

# Media logic against mediated deliberation. The case of presidential debates

## La lógica mediática contra la deliberación mediada. El caso de los debates presidenciales

### A lógica midiática contra a deliberação mediada. O caso dos debates presidenciais

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#### ABSTRACT

If correctly done, presidential debates can be considered as mediated deliberation events, with a rich knowledge base for citizens to learn and model their behavior. Nonetheless, they could adopt a media logic, unfolding elements of conflict, simplification and incivility that are salient in media discourse nowadays. To explore if such logic has penetrated this format, we conducted a content analysis on the three presidential debates of the 2018 Mexican campaign (N = 556 units), using variables that operationalize the values of deliberation. We found that, in general, debates performed with civility and were centered in public policy issues, but there was simplification and poor argumentation. Thus, while we cannot conclude that debates are colonized by a media logic, they do not function completely as deliberative events either.

**Keywords:** media logic; mediated deliberation; presidential debates; content analysis.

#### RESUMEN

*Si se desempeñan correctamente, los debates presidenciales pueden considerarse ejercicios de deliberación mediada, con una rica base de conocimiento para el aprendizaje y modelado de la ciudadanía. Con todo, estos pudieran adoptar una lógica mediática en su interior y reproducir los elementos de conflicto, simplificación e incivilidad que pueblan el discurso político contemporáneo. Para constatar dicha colonización, se realizó un análisis de contenido de los debates de la elección mexicana de 2018 (N = 556 unidades), operacionalizando criterios de deliberación. Encontramos que se condujeron con civildad, priorizando temas de política pública, aunque hubo elementos de simplificación y pobreza argumentativa; si bien esto no los inserta en la lógica mediática, tampoco les permite funcionar como actos de deliberación.*

**Palabras clave:** *lógica mediática; deliberación mediada; debates presidenciales; análisis de contenido.*

#### RESUMO

Os debates presidenciais, se se desempenham corretamente, podem considerar-se exercícios de deliberação mediada, com uma rica base de conhecimento para a aprendizagem e modelo da cidadania. Mesmo assim, estes puderam adoptar uma lógica midiática no seu interior e reproduzir os elementos de conflito, simplificação e incivildade que estão presentes no discurso político contemporâneo. Para comprovar dita colonização foi realizado uma análise de conteúdo dos debates da eleição mexicana de 2018 (N = 556 unidades), operacionalizando critérios de deliberação. Descobrimos que se fizeram com civildade, priorizando temas de política pública, mesmo havendo elementos de simplificação e pobreza argumentativa; não os coloca na lógica midiática, também não lhes permite funcionar como atos de deliberação.

**Palavras-chave:** *lógica midiática; deliberação mediada; debates presidenciais; análise de conteúdo.*

#### How to cite:

Echeverría, M. (2019). La lógica mediática contra la deliberación mediada. El caso de los debates presidenciales. *Cuadernos.info*, (45), 57-72. <https://doi.org/10.7764/cdi.45.1573>

## INTRODUCTION

Almost no political campaign format shows the contradictions of contemporary media systems more clearly than presidential debates. They are a kind of “media event” (Dayan & Katz, 1994) that summons a high degree of public attention, expressed in audience levels, the volume of media coverage and comment in social media. Considering that in the latter two political reactions to debates manifest agonistic or conflictive features, instead of policy proposals (Benoit, Stein, & Hansen, 2005; Echeverría, 2017), it is possible to assert that those events as well as the media coverage and social comment that stem from them frame presidential debates as great campaign spectacles. This alternative is fostered by a communicational environment that is driven by a media logic, i.e. the adoption of languages and formats of mass media by politicians, characterized by fragmentation, simplicity, negativity and unrest, among other features, to attract depoliticized audiences (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2016; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

These formats, unlike media coverage or political propaganda, have the potential to raise civic development, such as increasing citizens’ knowledge of candidates and their proposals, and political interest and participation, as it is demonstrated in international literature (Cho, 2009; Jarman, 2005; McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007). In a wider conception of these formats as learning platforms, it is possible to understand them as adequate spaces for mediated deliberation, that is, an arena to exchange rational arguments among candidates that inform the capacities of citizens’ deliberation while functioning as a model about the guidelines for them to perform their own deliberations. It is, besides, an *efficient* model of deliberation, compressing different components of this democratic procedure: representation of different political opinions, deliverance of rational arguments, lifting the complexity of proposals, and a synthesis of opposing positions that are defended or criticized (Maia, 2009). In this sense, and implementing such potentials, debates highlight their dimension of public service and democratic institutions.

