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American press and the beginning of Mexican television (1950-1955)

La prensa estadounidense y el inicio de la televisión mexicana (1950-1955)

A imprensa americana e o início da televisão mexicana (1950-1955)

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The U.S. press specialized in the radio and film industry followed in detail the emergence of television in Mexico in 1950. Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta's business leadership and national and international influence were tracked by the business press, as well as by the U.S. telecommunications regulatory authority. The U.S. press became an input that contributed to understand the complexity of the establishment and development of television in Mexico.
Keywords: Television history, Mexico, press, United States, legislation.

La prensa estadounidense especializada en la industria de la radio y cinematografía dio un seguimiento detallado del surgimiento de la televisión en México ocurrido en 1950. El liderazgo empresarial y la influencia nacional e internacional de Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta fueron rastreados por la prensa de negocios, así como por el órgano regulador de las telecomunicaciones de Estados Unidos. La prensa estadounidense se convirtió en un insumo que contribuyó a entender la complejidad del establecimiento y desarrollo de la televisión en México.
Palabras clave: Historia de la televisión, México, prensa, Estados Unidos, legislación.

O surgimento da televisão no México em 1950 foi acompanhado em detalhes pela imprensa dos EUA, especializada no setor de rádio e cinema. A liderança empresarial e a influência nacional e internacional de Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta foram acompanhadas pela imprensa de negócios, bem como pelo órgão regulador de telecomunicações dos EUA. A imprensa dos EUA torna-se um insumo que contribui para a compreensão da complexidade do estabelecimento e do desenvolvimento da televisão no México.
Palavras-chave: História da televisão, México, imprensa, Estados Unidos, legislação.

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Introduction

This article aims to analyze the media coverage given to the emergence of television in Mexico through the lens of the U.S. press. The hemerographic research was conducted at the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas at Austin and through the Media History Digital Library.[2] These collections include what Wilkinson (2016) calls the BPTJ, an acronym encompassing the business press and trade journals. The business press includes all news items that report on individuals, conditions, or developments in the media industry –this includes national newspaper business sections, regional newspapers, periodicals, and industry magazines. Trade journals, on the other hand, target professionals in specific industries, with examples including *Advertising Age*,[3] *Broadcasting+Cable*,[4] and *Variety*.[5]

The value of consulting BPTJ sources lies, as Wilkinson (2016) emphasizes, in the fact that these materials "can support well-informed studies of media industries … and [are] written by well-connected, reputable journalists or organizations [that] provide content otherwise available only from the sources themselves" (p. 7).

Three main assumptions guide this research. The first is that U.S. information sources are abundant but have been underutilized in exploring the history of television in Mexico. The second assumption is that

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2 https://mediahistoryproject.org/

3 Magazine founded in 1930 with the aim of reporting objectively, accurately and fairly everything related to the burgeoning mass media and advertising industry. In 2017 it changed its name to *AdAge* and became a global brand producing analysis and data on advertising and media.

4 Its first issue appeared in 1931 under the title *Broadcasting*, in 1945 it changed to *Broadcasting-Telecasting* and with the rise of the cable television industry it changed to *Broadcasting+Cable* in 1990. It considers itself to be the leading voice of the television industry.

5 The magazine's beginnings date back to the turn of the 20th century in New York. And it defines itself as the most reliable and authoritative source of entertainment news. *Variety* may ultimately be best remembered for its integration of show business slang into entertainment trade coverage.

analyzing BPTJ content and other American sources serves to refine, adjust, reaffirm, and complement existing interpretations of the origins of television in Mexico. This type of analysis also makes it possible to identify which issues were on Hollywood's entertainment industry agenda in response to the emergence of television in Mexico.

Within the BPTJ corpus, we find the perspectives of the film industry, radio broadcasters, powerful advertising agencies, and, of course, the emerging television sector. Though these are all profit-driven private actors, their interests and strategies are not always aligned –particularly when governments become involved. This variety of perspectives –sometimes aligned, sometimes conflicting– offers fertile ground for constructing new interpretations of Mexico's television history. The third assumption is that Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta's prominent role in radio and cinema earned him significant coverage in the U.S. press. His entry into the television business generated substantial anticipation among Hollywood entrepreneurs and New York advertising firms.

The role played by U.S. corporate interests in the emergence of broadcasting in Mexico has been widely studied and is well-documented. Fernández Christlieb (1982) and Mejía Barquera (1990) emphasize both Mexico's technological dependence and the equity participation of the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in Emilio Azcárraga's XEW. Similarly, Fernández and Paxman (2000) and Saragoza (1991) analyze the business ties between Azcárraga Vidaurreta and American companies such as the Victor Talking Machine, Radio Corporation of America (RCA), and NBC.

