protestors attacking the police, which is seen as a threat to the "moral balance" of peace and order. The newsreader determines the necessary course of action (more police reinforcements) for this narrative to reach what he conceives of as a satisfactory conclusion. The notion of upsetting the moral balance that is part of the rescue narrative relates to what Fulton describes as "moral panic" which she defines as a narrative device:

In which an event is reported as a perceived threat to the social and/or moral order, with a view to invoking public concern. The narrative structure of the moral panic is that the social fabric is under stress in some way, implying that this threat needs to be resolved by various 'rescues' or official interventions [...] (Fulton, 2005: 234)

The open call for police intervention shows the media positioning itself to take a leading role in what was later the repression in San Salvador Atenco. The newsreader activates the "moral panic" form by assuming his place as a voice of authority. Here, the newsreader is not a mere observer of the events but an active participant who is dismissing dialogue and inciting the use of greater violence towards the demonstrators. The newsreader goes beyond presenting the news to openly give his opinion of what the state and federal government should do. He questions the government's response to the confrontation and affirms that its authority is at stake.

In this sense, news is not there to provide objective information but to endorse an agenda that is shared with the government: the punishment of disobedience. TV Azteca, through its reporting, reveals its ideological stance towards the social movement of San Salvador Atenco. This is another example of what Gómez describes as TV Azteca's biased stance towards left wing groups such as the *Zapatistas* and leftist political parties and governments (2004: 75–76). The FPDT fits into this category due to its opposition to the airport development and the government's neo-liberal policies. The comment made by the TV Azteca newsreader Gloria Pérez Jácome reinforces this positioning:

See Jorge, Heriberto from Cuautitlan Izcalli [a neighbourhood of state of Mexico] says that you

and I should be unbiased, that how it is possible that we ask for more police to repress the people; No ladies and gentleman, we are asking for more police to defend the police. The ones that are hitting the police are the inhabitants of San Salvador Atenco as we have seen in the images (Canalseisdejulio & Promedios, 2006) [My translation].

The female newsreader justifies their involvement in the conflict as a necessary intervention. From the newsreader's point of view the violence comes exclusively from the demonstrators. By repeatedly referring to the images of the police officer being beaten, the report isolates one part of the conflict that then comes to stand for the whole. Through its reporting, TV Azteca makes evident its ideology in relation to neo-liberalism as Gómez remarks in his study of the corporation. His assertion that this ideology "limits the range of representation of points of view and information" (Gómez, 2004: 34) is clearly seen in the comments of both newsreaders who make no attempt to give a full account of both sides of the conflict.

This assertion is strengthened by a TV Azteca report that occurred four years after the news reports I have cited. The report was aired on 30 June 2010 after the National Supreme Court's resolution to free the last 12 activists of the FPDT without charges. One of the judges stated that the excessive sentences towards three of the leaders of the FPDT (30, 62 and 112 years in prison) by the authorities of State of Mexico aimed to criminalise the social protest and the freedom to demonstrate (Alzaga, 2010). The newsreader Javier Alatorre starts by saying:

The freed men participated in the acts of violence in San Salvador Atenco 3-4 May, 2006. These facts were under everyone's view and the judgement means there are no longer guilty people in this case (TV Azteca, n.d.) [My translation].

The reporter Miguel Aquino, who was also reporting on Atenco in 2006, then explains what he sees as the being the context for this case:

During nearly two years, the people led by Ignacio del Valle from San Salvador Atenco took over the streets, looted trailers, blocked streets and *kidnapped* public officials and police officers. This group opposed the construction of the new airport [of Mexico City], because *they assert* that the government offered too little money for their land. Their mobilisations reached a limit on the morning 3 May. It began when a group of florists from the municipality of Texcoco, near San Salvador Atenco, confronted the police because they were not allowed to sell the in the streets.

The people of San Salvador Atenco, led by Ignacio del Valle, joined the flower vendors of Texcoco and demanded that they be allowed to work. They blocked the highway and *kidnapped* the police officers Daniel Guzman Sosa y Carlos Hernandez Ortega as a means of exerting pressure. They also burned their police car; the *ejidatarios* put up barricades and used a gas trailer that they had *kidnapped*. The federal police went to support the local police, one of them was trapped by the demonstrators in exactly that place; his partners left him alone and he was beaten until he fainted (TV Azteca, n.d.) [My translation].

