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Imaginaries created by the media in Mexico about Afghanistan

by

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Made in Mexico / Hecho en México

Abstract

Following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, after 20 years of occupation, the eyes of different sectors around the world have turned to that Asian country. Mexico's mass media are no exception. Day by day they report stories from different perspectives, through which Mexicans form an imaginary of that country. It is true that the media, in its different formats, directly influences the perception that people form about Afghanistan, but how close to reality are these stories?

Resumen

Tras la retirada de las tropas estadounidenses de Afganistán, después de 20 años de ocupación, los ojos de diferentes sectores alrededor del mundo voltearon al país asiático. Los medios de comunicación mexicanos no fueron la excepción. Día a día reportan historias desde diferentes perspectivas, a través de las cuales los mexicanos se formaron un imaginario sobre ese país. Es cierto que los medios de comunicación, en sus diferentes formatos, influyen de manera directa en la percepción que las personas se forman sobre Afganistán, pero ¿qué tan cercanas a la realidad son esas historias?

Imaginaries Created by the Media in Mexico about Afghanistan

José Luis Maya

Introduction

Since the departure was announced and once the withdrawal of the U.S. military forces in Afghanistan was finalized, the mass media in Mexico prioritized their different platforms and formats to address the issue. In almost all cases, the main international news agencies such as Agence France-Press (AFP) and Reuters were used as a source of information.

The repetition of images and videos about Afghanistan formed an imaginary of violence, chaos, terrorism, and humanitarian crisis among the Mexican population. The images that made the most impact due to his recurring exhibition were those of crowds gathered along the walls of the Kabul airport: families fearful for their immediate future and men clinging to the landing gear of a military plane to escape the country.

Thousands of people who collaborated for two decades with the occupation forces and with the government were projected, their countenance was one of terror and despair as they felt threatened. They were mostly local employees, and military and civil officials who served the regime imposed by Western governments. Images taken mainly around Kabul airport showed the abandonment of local allies by the U.S. and its invading partners.

The imaginary that the United States had been trying to build up in the eyes of public opinion for almost two decades collapsed: the transformation of Afghanistan into a modern and democratic nation never materialized. Joe Biden had to accept that the sole purpose of the incursion was to avenge September 11, 2001, attacks on Washington and New York.

Among other situations, “the United States and its European allies provoked the most important political and cultural tragedy so far this century: leaving Afghanistan without having given guarantees for women and children to maintain their rights... the return of the Taliban to power in the Asian country does not guarantee the human rights of women and children” (Valdés, quoted by Olvera, 2021).

Given the sensitivity of the subject, this paper addresses the commitment that the media and journalists must assume in dealing with information on the consequences caused by the occupation of a country by external military forces. The role of the media and the importance of journalistic ethics today is crucial.

A brief account is made of the dimension of information warfare and its use in armed conflicts. The importance of the geographical location of Afghanistan and the interests of the main powers in that region are also contextualized.

Mexican media and the ethical dimension of the journalistic profession

The role of the mass media in Mexico acquires special relevance when reporting on a war conflict, as in the case of the occupation of Afghanistan by the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization

(NATO), and its subsequent departure after approximately 20 years. In these scenarios, it should be considered that journalistic information is essential for the recipients to be able to make decisions and form an informed opinion about the events occurring around them, whether local, national, or worldwide.

Regarding the opposing positions on how the media should deal with the issue of violence, Núñez (2013), argues that good journalism does not debate whether to publish or not to publish, but rather what, how, and for what purpose. What obliges reporters, editors, and media managers to assume the ethical dimension. For its part (Restrepo, 2011, cited by Núñez, 2013, p. 2) warns that:

Violence cannot become a show to satisfy the curiosity and morbid curiosity of the public. In this sense, the publication of macabre images of the dead, wounded, and violent acts, intended only to increase sales, perverts the profession and degrades the recipients of the information. Therefore, the publication of information on violence cannot be inspired by the desire to make a business. This information fulfills its function of service to the public when it shows them what is happening, explains why it is happening, and opens their eyes to see the damage suffered by society in the present and the consequences it will have in the future. Such information is not, therefore, an answer for the curious and morbid, but it is intelligent input to make them understand the facts. Moreover, it is information that becomes a permanent stimulus for action.

