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By Richard R. Cole

# Unique English-Language Daily Succeeds in Mexico City

*An example of the growing  
expatriate English-language  
press around the world,  
The News, owned by Mexicans  
but operated by Americans,  
sells 16,000 copies daily.*

► The number of English-language newspapers in non-English-speaking countries has grown in recent years. Approximately 250 such daily papers currently are published. Some 100 have been established since 1930, more than 25 since 1960.<sup>1</sup>

This expatriate English-language press boasts an audience of educated readers in higher socioeconomic strata; it offers a top consumer market for advertisers and exhibits better-than-average influence and prestige.<sup>2</sup> Most

<sup>1</sup> Dennis L. Wilcox, *English Language Newspapers Abroad: A Guide to Daily Newspapers in 56 Non-English-Speaking Countries* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1967), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> John Lee, "The Expatriate Press: A Survey of English-Language Newspapers Around the World," unpublished master's thesis, West Virginia University, 1965, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> Wilcox, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> 1969 *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook*. Only papers specifically noted as printed in English were counted; papers printed in more than one language were omitted.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* The 10 English-language dailies in non-English-speaking countries, by country, are: Argentina—Buenos Aires *Herald*; Brazil—Brazil *Herald* (Rio de Janeiro); Costa Rica—San Jose *Daily Express*; Guatemala—Guatemala City *Headlines*; Mexico—*Daily Bulletin* and *The News* (both in Mexico City); Panama—*Panama-American* and *Star and Herald* (both in Panama City); Uruguay—Montevideo *Montevidean*; and Venezuela—Caracas *Daily Journal*. The 1969 yearbook did not list the *Daily Bulletin*, but it continues to be published.

of the dailies are morning publications with circulations of between 10,000 and 20,000; most have liberal or moderate editorial policies politically and are independently owned.<sup>3</sup> Many are viewed as prestige organs of native-language publishers, and most use one or more world news agencies.

The newspapers may be divided into three classes: 1) those published in countries where English is a second language, 2) those published primarily to disseminate local and national news outside the native countries and 3) those published primarily to serve temporary English-speaking communities and tourists. In a recent count, 170 were found in independent nations formerly ruled by England and the United States, 26 in current possessions of England and the United States and 47 in nations never under the domain of an English-speaking power.<sup>4</sup>

Latin America accounts for at least 10 such dailies,<sup>5</sup> generally published for English-speaking communities and tourists. An outstanding example is *The News* in Mexico City, where several English newspapers have been attempted but nearly all have failed.

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► The author is an instructor in the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication where he is a Ph.D. candidate. The article was written under the direction of Dr. Raymond B. Nixon. The author thanks Professor Nixon, Jim Budd, editor of *The News*, and Bill Shanahan, a former editor of that newspaper.

### English-Language Newspapers in Mexico City

English-language newspapers in Mexico date back into the 19th century. Following the *American Star*, which on September 20, 1847, became the first English paper published in Mexico City, and other papers printed by U.S. occupation forces during the Mexican-American War,<sup>6</sup> an early attempt was the *Mexican Herald*, founded in 1895. It was silenced in 1915 for criticizing the Carranza administration.<sup>7</sup>

The oldest surviving English-language paper in the capital is the free-circulation (4,500 to 7,000) *Daily Bulletin*, established in 1935. More a list of tourist attractions than a newspaper, the 8½x11-inch handout goes to hotels and tourism centers. The *Mexico City Herald*, an effort at a true newspaper in English, began in 1945. It achieved a circulation of 10,000 before it died in 1950 because of inadequate financial support.<sup>8</sup>

Mexico's top three Spanish newspapers<sup>9</sup> all publish some news in English. *Excelsior* and *El Universal* began running English pages in the 1920s, and *Novedades*, which started an English page in the early 1940s, now publishes *The News*.

Established in 1934 as a weekly, *Novedades* grew in less than three decades from a sensational tabloid aimed at Sunday bullfight audiences to the nation's second-ranking quality newspaper. It became a daily in 1935 under founder Ignacio F. Herrerías, who was murdered in 1944 by the instigator of a strike among *Novedades* workers. Rómulo O'Fárrill Sr., a Mexican automobile tycoon and the current president of Publicaciones Herrerías, became the fourth owner in 1948. He added several newspapers and magazines to the publishing house and branched into radio and TV—becoming one of the most powerful media lords in the country.