Additionally, substantial scholarship has examined the role of the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) as a promoter of Mexico's emerging cultural industries during World War II. The OCIAA was created in August 1940 by an executive order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who appointed Nelson Rockefeller to lead the initiative. While not its only function, one of the OCIAA's primary objectives was to organize American propaganda in Latin America –an effort that, though sometimes strained, involved collaboration with the U.S. Department of State (Ortiz Garza, 1992, p. 24).

Indeed, during the 1940s –against the backdrop of the Second World War– the Mexican audiovisual industry was significantly

strengthened. One of the first beneficiaries of U.S. public and private funding was Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta. Baer (1992) attributes Azcárraga's success to three key factors: access to financial resources, collaborative networks with the American electronics and broadcasting industries, and a long-term vision that treated media as an integrated industry. According to Baer, Azcárraga represented a new generation of post-revolutionary Mexican entrepreneurs who looked to the United States for partnership, in contrast to Porfirian businessmen who had aligned themselves with European interests. North of the Río Bravo, Azcárraga found capital partners eager to invest in Mexico.

A profile published by *Broadcasting* ("We Pay Our Respect", 1942) recounts that Victor Talking Machine offered Azcárraga exclusive product distribution rights in northern Mexico in 1921. Soon after, this expanded to include the entire country. This initial contact with radio equipment provided a pretext to enter the broadcasting business: "Emilio wanted to build a market for RCA-Victor receivers (after the merger of the two companies)" (p. 40). In September 1930, Azcárraga founded the radio station XEW with a transmission power of 5 000 watts. By 1933, power had increased to 50 000 watts, and by 1937, to 100 000 watts. Amplifiers were later added, boosting signal power to 250 000 watts: "James Weldon, chief engineer of the Office of War Information in charge of the shortwave construction program, built the superpower unit" (p. 40).

The same profile highlights that, by 1940, Azcárraga focused on building a national radio network by affiliating with independent local stations and supplying them with XEW-produced content. To this end, he founded Radio Programas de México, the company responsible for distributing and marketing the broadcast material. Content was delivered to 62 affiliated stations either via telephone lines or on phonograph records. Approximately 90 minutes of programming were distributed through the former and three and a half hours through the latter. "Part of that airtime was purchased by the Rockefeller Committee to broadcast content aligned with hemispheric solidarity" (Ortiz Garza, 1992, p. 33).

In August 1942, Azcárraga traveled to New York to meet with NBC executives. He reported on the urgent need for vacuum tubes essential to station operation and also requested spare parts for Latin American

broadcasters. Without assistance from U.S. industry, he warned, "in six months or so [the shortage] threatens to take those stations off the air" ("Azcarraga Visits N.Y.", 1942, p. 14). He emphasized that "Mexican stations are playing an important part in the war effort" ("Tube Shortage", 1942, p. 3), while twenty-five percent of the broadcasting time on Mexican stations "is used by the Mexican government and all important United States programs are broadcast throughout Mexico, particularly speeches by President Roosevelt, Secretary of State Hull, and others" (p. 3).

Technical training was another form of U.S. assistance. According to *Broadcasting* ("Latins Will Study", 1942), the OCIAA funded a project enabling Latin American radio personnel to study American broadcasting techniques: "They will be given an opportunity to study American broadcasting techniques and in turn will serve as consultants on shortwave programs directed to their respective countries" (p. 48).

The American Association of Broadcasters reported in its official publication that "the radio business in Mexico has increased considerably, with some entrepreneurs reporting up to 25% growth compared to the previous year" ("Off the Antenna", 1942, p. 7). Likewise, *Variety* stated that "the war has affected radio probably more than any other industry" in Mexico ("War Shifts", 1943, p. 29). This transformation was partly due to the replacement of German and Italian advertisers and sponsors with American firms. "35% of Mexican radio advertising now features American pharmaceuticals and cosmetics ... and an increasing presence of American products, advertising professionals, and methods is entering the scene" (p. 29).

Mexican cinematography also underwent a profound transformation during World War II. For instance, U.S. authorities prohibited the export of raw film stock to Argentina, which at that time was the largest producer of feature films for the Spanish-speaking market. The rationale behind this decision was Argentina's refusal to declare war on the Axis powers. This measure effectively dismantled the Argentine film industry within less than three years. In contrast, Mexico, having aligned itself with the Allied cause, received extensive support. The Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) deemed such support strategic, undertaking the "modernization of film studios" with the aim

of "developing a more authentic source of war propaganda production for Latin American audiences" (Fein, 1994, p. 104). Consequently, the Mexican film industry came to "serve as a substitute for the American film industry in the Latin American market" (Martínez Assad, 1990, p. 344).

