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By Robert N. Pierce

# Public Opinion and Press Opinion in Four Latin American Cities

*How well does editorial opinion in Latin American dailies reflect public reaction on international issues? This study analyzes the problems involved in finding the answer.*

► World-weary editorial writers often come to see their critics in two distinct groups. There are those who believe the power of the press is irresistible—that a huff and a puff from the editorial page can blow anyone's house down. And then there are those who say that most of the editorials are just so much hot air, unheeded when not unread.

Researchers have approached the matter more seriously, if not always more analytically. They have provided voluminous evidence as to what is in the papers (content analysis) and what is in the readers' minds (opinion surveys), but little has been done to link the two; that is, to discover the rela-

tionship between manifestly persuasive material on public affairs and the opinions of readers on the same subjects. What work has been done has largely been in the superheated atmosphere of an election<sup>1</sup> or in laboratory experiments.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, prediction of public opinion from press opinion has largely remained an unexplored subject. This poses no policy problem in the United States, what with its ubiquitous and well-developed opinion sample operations.

But what of other countries? In a time when both political leaders and scholars are constantly attuned to what India will think of this event or what Brazil will think of another, our resources for getting quick and reliable answers remain skimpy. Gallup-type poll organizations exist, but their handicaps are great in developing countries and in the best of situations cannot provide the rapid evaluations needed for timely analysis.

So we rush to the editorial pages of leading newspapers in the country concerned and get an instant, cheap pulse-reading. Whether it is the heartbeat of the publisher or of his public is often uncertain.

Several years ago the United States Information Agency, a heavy consumer of data about opinion abroad, attacked

<sup>1</sup> More recent findings generally have borne out the findings of Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); and Bernard Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> Much of the evidence is reported in Milton J. Rosenberg, et al., *Attitude Organization and Change*, Vol. III: *Yale Studies in Attitude and Communication*, Carl I. Hovland and Milton J. Rosenberg, eds. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960).

► Dr. Pierce is assistant professor of journalism at Louisiana State University. His article is based on a paper presented to the international communication division of the AEJ at its 1968 convention.

the problem. After one of its regular opinion surveys in Latin America,<sup>3</sup> it commissioned the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication to do a content analysis of newspaper opinion<sup>4</sup> and to compare the two.<sup>5</sup>

This paper reports on a secondary analysis of the data developed in these projects.<sup>6</sup>

### *Hypotheses*

A survey of the available theory, speculation and research evidence led to several hypotheses that could be tested against the data, progressing from a broad generalization to more refined propositions:

1) Newspaper opinion in Latin America generally will serve as a predictor of the direction of public opinion.

2) The rate of agreement between press opinion and public opinion will be greater (a) on topics dealing with event-bound communications than with those on general attitudes, (b) on new issues than on older ones, (c) on peripheral issues than on crucial ones and (d) on issues involving personalities than on abstract issues.

3) Classification according to readership of particular newspapers will show an identifiable relationship with the holding of certain opinions.

4) Readiness to take positions on issues will be greater for both the press and the public in a generally literate country such as Argentina, with less than 15% of its population illiterate, than in a greatly handicapped country such as Brazil, with about 50% illiteracy. Venezuela and Mexico, with illiteracy rates of 35 and 38% respectively, should fall somewhere between.<sup>7</sup>

5) In a country such as Mexico, which for at least three decades has had political stability which is remarkable by Latin American standards, consensus on current issues will be more prevalent than in other countries which have been afflicted by economic and

political crises during this period, such as Argentina, Brazil and Venezuela.

### *Methodology*

As noted above, one major source of data for this study was an opinion survey commissioned by the U.S. Information Agency in four Latin American cities—Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Caracas and Rio de Janeiro—in the winter and spring of 1963-64. The questionnaire included about 50 questions on political and economic matters, both domestic and international, and also sought demographic and media use data on the respondents.

Also drawn upon was a content analysis of 19 newspapers published in the four cities during and immediately before the time of the opinion survey. A relatively small range of the questions in the opinion survey, mostly dealing with U.S. government policy concerns, formed the basis for the content analysis. That is, the coders tried to "ask" the content some of the same questions put to the survey respondents. The major purpose of the content analysis was to classify the newspapers as to whether they were favorable or unfavorable in their editorial expressions on each issue. Statements bearing opinions on the pertinent matters were tab-

<sup>3</sup> "Public Opinion in Four Latin American Capitals: Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Caracas," A Report to the United States Information Agency by International Research Associates, C.A., 1964 (in the files of the Agency).

