# On the tightrope

Written by Pedro Meyer



## I. The Elections

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The people of Mexico have spoken. The political party that has been in power for over seventy years straight -making it the oldest in the world- has to go. This was the outcome of the presidential elections this past July 2nd. I mention this in order to point out certain parallels with what is happening in the digital world, and more specifically, in relation to photography.

One would assume that people could easily be swayed to vote for change, not necessarily for the sake of change itself, but for new options that could greatly improve upon the status quo; especially as there are so many issues that speak to a change in power. That, however, was not the case. Not everyone sees eye-to-eye in the need for new leadership. In fact, although a majority of Mexicans voted for opposition parties (45 percent voted for the president-elect, and 18 percent for other parties), there were still 37 percent who voted to keep the present ruling party in power. They did not see any advantage to change; they feared loosing the benefits they have, modest as these might be.

Mind you, the rising tide of those willing to vote for change in this election did not gain its strength overnight; the outcome was the result of at least twelve years of effort by the parties involved. But it is only now that the debate can commence regarding how to implement such changes. This part is never easy. Challenging? Yes. Promising? Of course. But only with a lot of struggle in between.

**II. The Vote for Digital**

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With these references to the elections in Mexico, we can examine the digital world and discover similarities between the two. How, for instance, the tide of acceptance of digital photography has suddenly swelled in just this last year. As with the opposition in Mexico, what is happening now is not the result of one year's effort, but rather of many years. And in both exist those of the old guard, who believe their survival to hang in the balance.

There have been digital cameras, and computers with which to process images, and programs with which to fine-tune the picture for at least twenty years. Granted, the pictures one could create with them are a far cry from what can be achieved today with quite inexpensive equipment. The development was gradual, however at some point around six years ago the technology improved so dramatically and so fast that it has taken a lot of people by surprise.

For instance among the people who have been most surprised are the ones that sell all these tools. It used to be that a camera would be sold, well, in a photographic equipment store. Today you can find cameras also being offered of all places, next to TVs, refrigerators and vacuum cleaners in electronic and appliance stores, or next to computers in computer stores, or in office supply stores next to the cell phones and copying machines. In other words, a digital (still or video) camera has become ubiquitous, you can even buy all this stuff over the internet or from all sorts of catalog vendors. The same thing can be said for ink jet printers, the nominal equivalent of those past dark room days.

Lured in by advertising, people have been slowly voting for change, and thus started to buy

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digital equipment in ever increasing numbers. But now comes the hard part, teaching and training people how to best use all their newfound potential for creativity. Letís be frank about this, how much good information about photography can you get from the guy who is selling at the same time a camera and a refrigerator? Or what does the salesman know about making a good digital print using the ink jet printer they are selling you when he or she is also responsible to sell you telephones, among other items. Or how about the nondescript single paragraph next to the equipment being offered in catalogs, or on line stores.

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Moving picture created with Nikon still camera Coolpix 990.

When I wrote, about a decade ago, that soon we would have cameras that would offer the option within the same camera of making a still or moving pictures, I was considered an eccentric with extravagant ideas. Today one can find "off the shelf" video cameras that store the moving image (video) on to tape, while the still images land on a mini hard disc (flash card). Or the reverse, one can find still image cameras, with the capability to create mini movies in addition to still pictures.

In either way, still or moving images, I can assure you of one thing. The salesmen offering the equipment don't have a clue of what they are selling nor for that matter neither do the many of the art schools now teaching about digital technologies. For the most part they do not know of

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all the new tools that are, as in a river, constantly coming out onto the market. And finally, thinking about the end user, who can actually be using such potential creative capabilities in a meaningful way, when the information about the tools is so limited, and the intellectual and artistic debate so scarce. For instance, the emerging synergy between the still and moving images in multimedia presentations. Or the use of sound in conjunction with still images.