The BPTJ documented the various forms of assistance received by Mexican entrepreneurs. For example, Becerra (1944) reported that, pursuant to an agreement between Mexico's Secretaría de Gobernación and the OCIAA's Cinematography Section, the United States government provided the Mexican film industry with 35 million feet of raw film stock. This allocation aimed to ensure the achievement of production targets: "Great help was given by the United States Government that will enable them to fulfill their 1944 program, which they expect at least will equal the 65 features produced last year" (p. 42). The impact of this support was remarkable: Mexican film production increased from 38 feature films in 1940 to 107 by 1949. As noted by Fein (1994), "the film industry became the third-largest industry in the country, employing approximately 32 000 workers" (p. 104). Furthermore, between 1942 and 1945, "owing to its capacity to generate foreign currency, the Mexican film industry ranked among the five most important industries nationwide and established itself as the most powerful film industry in Latin America" (de la Vega, 1991, p. 35). This information was corroborated and disseminated by journalist Bellamy (1946), who asserted:

> Art was not a major objective during World War II. The war caused the collapse of the European movie industry. Argentina couldn't get enough film. Hollywood was concentrating on war pictures. So almost the whole Spanish-language market of 15 nations was left to Mexico's infant movie industry (p. 14).

This geostrategic context was astutely leveraged by Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta and California's RKO Studios, who, in partnership, initiated the construction of the Churubusco Studios in 1943. This milestone significantly impacted the Mexican film industry and was widely reported by U.S. sources. For instance, Braceer (1947) noted

that the facilities cost four million dollars, describing them as "the heart of the Mexican industry" and "a source of national pride for Mexico" (p. X5). Similarly, Brady (1947) emphasized Azcárraga Vidaurreta's role as a mediator between Hollywood productions and the Mexican and broader Latin American audiovisual industries. At Churubusco Studios, Spanish-language versions of successful 1930s American films were produced at a cost ranging between $100 000 and $160 000 each. "The revenue which these Spanish adaptations are expected to earn in the Latin American markets ranges between $200 000 and $600 000" (p. 17). Nevertheless, Braceer (1947) cautioned in his review that "the nationwide repute and influence of Azcárraga spares Churubusco from the charge that it is a dummy of the Yankee film czars" (p. X5).

On September 30, 1946, the First Inter-American Broadcasting Congress was inaugurated in Mexico City. The event was attended by representatives from "all countries of the continent [as well as] Benjamín Cohen, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations" ("Empezó el Congreso", 1946, p. 8). One of the major outcomes of the Congress was the establishment of the Inter-American Association of Broadcasting. This organization sought to "place broadcasting within the principles of freedom and responsibility, thereby promoting continental peace and solidarity". Moreover, it advocated before American governments for the enactment of legislation granting radio broadcasting the same freedoms enjoyed by the press ("Se constituye una Asociación", 1946, p. 1). The Cuban delegation proposed Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta as president of the new association, presenting his nomination as "a tribute to a figure of continental renown, commanding respect, admiration, and affection throughout Spanish America". The proposal was unanimously approved "by acclamation" (p. 16).

The repercussions of the Congress were swiftly felt in Mexico. Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, leading Cadena Radiodifusora Mexicana S.A., and Emilio Ballí, representing Radio Panamericana S.A., submitted a joint request to the authorities for a concession to operate "a 50 000-watt television broadcasting station in Mexico City, along with several lower-powered stations in Veracruz, Guadalajara, Monterrey, Puebla, Tampico, and Torreón" (Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas, 1946, pp. 2-3). These future stations were to be interconnected through ultra-high frequency microwave links.

By the 1940s, Emilio Azcárraga had already consolidated a solid reputation across the continent. Saragoza (1991) remarks that, by 1944, *Newsweek* had already regarded him as a radio magnate, and Braceer (1947) referred to him as "Mister Radio" (p. X5). He was equally well known in U.S. broadcasting circles. In commemoration of its twenty-fifth anniversary, the National Association of Broadcasters invited Azcárraga, alongside figures such as U.S. Representative Clarence F. Lea and FCC Chairman Charles R. Denny, to speak at its annual conference, thereby acknowledging his leading role in the Mexican and Latin American audiovisual sectors ("Congressman Lea", 1947).

