

WikiLeaks in Mexico: a penetrated State, the fall of an ambassador and a frustrated president

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❖ **WikiLeaks in Mexico: a penetrated State, the fall of an ambassador and a frustrated president**

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La Jornada has the conviction that all citizens have the right to know what happens on the backstage of political power and that the duty of making this information public is a keystone of a professional and ethical journalistic exercise.

The auditorium is packed. The adjacent room where the conference will be televised is also full. Amongst the audience, there are students, professors, lecturers, journalists, all eager to listen to Blanche Petrich. Petrich is a journalist from the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, the sixth newspaper worldwide to receive a package of filtrated cables from the US State Department from *Sunshine Press Productions*, headed by Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks. She has published several news stories based on the cables. Her conclusion about the stories *La Jornada* published using the cables is that "Mexico is a penetrated state by the US." Her conference unpacks this argument thoroughly. In addition to Petrich's conclusion, many media, political analysts, and scholars agreed that a consequence of the publication of news stories based on the US State Department cables was the resignation of US Ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual.

This essay presents the case of WikiLeaks in Mexico. It is based on news stories published by the national newspaper *La Jornada* using the cables provided by *Sunshine Press Productions*. It is also founded on the lecture given by Blanche Petrich at the Universidad Iberoamericana Puebla, Mexico, where she discussed her personal experience as journalist and presented her conclusions about the stories published in *La Jornada* based on the cables filtrated by WikiLeaks.

La Jornada

La Jornada is a Mexican newspaper founded on 19 September 1984 following the journalistic tradition of the Mexican-left of the 1970s. In the early 80s, a group of journalists, opinion writers, photojournalists, designers and intellectuals that worked in a newspaper called *Unomásuno* decided to jointly create a cooperative organisation to found *La Jornada*. This collective ownership of the newspaper is a key feature that made the publication unique in Mexico. The founding director of the newspaper was Carlos Payán Vélver. Currently, Carmen Lira is the director of the publication and its eight regional editions.

One year after the founding of the newspaper, a major earthquake hit Mexico City. This event unfolded an active participation of civil society, a sector thus far unarticulated and un-mobilized (Magallanes Blanco 2008). The emergence of an active and engaged Mexican civil society was reported by *La Jornada* from a critical and committed point of view. Four years later the newspaper covered in detail the presidential election of 1988 which was characterized by a questionable electoral process in which Carlos Salinas de Gortari from the official party *Partido de la Revolución Institucional* (Party of the Institutionalised Revolution, PRI for its initials in Spanish), was named elected president while there was a generalised perception and formal complaints of fraud from the left coalition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (Magallanes Blanco 2008). In 1994 *La Jornada* along with other four print media, were chosen by the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (National Liberation Zapatista Front, EZLN for its initials in Spanish) as reliable media to address and publish their communiqués (Magallanes 1998). Since then this newspaper is one of the very few media that cover and follow the ongoing activities, issues, problems and demands of the EZLN and the social movement surrounding it known as *Zapatismo*.

In a 26 year trajectory *La Jornada* has covered several social movements from the points of view of citizenship, NGOs, and civil society such as the National University's students' strike in 1999. It has also covered the struggle of Atenco peasants against the construction of an international airport in their lands and the subsequent state repression years later, and more recently the *Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity) lead by poet Javier Sicilia, father of one of the more than 30 thousand victims of the so-called war against drug trafficking which has taken place in Mexico since 2006.

Among the people who write or have written for *La Jornada*, are intellectuals and renowned figures committed to indigenous, social and peasant struggles such as Eduardo Galeano, Elena Poniatowska, Naomi Klein, Immanuel Wallerstein, Robert Fisk,

Raúl Zibechi, Cristina Pacheco, Noam Chomsky, Carlos Montemayor and Carlos Monsiváis, to name a few. The newspaper is also known for the quality of its cultural section and weekly magazines about discrimination caused by HIV-AIDS (named *Letra S*), indigenous affairs (named *Ojarasca*), peasant issues (named *La Jornada del Campo*), and culture (named *La Jornada Semanal*).

WikiLeaks at La Jornada

According to current director Carmen Lira (Staff May 26, 2011), the trajectory, ethical and editorial principles of *La Jornada* were key elements in the decision of Julian Assange to offer the newspaper a package of cables from the US State Department for their publication. *Sunshine Press Productions* delivered *La Jornada* nearly three thousand classified cables from the US Embassy and Diplomatic offices in Mexico (Staff May 26, 2011, Editorial February 10, 2011). This way *La Jornada* became the sixth newspaper around the world, the second in Spanish and the first in Latin America to have access to this information.