In reality, salesmen or "associates" as they are euphemistically called in some instances, the moment they would actually have the knowledge we would like for them to have, are spirited off to more lucrative paying assignments. And the people in schools and the art world that might offer some help, are for the most part mired in the most Byzantine budgetary constrictions, which seldom allows them to acquire the new tools to which we made reference earlier. Thus impeding them to stay on top of the learning curve of what can be done, be that hardware or software.

The Internet is our best hope for realizing new creative capabilities in a meaningful way. Much faster than ever before, with the Internet we find information, solve problems, get inspiration for new ideas, and share what we have accomplished. We can go directly to a manufacturer for product information that vendors rarely have on hand, or we can buy direct on-line. For inspiration we can visit sites displaying ideas and current projects which in the past would have taken years to be published. And above all, we can network in forums and chat rooms; we can look for others who confronted a similar puzzle and found a solution. We can ask questions of someone within a like-minded community of people who enjoy sharing their knowledge.

If you go to your local camera store, observe how the digital section has been growing and growing. Most tell me that they are now selling volume wise, more digital cameras, than film based cameras. The two areas, traditional and digital, are living side by side, and they represent more or less like in other aspects of life, the dichotomy between traditions and a future that has already started today.

The story with printers is even more dramatic, as there is really no direct past to deal with. Their past is not as with cameras, other cameras, but other systems. How many view that the past of the printer is actually the combination of enlarger trays, trough, prongs, timer, easel, chemicals, safety lamps, etc. In other words the entire dark room has in essence become the equivalent to a printer. Granted you also need a computer and some software. But were I can use my computer for many other things, i.e. to write this story, which I can print it out on that same printer, I can hardly do anything other than enlarge pictures with my dark room equipment. I own a wonderful dark room, which I have not used now in over ten years, and yet I have never made better prints, or been more productive than now, when it became all digital.

**III. The Democratic Process**

In variance to the Mexican elections, a process that took place on a specific day, votes are being cast every day for adopting digital photography. And rest assured, the votes are being counted carefully by all those interested in such an outcome.

Those of us who use all these tools and who operate from the perspective of creators, we must make ourselves heard as to what we need and want. Take for instance the fact that prints from

ink jet printers tended to fade rather quickly. The problem was addressed and largely resolved by numerous parties. We have now come to a point where some digital prints supposedly outlast even traditional silver halide prints. Now, that I call progress.

Another area desperately in need of improvement is that of the power supply. With so much equipment now electronic, we are faced with a nightmare of cables and power supplies that must be dragged along when we work outside of our immediate premises. It should not be so that when I take a journey, the bag of secondary equipment that I carry is heavier and more cumbersome than that which I will actually use. On my last trip I had nine power supplies with me! And that is not including the diversity of wall plugs needed, as they vary from one area of the world to the next. The main problem lies in that each company provides a unique re-charger, assuming that theirs is the only piece of equipment one uses. Has anyone given thought to creating a universal re-charger? To creating standards? The ideal would be a universal, solar battery re-charger. I am sure that this will come along sooner or later, as there is a demand for it and no technological hindrance. We need to make ourselves heard with respect to this issue.

[A scant few weeks after our editorial went on line, the following announcement was made at MacWORLD:](#)

The code has been cracked on human DNA; Mexico has broken with the past by voting out the ruling party; movies are increasingly being made digitally; bio technology developments promise to keep us around for a bit longer and in a better condition of health; there seems to be water on Mars; the speed of world-wide, wireless communication is creating new social relationships; e-mail has brought us closer together; the Internet has opened up worlds of information beyond our wildest dreams; computers are getting faster, cheaper, and more intelligent. Living beings are being cloned. Change is the underlying common denominator in these and many more aspects of our present state of affairs. Not everyone desires, or even believes in, these changes, but that will not reverse the forces that have been unleashed. We might as well embrace these changes on our own terms, rather than wait for them to walk all over us. Be forewarned, they will not go away by ignoring them. That has already been tried before without success.

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Remember one thing, your involvement and vote does count in this time of upheaval. Let us hear what you have to say about digital photography and all the changes at hand.

*Pedro Meyer*
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Coyoacán, Mexico

http://zonezero.com/editorial/julio00/july.html

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