The First Model of Mexican Television: Free Competition (1950-1955)

Mexican radio entrepreneurs saw it as natural to spearhead and lead the efforts to establish television as a private, for-profit enterprise. To that end, they launched a vigorous lobbying campaign which, after initial government hesitation, succeeded in securing authorization for television under a commercial regime (Hernández Lomelí, 2004). In December 1949, *Radio Daily* announced on its front page that the Mexican government had given the "green light" to television broadcasting in the country. It reported that by the end of 1950, "at least two private stations would be operating in the Mexico City metropolitan area" ("Mexican TV Development", 1949, p. 1). The article also noted that the authorities had imposed a cap on the importation of television sets.

The inauguration of XHTV Channel 4, the first commercial television station in Mexico, took place in September 1950 under the leadership of Rómulo O'Farrill Silva. The second concession was granted to Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta, who launched XEWTV Channel 2 in March 1951. In May of that same year, XHGC Channel 5 began broadcasting under the direction of Guillermo González Camarena. Thus, the first model of Mexican television was established: an early emergence under a commercial regime, three stations fiercely competing for the limited audience in Mexico City, and economic returns that fell well short of the promoters' expectations. The capital quickly became the undisputed hub of this young industry –home to both the infrastructure for content

production and the nexus for distribution and commercialization. The rest of the country would be relegated to serving as a network of repeaters for content produced in the center.

Television entrepreneurs were confident that one of their key strengths would be the production of original content, drawing from the know-how of more mature industries such as cinema and radio. However, these expectations proved overly optimistic, and the targets were difficult to meet (Hernández & Orozco, 2007, p. 118).

The equipment for Channel 4 cost approximately $2 244 000 pesos (about $280 000 USD at 1950 prices), but the total expenditures –including the construction of studios on the 13th and 14th floors of the Lotería Nacional building (Hernández Lomelí, 2020), the transmission antenna, five RCA cameras, and a remote control unit– amounted to 4 million pesos (around $500 000 USD). Mulvey (1950) wrote for his Arizona readership that television in Mexico was "just around the corner" (p. 50). *Variety* reported that XHTV would be "the first in Latin America" ("1st Mexico TV Set", 1950, p. 14), and that the 100 television sets then available were ready to broadcast President Miguel Alemán's annual government address ("Mex Prez in TV", 1950, p. 12).

Just two and a half months after Channel 4 launched, Bernard Kalb (1950) of *The New York Times* described the station's fragility: "TV is still too new, too experimental, too limited in audience to have produced a star. But if it has any … it is the Mexican favorite –the bull" (p. 39). Kalb noted that the programming was "surprisingly varied", featuring "magicians; amateur hours; news commentators; round-table discussions; dramatic shows; American serials with Spanish subtitles" (p. 39). He also mentioned the channel's ownership: "The O'Farrills, father and son (owners) of two newspapers, the Spanish-language *Novedades* and the English-language *The News*" (p. 39). Regarding the channel's financial viability, Kalb observed that very few advertisements were being sold despite the low prices: "Fifteen minutes of video time runs to about 450 pesos, or $50 –less than what a tourist will often pay for a good souvenir" (p. 39). He reported that 1 500 sets were in use at the time and that the government had authorized the importation of only 10 000 receivers.

Ever Jacobs (1951), also writing for *The New York Times*, highlighted what he considered the most remarkable feature of Channel 4: its "experimental approach in programming" (p. 9). He noted that five "teleteatros" (television plays) were broadcast weekly and particularly praised *Teatro Relámpago*, which was based on the improvisational technique of the Commedia dell'Arte, giving it a "spontaneity essential" to its character (p. 9). Writing for an American audience, Jacobs emphasized the contrast between the two countries:

> Television in Mexico seems to place more emphasis on cultural and educational material than in the United States. A round table in which current problems are discussed by prominent specialists has been very successful … and weekly remote broadcasts of rehearsals by Carlos Chávez and the National Symphony are on the XHTV agenda (p. 9).

Jacobs's overall assessment of the programming strategy was positive. He noted that "the dominance of live television over the exhibition of films and kinescopes seems appropriate, given that the Latin American market will remain limited for some time" (p. 9). Similarly, *Broadcasting* magazine suggested that American television producers could learn a few tricks from their Mexican counterparts:

> For example, the opera is telecast in its entirety … Each telecast runs three hours, ranks at the top of Mexican audiences, and costs Ford about $2 800 per program for the package –a fraction of what such a production would cost in this country (Beatty, 1953, p. 83).

Jacobs (1951) also reported a rise in the number of television sets: eight months after Channel 4 began broadcasting, the number of functioning receivers had grown to 4 000. In its early years, Channel 4's coverage was limited to the Valley of Mexico, but Rómulo O'Farrill Silva stated that RCA had conducted a technical study concluding that the signal would soon reach Puebla, Cuernavaca, Toluca, and Pachuca "within the next two years" (Rosen, 1950, p. 38).