With both views in perspective, political actors face a dilemma when performing in debates, as they have to choose if or how to respond to different expectations from between and within news media, audiences, and politicians themselves: to inform public debate with substantial arguments of policy, or to raise the enthusiasm of audiences using flashy arguments with convincing rhetoric, simple and fragmentary messages,

mudslinging, emotional appeals, etc. In consequence, this article empirically shows which of these two views better represents debates, analyzing the performance of candidates during 2018 Mexican elections. This is proposed as evidence of the trends of contemporary political speech during campaigns.

To satisfy this goal, theoretical elaborations are offered with the purpose of framing the debates as key formats of mediated deliberation during the campaign, in tension with a media logic that structures candidates’ performance and the characteristics of the format. After a brief description of the context and innovations in the 2018 Mexican debates, we offer an operative concept of mediated deliberation that better suits content analysis. Following every normative research, the discussion and conclusions contrast the expected performance of both models with the empirical findings of our analysis.

## DEBATES AS GROUND FOR MEDIATED DELIBERATION

As one of the key formats of political communication during electoral campaigns, debates have been studied from the different dimensions, either their effects (Jarman, 2005; Tsftati, 2003; Wicks, 2007), party and media negotiations about their format (Gallego, 2016; Matsaganis & Weingarten, 2001) and, of course, its content, whether their semiotic or linguistic dimension (Dominguez, 2011; Kanashiro, 2014), arguments and strategies (Barbaros, 2012; Benoit & Brazeal, 2002; Choi & Benoit, 2013) or international comparisons (Benoit & Sheaffer, 2006; Téllez, Muñoz & Ramírez, 2010).

However, normative research is less frequent, despite that the terms of reflection and evaluation – distinctively philosophical – were clearly established by Kraus & Davis (1981) less than 40 years ago. In their seminal chapter, the authors emphasize that the knowledge driven by debates help to comply the social contract between citizens and the democratic system, particularly in the representative type where, in exchange for voting rights, the former are capable of identify and comprehend the differences between the parties competing in campaign (Jamieson, 1990). Despite these fundamentals, empirical work on the normative assessment of debates is not abundant in the literature, particularly over different types of democracy with larger depth than the representative kind, such as deliberative democracies. This *lacuna* is salient due to the central role that communication and dialogue

play on the latter, and the fact that debates are better adjusted to its traits, as it will be argued later.

Deliberative democracy is proposed as a model in which citizens assume a central role against elites, and decisions are reached under some minimum requirements by them: a) taking a careful and reflective consideration on political issues, b) bearing in mind several perspectives that go beyond their own interests, and c) articulating and exchanging convincing arguments that may be justified in the public sphere and in groups (Gastil, 2008; Perloff, 2014; Strömbäck, 2005). This discussion sustains the principles of rationality, impartiality, and inclusion, and produces legitimacy in the political system, considering that, after a thorough deliberative process, the resulting decisions would be recognized as just and correct (Habermas, 1999; Rawls, 2001).

Nonetheless, such a model has been criticized due to its high expectations on citizens, with respect to their values (trust, integrity, tolerance) and their behavior (listening, reflecting, abiding to facts and willingness to change their mind) which ideally must be practiced during deliberation. According to critics, in sociopolitical contexts of massification and disaffection, as we have today, deliberative democracy is not realistic and unlikely (Althaus, 2012).

In response, scholars committed with this tradition have developed an intermediate model of *mediated deliberation*, which preserves some essential features of deliberation but ease the high costs entailed in its fulfillment.

It consists in implementing a deliberative practice between actors representing the political field and the civil society, which can be observed by the citizens and, therefore, it is mediated –these actors deliberate *in the name* of citizens– and mediated –reproduced and amplified by mass media– (Maia, 2009). By making the process visible, mass media selects sources that act as spokesperson of certain groups, giving meaning to the issues in discussion, and hierarchizing and promoting the defense or critic, implicit or explicit, or some positions (Maia, 2009). Although requirements of deliberation exposed above lay mostly on political actors instead of citizens, when properly executed, this model produce many benefits: at a micro level, it increases the complexity of positions and justifications in conflict, reducing information costs (Maia, 2009). And at the macro level, it provides a model of deliberative behavior for citizens and improve the quality of decisions by political elites, as positions

difficult to justify in public are manifested (Wessler, 2008; Wessler & Rinke, 2014).