When there are actors in the conflict, the management of information is part of their strategy, therefore journalists should avoid taking a posi-

tion for any of the sides, neither for the United States nor for the Afghan rebels, it is only up to them to inform society about what is happening to them. Although it is admittedly very difficult to do so objectively.

The media report on the clashes, terrorist attacks, deaths, and military actions in Afghanistan, but there is a need for investigative journalism that allows us to understand the background of things, not only to reproduce what is published or transmitted by international news agencies.

Regarding the coverage of the topic, it should be done from a broad perspective where all actors are given a voice and allow journalists to present relevant information. “In addition to giving an account of the ‘war report’ daily, the media can tell the stories of the victims, about how the issue is linked to daily life and how it affects economic, educational, health and cultural environments” (Núñez, 2013, p. 6). A journalistic approach must be made to the social consequences and how the life of the communities is disrupted.

If an ethical reflection is made, it must be recognized that there are no unique and definitive answers: journalism is a daily exercise that recognizes problems, analyzes them, considers options, and searches for reasoned and reasonable alternatives.

Media and journalistic ethics in the internet era

Micó, *et al.* (2008), reveal that ethics and self-regulation mechanisms circumvent the effects of new technologies. They question the conception of the network as a source of information, in an environment in which broadcasters multiply and question the traditional role of the journalist. They recall the classic function that political liberalism

assigned to the journalistic profession: to guide the citizen so that he can form his opinion and translate it into political will. In this sense, a professional journalist must distinguish himself from an amateur by doing a quality and credible job, always rigorously verifying the facts.

To the extent that the Internet offers the ability to express without obstacles what is said to a global dimension, without the intermediation of journalism professionals, it is forgotten that the essence of information is the truth. Another difference between professional and amateur journalism is that the former performs a journalistic practice based on ethical principles and rigor, seeking to avoid rumors and partisanship.

Unlike businessmen and other professionals who converge in the activity of the media, journalists have the theoretical and practical bases to “develop their function attending to the double commitment of the responsibility derived from their important task and the mandate of their conscience, following the constitutional mandate and the ethical principles of the journalistic profession” (Aznar, 2004).

The exercise of ethics in journalism corresponds to each person, it cannot be imposed from outside, it is a personal and non-transferable decision. Commitment to the truth cannot cease to be the fundamental value of the work of journalism as a business and of the journalist as information professional. Self-regulation avoids any attempt of external interference in the work of the media and its professionals.

The ideal of the journalist's function is to guide the citizen so that he can form an informed opinion of the facts, for this reason, he must maintain his positions differentiated from his journalistic work: inform as objectively as possible and always present the facts without distorting the context. In which they are presented. Your responsibili-

ty is to act honestly, so as not to affect the course of events you narrate. When the journalist adheres to ethics, he acquires a commitment to the truth and in defense of it.

Micó, *et al.* (2008), also emphasize that the correct publication of information should be prioritized over the scoop. Editorial statutes or codes of ethics have been overtaken by the challenges posed by the digital era.

Professional ethics consider that one of the rules for the search for truth is that the journalist should always contrast the information and not relax the security filter. The ethical precepts that should guide journalistic work in the Internet era are the same as before the emergence of the network since truth is the ethical basis on which any social relationship is based.

Given the evolution of information and communication technologies, it is necessary to know the technical aspects of the media, but without neglecting the application of the ethical and regulatory principles of the activity. It is a moral requirement of the professional.