Channel 2 was inaugurated on March 21, 1951, with a remote broadcast of a baseball game from the Delta Stadium in Mexico City.

For several weeks, its programming was limited to that sport, a few artistic performances, and professional wrestling matches. Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta (1950) himself acknowledged the programming limitations at the time:

> The challenge facing television is enormous, and we have no support. We intend to develop television with original programming to the extent that circumstances allow … In Mexico we are willing and ready to accept the task of producing professional television programs. We are unafraid because we have at hand the necessary talent, the experience, and the knowledge of radio and motion pictures … In this country we seem to have nearly everything, especially when we speak of art and crafts –an environment which offers a solution for whatever problem may arise (p. 50).

As early as 1946, Azcárraga had envisioned a centralized headquarters for his radio and television activities. This space –named Televicentro– was designed to house five radio stations and three television channels. For content creation, he planned three theater-studios with seating for 600 people each and 18 individual studios. The international market was a key factor in the facility's design. Azcárraga described Televicentro as "a major center for the production and distribution of educational and entertainment programs" (Azcárraga Vidaurreta, 1950, p. 52) and as "a network that will reach all of Spanish-speaking America" (Verni, 1951, p. 59). He expressed confidence in his international strategy:

> We have the 'know-how' in radio and motion pictures; we know their formulas. We have ample material for good stories and programs that can entertain and persuade the public –programs that reflect the family life, psychology, ideals, and shared values of our Hispanic American peoples (Azcárraga Vidaurreta, 1950, p. 52).

To reinforce this internationalist vision, Azcárraga emphasized that Mexican television could serve as both an inspiration and a model for its Latin American counterparts:

> What we have achieved in Mexico has been achieved –or better– in Cuba. We think that Mexican and Cuban television will be the school for Latin America. So far, Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Peru, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico are on the starting line, ready to go. It is our contention that the exchange of kinescopes, showcasing each country's talent, will –if developed in the next two or three years– help establish and consolidate television in Latin America. And we also foresee reasonable profits (Azcárraga, 1955, p. 63).

To support audiovisual exports, Televicentro included "makeup rooms, underground and overhead accessways to vast storage spaces, and facilities for artists, sculptors, designers, and other creatives to respond to the scenic needs of live programming" (Rosen, 1950, p. 38). It also featured a large studio where live television programs could be converted into 16 mm films for export to Latin American stations. According to Mexican press reports, the investment totaled 26 million pesos (approximately $3 million USD in 1951) and was described as "one of the boldest private-sector initiatives" (Verni, 1951, p. 59). Rosen (1950) described Televicentro as "a magnificent building and a set of facilities … that would make NBC or CBS green with envy" (p. 29). By March 1955, investments in Televicentro –including land, construction, technical installations, and equipment– had exceeded 40 million pesos (Anguiano, 1955, p. 18-A)

Channel 5 and Guillermo González Camarena

The third television station to begin operations in Mexico City was Channel 5 (XHGC), under the ownership of Guillermo González Camarena. An engineer with recognized expertise in television and telecommunications technology, González Camarena was the inventor of a pioneering color television system, patented in Mexico in 1940 and in the United States in 1942. However, sustaining a television channel required much more than technical brilliance. It demanded a viable financial model that could guarantee consistent revenue to fund the production and transmission of programming attractive enough to lure advertisers.

Unfortunately, the Channel 5 team was unable to achieve commercial viability. Advertising revenue proved insufficient to sustain operations, and the station folded within two years of its launch. Despite its modest infrastructure and precarious business model, Channel 5 drew attention from the U.S. BPTJ.

Notably, *Motion Picture Daily* ("Off the Antenna", 1942) briefly reported that "Guillermo González Camarena, an engineer at XEW in Mexico City, had patented a color television system", though it noted that "no further details had been released" (p. 7). The mention is significant, as according to Hernández Lomelí (2020), the first Mexican press coverage of González Camarena's invention did not appear until 1944.

The BPTJ also covered the inauguration of XE1GC, Mexico's first experimental television channel. *Variety* reported that González Camarena had built "the transmitting and receiving equipment" for the station and, according to General J. Fernando Ramírez of the Ministry of Communications and Public Works, the initiative would help "popularize television in Mexico" ("Tele's Mexican Bow", 1946, p. 32).