In the editorial of February 10, 2011 *La Jornada* states that responsibility and professionalism are the two basic elements to consider while editing the information provided by the cables given to them by WikiLeaks. *La Jornada* has the commitment to quote the cables and their essence, carefully select what is relevant amongst the information they have and "avoid the publication of names that could signify a risk to the integrity and security of private citizens, helpless individuals and low hierarchy public officers mentioned in the texts" (Editorial February 10, 2010). Following the principle of transparency that leads the WikiLeaks project *La Jornada* developed a website linked to their on line edition where all the information derived from the cables can be consulted as well as information related to WikiLeaks around the world. When a cable is used to publish a note *La Jornada* releases it so WikiLeaks can post it on its website for open, free and public access.

The cables in power of the Mexican newspaper are dated from 1989 to 2010; 24 four were labelled as 'secret', 461 'confidential', 870 'classified' and 1588 'declassified' (Miguel February 10, 2011). In order to explore, process, write and edit notes derived from more than 8,000 pages of English written documents, *La Jornada* had to create an ad-hoc team, buy computers devoted solely to this task (Staff May 26, 2011) and set a secure working area (Petrich April 7, 2011). According to Lira, in the period between February (when the first notes and news stories derived from the cables were published) and May (the time of her briefing to the newspaper's administrative board) 2011 the team had published 70 news stories, notes, articles and editorials directly written with information obtained from the classified cables (Staff May 26, 2011).

Blanche Petrich

One of the team members of the specially conformed group of journalists devoted to work on the cables provided by WikiLeaks was Blanche Petrich, a well-known Mexican journalist. Petrich studied journalism at Mexico's prestigious journalism school Carlos Septién García. She has been working at *La Jornada* since the beginnings of the publication and she has been known ever since for special reports on delicate issues such as the war declared against the Mexican State by the EZLN in 1994. In fact, Blanche Petrich was one of the first journalists to interview Subcomandante Marcos (the EZLN high profile spokesperson) in 1994.

Her thorough knowledge on international affairs and her outstanding ability to contextualize information led her to becoming a correspondent in Central America, the Caribbean, Colombia, and Eastern Europe, as well as covering the bilateral Mexico-US relations. She has published several biographic interviews with key figures of relevant social movements such as Atenco peasants violently repressed by state forces (2006), Triqui indigenous survivors to a massacre in the State of Oaxaca (2008), victims of the earthquake that devastated Haiti (2010) or more recently, poet Javier Sicilia, currently head of the Movement for Peace with Justice and Dignity (2011).

Given her journalistic trajectory and skills, as well as her competency in English, Blanche Petrich was chosen as one of the members of the special team put together to work with the US State Department cables given to *La Jornada* by WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks: the Mexico-US relationship

The cables provided by WikiLeaks are, according to Petrich (April 7, 2011) "one-way official communications", which means cables issued by US representatives in Mexico to the US State Department. The cables address political, economic and security issues (Editorial February 10, 2010). They are private conversations with politicians, bureaucrats, media presenters, police officers and the military, as well as briefings of meetings, regional or thematic analyses; notes on specific issues or summaries of Mexican media contents (Miguel February 10, 2010). The cables provide evidence of the opinions, perceptions, and concerns of US officials (in the US and in Mexico) about the Mexican government at all levels, Mexican policies, the Mexican armed and security forces (Petrich April 7, 2011). *La Jornada* said that the cables were of public interest as they offer an insight into the shape and tone of the bilateral relationship between Mexico and the US which is Mexico's "most important, conflictive and defining relationship" (Editorial February 10, 2010). The publication of the cables by *La Jornada* has raised debate about the Mexico-US relations in general, and about the security strategy of President Felipe Calderón in particular¹.

It is now well known that in November 2010 five major worldwide print media organisations published stories about and based on 250,000 cables from the US State Department filtrated by WikiLeaks. The first massive filtration of secret communications from US Embassies and diplomatic posts around the world were originally published by the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the Spanish *El País*, the French *Le Monde*, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, and the US newspaper *The New York Times*.

On Friday December 3, 2010 *El País*, followed by the major national Mexican newspapers (such as *El Universal*, *Excélsior*, *La Jornada*, *Reforma*, *Milenio*, *La Crónica* or *Unomásuno*) published the comments made by US Ambassador to Mexico, Carlos Pascual, where he disqualified the Mexican Army by referring to it as "clumsy and with aversion to risk." Other comments

emphasized the corruption of Security forces and institutions in Mexico, the lack of coordination and cooperation amongst them and in particular the competence between the *Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional* (National Defence Ministry SEDENA for its initials in Spanish) and the *Secretaría de Marina* (the Mexican Navy, SEMAR for its initials in Spanish). The cables also revealed that SEMAR had sought training from US.² Two months later *La Jornada* began publishing information based on the package of cables in their possession. According to journalist Pedro Miguel, on a note he published on February 10, 2010 (the day *La Jornada* published it had the cables provided by WikiLeaks), the two main revelations derived from the cables were:

- That the Mexican political class is the main source of information for the US State Department and that it never issues any sort of criticism, claims or hostile manifestation towards the United States although "sometimes, in an apologetic tone they warn the interviewers that they will have to publicly state some differences with Washington in order not to seem too pro-US to the general public" (Miguel February 10, 2010).
- That US officials in Mexico are gullible and not well informed and although at first they keep a distance from the Mexican informants they end up being "sole believers of a doubtful creed: [Mexico's] official discourse". (Miguel, 10 February 2010).