For the model to operate empirically, it is proposed a series of constitutive criteria that deliberative agents must follow (Bennett et al., 2004; Maia, 2009; Rinke, Wessler, Löb, & Weinmann, 2013; Rohlinger, 2007; Wessler & Rinke, 2014). The first is that it should have a *base of open information*, where the proportion of political content must be greater than other types of content, specially entertainment, and where no issue in discussion can be excluded. A second value is *civility*, where respect, courtesy and open dialogue are the principal components of a reasoned exchange of ideas and the development of conflict between actors. This would allow citizens to ponder the position of speakers. A third proposed value is *reason giving*, that is, actors must formulate reasoned arguments to sustain their positions, preferences and recommendations, particularly during a controversy. This input is necessary for the deliberative notion of public-political reason, and to organize positions for and against a discussion. The last criterium is *responsiveness*, by which actors' positions and objections should be carefully considered and contested, particularly by those that have opposite values and interests. In this way, ideas and opinions are related and dialogue between them, for arguments to be refined or positions can be retracted.

The vision of the theorists of mediated deliberation was developed as a normative aspiration for mass media and, in particular, political journalism. Nonetheless, we think that its principles are applicable to the debate format, given its deeply democratic vocation (Echeverría, 2008; Echeverría & Chong, 2013), in two ways. First, debates convey the necessary knowledge for citizens to learn about policies that concern their interests and this is widely and symmetrically distributed. This knowledge allows citizen to ponder the consequences of political decisions, and nurture the individual attribute of *enlightened understanding* that every consolidated democracy needs (Dahl, 1992; Morlino, 2007). Second, debates formalize, channel and process the political conflict, within the limits of civility, and, therefore, constitute democratic manifestations in small scale (Belanger, 1998; Kraus & Davis, 1981).

In this sense, it is possible to verify that debate formats potentially satisfy several conditions and criteria previously exposed about the mediated deliberation practices: this space allows the exchange of reasoned arguments between plural political actors, either political parties or citizens –in some formats on some

countries—, who act as advocates for the interest of their peers. The volume of information in these broadcasts, which generally lasts no less than two hours, and the reasoned and responsive articulation of stances by its participants, raises the complexity of the arguments, summarizes opposing views and constitutes a model of performance for citizens when they articulate their own positions during political discussions.

These normative assumptions may be sustained with evidence and theoretical arguments. With respect to political learning, American scholars in particular, have empirically verified several benefits of these formats, very similar to those proposed by mediated deliberation: it increases the audience's knowledge about the candidates' positions (Jarman, 2005) and the image and character of them (Cho, 2009); it provides a clear contrast between positions on these issues (Benoit, Webber, & Berman, 1998; Cho, 2009); increases citizens' interests on the campaign and their probability to participate in the political process, including voting; encourages citizens to search for additional information; and raises citizens' political efficacy and support of democratic institutions (McKinney & Chattopadhyay, 2007).

The proposal about candidates' behavior as a role model for citizens is relevant in some works (Ryfe, 2005; Wessler, 2008), although it has yet to find empirical verification, as far as we know. It is based on the social cognition theory and observational or vicarious learning by Bandura (2009), who postulates the acquisition of new behavioral patterns by individuals, that they observe in the media (Baran & Davis, 2015). For individuals to execute these observed behaviors, direct or vicar reinforcements are required, and a triad of specific personal characteristics, socially established behavioral patterns, and environmental events. Debates satisfy the attention condition posit by Bandura, in relationship with their "salience, attractiveness, and functional value" (Bandura, 2009, p. 432). In consequence, this theory allow to assert that, in the political field, leaders who "engage in more thoughtful rhetoric may prime citizens to adopt a more deliberative posture" and then "act as sea walls against the tide of routine habits of reasoning" (politically), based in prejudice or cognitive or emotional shortcuts (Ryfe, 2005, p. 63; Wessler, 2008).

In conclusion, and by fulfilling these potentials and criteria, debates may be conceptualized as formats of mediated deliberation, although without being mediated by journalists.

## MEDIATIZATION OF DEBATES AND COLONIZATION OF MEDIA LOGIC

Despite the aforementioned arguments, there is an alternative characterization of debates that constraints the potentialities posited above, when these are thought as massive political spectacles. This notion may predominate when the core of public communications in a given political system is overtaken by a process of mediatization and media logic. The first is defined, in a wide sense, as a transformation process or social change mediated by mass media, as institutions and technologies that are external to other institutions and social spaces and model their communication processes. Thus, structural changes are introduced in the way that institutions and social, political and cultural domains relate to each other, and influences or modifies the activities and practices of social actors and institutions, to the point of submit them or make them dependent on mass media and their logic (Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2016; Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

Meanwhile, media logic, as a concrete manifestation of the macro phenomena of mediatization, is conceived as a grammar that gives structure to processes of communication and the assumptions senders use to construct messages. This grammar includes the rhythm, language and format, which tends to be evocative, easy to use and familiar with audiences, and its main features are fragmentation, simplification, polarization, intensification, stereotyping and dramatic narrativization of actors and political events (Altheide, 2004, 2013; Strömbäck, 2008; Stromback & Esser, 2009). Politicians participate in this grammar through the phenomenon of self-mediatization, by which they adapt to the demand and needs of media and internalize the rules, routines and criteria of media selection that govern the access to public sphere. In consequence, politicians reap the benefits of mass communications, they anticipate their effects and strategically exploit them to their own interests (Esser, 2013; Esser & Matthes, 2013).