This report once again demonstrates TV Azteca's ongoing support for the government and its negation of other narratives in the event. In the first part of the segment, the reporter gives a partial context of Atenco by referring to the people's struggle against the construction of the airport. The way the FPDT is portrayed emphasises the strategies and actions that the FPDT and many organisations have used in order to be heard amidst authoritarian decisions by the government.

TV Azteca's portrayal has some similarities to the lack of recognition of the social movements that John Downing (2010) sees as being associated with early sociological studies of this sort of collective action. Indeed in Downing's terms we can see how the FPDT is portrayed by TV Azteca as a "mob" that is driven by a "demonic force that needed to be subdued by much greater force, if necessary an orgy of violence". Downing also remarks that instead of the term *social movement*, "mob" is used by the "elite to express their fear and disgust at large-scale urban or rural riots and insurgencies". The mob narrative restricts the possibility of knowing

the background of the FPDT. The idea of the mob is reinforced by TV Azteca's use of terms such as *kidnapped* in their 2010 news report implying that crimes were committed despite the acquittal of the leaders of the FPDT by the Supreme Court.

This portrayal leads to the justification of the repression by the state which, in turn, follows the argument of the neo-liberal logic with respect to those "who are considered a burden for increasing profits" (Ortega Bayona, 2005: 9–10). By minimising the origins of the protests, the narrative disregards the people's right to defend their land and their right to work and makes implicit the idea that such opposition to development has to be suppressed. In this neo-liberal ideology, while the "repressor state" does not intervene in the regulation of the market, it has its role "as a means for social control towards those who resist integration in this model and also as a guarantor of the encouragement and protection for those that integrate" (Ortega Bayona, 2005: 9–10). [My translation]

Miguel Aquino's report continues:

A day after the confrontations the order came to take control of San Salvador Atenco at any cost. The police went in there and took away the barricades from the highway and in the town entrances. This is the municipal auditorium; here they found the majority of detained people and the police officers and authorities that were retained the day before by the townspeople. 207 were detained in total. Twenty three of the women *affirmed* that they were victims of sexual violence at the hands of police officers while transported to prison. [The women] presented their legal statement to the National Human Rights Commission; a Chilean student amongst them who was deported to her country. *None of the women, who denounced, ratified their statement to the Attorney General's office.* After these confrontations, twenty four police officers were suspended from their positions. In the end just thirty-one of the detainees of Atenco, were imprisoned (TV Azteca, n.d.) [My translation].

After Miguel Aquino's report, the newsreader Javier Alatorre concludes:

There is the scenario and the story of what happened. With these scenes then it is imperative to ask why they were released. The answer is harsh, because it has to do with the failed execution of justice in our country (TV Azteca, n.d.) [My translation].

In the resolution of this narrative, the response of the government is not considered as repression but as the *taking control of San Salvador Atenco at any cost*. Details of these actions are not described, making explicit the consent of TV Azteca for the police raid as necessary in order to rescue the authorities who were being held by the FPDT.

The testimonies of the victims of the abuses are not only ignored but the validity of their claims is also put into question. By saying that the women who *affirmed* that they were abused did not *ratify their statements*, the report suggests that these statements are inconsistent and makes no reference to the obstruction of legal procedures that the women faced. At the end, the report mentions the minor disciplinary actions against the police who were involved in the abuses. In his conclusion, the newsreader questions the justice system but only in reference to the way the evidence was handled so the last twelve activists imprisoned were released. In his judgement the *facts* of TV Azteca's report are the true evidence to consider in determining the activists' guilt. In this sense we are being asked to judge the activists based on TV Azteca's narrative. The last report made in 2010 did not change the portrayal of the FPDT and insists on presenting its leaders and the social movement as criminals, disregarding the ruling of the Supreme Court.

In this article I have argued that the commercial imperatives of media corporations have ideological consequences for the portrayal of social movements whose actions affect economic and political powers. In the media landscape of Mexican television, this fact is exacerbated by the ongoing relationship between television media corporations and government, leading to unbalanced reporting of social dissidence, a fact that is clearly visible in the TV Azteca's portrayal of the social movement of FPDT. The position of the television news programs is not to provide information but to ensure a stance that endorses authoritarian

political decisions such as the violent repression occurred in Atenco, 2006. TV Azteca does this through their activation of moral panic and the rescue narrative. This is significant because, as George Lakoff argues, “when you accept a particular narrative, you ignore or hide realities that contradict it” (2008: 37). This is reinforced by the exclusion of the activists’ testimonies and voices of criticism regarding the police repression of Atenco.