In 1949, with the arrival of television in Mexico imminent, *Radio Daily* ("Mexican TV Development", 1949) stated that the country would likely begin with two channels and predicted that the first concessions would be granted to Emilio Azcárraga and González Camarena. Although this prediction did not fully materialize –González Camarena did not receive his concession until later– he was widely regarded as a natural candidate, based on his technical proficiency and his years of experimentation and public demonstrations of prototype systems.

For example, *Television Daily* referenced public demonstrations of both black-and-white and color television during events sponsored by the Mexican presidency. Regarding his chromatic television system, González Camarena described it as "a Mexican process, somewhat similar to the one used by CBS in the United States" ("First Mexican TV", 1949, p. 1).

Channel 5 officially launched on May 10, 1952, although it did not stabilize its transmission schedule until September of that year. According to *Broadcasting*, the XHGC station "blended 20 years of TV experimentation with the devoted help of a part-time staff to get a 1 kW, bench-built transmitter on the air". Using an old 16 mm home-

style projector, a vintage orthicon camera, and a set of transmission tubes, the team managed to deliver "a surprisingly good signal" (Beatty, 1953, p. 84). Beatty concluded that Channel 5 was a product of "ingenious planning and a minimum of money, with a total investment of perhaps $ 50 000" (p. 84).

There are multiple indicators suggesting that President Miguel Alemán's administration placed bureaucratic and political obstacles in the path of XEW-TV Channel 2's launch. The first red flag was that the initial television concession was granted to Rómulo O'Farrill Silva, a businessman with no prior experience in the media sector. This decision ignored the principle of seniority: Emilio Azcárraga and his associates had formally requested a television concession in 1946, and González Camarena had done so in 1947.

Another clue lies in the fact that Channel 4 was housed in a privileged location –on the 13th and 14th floors of the Lotería Nacional building, a public facility that greatly eased the technical and financial burden on O'Farrill. In contrast, Azcárraga's request to install a 130-meter-tall antenna at Televicentro was initially denied by the authorities, citing "public safety concerns for the numerous residents surrounding Televicentro" ("1st Mexico TV Set", 1950, p. 14).

Additionally, the permits for television stations outside of Mexico City were granted to O'Farrill, while Azcárraga –owner of the most ambitious broadcasting complex in the country– was once again excluded. Fernández and Paxman (2000) suggest that President Miguel Alemán had personal motives to obstruct Azcárraga's concession. In the 1940 presidential elections, when Alemán served as campaign coordinator for Manuel Ávila Camacho, Azcárraga had supported the opposition candidate, Juan Andrew Almazán. Thus, denying Azcárraga's initial television concession may have served as an act of political retribution (p. 53)

Television on Mexico's Northern Border

The installation of Mexican television stations in border cities –particularly Tijuana and Mexicali– provoked various reactions from U.S. regulatory authorities and audiovisual entrepreneurs in Southern

California. On the one hand, the U.S. government expressed concern that Mexican broadcasts could interfere with the signals of television stations already operating in Los Angeles and San Diego. The issue was further complicated by the possibility that other Mexican border cities –such as Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Matamoros– might follow suit, disrupting signals in South Texas and New Mexico. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was aware of this potentially chaotic scenario and responded with an initial preventive measure: a freeze period during which no new television licenses would be issued in the United States (Hernández Lomelí, 2004).

As a second step, the FCC sought to negotiate agreements with the governments of Mexico and Canada to rationally coordinate the establishment of television stations along their respective borders. Unregulated growth threatened to destabilize existing channels and hinder the development of new ones in neighboring U.S. cities (Slotten, 2000). To address the issue, and with the idea of reaching an agreement on this matter, in June 1951, the negotiating commission representing the U.S. government and its Mexican counterpart, headed by the Secretary of Communications, met in Mexico City. The negotiations proved difficult. Years later, Rosel Hyde –head of the U.S. delegation and president of the FCC– reflected on the talks, noting that while agreements had been reached with Canada and Cuba, Mexico remained a challenge:

> The Mexican delegation placed a number of comprehensive demands on the table and felt they were not adequately considered by their counterparts, so they walked away from negotiations … I felt it was my responsibility to resume talks, and I did … For historical or perhaps racial (sic) reasons, they tend to be very, very cautious. My position was difficult too because the U.S. had already planned out the use of frequencies very carefully, making it hard to satisfy Mexican demands for communication infrastructure. Still, I believe our Mexican colleagues recognized the sincerity of our efforts. In the end, we reached an agreement and signed it (Hyde, 1974, p. 25).

The agreement was signed in August 1951 and proved to be of strategic importance to Mexican television entrepreneurs. It served

as a legal and diplomatic framework to support their ambitions of commercially targeting U.S. audiences (Hernández Lomelí, 2004).

