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The Image of the United States in Ten Mexican Dailies

BY JOHN C. MERRILL*

According to a sample of the Mexican press, the image of the United States presented to their readers is that of a country peopled by citizens with a "pragmatic sense of values" and having a "philosophy of success." Americans are pictured as a materialistic people with little interest in religion or aesthetic qualities.

IT IS GENERALLY RECOGNIZED THAT "images"¹ which national groups have of each other are unrealistic; this seems especially true when these groups differ widely from one another culturally and racially.² Many observers have placed a large part of the blame for this condition on the media of mass communication and the incomplete and misleading generalized pictures—or stereo-

types—which they transmit. That these "images" are unreal or out-of-focus to varying degrees is obviously true, for the basic process of communication has the intrinsic difficulty of "faithfully translating deeds, words, character and so on into a given number of words."³

Despite the almost impossible task confronting the mass media—physically and semantically—in presenting realistic national images, the fact remains that images *are* presented and are the basis for opinions and attitudes. Undoubtedly there are sound kernels of truth in these national images. There is value in discovering as much as possible about the "image" of the United States as presented in any nation. Since it may be assumed that images are received, at least partially, through the mass media and that they affect international relations,⁴ any study clarifying the nature

*The author, an assistant professor of journalism and English at Northwestern State College of Louisiana, bases this article on his Ph.D. thesis ("The Image of the United States in Ten Mexican Daily Newspapers") written in mass communications at the State University of Iowa. He received the Ph.D. in February 1962.

¹ This term, although a semantically-difficult one, has gained a rather solid meaning and is basically synonymous with "stereotype," "composotype," "generalized picture," etc. It is a composite of impressions, themes, opinions, and attitudes that form an overall or dominant "representation." It is a descriptive "short cut" or a consolidated characterization of the "people" and the "government" of a country. See Erich Reigrotski and Nels Anderson, "National Stereotypes and Foreign Contacts," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Winter 1959-60), p. 517; William Buchanan and Hadley Cantril, *How Nations See Each Other* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1953), p. 95; C. L. Sulzberger, "To Change Their Image of Us," *New York Times Magazine* (March 5, 1961), p. 96; Robert G. Mead Jr., "Our Image in Latin America," *Hispania* (May 1961), p. 336.

² There is a large literature that substantiates this statement, even if its validity were not immediately obvious. Such studies as have been made by the International Press Institute (e.g., *The Flow of the News*, 1953) and UNESCO (e.g., *How Nations See Each Other*, 1953), and

specific national studies such as the following deal with this general subject: Ithiel de Sola Pool and Kali Prasad, "Indian Student Images of Foreign People," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Fall 1958), pp. 293-304, and Harold R. Isaacs, *Scratches on Our Minds: American Images of China and India* (New York: John Day, 1958).

³ Alex H. Faulkner, "The United Kingdom in the United States Press," *As Others See Us*, Vol. I (Zurich, 1954), p. 2.

⁴ In 1961, Leo P. Crespi, chief of the Survey Research Division of the USIA, expressed belief that the "application of the image concept in the domain of international relations" was most

of such images has meaning in helping to explain national attitudes or postures.

This study, designed to analyze the content of ten leading Mexican daily newspapers in all major regions of Mexico, was made to add to a growing literature descriptive of the U.S. as seen by others. The papers represent various geographical regions, ownerships, and sizes.⁵ Their content, exclusive of advertising and comic strip portions, was examined for the month of January 1960, a period chosen at random in 1959.

heartening, and added that the image of the U.S. in other countries is extremely important to those shaping the nation's foreign policy. Image information, he indicated, is vitally needed and is being used increasingly "to promote a better understanding among people of the world of what America is and what it stands for." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring, 1961, p. 116.