### Development of The News

In the late 1940s, James Arnold, *Novedades* English-page editor, and other Americans approached O'Fárrill about publishing a full-fledged English paper. The Americans would write and edit the publication, and O'Fárrill would own it. (Mexican law forbids foreign ownership of newspapers.) Though O'Fárrill could not read English, he agreed, and *The News*, a morning tabloid, appeared on July 5, 1950.

Day-to-day publication was a minor miracle. Power failures often resulted in candlelight editing, and at times the paper was put to bed at daybreak, prompting complaints about noon deliveries. Despite mistakes, *The News* prospered. Circulation the first year was 5,000, and it began to climb. Editor Arnold led the flamboyant staff through everyday problems and even the occasional earthquakes that shook the eleventh-floor office.<sup>10</sup>

The second editor was Luís Moreno Verdín, who held the position for approximately a year before resigning in 1953. Bill Shanahan, a veteran of the *Mexico City Herald*, was 1953-65 editor. He helped *The News* best a competitor, the *Mexico City Times*.

Edited by George DeWitt, a retired Hearst editor, the *Times* first appeared on November 25, 1963. Unfamiliar with Mexican customs, DeWitt fell into a mistake common to foreign journalists. A high Mexican official wished the *Times* success in a letter, and the editor

<sup>6</sup> During the Mexican-American War, some 20 American newspapers were printed in Mexico. For a discussion of the publications, see Lota M. Spell, "The Anglo-Saxon Press in Mexico, 1846-48," *American Historical Review*, 38:20-31 (October 1932).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bruce Underwood, "A Survey of Contemporary Newspapers of Mexico," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Missouri, 1965, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Bill Shanahan (personal communication) Feb. 26, 1969.

<sup>9</sup> Merrill lists *Excelsior*, *Novedades* and *El Universal* as Mexico's leading newspapers. John C. Merrill, *The Elite Press* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corp., 1968), p. 45 and *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> *The News*, July 4, 1968, p. 25.

headlined it in the first edition: "Pres. Mateos Congratulates The Times."<sup>11</sup> López is the surname of the former president's father, Mateos the surname of his mother. To use only the latter indicates that the father's identity is unknown. Because of various problems including inadequate advertising and *News* competition, the *Times* suspended publication in 1965.

Columbia University journalism school graduate Jim Budd joined *The News* in 1960, becoming editor five years later when Shanahan resigned. During Budd's tenure, the paper has progressed considerably.

*Economics.* The paper now makes money, which it did not always do before. Advertising occupies 15-20% of the space in each issue. Though circulation is difficult to determine in Mexico because most newspapers exaggerate their circulation to draw advertising, *The News* has at least doubled circulation during Budd's editorship. The daily press run in summer, 1969, was 15,950.<sup>12</sup>

Mexico City, where an estimated 30,000 Anglos live, takes half the circulation; the other half is spread among more than 20 other Mexican cities. Readership is estimated at 75% Anglo, 25% Mexican. The audience divides into two categories: 1) Americans, Britons, Canadians and others associated with a foreign business or government, plus Mexican executives, and 2) tourists and other temporary residents. *The News* makes a profit off each copy (it now sells for 1½ pesos, or 12 cents, in Mexico City) and shares in various *Novedades* campaigns to boost circulation. Raffle prizes have

included Mexican savings bonds, automobiles, television sets, watches and even a new home.

*Staff.* In its 20-year history, *The News* has had only four editors, but staff turnover has been tremendous. The problem was to find persons fluent in English and knowledgeable of journalism who would work for as little as \$20 a week in 1950.<sup>13</sup> Besides its drifters, college dropouts and aspiring Hemingways, the paper has had outstanding staff members who remained for years.<sup>14</sup> Many worked four hours a day for \$40 a week, often holding one or more jobs, until the 1968 staff reorganization, when 16 staff members resigned. Fewer employees now work six days weekly for salaries beginning at \$80. Some 35 persons comprise the staff.