<sup>4</sup> Roy E. Carter Jr. and J. Laurence Day, "A Content Analysis of Daily Newspapers in Four Latin American Cities," A Report to the United States Information Agency by the Communication Research Division of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, July 1965 (in the files of the Agency).

<sup>5</sup> Roy E. Carter Jr. and Robert N. Pierce, "Public Opinion and Press Opinion in Four Latin American Cities," A Report to the United States Information Agency by the Research Division of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, August 1965 (in the files of the Agency).

<sup>6</sup> Basis for this paper is the present writer's unpublished doctoral dissertation by the same name, University of Minnesota, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> Literacy figures are from Raymond B. Nixon, "Freedom in the World's Press: A Fresh Appraisal With New Data," JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, 42:3-14 (Winter 1965).

ulated on favorable-unfavorable scales to arrive at the classifications.

The present analysis concerns only 12 of the 19 newspapers originally selected. One, *El Mundo* of Buenos Aires, had to be eliminated because it took stands on none of the topics. Six others—four in Rio and two in Caracas—were excluded because much of the analysis was based on classification of respondents as to which newspaper they trusted most, and these six had fewer than the arbitrarily set minimum of 50 such “trusting” readers.

### *Prediction of Public Opinion*

When newspapers took recognizable stands on the topics considered here, they generally were on the same side as the majority opinion<sup>8</sup> among public respondents in their cities. (See Table 1.) Of the 39 comparisons available from the data, 29 reflected agreements between newspapers’ advocacies and the majority of respondents giving opinions. There were no disagreements between the newspapers’ positions and the city opinion majorities in Buenos Aires and Caracas, and Mexico City accounted for 8 of the 10 disagreements. Even there, only one paper (*Novedades*) was out of line with the public stand in more than half its comparisons. In all instances in which newspapers were opposed to the majority public viewpoint, the publics were on the side most favorable to U.S. interests.

While prediction of the majority of public opinion from press opinion was generally feasible, the data cast much doubt on the assumption that editorial advocacy alone caused the publics’ viewpoints. There were several instances in which the majority of a newspaper’s opinion-giving readers went along with the majority public view in their cities even while their newspaper was

opposing their opinion. It must be noted, however, that it was common to find a reader group, even while opposed to its paper’s stand, less polarized toward the popular viewpoint than other papers’ reader groups.

### *Nature of Issue*

*Alliance for Progress.*—Questions about the Alliance generally struck a chord of indifference or ignorance in the Latin American public and press.

The Alliance’s accomplishments prior to the survey were dealt with unfavorably in the few position-taking newspapers, whereas the publics were favorable in all cities except Buenos Aires. Wherever comparisons could be made on the Alliance’s prospects for the future—that is, in Mexico City and Rio—the majority opinion among both newspapers and publics was favorable.

These findings fail to support the hypothesis that there would be more press-public agreement on topics dealing with event-bound communications, such as past Alliance accomplishments, than with general attitudes, as represented by the future prospects of the Alliance. However, the data do support the idea that new issues (the Alliance’s future) are less divisive than old ones (past accomplishments).

*International Affairs.*—United States actions in world affairs won majority approval in all cities’ public samples and among the position-taking newspapers in Buenos Aires and Caracas. However, disagreements were found between editors and publics in the cases of two of the three position-taking Mexico City papers and one of the two such papers in Rio.

Without exception, the public groups and position-taking papers considered in these comparisons had majority opinions unfavorable to the Soviet Union’s recent actions in international affairs. It must be noted, however, that the level of opinion-giving was low in all the publics and newspapers except for a strong forthrightness in the Mexi-

<sup>8</sup> “Majority opinion” and similar phrases refer to prevailing viewpoints among those respondents who expressed opinions; that is, with “don’t knows” and “neutrals” excluded.

