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The Press in Mexico: Past, Present and Future

The Mexican press is handicapped by lack of professionalism, government pressures, meager circulation and advertising and poor equipment. The author reviews its history and present status in this summary.

► Anyone who has traveled in Mexico has probably been struck by the never-ending contrasts: the burro plodding along as a chauffeur-driven Cadillac swishes by; the slum hovels pasted on pale brown hills, and Mexico City's Latin American Tower, stretching 42 stories; the second-class bus, with its chicken crates, bouncing along in the shadow of a whistling jet airliner; the rebozo-clad Indian woman in Oaxaca carrying a child on her back and a basket of fruit on her head, and the young woman in Mexico City with a beehive hairdo and the latest Paris fashions; the yawning villages, and bustling Mexico City with its streaming rivers of people and taxicabs.

Anyone who has studied the Mexican press has probably been struck by the never-ending contrasts also: the four-page small-town daily, and the 60-page *Excelsior* and *El Universal*; the clanking flatbed presses of the weeklies and smaller dailies, and the humming, high-speed rotary presses of the large dailies; the reporter who earns \$2 a day, and the reporter who drinks \$1.25 Scotch and sodas at the swank Ambassadeurs bar in Mexico City.

Even though Mexico had the first printing press in the Western Hemisphere, with Juan Pablos having set up a press in Mexico City in 1536,¹ the development of Mexican journalism has been relatively slow. First, Mexico was repressed for almost 300 years by the Spanish, who began their conquest in 1519 and ruled until the Revolution of 1810. Then Mexico was torn apart for more than 100 years by internal revolts. It is something of a miracle that journalism was able to take hold and grow at all before World War I. In recent years the Mexican press has had a generally steady growth.

Mexico's press evolved from a religious and literary press during the Spanish rule, to a political press from about 1810 to the end of the 19th century, to an information press in the 20th century.

Nine major events stand out in the history of Mexican journalism: 1) the introduction of printing in 1536; 2) the introduction of irregularly published *hojas volantes*, "flying sheet" news pamphlets, in 1541; 3) the founding of the first regularly published periodical, *Gaceta de Mexico*, in 1722; 4) the founding of the first daily newspaper, *Diario*

¹ Several U.S. authorities place the date between 1537 and 1539 but Mexican authorities seem agreed on 1536.

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de Mexico, in 1805; 5) the starting of the revolutionary press in 1810; 6) the first freedom of the press under the Constitution of Cadiz in 1812; 7) the emergence of a free and liberal press, led by *El Monitor Republicano* and *El Siglo XIX*, in the second half of the 19th century; 8) the founding of *El Imparcial*, Mexico's first modern newspaper, in 1896, and 9) the founding of *El Universal* in 1916 and *Excelsior* in 1917.

The giants of Mexican journalism included Dr. Juan Ignacio María de Castorena Ursúa y Goyeneche, Mexico's first journalist, the founder of *Gaceta de Mexico*; Carlos Bustamante, editor of *Diario de Mexico*; Rafael Reyes Spínola, publisher of *El Imparcial*; Félix Palavicini, founder of *El Universal*, and Rodrigo de Llano, longtime editor of *Excelsior*, who died Jan. 31, 1963.

Freedom of the press developed from the licensing and censorship of the Spanish empire, to the intermittent freedom and suppression from 1810 to 1876, to the kept press of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship from 1876 to 1910,² to the basically free press guaranteed by the Constitution of 1917. Since the mid-1930s Mexico has probably had as free a press as any Latin American nation, although most publishers and editors are reluctant to exercise complete freedom for reasons that will be discussed later.

The press struggle in Mexico is far from over. But today the earlier struggles of Carlos Bustamante; Joaquin Fernández de Lizardi, the Tom Paine of Mexico; Andres Quintana Roo and José María Cos, two of the leading revolutionary journalists, and Filomeno Mata, an editor imprisoned at least 34 times by Díaz, have given Mexico a press that is heading toward financial and governmental independence. Because of its close relations with the United States, Mexico has borrowed many techniques of American journalism, but Mexico's

turbulent history has given the Mexican press a unique character. It is unmistakably *hecho en Mexico* (made in Mexico).