Today, journalists no longer have a monopoly on the dissemination of information, so personal ethical responsibility takes on greater weight. There is also the responsibility of organizations and citizens to demand a certain basis for the information or opinion issued by journalists and the mass media. The journalist must be an informed emitter who exercises his profession with honesty, and just as he has the freedom to say, he also acquires the responsibility for what he says.

Information warfare

According to Torres and García (2009), the information warfare dimension refers to the perceptual element of information, emphasizing how the dissemination of information and certain popular ways of understanding reality have a decisive importance in the outcome of conflicts.

These authors argue that information warfare is not a new phenomenon, as it has always been present in all armed conflicts. Psychological warfare, propaganda, and disinformation have been present in warfare throughout history, and the conflict between the United States and Afghanistan is no exception. Over time, the way warfare is conducted has been transformed, largely because technological advances have played a key role in the growing importance of public opinion in the face of conflict. They determine the primacy of the informative facet over any other aspect of armed confrontations. Relations between states and the media have changed.

Today, it is not enough to possess arms, and economic and social power, because the weakest actors in a conventional war find a tool of great value in information warfare. For insurgents and terrorist groups, it has become the central axis of their action.

Information warfare has become one of the main resources for the actors involved in a war conflict, but this does not imply that violence disappears from the conflict. Armed actions can be part of information warfare since violence can easily become a message or an effective transmitter of symbols and meanings.

The use of force for communicative purposes translates into struggles to impose a discourse or a narrative of reality that justifies

or condemns the actions that take place during the conflict: the terrain of the subjective is worked to obtain objective results.

In all cases, successful implementation of an information strategy requires highly skilled teams, and professionals with a deep understanding of the cultural, social, and psychological factors that can explain the behavior of a given society. This type of personnel, adapted to the Afghan societal environment, is not commonly found in sufficient within the U.S. and allied sides.

It must be considered that the widespread diffusion of new information technologies has broken the traditional dichotomy between those who fight and those whose job it was to report on the conflict. The new instruments of the information society have allowed the actors to play a dual role, fighting and reporting on the conflict simultaneously. Currently, any soldier deployed in a combat scenario has access to a range of technological means of potentially strategic impact: digital cameras, filming equipment, cell phones, and laptops, among others.

The soldier-journalists (as Torres y García calls them) have become a new source of information on the development of the conflict and, in the face of the danger of the media's performance in this context, they are almost the only primary source of information on the events.

Context

According to Leyton (2013), one of the military actions that have had the strongest impact so far this century is the occupation of Afghanistan. As has happened with other countries in that region, it has been linked to terrorist networks that have attacked the security of the

West since September 11, 2001. The deployment of troops in Afghanistan was carried out under the slogan of combating international terrorism by the United States and NATO. In Afghanistan, it was called Operation Enduring Peace.

The situation in Afghanistan became problematic and it was not possible to solve it in the short term, as initially expected. Rather than solving the problem, the U.S. decision was to withdraw its troops, which took place during constant attacks.

On the other hand, Laborie (2017), assures that this Asian country maintains a commercial, ethnic, and cultural crossroads. Because of its history and geographical situation, it is dominated by its dynamics. He states that the said country belongs neither to Central Asia nor to South Asia: its intermediate situation has given it a unique geostrategic character. This was evidenced by the Western military intervention in 2001, which put Afghanistan back on the map to integrate it into the contemporary world.

The author states that several years after the departure of international combat forces, Afghans continue to face major challenges that cast a shadow over the country's present and future. The internal situation is still dominated by traditional centrifugal tendencies, fostered by local leaders and by an ethnic, religious, and tribal structure that hinders the implementation of a common state project. Weak governance and corruption are considered the main causes of instability, resulting in a lack of vital expectations for this population.

In addition, Taliban and other jihadist groups' violence hampers the country's security. It is no secret that radicalism, drug trafficking, and terrorism affect Afghanistan and neighboring countries, without exception. Because of all this, geopolitical struggles between the

great powers determine regional relations, and cooperation is mediated by the interests of nations.

