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The Press and the Mexican Revolution of 1910

The press, playing a vital role in the 1910 revolution, later helped topple its hero. Thus an unsympathetic press can fell democracies as well as tyrannies.

► “It is undoubtable, gentlemen, that we are passing through a very difficult situation; not as grave as the picture painted by the alarming and exaggerated news which the press publishes, but yes we are in a difficult situation . . .”¹

Addressing the editors of Mexico’s leading dailies in March 1912, the short, bearded, dapper man had difficulty restraining himself.

The speaker, Francisco I. Madero, only a year before had been the glorified hero of the popular movement which had toppled the 35-year iron-fisted rule of aging general Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), the longest dictatorship in Latin American history.

Yet within the space of that short year, and less than five months after becoming president, Madero had witnessed Mexico coming apart at the seams.

Veracruz was on the verge of rebellion, two small armed movements were underway in Oaxaca, and

Emiliano Zapata in Morelos had been in open revolt against the Madero regime for two months. Emilio Vázquez Gómez was opposing Madero in El Paso, and Bernardo Reyes was plotting revolution in San Antonio.

Partly responsible for Madero’s difficulties was his policy of complete freedom for the Mexican press, a liberty which was confused with license. Conservative newspapers savagely attacked the president and undermined his authority.

Speaking before a conference called to warn the press against its abuses, Madero continued, “Yes, the alarming news that the press is publishing does disturb me, because of the falsities and inexactitudes which it contains [such as the city of Torreón falling to the rebels of Pascual Orozco in the north].”

Madero accused the editors of having fabricated this news, to which the director of *El País* replied that the editors were forced to recur to any source in order to obtain news.

The president pointed out that he had ordered the issuance of daily official bulletins—often composed by himself personally—but that they usually appeared on the fourth page “where nobody reads them.”

Indignantly, Madero declared, “I have never sent false news; you can be sure I will never hide the truth; if I

► The author is assistant professor of Latin American history at the University of Kentucky. He acknowledges research assistance from the Doherty Foundation.

¹This and succeeding quotations from the Madero press conference of March 1912 are from Document 255, *Política Interior, Ramo Revolución, Archivo General de la Nación* (hereafter cited as AGN), Mexico, D.F.

have any prestige with the people it is because I have never deceived anyone."

Had he not revealed at once the suicide of General González Salas? But this news had appeared in such sensational form that it precipitated "a terrible alarm."

Correspondents, Madero charged, were sending false and irresponsible reports, disclosing governmental plans and operations to the enemy, and creating a distorted picture of the weakness of his government, provoking and encouraging revolts.

Orozco's rebellion was attributed to the press because the rebel believed that "many would rise with him, and that public opinion would be in his favor."

"Gentlemen, this cannot continue," Madero said. "I am a partisan of freedom of the press, I believe that the liberty to emit thought creates the greatness of a people; but from that to licentiousness, to insult, to calumniate, and above all to publish news completely false, there is a great difference. To follow this last course, gentlemen, is to carry the country to anarchy, to an abyss."

Therefore, he had called this conference to appeal to the editors' patriotism, to remind them that the nation's interest must precede that of gaining a few centavos by street sales of sensational reports.

Madero stated that he had tried every conciliatory means to win the press to his side—and for this he had been accused of being weak, of being unable to dominate the situation.

The president stressed his position that he had never been opposed to the publication of truth or of criticism of his acts, but the Mexico City press had degenerated to such an extreme of abuse and irresponsibility that public order was threatened.

"The penal code prohibits whatever alarms the populace," Madero declared, "and we are going to use this article to avoid such alarm."

But he asked for cooperation rather than submission to force. He urged "that all of your evaluations be serene, that you study the problems calmly, without insulting or ridiculing the Government, because that weakens the principle of authority and weakening that principle brings anarchy."

Madero emphasized that he and all ministers of his government were always disposed to grant interviews, whereupon the editor of *El País* responded that he did not distrust "the high representatives of Government, but the reports issued by the Government which are generally overly optimistic."

Madero asserted that there was more freedom of the press in Mexico than there had been even under the liberal Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada (1872-1876), successor of Benito Juárez.

