Extraordinary Gubernatorial Election in Puebla, Mexico, 2019: Negative Political Publicity, Its Regulation, and Its Implications for Discourse and Journalism

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Abstract. Electoral processes are always hectic. In the case of Puebla, Mexico in 2019 an extraordinary election was held after the governor elected in 2018 passed away a month after taking office. This article presents a case study where the negative political advertising used in the campaign of the elected candidate was analyzed from the application of the critical discourse analysis proposed by Van Dijk in a corpus composed of the main statements and communiqués analyzed in a judicial case promoted by the opposition candidate. In addition to the analysis of the legal regulations applicable to the case. The findings indicate that negative political advertising was a key element throughout the electoral campaign of the candidate-elect. In addition, it is concluded that, although there is a rigid regulation against slander in the country, human rights, such as freedom of speech and press freedom, there is still a huge flow of manipulative messages circulating through the media.

Keywords: Negative political advertising · Election · Manipulation

1 Introduction

As a consequence of the mediatization of elections, that is, the use, adaptation and subordination by politicians to the media [1] which has placed political marketing as the foundation of electoral campaigns [2], and the belief that negative information, unlike positive information, leads to a sensory process of basic stimuli [3, 4] with a greater impact on our memory [5], negative publicity, defined as that message composed of criticisms or attacks that disqualify the capacity or integrity of political contenders [1], has become one of the characteristic elements of contemporary political communication [6].

In the midst of this spectacularization and dramatization of electoral contests [7], is that the media obtain greater weight in electoral processes, since these are the ones in charge of controlling and disseminating messages in order to promote the interests of politicians [8]. It is under this communicative process that the influence of political advertising manifests itself as a form of manipulation [9], since power, understood as the ability to influence the values and interests of others, is exercised from the construction of meanings through discourse [10], which is inserted to a specific social situation [11].

In this sense, the dissemination of biased information about any actor or political party in order to influence the voting decision of citizens represents a case of manipulation [12]. Consequently, manipulation should be understood as an abuse of power, or in other words, as an exercise of domination [12], since the manipulator, for his own benefit, seeks to make the manipulated do or believe certain things against his own interests [13, 14].

Although manipulation can be understood as a type of persuasion, the difference between these concepts lies in the role that the recipients of the discourse play in the discursive process, since in the manipulation process their role is mostly passive [12]. Thus, the relevance of analyzing discourse lies in the fact that those who have control over discourses have a greater possibility of exercising their power in the minds and actions of the rest [15].

The dominance exercised through political propaganda is closely related to the regulatory and material characteristics of the media systems in which it is broadcasted [8]. In the Mexican case, negative political advertising, since the turbulent federal elections of 2006, has been regulated in a more rigorous manner to avoid slander that may influence the voting decision of the electorate [16]. At the constitutional level, Article 41 of the Mexican Political Constitution establishes that political-electoral propaganda of parties and candidates must avoid disseminating messages that represent slander. Within this framework, Article 471 of the General Law of Electoral Institutions and Procedures defines slander as the imputation of false facts or crimes with impact on an electoral process.

However, there is a paradox in the framework that regulates the speech during the electoral process, since, in juxtaposition to the attempt to protect the right to integrity of candidates and political parties, there is the need to protect the right to freedom of expression of the actors involved in the electoral contest, as well as freedom of the press, since journalism is considered fundamental for the proper functioning of a democracy, since it allows the free circulation of ideas, fostering debate, and nurturing the public opinion of citizens [17].

Based on the above, the purpose of this article is to analyze, based on Van Dijk's theory, the discourse that predominated in the campaigns of the Extraordinary Election to the Governorship of Puebla 2019 by the elected candidate, Luis Miguel Barbosa Huerta, over the candidate Enrique Cárdenas Sánchez. The work seeks to answer if the discourse was used as a form of dominance of power to persuade the electorate from the presentation of manipulated information, in addition, to analyze the judicial implications that such acts have with respect to the rights of freedom of speech and press of journalists.