Today Mexico, which has a population of more than 36 million, has about 175 daily newspapers, of which at least 153 are published regularly. It also has about 500 weekly newspapers, 1,000 magazines, 384 radio stations and 22 television stations. The weekly newspapers are generally unimportant, often being issued irregularly. Only about 100 of the magazines are of general circulation, and only seven of these have circulations of more than 25,000.

Mexico has no national wire-news service, although Informex, which serves radio and television stations, is trying hard to become one. The three big international news services in Mexico are United Press International, Associated Press and Agence France-Presse. All three have bureaus in Mexico City that send stories to New York, where the news is processed and sent by radio teletype to all Latin America. In addition, a number of U.S. and other foreign news media have correspondents in Mexico. In Mexico City there are about 40 full-time and 100 part-time correspondents.

The News, a tabloid owned by *Novedades* in Mexico City, is far and away the dominant English-language daily in Mexico. It is edited by Bill Shanahan, a genial, cigar-smoking transplanted Georgian, and claims a circulation of 19,879 daily and 22,000 Sunday.³

► Newspaper circulations are extremely difficult to ascertain in Mexico. The nation's dailies claim a total circulation of more than 3 million but probably have about 1.25 million. *Excelsior*, the nation's largest and best daily, has 120,753. The other large Mexico City dailies are *La Prensa*, 119,402; *Ultimas Noticias de Excelsior* (first edition),

² Manuel González was president from 1880 to 1884 but Díaz had already started his stranglehold on the press.

³ *Medios Publicitarios Mexicanos*, Feb. 15, 1963, to May 15, 1963 (Mexico City: Venecia, S.A., 1963).

103,451; *El Universal*, about 100,000, and *Novedades* and *Ovaciones*, about 80,000 each.⁴ The largest and best provincial daily is *El Norte* of Monterrey, which has a circulation of about 50,000. Other outstanding provincial dailies are *Diario de Yucatán* of Mérida, *El Porvenir* of Monterrey, *El Informador* of Guadalajara, *El Dictamen* of Veracruz and *El Siglo de Torreón*.

Of the 153 regularly published dailies, 85 probably have circulations of less than 5,000. The median-sized daily in Mexico probably has a circulation of about 2,500 and contains four to six standard pages. There are probably four main reasons for the low circulations of Mexican newspapers:

1) The low per capita income (less than \$300 a year).

2) The high illiteracy rate (at least 37%).

3) A general distrust of the press because of governmental, political and economic pressures.

4) The general unprofessionalism of most Mexican newsmen and newspapers.

Possibly more than anything else, most Mexican newspapers and newspapermen lack integrity. Any column of any page of almost any newspaper in Mexico is for sale. Reporters too often are nothing but concessionaires who sell space to the highest bidder. Newspapers too often are started not to inform the people, or even to make money, but to satisfy a personal whim. By and large, journalism is a part-time job in Mexico.

Newspapers in each of the six geographic regions reflect the characteristics of the regions. The Federal District's newspapers are large and cosmopolitan, with wide distribution and influence. The North's newspapers are patterned after those in the United States. The North Pacific's newspapers are frontier journals, often bearing the

scars of violent episodes. The Central Plateau's newspapers are hampered by their proximity to Mexico City. The newspapers of the Gulf Coast and Yucatán Peninsula are dominated by papers in the two large cities in the relatively isolated area: Veracruz and Mérida. The South Pacific's newspapers, like the region's population, are scattered and small.

Journalism is clustered in the nation's three largest cities: Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey. Mexico City, the capital and largest city with a population of more than 5 million, is the political, economic, cultural and journalistic center of Mexico. However, a sharp cleavage in size no longer exists between the Mexico City dailies and the provincial dailies. Of the eight largest papers in column inches the author studied, three were in Mexico City: *Excelsior* (1), *El Universal* (2) and *Novedades* (4). Five were in the states: *El Porvenir* of Monterrey (3), *El Norte* of Monterrey (5), *El Occidental* of Guadalajara (6), *El Informador* of Guadalajara (7) and *El Mexicano* of Tijuana (8).

Most Mexican dailies contain less than 30% advertising, which means they must supplement their regular advertising income with income from *gacetillas* (paid publicity).