But liberty, the president continued, brings responsibility and duty in its train. Madero had hesitated to take action up to that time, he said, because extreme measures would indicate "that we are not yet ready for Democracy. I did not want to proceed against the journalists; but if you absolutely oblige me to do it in order to save the Republic, I will, because the salvation of the Fatherland comes before all else."

► Madero claimed that he had no personal interest in remaining in power, but the press should not deceive itself that he might resign. "I shall resign the day that they kill me," Madero declared, in an uncanny prediction of his fate.

The representative of *El País* pointed out that if Madero would allow them access to all dispatches, without censorship, they would be able to publish true and exact news.

Other editors answered that even President Abraham Lincoln had to suppress the publication of some newspapers and that all democratic governments during times of civil or foreign war were forced to impose censorship.

Madero repeated that if exaggerated

reports, exciting public alarm, continued, the offending journalist would be jailed under the provisions of the *Código Penal*, and he would adopt even more stringent measures if necessary.

The editor of *El Diario* stated that "some newsmen interpret badly the mission of the press . . . I believe that the newspaperman should be calm, and I will be that way [but] I protest that the day when one of your [Madero's] acts is censurable, I will censure it."

Francisco Bulnes, director of *La Prensa* and former supporter of the Díaz dictatorship, announced that he would cancel, as a demonstration of his good faith, the publication of an article, "A great lesson of Napoleonic strategy given by ranchers to generals of the Federal Army."

Bulnes said he would also correct the false news published in an extra edition the previous day that Torreón had fallen to Orozco. The editor charged that the Associated Press also was sending false and alarming reports, supplied by the pro-Orozco Secretario de Gobierno of the state of Chihuahua, Braulio Hernández.

Madero's concluding statement to the editors: "I hope that you will understand that the press is the Fourth Power of the Republic, that it must bring about harmony among all Mexicans, and that everyone must aid the well-being of the *Patria*."

But Madero's appeal fell on deaf ears. A press shackled so long would not give up any part of its new-found freedom. The last opposition newspaper against Díaz, *El Monitor Republicano*, had been forced to close its doors in 1896, 18 years earlier, and the Mexico City newspapers refused to go the same route under the Madero government.

Editors remembered also the trials of the Flores Magón brothers, publishers of the radical socialist newspaper *Regeneración*, suppressed in Mexico

and driven from San Antonio to St. Louis to Los Angeles by United States agents acting on complaints of Mexican authorities.

Even Madero's own newspaper, *La Nueva Era*, successor to his campaign organ *Anti-Reeleccionista*, pleaded for complete liberty of the press. It stated editorially, "The people feel a great thirst, an immense thirst for honesty and clarity, and toward the fountains of long ago in which burst forth the clear water of sincere information, their dry mouths and avid lips turn for truth and loyalty."²

Madero not only maintained his own administration newspaper but paid Heriberto Barrón 240 pesos a month to serve as agent of "commercial propaganda" in the United States. The term "commercial" was interpreted broadly.³

Madero himself was a sincere and genuine believer in the democratic process, including freedom of the press. A 19th century liberal, he was against governmental intervention in the economy or social order, but he supported political freedoms to the utmost.

In a newly discovered letter from Madero to William Randolph Hearst, the revolutionary leader wrote in the spring of 1911, before he had gained power in Mexico:

. . . you have always been a defender of democratic principles and public liberties, knowing how to defend those principles of the most powerful lever which the civilized world commands, the Press, which in no other part of the world merits better the title of Fourth Estate than in your country, since the press is that which directs public opinion, all powerful in your Republic, first cradle of the liberty of America.⁴

Madero added that he had participated in the overwhelmingly one-sided Mexican electoral campaign of 1910

² *La Nueva Era*, Aug. 5, 1911.

³ Barrón to Juan Sánchez Azcona, March 16, 1912, Document 232, Política Interior, Ramo Revolución, AGN.

⁴ Madero to Hearst, April 23, 1911, Document 5/2350, Correspondencia del Presidente Madero, Biblioteca Nacional, Mexico, D.F.

simply to prepare public opinion for the armed revolution planned at that time.