TABLE 1

## Public Opinion and Newspaper Positions on Six Issues

	MEXICO CITY					BUENOS AIRES*				
	City sample	Excelsior readers	Novedades readers	El Universal readers	La Prensa readers	City Sample	La Prensa readers	La Nación readers	La Razón readers	Clarín readers
N	506	69	56	96	63	517	103	64	74	106
Paper's position, ALLIANCE TO DATE		UNF	UNF				UNF			
Public opinion:										
Favorable	30%	35%	38%	36%	37%	23%	29%	25%	24%	30%
Unfavorable	9	14	16	8	3	32	35	53	27	23
Don't know	62	51	47	55	60	45	36	22	49	47
Paper's position, ALLIANCE'S FUTURE		FAV		FAV	FAV					
Public opinion:										
Favorable	30%	36%	43%	37%	34%					
Unfavorable	9	14	18	8	8					
Don't know	60	49	39	56	59					
Paper's position, U.S. ACTIONS		FAV	UNF		UNF		FAV			
Public opinion:										
Favorable	62%	68%	51%	69%	55%	49%	61%	61%	43%	49%
Unfavorable	7	8	23	5	0	23	23	22	23	17
Don't know	32	23	27	25	44	29	16	17	34	35
Paper's position, SOVIET ACTIONS		UNF	UNF	UNF	UNF		UNF	UNF		UNF
Public opinion:										
Favorable	7%	7%	11%	5%	10%	16%	12%	22%	18%	10%
Unfavorable	45	56	52	51	29	47	62	59	35	45
Don't know	48	36	38	44	62	37	26	19	47	45
Paper's position, FIDEL CASTRO		UNF	UNF	UNF	UNF		UNF	UNF	UNF	
Public opinion:										
Favorable	6%	1%	9%	6%	5%	9%	6%	7%	8%	8%
Unfavorable	60	75	59	69	54	60	71	80	49	63
Don't know, neutral	35	23	32	25	41	32	24	14	42	28
Paper's position, POLICY TOWARD CUBA		UNF	UNF	UNF	UNF					
Public opinion:										
Favorable	40%	48%	46%	46%	38%					
Unfavorable	37	36	41	38	38					
Don't know	23	16	12	17	24					

\* Omission of public responses on certain issues means no newspaper positions were found on these issues.

co City press and a relatively high level in the Buenos Aires newspapers.

The moderate rate of disagreement over U.S. actions and the consistent agreement on Soviet actions tend to

bear out the contention that there will be more agreement on peripheral issues than on crucial ones. This is based on the assumption that what the United States does has much more relevance

TABLE 1 (Cont.)

CARACAS*			RIO DE JANEIRO*		
City Sample	<i>El Universal</i> readers	<i>El Nacional</i> readers	City Sample	<i>O Globo</i> readers	<i>Jornal do Brasil</i> readers
496	145	211	466	78	72
					UNF
			27%	41%	38%
			8	13	8
			65	46	54
					FAV
			25%	47%	29%
			8	3	8
			67	50	63
					FAV
				UNF	FAV
52%	56%	51%	26%	35%	30%
23	20	33	14	18	13
25	23	17	60	47	56
				UNF	UNF
				UNF	UNF
14%	12%	21%	11%	17%	9%
53	60	54	18	24	28
32	28	25	71	59	63
				UNF	
				UNF	
8%	6%	12%	8%	8%	6%
63	72	57	28	38	43
30	23	30	64	55	51

to Latin America than most actions of the Soviet Union.

*Fidel Castro and U.S. Policy Toward Cuba.*—On the matter of pro and con sentiments about Fidel Castro and his government, strong disapproval of the Cuban leadership was found in all city samples and position-taking newspapers. However, despite the rather categorical feelings among opinion-givers, about a fifth of the respondents in Caracas, Mexico City and Buenos Aires took neutral positions and about two-fifths

of the Rio sample said they had never heard of Castro.

The most striking observation on U.S. policy toward Cuba was the general lack of partisanship by the press. Although all four papers in Mexico City took positions, none in the other cities could be classified. All four papers classified were unfavorable to U.S. policy, but the public sample in their city was slightly inclined toward the favorable side.

Inasmuch as the first question focused on the person of Fidel Castro, the widespread agreement on disapproval supported the hypothesis that there would be more agreement on issues involving personalities than on more abstract matters, such as U.S. policy toward Cuba. However, these findings also cast doubt on the previously discussed hypothesis that more agreement would be found on event-bound situations, such as U.S. policy toward Cuba, than on general attitudes, which would be reflected in Castro's reputation.