Channels 7 (Matamoros) and 6 (Tijuana)

The *Abilene Reporter-News* ("Mexican TV Station", 1950, p. 17) reported in October 1950 that a television station in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, would begin operating by December of that year. This information came from Pedro de Lille, who would become the station's general manager. Nine months later, *Broadcasting* ("Mexican TV. Matamoros", 1951) confirmed that Rómulo O'Farrill was the station's principal shareholder. It would broadcast 10 hours daily, with 75% of its programming consisting of American films and kinescopes (film recordings of TV broadcasts) subtitled in Spanish. When asked whether Mexican entrepreneurs intended to build a chain of television stations along the border to transmit in English and exploit the FCC's freeze on new U.S. licenses, O'Farrill responded:

> We do intend to build TV stations in the larger Mexican cities along the border … but it is not because of the freeze. We would do so anyway, without regard to your situation. As far as the use of English is concerned, all our stations will be using your language extensively, since we will use your films and kines to a great extent (p. 62).

According to *Ross Reports on Television*, in September 1951 Channel 7 became "the first Mexican station to become affiliated with an American network when it signed as CBS-TV's 62nd outlet" ("CBS & NBC Make New Affiliation", 1952, p. 3). Mexico City's XHTV was the second. In mid-1954, a hurricane destroyed Channel 7's facilities, forcing it to suspend operations. Still, the XELD-TV station in Matamoros generated an installed base of 18 000 television sets. Little is known about the short life of Channel 7. As early as 1952, journalist Alejandro Anguiano lamented the lack of public information: "We don't know what work has been done by this pioneering border station with our good neighbors … Let's hope the outcome is both highly beneficial and genuinely Mexican" (p. 10). He added:

> Television should be a cultural instrument –albeit one dosed with commercial content– and it must not present to the American people (to whom our border television is directed) a version of Mexico that we ourselves reject: the "charro-for-export", the pseudo-Mexico, a distorted image of who we really are … Is it true, as we have unofficially been told, that Matamoros TV has failed to meet the artistic and cultural standards it should uphold? (p. 10).

The second border station was XETV Channel 6, based in Tijuana and owned by Emilio Azcárraga. *Variety* estimated the station's cost at $ 500 000 and stated that "it will be powerful enough to serve Los Angeles and can easily cover San Diego" ("TV Station for Tijuana", 1952, p. 13). Azcárraga announced that the station would affiliate with NBC. The imminent launch of Channel 6 sparked controversy in California. *Hollywood Daily Variety* ran a front-page article titled "Border Incident Looms Which Can Precipitate U.S.-Mexican TV 'War'" (1952). The piece warned that Channel 6's NBC affiliation would pose a serious threat to the local San Diego station, as it would broadcast NBC content from Mexico, thus becoming an "unfair" competitor. The article also claimed that Azcárraga planned to "bombard" American border cities with high-powered stations located throughout northern Mexico. This "border incident", the article argued, might trigger "the first international crisis caused by television" (pp. 1-10).

While *Variety* echoed the controversy, it adopted a more conciliatory tone, acknowledging the importance of NBC affiliation for Azcárraga while also noting his need to face "organized opposition from the San Diego Chamber of Commerce and the CBS affiliate KFMB-TV" ("Azcárraga's Border Troubles", 1952, p. 27). The situation became even more complex with a proposal from Alvin Flanagan, a television producer formerly associated with ABC, who sought FCC approval to: "Supply live shows from San Diego via microwave relay. These programs would comprise 30% of the regular XETV schedule" ("Mexican TV Originations", 1953, p. 71). Flanagan's plan was vigorously opposed by TBC Television Inc. and radio station KFSD, both of which were competing for a television license in San Diego. They argued that if Flanagan succeeded in establishing a production

studio in San Diego, Channel 6 would effectively become: "A regular American broadcast outlet controlled by aliens and not responsive to U.S. regulations ("TBC Claims xetv", 1953, p. 54).

Their complaint to the FCC included the following arguments:

- The bulk of XETV's service area was in San Diego and Southern California, including parts of Los Angeles.
- Channel 6's frequency had been reassigned from San Diego to Mexico during the freeze, specifically to serve Mexican audiences.
- The plan aimed to turn XETV into a U.S. station based in Mexico, targeting American viewers, supported by U.S. advertisers, but with none of the legal responsibilities or financial burdens imposed on U.S. stations –particularly in terms of taxes, labor costs, and royalty fees ("TBC Claims XETV", 1953, p. 54).