⁵ This segment of the press included two capital city dailies, five provincial "independents," and three members of the García Valseca chain, the largest in Latin America. The ten dailies in 1960 had a combined total daily circulation of 477,340 and reached an estimated (by their own officials) 2,048,700 readers in all parts of Mexico. Combined, they presented their readers with 4,110 items about the U.S. during the month, with a total of 34,094 column inches. This would

TABLE I
Use of All Foreign Material in the
Combined Ten Dailies for
January, 1960

Total Pages Available For News-Opinion-Pix	3,355
Total Pages Given to U.S. Material	212.9
Proportion of Total Pages Available Given to U.S. Material	6.3%
Total Pages Given to "Non-U.S." Foreign Material	362.5
Proportion of Total Pages Available Given to "Non- U.S." Foreign Material	10.8%

amount to about 215 pages of U.S. material, a considerable number when it is realized that together the ten dailies had only 3,355 pages for all news-opinion-picture material during the month.

The ten dailies selected for use in the study were: *El Imparcial*, Hermosillo, Sonora; *El Fronterizo*, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua; *El Norte*, Monterrey, Nuevo Leon; *Diario de Culiacán*, Culiacán, Sinaloa; *El Heraldo*, San Luis Potosí, S. L. P.; *Sol de Tampico*, Tampico, Tamaulipas; *Excelsior* and *Novedades* of Mexico, D.F.; *El Occidental*, Guadalajara, Jalisco; and *Diario de Yucatán*, Mérida, Yucatán.

TABLE 2
Distribution of All Foreign Material in Combined Ten Dailies, January, 1960

World Area	Items of For. Mat.	Col. In. For. Mat.	% of Total For. Space	Rank by % Space	Rank by % Items
U.S.	4,110	34,094	37.0	1	1
U.S.S.R.	368	3,250	3.5	7	8
Britain	700	3,869	4.2	5	4
France	624	5,729	6.2	3	5
West Germany	392	3,149	3.4	8	7
Italy	306	1,959	2.1	10	9
Vatican City	139	982	1.1	13	12
Spain	272	2,797	3.0	9	10
Cuba	534	3,302	3.6	6	6
Other Latin America..	2,946	24,544	26.7	2	2
Algeria	135	1,210	1.3	12	13
Other Africa	263	1,378	1.5	11	11
Japan	73	409	.5	14	14
Other	795	5,422	5.9	4	3
Totals.....	11,657	92,094	100.0		

THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY MAY BE summarized under eight headings:

"Size" of the Image

The ten Mexican dailies carried a very large image of the United States, however blurred or spotty it may have been in parts. By comparing this quantitative picture of the U.S. in the Mexican dailies with similar portrayals in dailies of other countries,⁶ it is clear that the Mexican press is as "U.S.-conscious" as any in the world. The ten dailies combined gave more than 6.3% of their total available space to U.S. material. (See Table 1.) This U.S. material comprised 37% of all foreign (non-Mexican) space in the dailies, the most emphasis given any one foreign nation. France, Britain, Cuba, the Soviet Union, West Germany, Spain, and Italy followed, in that order. (See Table 2.)

As is shown in Table 3, "news" stories accounted for 77.7% of the U.S. items and 57.6% of the space. "Opinion" stories⁷ comprised 10.2% of the U.S. items and 22% of the space, and "pictures" made up 12.1% of the U.S. items and 20.4% of the space.

The main U.S.-item and space user was *Excelsior*, followed by the other capital daily, *Novedades*. Next was *El Norte* of Monterrey. Then came the three García Valseca papers—*El Fronterizo* of Ciudad Juárez, *El Heraldo* of San Luis Potosí, and *Diario de Yucatán* of Mérida. Last was the smallest daily in the study—*Diario de Culiacán*.

When the amount of U.S. material used was considered in proportion to the space each paper had available, however, the order was quite different. Then the newspapers ranked as follows: *Excelsior*, *Diario de Culiacán*, *El Norte*,

⁶ E.g., James W. Markham, "Foreign News in the United States and South American Press," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer 1961, and Jacques Kayser, *One Week's News* (Paris: UNESCO, 1953).

⁷ Periodic essays, columns, editorials, letters to the editor, and personalized (subjective) "interpretive" feature articles.

TABLE 3
"Forms" (News-Opinion-Picture) of
U.S. Material in Combined
Ten Dailies

U.S. Items	No.	% of Total
News	3,193	77.7
Opin.	418	10.2
Pix	499	12.1
TOTAL	4,110	100.0
U.S. Col. In.		% of Total
News	19,644	57.6
Opin.	7,497	22.0
Pix	6,953	20.4
TOTAL	34,094	100.0

Diario de Yucatán, Novedades, El Imparcial, El Fronterizo, El Heraldo, Sol de Tampico, and El Occidental.