"... I knew," Madero wrote, "that General Díaz could only be defeated through the force of arms but to make the revolution a democratic campaign was indispensable, because this would prepare public opinion and justify the armed uprising."⁵

It is not surprising that the man who could take so cynical a view of public opinion would later castigate the Mexican press for not supporting him against new challengers.

Probably no man in public life lost so much support so rapidly as did Francisco Madero in his transition from aspiring revolutionary in the spring of 1911 to actual president in the fall of the same year.

Reasons other than journalism help explain the dramatic change. Madero, anxious to end the fighting in Mexico, had halted a revolution midway in its course by agreeing to the terms of the Treaty of Ciudad Juárez of May 21, 1911, which left the Díaz state and federal political machines intact—making the Victoriano Huerta counter-revolution of 1913 both possible and inevitable.

But the press triggered that counter-revolt, which plunged Mexico into more years of internecine warfare before recognition of Venustiano Carranza by the United States in 1915 ended the factional struggles.

► But if Madero suffered from an adverse press, others fared worse. Foremost among these was the simple agrarian reform leader and guerrilla fighter of the south, Emiliano Zapata.

Zapata always understood his horses better than capital politicians, and he was continually bewildered by the vicious attacks upon him in the newspapers of Mexico City.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *La Nueva Era*, Aug. 10, 1911.

⁷ Alfonso Taracena, *La tragedia zapatista* (Mexico, D.F., 1931), pp. 15-16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

Rodolfo Magaña, sent on a peace mission to the Morelos area of disaffection in August 1911, later castigated "the farcical press" of Mexico City for reporting false news about Zapata. The capital newspapers, Magaña believed, had hardened Zapata into a position from which there was no exit except continued armed resistance.⁶

Zapata himself was well aware of the force of partisan propaganda. A favorable biographer wrote a decade later:

It is known that some capitalists of Morelos had distributed money among the reporters to denigrate Zapata in every way, something which fitted the journalists to a tee in their desire for scandal and to censure indirectly the budding regime, in such a way that liberty for them pushed them into the worst of despotisms.⁷

In mid-1914, while Zapata continued the fight against the usurper Huerta, the guerrilla chief wrote to a confidant, "... if, in effect, [you] want to aid the Revolution you should establish ... a newspaper directed by [José] Ferrel [a liberal lawyer of Mexico City], which would tell the truth about the agrarian Revolution and the Plan of Ayala."⁸

The latter was Zapata's scheme for agrarian reform for Mexico, the origin of Article 27 of the Constitution of 1917.

Under the Plan of Ayala, all great land-owners would be required to sell one-third of their holdings for distribution to the landless. If they refused, all of their land would be confiscated and of the remaining two-thirds, half would go to pay the costs of the revolution and half to provide pensions for war widows and orphans.

Zapata also subsidized a propagandist in Cuba, General Jenaro Amezcuá, who planted stories in *La Discusión* of Havana which inflated the true strength of the southern guerrillas.

The Liberating Army of the South, Amezcuá declared in an interview of

January 8, 1918, long past the peak of Zapata's effective resistance, controlled 12 Mexican states (actually no more than three), had maintained an army of 70,000 men in the field for three years (less than 3,000), manufactured its own explosives and cartridges and was even organizing a Corps of Aviation with 12 airplanes already on hand.⁹

In a "Manifiesto to All the People in General" of December 31, 1911, Zapata had scored "the alarmist press and . . . all attacks against my brave soldiers whom they call bandits, because one cannot call a bandit he who weak and helpless was despoiled of his property by the strong and powerful . . . Let the despoiler, not the despoiled, be called bandit!"

Elsewhere, in the same manifesto, Zapata lashed out at "the fawning press of our enemies who try to stain my honor and that of my valiant soldiers . . ."¹⁰

A few—very few—newspapers supported Zapata, indirectly or openly, such as *El Rebelde* of Jofutla, but they were weak and ineffective.¹¹

Tierra y Justicia of Mexico City, named after Zapata's own pained cry for social justice and edited by Marcos Serrano, also supported the southern agrarian revolution, but this newspaper had a miniscule readership in a largely illiterate country of small circulations.¹²

The most important journalistic support for Zapata was *El Diario del Hogar*, which first published the Plan of Ayala (with Madero's explicit permission) and gave a more factual account of the southern uprising than other capital newspapers. The others printed innumerable atrocity stories and denounced Zapata in their news columns as the "Attila of the South."¹³