In summary, if we take debates as a democratic institution, its mediatization may be understood as the colonization of media logic within it, in the sense that debates adapt or adjust to the communication rules of mass media (Esser, 2013; Hepp & Krotz, 2014). In the end, debates may become simple infotainment events, following a format and performance of highly mediatized participants.

As such, in a political system that is mediatized, it is likely that political actors choose to perform in debates by self-mediatization, that is, following the

styles and narratives imposed by the media. This implies the deployment of a media logic previously internalized and that satisfies media and audiences, characterized by fragmentation, simplification, and dramatic devices in its messages, in order to maximize their reach and level of public controversy. Even the televised debate format itself, sometimes defined by journalists or private networks, and sometimes by electoral authorities, may be configured in such a way that incentivizes actors to adopt these features.

Of course, this is not a clear-cut process. The execution of a debate as a spectacle may happen more likely when different actors that have a stake in the format establish their own expectations: if audiences consider that they must be entertained and not informed by the debate; if journalists expect to report news with high impact, before the same, worn-out campaign proposals; and if politicians choose to satisfy journalists' expectations to get more coverage or to influence depoliticized audiences that, before sophisticated arguments on policy, expect to be amused by a show.

This introduces a tension amid and inside each of these fields, between executing the debate as a public service, with the goal of deliberation, or as a spectacle guided by media logic. Although every political scene is theatrical in some ways (Dader, 1998), media logic is mostly at odds to some criteria of mediated deliberation, to the point that it may nullify it: its fragmentation, simplicity, and flashiness are opposed to values such as the information base and reasoning; the dramatics makes actors prone to incivility and lack of responsiveness or dialogue. Although the debate format is wide enough to encompass both logics, in certain moments, or as a general strategy, actors have to decide which should they adopt.

The way in which this tension is solved will result in a certain performance by the actors and an outcome in terms of the content of the format. Thus, we face an empirical question, which has seldom been answered in the theoretic coordinates posited. The only instance we found is in the context of the 2015 Spanish debates where candidates were, mostly, focused on issue instead of image utterances. This demonstrates how far was the format to the process of current mediatization (López, Llorca, Valera, & Peris, 2018). Nonetheless, and as a function of research based on measuring attacks, acclaims and defenses, as well as issue or image discourses by Benoit (2002), it is possible to find a pattern of civility and informative richness in countries such as France (Choi & Benoit, 2013), Korea (Kim,

Khang, & Lee, 2008), or Ukraine (Benoit & Klyukovski, 2006), where debates have focused mostly in acclaims instead of attacks.

In the Mexican case, although agenda effects have been confirmed (Mercado, Hellweg, Dozier, & Hofstetter, 2003), empirical research on its content shows different findings. Scholars that analyze debates with linguistic tools determine that actors' performance is normatively poor. Their observations highlight the prevailing empty rhetoric instead of facts (Valbuena, 2007), the use of denial resources such as denigration, exposure, sarcasm, and irony aiming, not to ideas or policies, but *ad hominem* (Flores Treviño & Infante, 2010) and an aggressive and scornful framing of rival candidates, particularly the front runners in surveys (Chihu, 2009, 2014).

In contrast, the scarce quantitative work indirectly contends that debates have been civil and with some depth. In the 2006 debates (Echeverría, 2008; Téllez et al., 2010) and in 2012 (Echeverría & Chong, 2013), the acclaims largely exceed attacks, just as issues instead of image utterance's, the former in a ratio of 2 to 1 and 3 to 1 in the latter. However, issues and policies are based approximately 70% of the times in opinions, not in facts, and a small percentage, near 10%, are explained, which sets up a debate relatively poor when it comes to its base of information. We must admit that these studies use only a variable to indicate the level of civility and another one for depth, which hinders any conclusions regarding their mediatization or deliberative quality, while justifies the efforts in this study.

## EMPIRICAL CASE AND METHODOLOGY

The 2018 Mexican debates<sup>1</sup> had peculiarities that should be considered in relationship with our theory. Organized under Constitutional mandate by the electoral authority, and nationally broadcast, the old stiff debate formats that were used during the short Mexican tradition, which began in 1993, faced a substantial modification. Previously, debates favored politicians' speech by reducing participation from moderators—who only gave speech turns—, with prolonged exposition times for candidates and static camera shoots of them.