Subject Components of Image

Of the 13 subject-matter categories used in the content analysis (see Table 4), "athletics" accounted for the greatest volume of U.S. material in the ten dailies—slightly more than 22% of both items and space. Material classed as "government" was second-most-prominent—some 20% of the items and

TABLE 4
U.S. Subject-Matter Treatment in
Combined Ten Dailies,
January, 1960

Subject Matter	No. Items	No. Col. In.	% of Total U.S. Space
Athletics	932	7,886	23.1
Government	827	7,044	20.6
U.S.-Mex. Rel. ..	346	3,408	10.0
Business	573	3,383	10.0
Entertainment ...	251	3,001	8.8
Human Interest ..	274	1,959	5.7
Crime	214	1,594	4.7
Politics	132	1,370	4.0
Culture	105	1,191	3.5
Science	133	1,159	3.4
Military	156	1,066	3.1
Disaster	96	578	1.7
Race	71	455	1.4
Total	4,110	34,094	100.0%

space allotted U.S. material. Most (83.6%) of this "government" material dealt with relations between the U.S. and other countries, excluding Mexico.

U.S. "business" ranked third among the subjects used by the ten dailies (14% of items and 10% of space). Relations between the U.S. and Mexico formed the subject of the next-most-prominent component of the U.S. image by subject—8.4% of the items and 5.7% of the space. In fifth place among subjects emphasized was "human interest" material, accounting for 6.7% of the items and 5.7% of the space.

"Entertainment" material, nine-tenths of which dealt with Hollywood, formed the sixth-most-prominent subject component of the U.S. image—6.1% of the items and 8.8% of the space. Following "entertainment" was "crime" material, accounting for 5.2% of the items and 4.7% of the space. None of the other six subject-matter categories composed as much as 4% of either the total U.S. items or space in the combined dailies. In order of prominence in the dailies, the other categories were "military," "science," "politics," "culture," "disaster," and "race."

"Heavy" and "Light" Tones

Grouping the 13 categories of subject-matter content into heavy and light tones—or "hard" and "soft" news—gives some indication of the emphasis on serious or "heavy" portions of the image of the U.S. as contrasted to the non-serious or "light" portions. Considered as "heavy" tones are government, business, U.S.-Mexican relations, crime, military, science, politics, culture, disaster, and race. "Light" tones include the remaining three categories—athletics, human interest, and entertainment. An analysis of proportions reveals that 64.5% of the U.S. items and 62.4% of the space carried "heavy" material, while 35.5% of the items and 37.6% of the space was given to "light" material.

"Gaps" and "Shadows" in Image

The study bears out three of the main conclusions of the 1953 International Press Institute *Flow of the News* survey⁸ of U.S. material used in dailies of Western Europe and India—namely that (1) very little is reported which gives the reader a real idea of how Americans live, (2) the heavy emphasis on official news of the U.S. makes the general picture of the country off-balance, and (3) almost all the U.S. news is from Washington, D.C., and New York City.

Certain aspects of the U.S. and the life of its people were given little or no representation in the ten Mexican dailies. Perhaps this is simply an inherent weakness (or natural consequence) of the processes of collecting, writing, transmitting, and selecting news for publication. Nevertheless, there were certainly noteworthy "gaps" and "shadows" in the image of the United States as presented by the ten dailies.

For example, (1) very little material dealt with the American man-in-the-street, (2) religion and education were apparently considered un-newsworthy, (3) very little material dealt with the American rural or small-town dweller, and life in vast portions of the U.S. was totally or almost-totally ignored, (4) women's activities were scarcely mentioned, and children had no place in the image of the U.S., (5) only a few of the vocations or professions engaged in by Americans were mentioned by the dailies, and (6) state, county and city politics and government activities were virtually ignored.

"Opinion" in the Image

The preponderance of opinion material came from Mexican writers (269 columns and editorials), but an impressive amount (131 columns) came from U.S. writers. (See Table 5.)