Afterword

The repression of Atenco is a watershed moment in the involvement of the television corporations in order to legitimise state violence in Mexico. The reporting of TV Azteca and Televisa attempts to criminalise social protest while supporting the governments of President Vicente Fox and Enrique Peña Nieto (Governor of the state of Mexico then) who both were responsible for the repression of Atenco in 2006.

The collaboration of the commercial media and governments elites reached new levels in the 2012 Federal elections. In the period between 2006 and 2012 Enrique Peña Nieto was groomed for the Presidency by Televisa. Televisa’s coverage extended to Peña Nieto’s private life with the televising of his romance and wedding to Televisa soap opera actress Angelica Rivera (including a visit by the couple to the Vatican and Peña Nieto’s announcement of their marriage in front of the Pope). Towards the end of the Federal election campaign, *The Guardian* revealed documents that suggested that Peña Nieto’s party paid subsidiaries of Televisa for favourable coverage on the Televisa network (Tuckman, 2012; Carroll, 2012). The allegations did not stop Enrique Peña Nieto becoming President. The ongoing collaboration between neo-liberal governments and media corporations in Mexico continues to be an important issue for Mexican democracy. This was highlighted by the emergence of a major new social movement, (#YoSoy132), during the 2012 election campaign whose demands included the democratisation of the media.

Endnotes

1 The local government of Texcoco began an urban improvement program in the main square. This plan involved removing informal vendors from the footpath, where for years they used to sell their flowers, vegetables and fruits.

2 3 May is the day of the Holy Cross, one of the most important days of business for the florists as flowers are central to the celebration

3 The state of Mexico neighbours Mexico City.

4 A collective investigation by the Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women’s Rights [CLADEM], the World Organisation Against Torture [OMCT] and the “Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez” Human Rights Centre [Centre Prodh].

5 The woman, having exhausted all legal avenues to have their case properly investigated in Mexico, have taken their complaints to the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights, CIDH (*Comision Interamericana de Derechos Humanos*) (ProDH, 2012: 32).

6 The detainees were held in jail for many months. The last 12 activists were in jail for four years, three of them in maximum security. Three of the main leaders of the FPDT were sentenced for up to 112 years in prison. The FPDT continued to mobilise to free their members and gained support from more of 400 national and international grassroots organisations, collectives and movements, as well as intellectuals, journalists and artists (ProDH, 2010: 11; Williams, 2012: 12). These efforts, and the legal assistance demonstrating the weak arguments and other inconsistencies in the original sentences, contributed to the resolution of the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice on June 30, 2010 which gave the 12 activists of Atenco constitutional protection and freed them without charges (Alzaga, 2010; Aranda, 2010).

7 There are three public channels: Canal 11 run by a Technological Institute (IPN), Canal 22 which only covers Mexico City and surroundings, and the last to incorporate in the system the Channel of the Congress. The channel Canal 11 has very limited reception, covering 3.1 per cent of the Mexican audiences. The cultural channel Canal 22 covers just 0.7 per cent of the audiences (Gómez, 2004).

8 These privatisations included banks, telecommunications, mass media communications and mining companies. During this presidential term Mexico also signed the NAFTA trade agreement with the United States and Canada, which brought with it a series of changes in the participation of the state in the economy.

9 The government sold 1,115 of its companies to private investors. In many of these cases, the government gave preferences to business men who already had well established companies. Many Mexican billionaires of today were recipients of the benefits of the neo-liberal policies of the time (Orozco, 1998) as is the case with Carlos Slim, who purchased the state owned Telecommunications company Telmex in 1990 and was named the world's richest man in 2007, 2010, 2011 and 2012 by *Forbes* magazine (See more <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/06/2012629203127549484.html>).

10 With the PRI [Institutionalised Revolution Party] who ruled from 1934-2000 and with the conservative party of PAN [National Action] from 2000 until present.

11 Villamil points out that the group behind this bid had experience and expertise, they also presented a proposal for a different model for television similar to the BBC with connections with Italian and French television companies (2005: 42).

12 Carlos Montemayor puts into context this concept of social peace:

Besides being confused with the absence of popular nonconformity, this broad idea puts to one side the reality of an already institutionalised polarisation: poverty, malnutrition, unemployment, illiteracy, marginalisation, lack of health services, insufficient housing, insufficient or nonexistent public services, extreme social inequality, the decrease in size and height in the rural or indigenous communities, the shortening of life expectancy in rural and marginalised areas" (2010: 182). [My translation]

13 The word *macheteros* could be translated as "the people who use machetes".

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