2   Background

Puebla is located in the centre of the country and is one of Mexico's five main cities, which, due to its size and proximity to Mexico City, gives it importance in federal elections and represents an attractive booty for political parties. On December 24, 2018, the newly elected governor of Puebla, Martha Erika Alonso, and her husband, the then senator and former governor of Puebla, Rafael Moreno Valle Rosas, died in a plane crash. For this reason, and after complying with the provisions of the Political Constitution of the Free and Sovereign State of Puebla, an extraordinary election was called on June 2, 2019 to elect the new governor of the State who would be in charge of completing the administration until 2024.

However, due to the irregularities and violent events that took place during the 2018 elections, and because of the media and citizen polarization that the struggle between the two most important political forces at the time (Morena and PAN), the National Electoral Institute (INE) was in charge of coordinating and managing the new electoral process instead of the Electoral Institute of the State of Puebla (IEEP) in order to prioritize transparency and objectivity in this new election.

The candidates for this new electoral process were: Luis Miguel Barbosa Huerta, for the coalition "Juntos Heremos Historia", formed by the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena), Partido del Trabajo (PT), Partido Verde Ecologista de México (PVEM); Enrique Cárdenas Sánchez, as a common candidacy of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), Movimiento Ciudadano, and Compromiso por Puebla; and Alberto Jiménez Merino, for the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). It is relevant to mention that Enrique Cardenas tried to be a citizen candidate in the 2018 election, but it was impossible for him because he did not have the number of signatures necessary to complete his registration before the state electoral body.

The period for the pre-campaign was established from February 24 to March 5, 2019. On the other hand, the campaign took place from March 31 to May 29, 2019. On May 19, 2019, a debate was held between the candidates, which was broadcast on radio, television and the main social networks.

Days before the end of the campaign period, on May 24, 2019, the PAN accused Barbosa Huerta, and the political parties that are part of its coalition, of making slanderous statements about its candidate, Cárdenas Sanchez. The sentence of this court case, identified with folio SRE-PSL-31/2019, was published on July eleventh of that year with a favorable ruling for the new governor of the state.

With a meager 33.4179% of citizen participation, Barbosa Huerta became the new governor of Puebla by obtaining 44.6767% of the votes. He was followed by Cárdenas Sánchez with 33.2330%, and then Jiménez Merino with 18.4584% of the total.

3   The Socio-cognitive Model of Van Dijk

For this paper we have taken up the proposal of the author Van Dijk, who defines critical discourse analysis (CDA) as an analytical research on the way in which the abuse of power or dominance is practiced, reproduced and combated through the exercise of
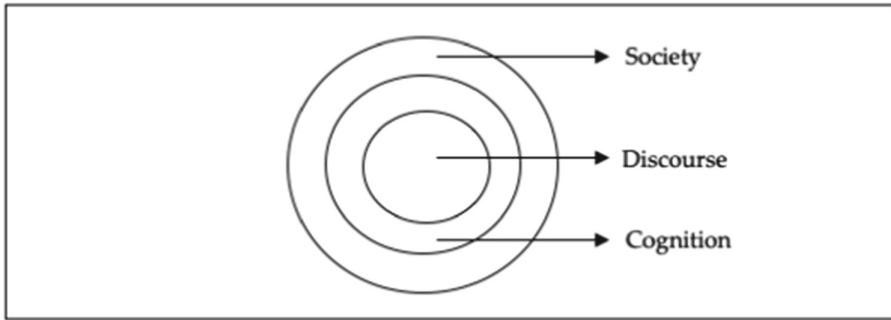
Fig. 1. Socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis in Van Dijk's theory

discourse in social and political contexts [15]. His model of CDA is composed of three aspects: discourse, society, and cognition, which works as a link between the other two elements (see Fig. 1).