In this occasion, moderators were journalists—three by debate—who were free to question, interrupt and contradict candidates, while developing an agenda previously agreed upon by the parties and the electoral authority. The last two debates also included questions by



citizens, first by their presence in set in a rally-like format, while the last one synthesized questions posted in social media, and read by the moderators. Each candidate, five in the first debate and four in the remaining two, had a time schedule that allocated argumentation (2 minutes), reply (1 minute), and counter-retort (30 seconds), and was meant to be managed carefully. Regarding visual frames, camera shots alternate dynamically between journalists and candidates, or between the debaters, having them in confrontation in the same shot, or recording their reactions to other participants in medium shots and closeups.

The debate dynamics and its visual performance constitute a first fact that shows the format display, and appears to be designed to satisfy criticism by journalists regarding the previous stiff and tedious formats that, notwithstanding the high ratings, were not up to date with contemporary television standards. Nonetheless, that redesign predisposed these debates to perform according to media logic that may result fragmentary, simplistic and contentious, in virtue of the brief times, the agonal visual language, and the journalists' license to interrupt and question candidates at any given time. It must be pointed out that all three broadcasts had high ratings. The first debate (April 22th) was tuned in by 11.4 million voters older than 18 years old, that is a 40% share; the second debate (May 20th) had 12.6 million voters in audience, 50% share; and the third one (June 12th) had 10.7 million voters, 39% share (INE, 2018). These figures show their massive nature, very timely in the era of fragmented audiences, and the essential role it had during the electoral process.

However, we do not know whether these predispositions in the format translated into content features that are linked with mediated deliberation or media logic. Therefore, we provide a content analysis of all three presidential debates. The corpus (N=556) was built from "thematic units" defined as an assertion over an issue, an argument over candidates or parties, manifested in a phrase or in several utterances (Benout & Klykovski, 2006).

Regarding the code book, we operationalize those criteria considered relevant to assess the performance of the debate, using codebooks from several works that attempt to measure the concept of mediated deliberation in mass media (Bennet et al., 2004; Benoit & Klyukoyski, 2006; Maia, 2009; Rinke et al., 2013; Rohlinger, 2007; Wessler & Rine, 2014). In consequence, inclusion and recognition criteria were both excluded, as every party were present in fair circumstances, and the criteria of

base of information, reason giving, proposals' delivery, civility and responsivity were kept. The first criteria attempts to verify the presence of political content in the debate, following two categories from functional theories of discourse; in that sense, 1) it is verified the presence of an issue in the units, and 2) if they allude to them and proposals to solve them or to personal characteristics of the candidate. Reason giving monitors the basis of candidates' speeches: if they are based on facts (verifiable) or in mere subjective opinions, and their level of depth, which may go from explanations on the issue's dynamics, the description of its features or its simple mention.

The criterium of proposal delivery was operationalized, in part, during the first variable of base of information, with the verification of its presence. Nonetheless, we attempt to also verify that proposals have a basis (in terms of facts or opinions) and their level of elaboration (being mentioned, described, or explained). The criteria of civility, understood as respect and courtesy, has two variables: the former checks the absence of derogatory or aggressive expressions and, the latter, the lack of attacks. Finally, responsiveness observes the allusion to former interventions by candidates. The specific way in which these criteria were operationalized, from its composition in criteria, variables, operative definition, and categorical breakdown, is shown in Table 1.

Given that this research has no antecedents in empirical literature, this is focused in the following question:

- Q1. What is the degree of mediated deliberation in the Mexican 2018 presidential debates?

Regardless, we complement the measured variables with additional indicators that verify the mediatization degree of the practice, relating content variables with contextual variables. First, in the Mexican literature on informative mass media, a study reveals that when the campaign nears its end, candidates underperforming in surveys will increase the attacks and incivility (Muñiz, Saldierna, & Marañón, 2018). This has not been studied in debates, and creates the opportunity to a first hypothesis:

- H1. Debates mediatize as the campaign develops.

In second place, it is pertinent to research if all candidates perform in accordance to media logic, and

whether it is manifested in every issue or some of them are more likely to it. Any homogeneity in performance would imply that the colonization of media logic is deep, while particular performance would be related, in the case of candidates, with a populist profile or a lagged position in surveys, that leads candidates to self-mediatization and, in the case of issues, to relate with those that have been previously mediatized and, therefore, could be polarized, for example. These assumptions break down in a couple of hypotheses:

- H2. Debate performance under a media logic is associated with the particular performance of candidates.
- H3. Debate performance under a media logic is associated to the issues that are debated.