In her public lecture at Universidad Iberoamericana, Puebla, Blanche Petrich refers to Pedro Miguel's note as an emblematic article of the project of *La Jornada-WikiLeaks* because it describes how the Mexican State does not only suffer intervention by the US but it is described as having been 'penetrated.' This means that it is the political decision of the Mexican state to let Washington make the vital decisions for Mexico such as fighting drug trafficking with the army, pulling the army out of Ciudad Juárez because the original strategy did not work, or letting US Unmanned Aerial Surveillance planes fly over Mexican territory.

An example of a story that exemplifies this is the following. On February 21, 2011 Blanche Petrich published a story using information obtained from three particular cables issued by (then) US Ambassador to Mexico Anthony Garza. She wrote that just four days before the TEPJF declared Felipe Calderón the winner of the presidential election, Ambassador Garza stated he was concerned because of the political weakness of the soon-to-be-elected President Calderón. His margin of legitimacy was so small that he was perceived as weak. The cables also revealed the active participation of US Ambassador in putting together a transition team as at the time President Fox and Calderón were not speaking to each other. The general perception of Ambassador Garza was that Calderón was in much need of aid from the US to start his government and would be throughout his presidency. The cables also indicated that it was Felipe Calderón who requested a meeting with Ambassador Garza to request help from the US in his coming to power.

According to Petrich, "what WikiLeaks has given us is the evidence of the responsibility [of the Mexican government] on this side of the border over the state of things in Mexico ... We now know for a fact that since the PAN party has been in government Mexico has given up the defence of national interests over the US." (April 7, 2011). The evidence is found in the cables provided by WikiLeaks and the task of *La Jornada* was to present it to the public.

The consequences of the filtration of WikiLeaks

On Thursday, March 10, 2011 Petrich published a story about the declarations of US Ambassador to Mexico Carlos Pascual regarding President Felipe Calderón. These cables were issued on 2009 after the intermediate election when the PAN party lost many positions at local congresses and State governments. In these cables, Pascual referred to President Calderón as overwhelmed and insecure. Pascual also expressed his belief that Calderón thought if he achieved success with his struggle against drug trafficking he would reinforce his position and gain support and legitimacy.

The declarations of Ambassador Pascual caused much controversy and were reprinted in many Mexican media. The March 10 story with the comments of Ambassador Pascual was a final example in a thread of tense moments in the relationship between Mexico and the US. According to Spanish journalist Javier Moreno, in an interview with President Calderón published in *El País'* weekly magazine, the relationship between the Mexican President and the US Ambassador had been on bad terms since *El País'* published the story where Pascual expressed his negative opinion about the Mexican Army. On February 22, 2011 the Mexican president gave an exclusive interview to the Mexican newspaper *El Universal* where he declared that "I do not have to report to the US Ambassador how many times I have meetings with my safety cabinet nor what I say in them. Truth be told, this is none of his business. I do not accept nor tolerate any kind of intervention. The ignorance of Mr [Carlos Pascual] is translated into a distortion of what happens in Mexico and turns into an upsetting matter for [the Presidency's] team".

Shortly after the March 10 story was published in *La Jornada*, President Calderón travelled to Washington in an official visit. In an interview with *The Washington Post* he declared, "... it is hard when you see the courage of the Mexican Army. For example, they have lost 300 soldiers... and all of a sudden someone at the US Embassy states that they are not brave enough." It was reported that the issue of Ambassador Pascual's declarations regarding the Mexican army and President Calderón were not discussed between Presidents Obama and Calderón, nonetheless an unidentified source of the State Department declared to *The Washington Post* that it was something the two heads of state discussed as part of their agenda. In the interview published in *El País'* weekly magazine, journalist Moreno expressly asked President Calderón if he was on speaking terms with Ambassador Pascual as he (Calderón) had called him (Pascual) ignorant (in the interview with *El Universal*), to which the Mexican President replied, "Regarding that subject I have said all there is to say. To me the relationship with the US is very important and is a very complex relation that encompasses more than individuals."