Ambrosio Figueroa, the Madero-appointed governor of Morelos, wrote to his chief in late 1911:

. . . no more damage has been or will be made to society than by the dissolvent and anarchical principles of the

grossest socialism that "Diario del Hogar" spreads among the lower classes of Morelos especially . . . and by that organ through all the country. This damage is greater than that caused by the arms of Zapata and his men . . .¹⁴

Other newspapers were completely hostile to the Zapatista cause. When Zapata submitted to *Excelsior* an open letter to the ruling Venustiano Carranza in early 1919, the newspaper refused to print it.¹⁵

The English language newspaper of Mexico City, the *Mexican Herald*, conservative spokesman for American business interests in Mexico, had supported Porfirio Díaz to the bitter end and had brutally attacked Zapata until it was closed on October 30, 1915, a victim of the Revolution which it had never understood.¹⁶

In the face of such opposition, Zapata resorted to makeshift propaganda. Decrees, brief and inflammatory, easily transmitted by those who could read to their less fortunate fellows, was the major means of propaganda of the Mexican revolution.

Throughout Mexican—and Latin American—history, the *Plan* or *pronunciamento*, a statement of revolutionary goals, fulfilled the same function.

Zapata, for example, ordered the printing of 5,000 copies of his decree of September 8, 1914, nationalizing all of the lands of Mexico. With one copy posted in every village or town, this was enough to saturate a wide area.¹⁷

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

¹⁰ Document 195, Política Interior, Ramo Revolución, AGN.

¹¹ Telegram from Alfonso María Figueroa, director of *El Rebelde*, to Manuel Palafox, Nov. 28, 1914, Legajo Años 1911-1915, Telegramas Estado de Morelos, Gral. E. Zapata, Varios Asuntos, AGN.

¹² Telegram from Serrano to Zapata, June 2, 1915, Legajo cited in footnote 11, AGN.

¹³ An epithet also used by the *New York Times* as the headline for an editorial, March 18, 1919.

¹⁴ Figueroa to Madero, Dec. 15, 1911, Document 176, Política Interior, Ramo Revolución, AGN.

¹⁵ *Excelsior*, April 4, 1919.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1915.

¹⁷ Legajo Expedientes de la Honorable Convención, Estado de Morelos, 1915, AGN.

Spurred by a small but effective brain trust from Mexico City, led by the Marxist lawyer Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama, Zapata formed revolutionary committees in the capital for propaganda purposes.¹⁸

The first typewritten broadside issued by such groups was a piece by lawyer D. Druckman on February 5, 1915, which denounced "the spectacles of degradation" which the Carrancista troops had committed while occupying Mexico City. A total of 150 typewritten copies were made, with the notation that each person who received one should make five more for further distribution.¹⁹

The second article, by J. Daniel Boizart, appeared on February 21, 1915, beginning with the exhortation: "Now that this horde of thieves and assassins who call themselves Carrancistas have obliged you to take sides, unite with Zapatismo!"

It referred to Carranza as "that farcical BARBARIAN who is called Venusti-ASS." Again, 100 typewritten copies were made with appeals for reproduction. The message concluded with a "Note to the Carrancistas: You can tear these notices from the walls, but you can never erase the reasons for justice that are written in the hearts of Mexicans."²⁰

The third article in this homespun campaign appeared on February 22, 1915. Again authored by Druckman, 120 typed copies denounced "that legion of Carrancista vampires . . . those types of goat condottiere . . . that legion of troglodytes."

This broadside continued, "We will make the beast return to the jungle . . . We must give evidence of our virility. We will build barricades; the Country demands it!"²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cepeda to Madero, Oct. 9, 1912, Document 332, Política Interior, Ramo Revolución, AGN.

A fourth article of 150 original copies, again penned by Druckman and signed by the Revolutionary Committee, was headlined, "THE BEAST HAS FLED!" Carranza was called "the serpent of his epoch . . . unfaithful and felon . . . cretin."