Two undergraduate students coded the units, obtaining a general inter-codification coefficient of 0.72 Cohen's Kappa<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, Chi Square tests were made to find statistically significant relationships between content variables and contextual variables for the number of debate (3), candidates (4) and issues (10), followed by Cramer's V to measure the strength of the relationship.

## FINDINGS

Findings of different variables are shown in relationship with the concept of mediated deliberation that was operationalized (Table 2). In this way, results on the criteria of base of information and reason giving are presented first. We find that units are distributed between those that communicate candidate's features (36%), followed by those that exhibit issues (35%), and solution proposals (28%). Hence, 63% of units tackle the campaign issues and their solutions.

From there, a thin treatment on different aspects of the debate becomes noteworthy. Although 55% of units tackle public issues, less than half (43%) are based in verifiable sources (data, evidence), while half is founded in the candidate's subjective opinions (57%). Most units mention issues (50%), and a third describes its features (33%); a small proportion explains related factors (17%).

Proposals' delivery is presented in more than a third of units (34%) although they are based, mostly, in opinions (81%) and not facts (19%). Similarly, proposals are barely explained (17%), moderately described (28%) and, in most cases, merely mentioned without details (55%).

The responsiveness criteria implies a dialogue between peers, stimulated by moderators or participants. We find that only 20% of candidates' units retake others' positions, thus exchange of ideas happens between candidates and moderators but not between candidates, as it is expected.

Finally, regarding the civility criteria we find that, according to the operationalization, derogatory or aggressive speeches are only made in 5% of units, although the attack function is present in a fourth of them (25%). This means that attacks have a moderate frequency but are conducted with civility.

In reference to associations between content and contextual variables, capable of detecting homogeneity patterns in debates, we notice a heterogeneous performance in these practices. With regards to a possible link between specific candidates and a deliberative performance, some statistically significant relationships are observed and moderate relationships between the first variable and the basis of description (facts, opinions),  $\chi^2(1, N=556) = 31.86, p=0.000$ , the depth of issues' description (mention, description, explanation),  $\chi^2(6, N=556) = 35.78, p=0.000$ , and with the basis of proposals (facts, opinions),  $\chi^2(3, N=556) = 8.08, p=0.044$ , with Cramer's V values of 0.324, 0.244 and 0.208, respectively. For instance, the PAN candidate described the debate issues with facts before opinions in 64% of his units, in contrast with the PRI (45%), MORENA (37%) and the independent (23) candidates. Similarly, in the basis of proposal variable, 33% of units were based in facts by this candidate, contrasted with its opponents from PRI (17%), MORENA (18%) and independent (11%). Nonetheless, other content variables manifest less or no relationships with the candidate, where derogatory expressions and those of unit orientation (either with the candidate itself, the issue or the policy proposal) are remarkable.

These differences happen with respect to issues tackled during the debates, to the degree that the level of deliberation is related with the issue addressed. In fact, all deliberative variables that were measured show a statistically significant relationship with the issue variable, in particular those of the proposals' basis (facts, opinions),  $\chi^2(9, N=556) = 15.55, p=0.077$ , detail level in the proposal (mention, description, explanation),  $\chi^2(18, N=556) = 28.85, p=0.050$ , and derogatory expressions,  $\chi^2(9, N=556) = 24.15, p=0.004$ , with Cramer's V values of 0.411, 0.396 y 0.283, respectively. Hence, sharp differences are shown in the way that several issues are deliberated. For instance,