In response, the FCC convened a hearing to assess the situation. Its final ruling was that: "there was an insufficient showing that the San Diego stations would be injured by the grant of this authority". It further added that it was in the "public interest" to maintain a "free exchange" with stations licensed in Mexico ("FCC Okays ABC-XETV", 1955, p. 76).

This had been Azcárraga Vidaurreta's plan all along: to rely on the bilateral treaty, which did not prohibit the transmission of U.S.-produced content from Mexico, and to sell advertising slots to California agencies. Channel 6 finally launched in September 1953, dedicating only 25% of its broadcast hours to Spanish-language programming. The station aired from 4:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m., offering dubbed series, soap operas, and a newscast with local updates (Iglesias Prieto, 1990). Azcárraga's strategy was clearly illustrated in a promotional ad published in *Broadcasting* (see Figure 1).

Conclusions

Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta was undeniably the central figure in U.S. business and trade press coverage (BPTJ) related to Mexico's radio, film, and television industries during the period from 1946 to 1955. These

FIGURE 1

Source: "Buy XETV" (1953, p. 69).

sources emphasized his exceptional business acumen and his strategic relationships with American companies –ranging from equipment manufacturers like RCA to content producers such as RKO Studios, NBC, and ABC. The BPTJ consistently acknowledged Azcárraga's dominant position in the Mexican radio industry and his critical role in the country's cinematic development. They also recognized his growing prestige and leadership within the broader Latin American audiovisual landscape.

Consequently, the U.S. press paid special attention to Azcárraga's content-production infrastructures –namely the Churubusco Studios and Televicentro. These complexes were emblematic of Mexico's media industrialization and were positioned not only to serve domestic demand but also to support the export of content to the Latin American market. *Broadcasting* and *Variety* were the two publications that most thoroughly covered the emergence of Mexican television.

Channel 4, the first commercial private station with regular transmissions in Mexico –and indeed, in all of Latin America– was a particularly frequent subject of U.S. press commentary. American journalists were struck by its "surprisingly varied programming" and its apparent emphasis on cultural and educational content, in contrast to the enter-

tainment-heavy focus of U.S. television. The spontaneous creativity seen in its "teleteatros" (television plays) and the inclusion of operas and bullfights as televised spectacles were viewed as innovative programming choices.

At the same time, the U.S. trade press highlighted the evident improvisation and lack of experience at Channels 2 and 4. There was widespread concern over the fragile economic state of Mexico's fledgling television industry –stemming from its limited audience and its inability to expand signal coverage beyond the Valley of Mexico. In this respect, the American press complemented and validated diagnoses already made by Mexican observers, who had noted the financial unviability of sustaining three separate companies within such a constrained market.

Guillermo González Camarena and his modest Channel 5 also drew attention in the BPTJ. These outlets acknowledged the technical ingenuity involved in developing in-house broadcasting technologies, even under precarious conditions.

By the late 1940s, the U.S. television industry was undergoing consolidation and could not afford the risk of chaotic cross-border signal interference. Reaching bilateral agreements with Canada, Cuba, and Mexico was essential to ensuring that the growth of the medium would not be undermined. Thus, the FCC closely monitored the development of television along Mexico's northern border. In coordination with the U.S. State Department and Mexico's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both governments signed a bilateral agreement to coordinate frequency allocation along the border.

However, the launch of Channel 6 in Tijuana –owned by Azcárraga– sparked intense controversy. U.S. stations in San Diego and Los Angeles accused the Mexican broadcaster of engaging in "unfair competition" by transmitting English-language programs produced in the U.S. from Mexican territory. The resulting conflict mobilized significant political and corporate resources and forced the FCC to formally weigh in on the matter. In the end, Mexican entrepreneurs succeeded in securing authorization to broadcast U.S.-produced content from Tijuana to audiences in Southern California. The U.S. press documented this entire dispute in detail, providing the only comprehensive contemporary ac-

count of the negotiations and power struggles involved. In doing so, the BPTJ filled a critical gap in the historical record regarding the development of Mexican border television.

From September 1950 to March 1955 –the time frame analyzed in this article– it is possible to observe the first organizational structure of Mexico's television industry: three private commercial channels, each with its own approach to content production. Channel 4 offered a balanced mix of culture and entertainment; Channel 2 sought to leverage its deep experience in cinema and radio; and Channel 5, despite its innovation, lacked the financial backing and operational capacity to succeed.

The result was the technical and financial collapse of Mexico's nascent television industry. In order to protect their investments, the channel owners merged in 1955 to form Telesistema Mexicano, a company created to coordinate content production and distribution, as well as advertising sales. From that point on –and until 1968– Mexican television developed under a monopolistic model.

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