⁸ *The Flow of the News: A Study by the International Press Institute*. Zurich, Switzerland: International Press Institute, 1953.

TABLE 5
"Writer Source" of "Opinion" Articles about U.S. in the Ten Mexican Dailies

<i>Newspaper</i>	<i>Mexican Columns</i>	<i>Editorials</i>	<i>U.S. Cols.</i>	<i>Other*</i>	<i>Total Opin. Articles</i>
<i>El Imparcial</i>	15	6	8	2	31
<i>El Fronterizo</i>	14	1	20	2	37
<i>El Norte</i>	11		17	2	30
<i>Diario de Culiacán</i>	23	3	6	3	35
<i>El Heraldo</i>	12		8		20
<i>Sol de Tampico</i>	25		14		39
<i>El Occidental</i>	12	1	8	1	22
<i>Excelsior</i>	50	5	31	3	89
<i>Novedades</i>	70	1	17		88
<i>Diario de Yucatán</i>	20		2	5	27
Totals	252	17	131	18	418

*Includes articles by (non-U.S.) foreign writers and letters-to-the-editor, and by undetermined sources.

From this opinion material related to the United States emerged 12 main themes. Of these only two could be called "favorable" to the U.S., and they were not among the six most-frequently used.

The six top themes (in order of frequency) were (1) the U.S. is plagued with family problems, juvenile delinquency and crime-sex problems, (2) the U.S. needs to improve its total foreign policy, particularly with reference to Latin America, (3) the U.S. should try harder to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union for the suspension of atomic tests and for the maintenance of world peace, (4) the U.S. is unfair in placing the blame on Mexico for border drug smuggling, (5) the people of the U.S. are overly-concerned with money and possessions, and are hurried people who show great emotional tension, and (6) the U.S. should keep out of the internal affairs of Latin American nations.

U.S. Geography in the Image

The "East" composed the main regional portion of the U.S. image in the ten dailies—mainly due to the emphasis given in U.S.-related material to New York City and Washington, D.C. This

region was the source or subject of 59.9% of the U.S. news presented by the ten dailies.

The "Southwest-West" was next, with California the subject and center of about two-thirds of the news from this region. This whole region, the largest of the four main sections of the country, was the source or subject of 19.5% of the news material about the U.S. appearing in the ten dailies.

The "South" received next-most emphasis, mainly due to stories from Florida dealing with missile-firing at Cape Canaveral and with U.S.-Cuban relations in Miami. The South produced 8.5% of the U.S. news in the dailies.

Least emphasis was given to the "Midwest," with Illinois (because of Chicago stories) most prominent in the region. The Midwest provided 6.4% of the total U.S. news in the dailies. The remaining 5.7% of U.S.-related news, not accounted for in the four regions, was "general"—not dealing with any one region.

Sources of the Image

The ten dailies received most of their U.S. news and photographs from three world news agencies—the Associated Press, the United Press International,

TABLE 6
Fifteen U.S. Publications Most-Often-Referred-to by the Mexican Dailies

<i>U.S. Publication</i>	<i>No. References</i>	<i>No. Uses as Source*</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>New York Times</i>	25	21	46
<i>Washington Post</i>	7	8	15
<i>New York Herald Tribune</i>	10	4	14
<i>U.S. News & World Report</i>	3	7	10
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	2	8	10
<i>New York Daily News</i>	3	7	10
<i>Miami Herald</i>	8	1	9
<i>Chicago Daily News</i>	6	2	8
<i>New York Daily Mirror</i>	3	4	7
<i>Time</i>	3	2	5
<i>Newsweek</i>	4	1	5
<i>Foreign Affairs</i>	2	3	5
<i>Saturday Evening Post</i>	2	3	5
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	4	0	4
<i>Minneapolis Tribune</i>	3	1	4

*Number of times (separate items) the publication printed a story which was used as the basis of a story written by a news agency and used in the ten dailies of Mexico.

and Agence France-Presse. Opinion articles about the U.S., other than those by staff writers, came mainly from a number of feature syndicates of Latin American, United States, and European origin. The AP and UPI together provided 67.7% of all news stories about the U.S. used in the dailies. AP was the main source, providing 42.7%; UPI providing 25%. The French agency, AFP, provided 7.7%.