Criteria and definition	Variables and operational definition	Dichotomic and nominal categories
Base of information	Unit orientation: the electoral dimension in which the message is focused, either candidate's personal characteristics or the proposal.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Candidate's image: the message is focused in the candidate's characteristics or qualities, and their personal opinions or private life.</li> <li>2. Issue: the message is focused in the candidate's position or preferences on issues.</li> <li>3. Proposal: the message is focused in actions or programs to be implemented to solve a particular issue.</li> </ol>
	Issue presence: understood as the dominium of social experience.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present.</li> <li>2. Absent.</li> </ol>
	Issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Corruption.</li> <li>2. Insecurity and violence.</li> <li>3. Vulnerable groups.</li> <li>4. Democracy and pluralism.</li> <li>5. International trade.</li> <li>6. Border security and transnational crime.</li> <li>7. Immigrant's rights.</li> <li>8. Economic growth, poverty and inequality.</li> <li>9. Education, science and technology.</li> <li>10. Healthcare, sustainable development, climate change.</li> </ol>
Reason giving	Descriptive basis: argumentative inputs used to exhibit the issue.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Facts: use of data, events or verifiable information to describe the issue.</li> <li>2. Opinions: use of judgements, opinions or subjective perceptions, without reference to data to describe the issue.</li> </ol>
	Depth of information: level of detail in tackling the issue.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mention: the issue or problem is enounced but no information about it is presented.</li> <li>2. Description: quantitative or qualitative data is mentioned, as also events that describe the issue and its features.</li> <li>3. Explanation: some features are mentioned, which originate or are related with the behavior of the issue, allowing a better understanding.</li> </ol>
Delivery of proposals	Descriptive basis argumentative inputs used to describe the proposal.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Facts: the proposal is based by information, data or facts to show its convenience.</li> <li>2. Opinions: use of judgement, opinions or subjective perceptions, without reference to data to describe the proposal.</li> </ol>
	Proposal detail: the degree of explanation in the mentioned proposal.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mention: the argument mentions an intention to solve but does not give any detail regarding actions to achieve it.</li> <li>2. Description: the argument describes actions to implement in order to solve the issue.</li> <li>3. Explanation: the argument details the implementation of mentioned actions, and why could be successful.</li> </ol>
Civility	Civility: use of derogatory or aggressive words or expressions against some actor.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes.</li> <li>2. No.</li> </ol>
	Function: strategic intention in the message against opposition and the campaign circumstances.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Acclaim: portrays the candidate or party favorably, while acclaiming or emphasizing its positive traits, and elaborates proposals or actions to solve national issues.</li> <li>2. Attacks: portrays the opponent candidate or party unfavorably.</li> <li>3. Defense: replies explicitly to a previous attack to the candidate or party.</li> </ol>
Responsiveness	Reference to ideas previously exposed by opponents.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes.</li> <li>2. No.</li> </ol>

Table 1. Operationalization of the mediated deliberation concept in debates

Source: Own elaboration.



issues regarding vulnerable groups are discussed with facts in 19% of units, while economic growth, poverty and inequality in 82% of units. Also, attacks are relevant while discussing corruption (37%) and democracy and pluralism (28%), while are negligible in issues of healthcare, sustainable development and climate change (5%), and not observed on migration issues.

Finally, features of deliberation are almost not related with the order of debates. Only a couple of variables have statistically significant associations: the depth of issue description (mention, description, explanation),  $\chi^2(8, N=556) = 23.36, p=0.000$ , Cramer's  $V=0.197$ , and the proposals' basis (facts, opinions),  $\chi^2(6, N=556) = 16.08, p=0.000$ , Cramer's  $V=0.293$ . Other variables do not have an outstanding Cramer's  $V$  value, although are statistically significant. Henceforth, the first debate is the poorest of all, given that, for example, issues are barely explained (9%), moderately described (26%) and mostly mentioned (65%), in contrast with the second one (25%, 37% and 37%, respectively) and the third debate (21%, 40% and 39%, respectively) which are richer. Similarly, proposals presented in the debates are better backed up, using data and facts, in the third debate (32%) than in the second (19%) and first (6%). The assumption of greater incivility as debates progresses does not hold. In fact, attacks decrease from the first (31%) to the second (23%) and third debate (19%), while derogatory expressions show a slight decrease from the first (6.7%) to the second (6.5%) and third debate (1.2%).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Considering presidential debates as democratic institutions and adequate forums for mediated deliberation, we attempted to assess how the 2018 Mexican debates behaved in that way or were mediatized, that is, colonized by a media logic that entails flashy rhetoric, simplicity or dramatics in messages instead of deliberation.

Our findings are mixed. Based on the fundamental criteria of civility, expressed as attacks and aggressive or derogatory expressions, or in that of a base of information, manifested by the predominance of policy proposals or issues instead of personal references, we are able to sustain that debates have an important component of deliberation. Both indicators confirm findings from previous studies in the Mexican case (Echeverría, 2008; Echeverría & Chong, 2013; Téllez et al., 2010), and the international literature (Benoit &

Klyukovski, 2006; Kim et al., 2008; Choi & Benoit, 2013), that also highlight low levels of personal attacks and personalized content.

Nonetheless, other findings oppose this conclusion, given that variables that indicate deep argumentation are far from a desirable performance. For example, only half of the debate units tackle policy issues, and half of them, at the same time, are based on opinions. Explanation of issues is marginal (16%), and half of the times they are only mentioned, not described. Although proposals are voiced in a third of all units, the basis is superficial given that 80% are based in opinions and only a fifth part has any explanations; most of them are barely mentioned, as any product of political marketing. The specific case of responsiveness, understood as the exchange of ideas between debaters is particularly weak. In this sense, it cannot be completely rejected the observation of qualitative researchers that observes an empty rhetoric in debates that do not use facts or verifiable data (Valbuena, 2007).

One of many elements that could explain this mixed performance could be the adaptations in the debate format in the 2018 campaign, which preserved the exposition and confrontation of candidates' proposals but gave greater visual dynamism and assertive intervention by journalists. This results in a hybrid space that attempts to appeal both to the civic and media spectator roles of the audience.