*Coverage and content.* The paper's policy is to promote better understanding between Mexico and the English-speaking world, and news of Anglo nations is emphasized. For years, *The News* ran two "front pages" daily—international news on page 1 and local news on the back page. Since the 1968 Olympics, sports has occupied the back display page. The paper uses five news services (AP, Copley, NEA, UPI and Los Angeles *Times*-Washington Post) and has no permanent foreign correspondents. In recent years, local and national news has been expanded, but it does not equal space devoted to world news.

Known for its extensive financial coverage, the paper carries Mexico City and New York stock quotations daily. It runs 21 comic strips, more than any other Mexico City paper and more than any other expatriate English-language paper in the world.<sup>15</sup> Comics, features and more than a dozen syndicated columnists comprise 30% of the content, an obvious criticism by those who advocate a more serious publication. A readership survey, however, showed the features and comics to be popular. Sunday issues swell to more than 60

<sup>11</sup> Shanahan, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Jim Budd (personal communication) July 18, 1969. All figures on circulation, advertising, etc., are from Budd.

<sup>13</sup> Shanahan, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> One of the most celebrated staff members was Alma Reed, the noted author, art patron and archaeology expert who for more than a decade enriched the paper with commentary on anthropology, archaeology and other fields. She died in 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

pages with the 24-page color comic section and the weekly magazine *Vistas*.

Overall, the paper should be considered in light of two common criticisms of Mexico's press system:

*Lack of professionalization.* Advertisers purchase news space (*gracetillas*) in most Mexican papers, and poorly paid journalists, who often have more than one job, many times receive *iguallas* (payoffs for coverage) from private sources and the government. Abhorrent by U.S. standards, such practices are not so shocking in Latin countries, where payoffs often are ingrained in the culture. In Mexico, the *gracetilla* system is centuries old. *The News*, however, runs no *gracetillas* and staff members receive no *iguallas*, as attested to by the management and as observed by this writer during a year on the paper.

*Press freedom.* Laws against *desacato* (disrespect)—not criticizing those in power—exist to a degree throughout Latin America, though each country's constitution guarantees a free press. Mexico's Constitution of 1917 has not been so important to the press as the attitude of the president in power. The Mexican press rarely criticizes the president, and the government—through loans, newsprint, payment for news and advertising, and other factors<sup>16</sup>—can influence the press.

Government controls do not seriously affect *The News*, though it never has taken the President to task. Editorials and editorial cartoons appear daily, together with summaries of commentary from other local papers. A possible criticism is that the paper does not always editorialize forthrightly on internal politics. Usually it stands for the status quo politically.

With flags of Canada, Great Britain, Mexico and the United States in its nameplate, and a 20-year history, *The News* stands firmly rooted in Mexican

journalism—a success where other attempts at English-language newspapers have failed. Several factors contribute to this success.

*Financial ties.* As part of the established Publicaciones Herrerías, *The News* received a measure of acceptance from the beginning. It shares the press, delivery trucks, photographers and other staff and facilities with the other member publications. Further, management views *The News* more as a prestige vehicle than a profitmaking operation.

*Quality.* The lively, informative publication is recognized as the best daily foreign-language publication in Mexico. Budd contends that it covers world news more responsibly than Mexican papers, and Alisky asserts that it is sometimes the only reliable paper in the country.<sup>17</sup> Its future appears bright. Considering Mexico City circulation saturated, executives eye blanketing the nation and branching into Central America.

*The News* has one of the largest circulations and a greater ratio of news to advertising than the other English-language dailies in Latin America. One author wrote in 1965 that the paper had one of the most distinguished staffs in all of Latin America journalism.<sup>18</sup> *The News* asserts that it is "Latin America's finest English-language newspaper," and this writer agrees with the assertion.

<sup>16</sup> Erlandson lists nine means whereby the Mexican government can influence the press: 1) legal measures, 2) PIPSA, the government newsprint agency, 3) loans, 4) government payment for news stories, pictures and advertising, 5) news management by instructing officials about what news to release, 6) *iguallas*, 7) requests for suppression of news, 8) government domination of labor unions and 9) force or violence. Erling H. Erlandson, "The Press in Mexico: Past, Present and Future," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 41:232-6 (Spring 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Marvin Alisky, director of the Institute of Latin American Studies, Arizona State University, (personal communication) Feb. 11, 1969.

<sup>18</sup> Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 344.

► The day Man began paying less for a publication than it cost to produce it, he lost his freedom of the press.—HOWARD LUCK GOSSAGE.