At the time the interview was conducted, Carlos Pascual was still the US Ambassador to Mexico, nonetheless a week before the interview was published, Ambassador Pascual had tendered his resignation of his position as US Ambassador to Mexico despite the declarations of the US government stating that there were no plans for removing Pascual from his position after the controversy caused by his declarations filtrated by WikiLeaks and published by *El País* and *La Jornada*. *La Jornada* published the story on Sunday, March 20, indicating that, according to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Pascual's decision was based on

personal reasons as he did not want to damage Mexico-US relations. President Obama was sorry about this decision but accepted it.

The *La Jornada* editorial on that day stated: "public opinion's rejection of US intervention in Mexico is a central element to explain the resignation of [Ambassador] Pascual [which should be understood as] a victory of transparency" (March 20, 2011: 4). The following Monday columnist John Ackerman published that "the resignation of Carlos Pascual will lead to a harshening of US policy towards Mexico as Washington will not allow the resignation to be interpreted as a sign of weakness" (March 21, 2011: 19). Ackerman's forecast is yet to be proven but in the meantime, US President Obama had the last word. On Tuesday March 22, 2011, Barack Obama gave an interview to the television network CNN in Spanish in which he stated that Mexican President Calderón "is frustrated because his militarised struggle against organised crime is not delivering what he promised to the Mexican people" (Esquivel March 27, 2011: 7). To several journalists, political analysts and scholars, in spite of Obama's last word, the resignation of US Ambassador to Mexico Carlos Pascual was a major blow to US foreign politics and it was an event derived directly from the publication of the US State Department cables filtrated by WikiLeaks.

Conclusion

Blanche Petrich started her public lecture at the Universidad Iberoamericana stating that at a time, and in a world where global media consortiums have the control of most of the media content we read, hear or see, and when we have communication and information technologies that allow for immediate and instantaneous access to data, we face greater quantity of information but with less quality.

We have faster information but it is more confusing, out of context and homogeneous (Petrich April 7, 2011). To Petrich, in this context, WikiLeaks becomes a major asset as it allows journalists to go to the primary source of information and to practice complicated investigative journalism. For Petrich the experience of working with the cables provided by WikiLeaks has been a fantastic adventure while at the same time has created a level of work overload that has her overwhelmed. Nonetheless, she considers she is having journalism lessons in the making while processing, writing, editing and publishing the information.

There is much left to say about the ways WikiLeaks is changing journalistic practice. There is much left to say too about the possible consequences of the publication of information derived from the US State Department cables filtrated by the team headed by Julian Assange. What this essay has attempted is to shed some light on the particular case of Mexico, a country where the sixth worldwide newspaper to receive the cables from *Sunshine Press Productions*, *La Jornada*, published relentlessly and against the silence of all other major Mexican media information they considered important to understand the unofficial side of the Mexico-US relationship. The notes, articles, stories, editorials published in *La Jornada* provide evidence of the level of participation of Mexican authorities in the involvement of the US government in Mexican affairs. The revelations of *La Jornada* contributed to open and shake up the debate about Mexico-US relations to the point of raising the tension and pressure on President Felipe Calderón to openly complain about US Ambassador Carlos Pascual's declarations. There is no doubt that there is a connection between the stories published from the cables and the decision of Carlos Pascual to resign to his position. What we need now is to wait for the filtration of the documents that prove it. We might have to wait for a while, but the wait will be worth it.

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Footnotes

1 Felipe Calderón was elected President of Mexico in 2006 after a questionable electoral process where the election was impinged by the candidate from the left wing coalition, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The *Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación* (the Electoral Court of the Judicial Power, TEPJF for its initials in Spanish, the maximum authority for electoral procedures) declared on September 5, 2006, after a recount of part of the votes, that the winner was the right-wing candidate from the *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party, PAN for its initials in Spanish), Felipe Calderón, by a margin of 0.56% of the votes. The new president was to enter into office with low levels of legitimacy and support. In this scenario one of the main actions of president Calderón since the beginning of his term has been a declared war (although he states that he has not called it that) against drug lords, *cartels* and organised crime. As part of the security strategy President Calderón has

militarised the country with more emphasis on certain States with high levels of violence and crimes where the major *cartels* operate. Many Mexicans have openly criticized Calderón's strategy and have clearly opposed the "war" as it is perceived that it has not solved the issue of drug trafficking and it has raised the levels of violence in the country. In five years of presidency the number of victims directly related to the President's "struggle against transnational organised crime" (as he has officially named his security strategy) has reached more than 30,000 people. For many this figure already counts as genocide.

2 For Petrich (April 7, 2011), the confrontation between SEMAR and SEDENA was prompted by the US State Department in search for taking an active role in the military operations against *cartels* and organised criminals in Mexico.

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