Several U.S. newspapers and periodicals served as "primary sources,"⁹ for many of the news and opinion articles about the U.S. (See Table 6.) The newspapers relied on most heavily in this respect were the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Daily News*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. Magazines serving most often as primary news sources of stories in the ten dailies were *U.S. News & World Report*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *Newsweek*. (See Table 6.)

⁹ This means that news agencies used stories appearing in the U.S. publications as sources (or bases) for their stories.

Persons in the Image

Athletes, film stars, and government officials substantially composed the personality-image of the U.S. in the ten dailies. The American women in the papers were, for the most part, motion picture actresses or New York models.

THE "IMAGE" OF THE UNITED STATES that would seem to emerge from the sample of the Mexican press examined, and that therefore would tend to be impressed upon the minds of Mexican readers, presumably would be that of a country peopled by citizens with a "pragmatic sense of values" or having a "philosophy of success." This came through especially in opinion columns.

A combination of news stories, opinion articles, and pictures in the ten dailies tended to verify the well-publicized image of Americans (held by foreigners) as people who are admirers of the businessman and the athlete, who applaud physical prowess and care little for aesthetic values, who love a mechanical civilization, who have small interest in religion or in a high level of sexual morality, and who are prone to

see Communists everywhere, especially where there is disagreement with American policy.

The heavy reliance by the dailies on U.S. news agencies and syndicates reveals something about Mexican journalists. Although they are quick to criticize what they may regard as "conveyor belt" activities and a lack of individuality among their northern neighbors, they themselves show almost complete satisfaction with information agencies which obviously have stereotyping tendencies and show a lack of individuality.

It is noteworthy, furthermore, that the aspects of U.S. life and general culture considered newsworthy by the dailies were largely the same aspects of Mexican life and culture chosen for news emphasis. And very likely the reason U.S. athletics, for example, received so much emphasis in the ten dailies was that this subject was of most interest to the Mexican, and not that the Mexican journalists wanted to show how athletically-oriented the *yanqui* society was. Likewise, the heavy use of Hollywood and Wall Street items indicate a Mexican, as well as American, preoccupation with sex, success, and the dollar. In short, it is the writer's contention that the use of material about the U.S. in the press of Mexico tells as much about Mexicans as about Americans.

Although the "news" portion of the image of the U.S. in the ten dailies was basically neutral and reflected mainly the news judgments of the three non-Mexican news agencies and the interests of the Mexicans themselves in their selections from those reports, the "opinion" portion was more vivid—as opinion tends to be—and certainly was more hostile toward the United States. It should be mentioned, however, that the critical opinion pieces written by Mexicans were no more searching—or vindictive (when they were)—than many which appear with regularity in U.S. newspapers. Furthermore, many of the same criticisms made by Mexicans are made by serious writers in the U.S. and are, in some cases, simply criticisms of Man in the Twentieth Century as personified in the United States.

One final conclusion of this study might be that if the Mexican reader exposed himself regularly to the editorials and opinion columns as well as to the news content, he would find the over-all neutral or bland image of the news affected by a series of "antagonistic" themes which, because of their sharpness and because they often reinforce his already existing beliefs, would leave him with a basically negative or unfavorable image of the United States.

"The news media, more and more, are abdicating their job to the public relations practitioners. Some of my journalism colleagues challenge this word, abdication, and say that the news media are covering the news much as they always have. This is perhaps true of the traditional sources of news—courts, city hall, state capitol, police, politics, and the like. But what about the new areas of news—business, science, health, religion, art, music, education, social welfare, etc.? Study will show that these areas are covered in a large degree by the PR man, not the aggressive, investigative reporter. . . . In New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and other major cities PR newswires send publicity releases clacking into newsrooms by teletype printers standing alongside the familiar press association printers. . . . The news media, particularly the understaffed press associations, can't do the full news reporting job without PR help.—SCOTT CUTLIP, professor of journalism, University of Wisconsin, to Minnesota chapter, Public Relations Society of America.