Laborie (2017), also highlights the fact that Afghanistan and Central Asia are linked both geographically and demographically: it shares borders of just over 2 thousand kilometers with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In this line, the inhabitants have shared customs and habits since ancestral times. For this reason, what happens in Afghanistan affects events in Central Asia and vice versa.

On the security front, the reduction of the Western military presence on Afghan soil has stoked the usual concerns of the Central Asian republics about instability with their southern neighbor. The region's borders register uncontrolled movements of people, weapons, narcotics, and insurgents. Security and economic development are two sides of the same coin.

The deterioration of the security situation has led to a deepening humanitarian crisis for the civilian population. The country's governance has been damaged, resulting in the proliferation of anti-government groups, which promote and carry out violence.

With the international community's commitment to Afghanistan's future uncertain, security remains the main challenge for the reconstruction of the Afghan state. The decline of the Afghan security forces is reflected in the increase in civilian casualties and the strengthening of the insurgency. The Taliban are imposing their radical vision of life and governance.

Laborie (2017), concludes that U.S. and NATO strategies lacked a genuine long-term political vision capable of reversing the situation in Afghanistan. In addition, he considers an important point to consider the weariness of Western public opinion towards this conflict.

The United States failed to reach an agreement with the insurgency, which is largely attributed to the fact that it clashes with the interests of other countries, including Russia, China, Iran, and Pakistan. Its internal difficulties and the geopolitical struggle between the superpowers are major challenges to regional stability.

Final Thoughts

During and after the withdrawal of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, the mass media in Mexico dedicated ample space to its different platforms taking as a source of information the main international agencies such as AFP and Reuters. The repetition of images and videos about Afghanistan created an imaginary of violence, chaos, terrorism, and humanitarian crises among the Mexican population.

For nearly two decades, the occupation was justified by the claim that a modern, democratic nation was being built in Afghanistan. However, contrary to this justification, days before leaving Afghanistan, Joe Biden declared that the sole purpose of the incursion was to avenge the attacks of September 11, 2001, in Washington and New York, as well as to extirpate the terrorists who operated from Afghan territory.

Moisés Garduño summarizes the situation as follows: the exit from the US

Is about a failure of the foreign and security policy of the United States, from Bush, Obama, Trump, and even Biden, and it is because it was promised to the international public opinion a democratic Afghanistan, institutionally consolidated, with freedom for women, and so on. In terms of international security, the invasion was a failure and...

there was no improvement in the quality of life of the Afghans (Garduño, cited by Romero and Maguey, 2021).

The military invasion of Afghanistan by the US and its NATO partners responded to the interests of the Anglo-American oil giants (Unocal, Chevron, British Petroleum), allied with the five big arms manufacturers: Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Northrop Grumman, Boeing, and General Dynamics. Afghanistan is strategic, not only because it borders the 'Silk Road' corridor that joins the Caucasus with China's western border, but also because it is at the center of five nuclear powers: Russia, China, Pakistan, India, and Kazakhstan. The Eurasian corridor has oil and natural gas reserves like those of the Persian Gulf, which makes Afghanistan a key territory for the crossing of transportation routes and pipelines, and a logical land bridge for pipelines going to the south, from the former Soviet republic of Turkmenistan to the Arabian Sea, through Pakistan (Fazio, 2021, p.9).

Due to how the U.S. troops are leaving Afghanistan and its possible consequences for the civilian population, one could venture to say that some Mexican media outlets lack journalistic ethics, whose causes could be conflicts of interest, agreements of the owners with other businessmen, or with the government sector. Because of this possibility, it should be emphasized that when there is a commitment to the truth, the journalist should shed light on opacity, reveal irregularities, denounce corruption, and abuses of power, and not get carried away by conflicts of interest. Their social role requires them to investigate and give a voice to all the actors involved to offer documented information based on real, first-hand sources.

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