

AMLO is not our ultimate boss

The Mexican President has systematically discredited journalists and media outlets. He is powerful and popular, but he is not untouchable



JORGE RAMOS

Mexico is the only country in the world where the president holds a news conference every day (except Saturdays and Sundays). It is known as la Mañanera: At 7 in the morning Andrés Manuel López Obrador sets the agenda for his young government, responds to criticism and answers questions from the reporters in attendance.

It's an extraordinary democratic exercise. The president's communication office has laid out the 13 rules that journalist must abide by: Each reporter is granted two questions, and questions are not censored, nor is it necessary to submit them in advance. The microphone circulates among reporters and AMLO, as he is known, calls upon them. The daily routine lasts for an hour or more.

I was there recently, and couldn't miss the opportunity to participate. In our over 20-minute exchange, we talked about security in Mexico — 8,524 Mexicans were murdered in his government's first three months — and his strategy of silent restraint (rather than fighting) towards the Trump administration. But it's his torturous relationship with the press that has sparked a fiery debate on social networks. I also asked about that.

The Mañaneras benefit from wide distribution on social networks and, often, dominate the news in the traditional media as well. Despite the journalistic effort on display, López Obrador has systematically used the space to discredit reporters, columnists, and the media that criticise him. He calls them "fifi media," among other qualifiers (such as conservatives and dishonest). He says he is only exercising his "right of reply," which he is entitled to.

But the criticism is worrisome. Mexico is ranked one of the deadliest countries for journalists.



President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico speaking at the morning press conference.

Six have been murdered since AMLO's inauguration on Dec 1. At least 124 people have died in connection with their work since 2000, according to the organisation Article 19. In a country wracked by violence related to drug trafficking, journalists fall as if they were in a war zone. The president can and must do much more to protect my brave colleagues.

The primary social responsibility of journalists is to question those in power. It is up to us to serve as a critical counter-power and to ask difficult questions. But López Obrador doesn't seem to understand this. He recently praised those journalists he deemed "prudent," and declared: "If you cross the line, well, you know what happens, right? But it's not me it's the people."

Indeed the wild jungle of social media can be brutal in the face of criticism of López Obrador. He is

a very powerful president — he controls Congress — and won the presidency thanks in part to a wide popular social support. More than 30 million people voted for him in a nation mired in violence and corruption. After Enrique Peña Nieto's disastrous presidency, it's understandable that López Obrador has managed to garner people's hopes for change. Particularly among the most vulnerable Mexicans.

But that doesn't mean that AMLO is untouchable. It would be grievous for Mexico to resuscitate some of the practices of the period from 1929 to 2000, when presidents dictated what could and could not be published. And the only way to avoid that is by being irreverent and disobedient toward authority. It's not a lack of respect; it's the way in which vigorous and independent journalism is done. The president is not our boss. As journalists, we

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are accountable to our readers, viewers, and listeners, and above all, to the truth. In the end, it's a simple matter of credibility. And credibility is not achieved by being close to power, or by praising it. He must develop a thicker skin.

López Obrador was out of line when he asked the Mexican

newspaper Reforma to reveal its sources. Reforma published the text of a private letter that the Mexican president sent to the king of Spain requesting his apology for the abuses and grievances committed during the conquest. Asking for the disclosure of journalistic sources, I told AMLO at the Mañanera on April 12, is an attack on press freedom. "No journalist, Mr President, will reveal their sources. None." He didn't agree, but he hasn't followed up on his request to the newspaper.

One of the few points in common between AMLO and Donald Trump is their obvious annoyance and impatience with the press that questions them. Both have very thin skin, overreact to their adversaries, and demonstrate great skill in handling Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. These are different times, López Obrador says often. "The blessed social networks," he has called

them. But there is one significant difference between the two: López Obrador endured and answered all my questions during the news conference in Mexico City, while Trump, in 2015, expelled me with a bodyguard from a news conference in Dubuque, Iowa.

The governments of Mexico and the United States recently cooperated to get me out of Venezuela, along with a team from Univision — for which I am grateful — after President Nicolás Maduro detained us and confiscated our cameras and video cards from our interview with him. And the still have not returned anything to us.

It's clear that Mexico is not an ally. It will not be Venezuela, and López Obrador has nothing to do with Maduro. Nor with Trump's racist and xenophobic affronts. But the president of Mexico should not disqualify journalists who question his work; that is precisely our job. Personal attacks are unnecessary, and unfortunately, they proliferate and intensify dangerously in social media. Especially if they come from the president.

Journalists do not question their well-earned legitimacy — that's why I addressed him as "Mr President" during the news conference — just as he should not resort to personal attacks, nor ask media groups like Reforma to violate journalistic ethics. López Obrador says he wants transparency. And yet, if he had made the text in the letter he sent to the king of Spain available, Reforma would not have had to publish it.

The power-press relationship will always be tense. But in a developing democracy like Mexico's, it is fundamental to discuss, defer and dialogue; not attack. The challenge is to coexist, even if at times we disagree. We inhabit different spaces — ours must always be on the other side of power, regardless of who wields it.

(Jorge Ramos is an anchor for the Univision network and the author of, most recently, "Stranger: The Challenge of a Latino Immigrant in the Trump Era.")

CIVILIAN'S TRIBUNE

Hate, division can't heal wounds

According to the Global Terrorism Database, almost two-thirds of terrorist attacks in the US in 2017 were tied to right-wing extremism.

This statistic, which was garnered from media information, leaves us in no doubt that extremism isn't just confined to far eastern or Asian countries.

It is something that is very much on our doorstep. Dangerous rhetoric is what we have heard this past number of years. It has not been helped by the President of the US, Donald Trump, who tries to put the blame for an attack on a Pittsburgh synagogue on the fact there was no armed guard to repel the attacker, and not on the fact that his acidic vitriol and rhetoric has assisted some right-wing supporters and extremists to use it as an excuse to carry out



A man prays at the memorial for Pittsburgh synagogue attack victims.

their deadly deeds.

Instead of President Michael D's "hope over division and fear speech, in America sadly the opposite has become a reality.

We should not be complacent when we saw how well former presidential candidate Peter Casey did when he touched a raw nerve in the Irish psyche when he spoke about "ethnicity" and "welfare" in both very loose and, to some, inflammatory terms.

Hopefully, we will never see any of the attacks as we saw in Charlottesville or in Pittsburgh come to our island.

Thirty years of terrorism in Northern Ireland should tell us that: "hate and division will never succeed in healing wounds, only respect for each other's point of view".

Christy