### Newspaper Readership

Analysis of the relationship between demographic characteristics and the holding of certain opinions by public survey respondents indicated that socio-economic status, education and sex were likely to have substantial bearing on opinion patterns. It was hypothesized that, when controls were applied to these factors, the respondents would differ in the holding of opinions according to which newspaper they said they trusted most. If a newspaper's most-trusting readers were distributed on an opinion scale in about the same demographic ratios as the city sample but were, in all subgroups, more polarized toward a particular viewpoint than the city sample, it would indicate that both the identification with the newspaper and the demographic predispositions are possible influences on the formation of opinion. If, however, the newspaper's readers should depart consider-

TABLE 2

Opinion of Four Mexico City Newspapers' Most Trusting Readers on Recent U.S. Actions, by Demographic Characteristics

Newspaper's position	City Sample			Excelsior readers FAV			Novedades readers UNF		
	M	F		M	F		M	F	
SEX									
Favorable	70%	56%		65%	70%		50%	50%	
Unfavorable	11	4		15	5		35	17	
Don't know	19	40		19	26		15	33	
N	201	305		26	43		20	36	
SOCIO-ECONOMIC	low	mid.	high	low	mid.	high	low	mid.	high
Favorable	59%	66%	63%	58%	73%	75%	50%	48%	56%
Unfavorable	3	10	13	11	7	13	14	26	22
Don't know	38	24	25	32	20	13	36	26	22
N	275	189	24	19	41	8	14	31	9
EDUCATION	low	mid.	high	low	mid.	high	low	mid.	high
Favorable	57%	65%	68%	64%	63%	73%	36%	54%	53%
Unfavorable	3	7	21	9	0	15	18	14	41
Don't know	39	28	11	27	37	12	45	32	6
N	261	166	71	22	19	26	11	28	17

ably from the ratio of the demographic distribution, it would appear that the identification with the newspaper is an independent influence and the demographic predispositions are inoperative.

These relationships were investigated in the data for each of the four cities. As the findings were similar in all four cities, the discussion here will be confined to Mexico City, which provided the fullest range of data, and to only one of the topics—U.S. actions in international relations. (See Table 2.)

In regard to opinion patterns according to sex, Mexico City men were much more likely than the women to support U.S. actions. However, this situation did not prevail with all four newspapers studied, as Table 2 shows.

Among *Excelsior's* readers, the proportion of women supporting U.S. actions was even higher than the rate for men and considerably higher than the rate for all women in the city sample. This would indicate that the association between *Excelsior* readership and a favorable attitude on the topic is independent of sex.

Although *Novedades* was out of tune with its readers by taking an unfavorable stand on the topic, the distribu-

tion of its readers favoring U.S. actions was completely independent of sex. Table 2 also shows the ratio of both men and women among *Novedades'* "unfavorable" readers to be substantially above those in other respondent groups.

*La Prensa's* disapproval of U.S. actions apparently had no relation with its readers' opinions. Those who held an opinion were unanimously favorable, but the high rate of don't-knows made them even less polarized toward the majority view than was the city sample.

The most striking part of the findings, though, was the response of *El Universal's* readers. Although no position was found in its pages, both its male and female readers were more favorable than corresponding groups in the city sample. However, it should be noted that, on those topics on which *El Universal* took a stand, its position was generally favorable to United States interests, and this attitude may have influenced readers' view on specific topics.

Smallness of the high-status subsamples makes an interpretation of the socio-economic data difficult. *Excelsior* and *El Universal* readers in the low-status group approximated the city



TABLE 2 (Cont.)

<i>El Universal</i> readers			<i>La Prensa</i> readers UNF		
M	F		M	F	
76%	62%		69%	46%	
9	2		0	0	
15	36		31	54	
46	50		26	37	
low	mid.	high	low	mid.	high
62%	77%	50%	54%	53%	0%
6	5	0	0	0	0
32	18	50	46	47	0
50	39	4	46	15	0
low	mid.	high	low	mid.	high
67%	68%	79%	51%	60%	50%
6	3	7	0	0	0
27	30	14	49	40	50
45	37	14	39	20	2

sample in majority-view polarization, but the middle-status readers of both papers were more inclined than the city sample to voice the majority opinion. (The high-status group is disregarded here because of the smallness of the subsample.) Again, *Novedades'* negative stand seemed to strike a chord among a minority segment of its readers which was somewhat independent of income.

On the educational scale, there was little difference among the middle-ranking groups in the city sample and *Excelsior* and *El Universal* segments. But the low and high groups for each newspaper were somewhat above average in pro-U.S. sentiments. All educational levels of *Novedades'* readers were again below the city sample in inclination toward the majority view.