For Van Dijk, the cognitive nature of communication becomes vital for the processes of persuasion [18], since "cognitive processes and representations cause and control all human action and interaction" [19] (p. 5). Language and discourse, therefore, are an abstraction of our social interaction and the way we perceive and form opinions of others.

For Van Dijk, cognition develops in two dimensions: personal and social. In the personal aspect of cognition, we find what the author calls "mental models", which are subjective perspectives of doings shaped by our own experiences. Nonetheless, as social actors, we do not only produce or understand language (or discourse) as individual beings, but as part of communities or institutions, this is understood as social cognition. In addition, what we share with each other is conceptualized as social memory, which refers to the ideologies, values, norms and attitudes that the different social groups have in common and differentiate them with the rest [19]. The formation of the different perceptions of language and discourse leads to the creation of ideologies, which, at the same time, polarize them with us.

4   Materials and Methods

Initially, CDA requires the researcher to integrate a corpus of discourses that document the communication situations to be studied [20–22]. For this reason, the fragments of the communications that the judicial authority analyzed in the case mentioned in a previous section have been selected (see Table 1).

Subsequently, and taking into account that the connection between discourse and the social or political must go through a cognitive process based on the knowledge and opinions of the receiver of the message. We've employed Van Dijk's ideological framework, which categorizes the way in-groups and out-groups are represented in discourse by using the ideological pronouns "Us" and "Them" [19], to permit us illustrate the polarization processes that the candidate Barbosa Huerta, as well as the journalist of the presented note, employed in their discourse against the candidate Cárdenas Sánchez (Table 2).

Table 1. Corpus of research.

Visual composition	Type of communication	Textual excerpt
	Interview for television	"It is part of the dirty war that his party is waging, do you know who is paying for the dirty war? Jalisco, the government of Jalisco, and he knows it; he is paying for the dirty war against me from Jalisco in Puebla; I say it clearly, because he knows it, okay? And everything is going to continue like this, because it is the only way they know how to campaign, they campaigned against me, they did nothing against me, now they want to see me in a coffin, they want to see me dead, no, it is not going to work for them" "(...) they want to position themselves for the two thousand and twenty-four, that's why, companies from Jalisco". "(...) No, not at all, I am very busy in my clean battle against the dirty war, the clean battle of thousands and thousands of Puebla citizens, my speeches are getting better and better, by God, I never prepare a single one, but they come out"
	Streamed political debate	"They represent corruption, backwardness, the past; they represent stagnation and the state of things" "The PAN candidate comes to this debate defeated, he did not campaign, he was very weak, today he comes as he has always donde, to make dirty war, to defame he does not know the State, he is not reliable, he has already shown through the media everything he has done, he is not reliable, Mr. Enrique Cardenas is a little chip, that is what he turned out to be" "(...) and he is a fraudster of the Treasury, and of the government's investigation programs. He is a millionaire with a great fortune that contrasts with the modesty of the investigators"

Table 1. (*continued*)

Denuncian a Enrique Cárdenas por abuso sexual 🗓 23 mayo, 2019 ⏰ 1:56 am 👤 24 Horas Compartir [social icons] "Rosario" —quien solicitó reservar su identidad ante el temor de sufrir represalias— asegura que Enrique Cárdenas abusó sexualmente de ella a finales de los años noventa Por: Mario Alberto Mejía / Especial	Journalistic note	"Rosario" claims to be a victim of Enrique Cardenas and asks for the grace of anonymity. In a conversation with this writer, she states that at the end of the nineties, the then rector of the University of the Americas Puebla (Udlap) harassed her in his own office, "took her by force", "lifted her skirt", "pulled down her panties", "opened (sic) her pants" and "abused" her. In compensation, and in order to commit her not to publicly evidence the current PAN candidate, the Udlap Foundation gave her four million pesos in cash and forced her to sign "some papers where (sic) she waived the right to sue Dr. Cardenas".

Table 2. Ideological square model.