"He tried to be the virtue to overcome the misfortunes of the country," the article stated, "without being any other thing than evil. [The Carrancistas] pretended to be white water lilies in order to cover with perfume the putrefaction of the swamps and hide the stench of their work as miserable and knavish Israelites . . ."²²

A fifth and apparently final printed effort, headlined "DAMNATION!" in two-inch block letters, proclaimed, "The sons of Cain . . . satiated of assassinating and . . . with their hands stained with the blood of their victims, flee cowardly before the energetic protest of civilization, carrying in their ears the echoes of a continuing damnation . . ."²³

But such awkward pyrotechnics could not save the floundering Zapatista movement nor the coalition Convention government which it had embraced. Amateurs in propaganda as well as on the battlefield, although they later had their own newspaper *El Sur* published at Tlaltizapán, the white clad men of Morelos had to wait for the vindication of history to win their cause.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the press played a vital role in the Mexican revolution of 1910. Frequently newspapers were disruptive or destructive. As Dr. Rafael Cepeda, governor of the state of San Luis Potosí, wrote to Madero in 1912, attacks by the press against public figures had made the task of governing so difficult that "politics is a stormy sea tossed by passions in which ambition dominates, which drags us under by its tremendous waves."²⁴

Francisco Madero, assassinated on February 22, 1913, in a counter-revolution led by Victoriano Huerta, never

fathomed the mystery of a popular press. Abstractly Madero honored freedom of the press, but concretely he loathed criticism and denounced it as "unpatriotic" and "divisive."

His sheer inability to understand the workings of a popular revolution, in reform as well as in journalism, caused Madero to pay with his life for a new social order which he did not intend to create.

Victoriano Huerta, the alcoholic general who ruled Mexico from 1913 to 1915, was not given to such schizophrenic distinctions between abstractions and realities. He suppressed all newspaper opposition, which partly accounts for a tenure in office as long as that of Madero even though Huerta was by far the minority leader.

Venustiano Carranza, who finally obtained *de facto* recognition from the United States on October 19, 1915, which in effect ended the power struggle in Mexico four years before

Zapata's assassination, struck a middle path between license and repression. Mexicans, weary of battles of words as well as of bullets, seemed to welcome Carranza's mild authoritarianism.

In retrospect, the greatest victim of the press in the Mexican revolution of 1910 was Francisco Madero, whose vacillating leniency led to his own downfall and insured several more years of armed strife.

In a country of scant literacy and feudal conditions, unrestrained freedom of the press in 1911 was as sheer an impossibility as the universal vote itself.

Madero, blindly and slavishly adhering to form rather than heeding reality, believed that imitation of democratic procedures would bring democracy to Mexico.

Such naiveté can be censured easily today, but the most significant lesson of the Mexican revolution is that an unsympathetic press can topple democracies as well as tyrannies.

International News Notes

► The Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen in Munich, Germany (Rundfunkplatz 1) published a bibliography entitled *Television and Youth*. All entries are in English, French and German. The center also published a monograph, *Findings and Cognition on the Television Perception of Children and Young People*. James D. Halloran compiled information based on research in Germany, France, Great Britain, Czechoslovakia and the United States.

► A new research-aid publication has been developed by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm. The publication, *Archives 69*, is designed to facilitate research problems for scholars and other investigators of economics, political science and international relations by selecting articles and analyses from leading international newspapers. For researchers who have either no or only incomplete access to the world press, the *Archives'* Duplication Service mails daily reprints of the indexed articles in their original languages.

► Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag in Germany has started a new series of books called *Gesellschaft und Kommunikation*; the latest publication is *Reader: Massenkommunikation*, volume I edited by Alphon Silbermann.

► A comprehensive listing of Dutch newspapers from 1848-90 has been published as part of a study of taxation and press freedom in the Netherlands by Joan Hemels, *Op de Bres Voor de Pers* (Assen, 1969). The book contains a summary in German.

► Kingsley Martin, former editor of the *New Statesman*, is author of *Editor. A Volume of Autobiography, 1931-45* (London: Hutchinson, 1968).

► Meaning and function of educational television is subject of an extensive bibliography with over 1,200 titles covering research activities around the world between 1955 and 1967. Its title is *Unterrichtsmittel: Bibliographie Fernsehen I* and it was published by the VEB Verlag Volk und Wissen in Berlin, Germany.