Thus identification with *Excelsior*, *Novedades* or *El Universal*—the so-

called "Big Three" of Mexico City journalism, all appealing to the upper and middle classes and all considered highly influential—was either independent of demographic predispositions as an opinion-formation factor or was interwoven with them. Identification with *La Prensa*, a mass-appeal tabloid paper with little prestige, appeared to have no bearing on opinion patterns whereas demographic factors did have a bearing.

It must be noted, however, that certain aspects of the findings cast doubt on the assumption that, even when readership of a particular newspaper is predictive of opinion formation among readers, the newspaper's manifest editorial position or lack of it is independent of factors such as editors' selectivity of news and the readers' selectivity of publications.

### Literacy

The data did not provide clear support for the hypothesis that newspapers and publics in the more literate countries would be more willing to express opinions on current issues.

Even considering the differences in the types of newspapers studied, the less literate countries do not seem to have more reticent editors than the others. There were fewer classifiable newspaper positions in Argentina, with the highest literacy, than in any of the other countries. The press in Brazil, with the lowest literacy, was comparatively opinion-loaded.<sup>9</sup>

The rate of opinion-giving among the publics comes much closer to the hypothesized pattern. While the Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Caracas publics did not differ appreciably in responsiveness, the rate of failure to give opinions in Rio was far higher, ranging from 60% on U.S. actions to 71% on Soviet actions.

### Political Stability

According to another hypothesis, Mexico City's relatively great political

<sup>9</sup> Table 1 does not show the full scope of newspaper advocacies, as some newspapers were excluded from comparisons because of their low ranking in "trust" by their readers. On the six topics considered here, the following positions were found in the four cities: Mexico City, 20 advocacies in four newspapers; Rio, 18 in six papers; Caracas, 10 in four papers; and Buenos Aires, 8 in five papers.

stability would produce a higher rate of agreement between press and public than in the other three cities. This idea was not borne out by the data, as in only three-fifths of the comparisons in Mexico City were the newspapers in agreement with the direction of the public opinion majority, whereas all the comparisons in Buenos Aires and Caracas and about three-fourths of those in Rio showed directional agreement.

### *Summary and Discussion*

The findings indicate support for the following hypotheses:

1) Editorial stands taken by Latin American newspapers generally will serve as predictors of the majority public sentiment on topics having to do with international politics, although it is doubtful that the advocacies themselves are consistently causal factors.

2) More press-public agreement will be found on new issues than on old ones, on peripheral issues than on crucial ones, and on personality issues than on abstract ones.

3) Identification with particular newspapers has a bearing on the holding of certain opinions in the case of high-prestige newspapers but not in the case of mass-appeal papers.

4) Neither literacy nor political stability in a nation was found to have a relationship with the rate of agreement between press and public.

One of the most surprising and appalling findings of this study was the paucity of editorial leadership evinced by Latin American newspapers on matters which seemed to have a vital importance to the welfare of their countries. So scarce was the comment on matters such as U.S. policy toward Latin American juntas and the U.S. influence on political and economic change in the hemisphere that these topics had to be eliminated from comparison with public opinion.

The unreadiness of respondents in the public opinion surveys to state their opinions also was disturbing. For example, more than half the respondents

in Mexico City and in Rio and a quarter of those in Buenos Aires said they had not heard of the Alliance for Progress.

Against this background of indifference and/or ignorance, the generally high predictive value of newspapers for determining public opinion becomes clouded. The findings indicated that press-public agreement is less likely on crucial and old issues than on new and peripheral ones. This raises the question of whether the predictive value of newspaper opinion would hold up as an issue grew in salience among the populace.

Perhaps a more heartening aspect of the findings was the indication that newspapers which seemed to have substantial rapport with their readers generally were those considered both at home and abroad as responsible media of information and leadership. This assessment does not take into account the possible influence of small, radical papers which were omitted from the press opinion sample. However, one paper which was of this type, *Ultima Hora* of Rio, was found to have a relatively low rate of agreement with its readers. In fact, it had so few readers professing primary loyalty to it that it was omitted from the analysis presented.

Although more relevant to political theory than to mass communication, the finding that anti-Yankeism is not the typical position of Latin American newspapers and publics goes against many analyses of hemispheric relations. This sentiment almost never emerged as a prevalent view among the publics or among the newspapers studied.

In a highly summary fashion, it could be said that this study indicates that Latin American newspapers are not nearly so concerned as the United States is with what they and their publics should think about the "Colossus of the North" but that, when they do cast their eyes this way, their glance is approving or only mildly critical.