	Positive	Negative
Us	**Accentuate our positives**	**Minimize our negatives**
Them	**Minimize their positives**	**Accentuate their negatives**

5 Results

By adapting Van Dijk's ideological square to our corpus, we have found that Barbosa Huerta's campaign was based in negative political advertising against the opposition candidate, Cárdenas Sánchez. His speech was adapted according to each broadcast format. In addition, his message was always forceful and directed towards those who share his ideology and discourse. On each occasion, it was observed that the candidate-elect sought to attack the integrity and morals of candidate Cárdenas Sánchez by calling him "defeated", "corrupt" and a "swindler". Barbosa's discourse was categorized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Ideological square model of Barbosa's discourse in a television interview.

Accentuate our positives	Minimize our negatives
The candidate states that his battle is clean and that he represents the interests of many Puebla residents.	The candidate considers that although he does not have a discursive preparation, he is getting better and better at it.
Minimize their positives	**Accentuate their negatives**
The candidate categorized as a dirty war the support of the government of Jalisco for the candidate Cárdenas Sánchez.	Candidate emphasizes that the campaign against him wants to see him dead

Table 4. Ideological square model of the journalistic note.

Accentuate our positives	Minimize our negatives
The candidate makes himself look like a humble person who knows the State of Puebla, unlike the opposition.	The candidate tries to clean up his image by pigeonholing Cárdenas Sánchez as a millionaire swindler.
Minimize their positives	**Accentuate their negatives**
The candidate minimizes Cárdenas' discursive skills to defamations and slanderous statements.	The candidate considers that the opposition party and candidate represent nothing but corruption and stagnation.

6   Discussion and Conclusions

As pointed out at the beginning of this text, the dissemination of biased information is a form of abuse of power (dominance) over the other social actors involved in the discourse process. Therefore, control of the mass media is one of the central elements of social power in current information based societies [23].

Although we believe that the rights of freedom of expression and of the press should prevail at all costs, what has been observed in the case study when analysing the role of the media differs from what the theory states. In other words, the media has an important role to play in democracy by promoting the dissemination of diverse information, but it is not always objective, and therefore does not fulfil its function of encouraging citizens to better exercise their right to vote.

As Van Dijk notes, the goal of a news story and its authors is for readers to form an idea of that new event, in such a way that readers form a model that at least resembles their own model of that event. For this, one of the main ways to influence the structure of a model (and thus the understanding of a new event) is to manipulate the information that is important.

What was found when unraveling and categorizing the message of the elected candidate against the opposition candidate, is the crystallization of the dominance from the discourse, because by using negative political marketing as the basis of his message,

Barbosa Huerta used the various mass media to, on the one hand, manipulate the electorate to get the vote in his favor, and on the other, discredit the honor and morals of the candidate Cardenas Sanchez, accusing him, by his own voice or through official journalists, of being a swindler and a rapist, turning Cardenas into a criminal. Activities that were not verified nor was a judicial process followed when Barbosa Huerta came to power; who at the close of this article has died; leaving Puebla with a new governor appointed by the legislature because he only had 2 years left to complete his period of government.

As long as the belief that negative political marketing of opponents has positive effects for the author's campaign persists, the proliferation of unbiased information will continue to exist under the guise of protecting the freedom of speech and press freedoms safeguarded by the country's political constitution. This case showed that the rules and judicial authorities in electoral matters in Mexico are perfectible. Unfortunately, the discussion and approval of the electoral reform proposed by Andrés Manuel Lopéz Obrador is still in progress at the close, due to the fact that by not having a qualified majority in the union congress, the president cannot modify the constitution and has proceeded with the modification of secondary laws, but this implies that several of the proposed reforms are unconstitutional. The issue of slander in campaigns is undoubtedly one of the points where, from the regulatory field and political marketing, we can continue to raise new research questions, since both candidates and communication professionals are more creative every day when designing strategies. that they achieve their objective of manipulating the voter to achieve their electoral triumph but without violating the norm so as not to be sanctioned.

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