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that there is a heterogeneous performance in the debate, which is more or less deliberative according to the actors and issues to be tackled. This sustains our hypothesis 2 and 3. In contrast, we cannot verify any significant differences in the development of debates in the first, second, and third broadcasts, which rejects hypothesis 1. In consequence, it is possible to assert that there is not a broad colonization of media logic, but rather is partial: some actors self-mediatize with more frequency, adopting simplifying, effective and contested codes that belong to mass media, while others keep a homogeneous performance of deliberation, probably related to their rank in surveys. Meanwhile, some issues were more prone to be framed by the media logic than others, particularly those with a greater interest in the news media or the public agenda, such as corruption or democracy, while others were more deliberative, such as economic growth, probably due to technical complexity.

As a whole, these findings allow us to conclude that media logic, understood as simplification and fragmentation of political speech, has a relevant

Value	Category			Candidates		Issues		Debate Number	
		N	%	$\chi^2$	Cramer V	$\chi^2$	Cramer V	$\chi^2$	Cramer V
<b>INFORMATION BASE AND PROVIDING REASONS</b>									
Unit orientation	Candidate's image	200	36.4	25.521	0.152	84.444	0.375	17.137	0.125*
	Issue	195	35.5						
	Proposal	154	28.1						
Issue presence	Present	302	55	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡	‡
	Absent	247	45						
Description's base	Facts	129	42.9	31.683	0.324***	23.029	0.277*	9.509	0.178*
	Opinions	172	57.1						
Description's depth	Mention	150	49.8	35.781	0.244***	59.128	0.313***	23.367	0.197***
	Description	101	33.6						
	Explanation	50	16.6						
<b>PROPOSALS' DELIVERY</b>									
Proposals presence	Present	188	34.4	11.196	0.143	24.522	0.286*	8.225	0.123
	Absent	359	65.6						
Proposals' basis	Facts	35	18.7	8.088	0.208*	15.554	0.411*	16.086	0.293***
	Opinions	152	81.3						
Proposals' detail	Mention	103	55.1	5.911	0.126	28.859	0.396*	10.337	0.166*
	Description	52	27.8						
	Explanation	32	17.1						
RESPONSIVENESS	Yes	110	20	12.307	0.150***	19.652	0.256*	11.746	0.146***
	No	439	80						
<b>CIVILITY</b>									
Derogatory expressions	Yes	27	4.9	3.952	0.085	24.156	0.283*	7.291	0.115*
	No	522	95.1						
Dominant function	Acclamation	53	9.5	29.289	0.133***	64.21	0.267***	19.519	0.135
	Attack	140	25.2						
	Defense	27	4.9						
	NA	336	60.4						

Table 2. Criteria and mediated deliberation variables

Note: N=556, \*  $p>0.05$ , \*\* $p>0.001$

Source: Own elaboration.

presence in debates, while the benefits of mediated deliberation for audiences, in the terms of complexity in candidate's stances, comprehension of issues and reasoned exchange of arguments, cannot be completely asserted, neither as inputs of enlightened understanding nor civic modeling.

Finally, it is convenient to underline that although the format changed the simplification that was shown in 2012 (Echeverría & Chong, 2013) continued in 2018. In this sense, this study is limited and future research proposals would benefit from a longitudinal analysis

between different Mexican debates, or with other countries, to explore how different formats, and the incremental circumstances of mediatization in the last cases, have an effect in candidates' performance. This is key in the performance of journalists-moderators, sometimes shy and, others, assertive. An additional alternative would be to verify this tension in other media formats, such as political news, that may shed light regarding the degree of penetration of the media logic in spaces that could potentially reinforce good practices of mediated deliberation.

## NOTES

1. These debates happened in a context of the presidential campaign that took place from March 30th to June 27th of 2018. Participants included the rightwing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), with candidate Ricardo Anaya Cortés (22% of votes), the center-left and incumbent Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), with Jose Antonio Meade Curibreña (16%), the independent Jaime Rodríguez Calderón (5%), and the leftwing Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA), with the elected Andrés Manuel López Obrador (53%). The latter was the front runner during the whole campaign, and the rival to be defeated in every debate by his opponents.

2. The variable reliability breakdown is as follows: Unit orientation, 0.88; issue presence, 0.67; Specific issue, 0.89; basis of description, 0.67; depth of information, 0.54; proposal presence, 0.84; proposal's issue presence, 0.84; basis of proposal description, 0.60; detail of proposal, 0.57; derogative words or expressions, 0.70; references to previous ideas by opponents, 0.63; function (attack, defense), 0.76.

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