The news content of Mexican dailies can be classified in six categories: foreign, domestic, state and local, sports, society, and *nota roja*, or crime and accident news, which is usually departmentalized on a special page. A typical daily devotes 5% of its total space to foreign news, 3% to national news, 12% to state and local news, 9% to sports news, 4% to society news and 4% to *nota roja*.⁵

In one sense, almost no newspapers in Mexico are political organs. In another sense, almost every newspaper is a political organ because only a handful

⁴ *El Universal* claims 130,409, *Novedades* 97,335 and *Ovaciones* 123,275 for its two editions. The author accepted at face value only the circulations certified by Roberto Casas Alatríste of Mexico City.

⁵ Based on the author's content analysis of 43 dailies.

of Mexican dailies are truly independent of the government and the government political party, Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Probably the most independent newspaper is *Diario de Yucatán*, which sometimes criticizes the president directly, something almost unheard of in Mexico.

The Mexican government has at its disposal nine forms of influencing newspapers, newspapermen and news:

- 1) Legal measures.
- 2) Productora e Importada de Papel (PIPSA), the newsprint importation and allocation agency.
- 3) Loans through Nacional Financiera and other agencies.
- 4) Government payment for news stories, pictures and advertising.
- 5) News management by instructing officials about what news to release.
- 6) Regular payments to reporters covering government beats.
- 7) Requests for suppression of news.
- 8) Government domination of labor unions.
- 9) As a last resort, force or violence.

Force or violence is unnecessary at the federal level because of the other effective controls. It has been used at the state level, however. The PIPSA control has been only an implied threat; no newspaper's newsprint supply has been cut off except for non-payment of bills. *Iguales* (reporter payoffs) and official advertising are probably the most effective controls. Official advertising probably accounts for 20 to 30% of the average daily's advertising income and may often mean the difference between life and death for a touch-and-go operation. Nacional Financiera reportedly furnishes most of the capital for José García Valseca's string of 29 dailies, the largest newspaper chain in Latin America.

► These seem to be the five major problems of the Mexican press:

1) *Government pressures.* The various pressures just listed mean that the press is generally at the mercy of the government, which is a near-dictator-

ship. Modern Mexican governments are using some of the techniques developed during the Díaz dictatorship, but in a more subtle manner. Many newspapermen and newspapers are still bought by the administration.

2) *Lack of professionalism.* As José Pages Llergo, editor of *Siempre!*, the most influential magazine in Mexico, says, only about 10% of Mexican newspapermen are professional journalists. Too many Mexican newspapermen are in journalism as a hobby. Low pay is undoubtedly a factor, since the average reporter in Mexico earns less than \$4 a day, about the same amount as a secretary.

3) *Low circulation.* The circulations of Mexican dailies are pathetically low: 31 copies per 1,000 population, or about one-tenth as many as in the United States and Western Europe.

4) *Low income.* This results largely from low circulation and makes it necessary for the average newspaper to depend on the government and *gacetillas* for a substantial share of its income.

5) *Poor mechanical equipment.* This is a direct result of low income. In turn, poor mechanical equipment produces an inferior product, which in turn limits the circulation and income.

Communism does not seem to be a major problem of the Mexican press. The only clearly Communist publication of general circulation is the magazine *Política*. *El Día* and *La Prensa*, two Mexico City dailies, are leftist but not Communist. *Siempre!* is a liberal magazine that prints articles ranging from far left to far right politically. Most of the press is politically to the right of the government and most of the people.

These are some things that might be done to improve the Mexican press:

1) *Reduce government intervention.* The *iguales* paid to reporters covering government beats should be abolished. Government payment for publication of official information should be drastically reduced. This would force out the

marginal newspaper that performs little public service and give the remaining newspapers a chance to grow. Newspapers should be allowed to buy newsprint outside PIPSA if they want. Let PIPSA compete on the free market.

2) *Increase newspaper advertising.* The fact that any column of almost any newspaper in Mexico is for sale is appalling and the *gacetilla* system should be abolished as soon as possible. It seems evident that one way the papers might offset a loss of government and *gacetilla* income is to increase advertising revenue by adopting more professional methods. Advertising research and promotion should be encouraged to help educate the merchants in Mexico's expanding economy.

3) *Increase newspaper wages.* This can be brought about easiest by increasing newspaper income, but it can be brought about also by trimming non-essential employees from newspaper staffs and paying the remaining employees better salaries. The widespread practice of reporters on government beats accepting payoffs should be abolished.

4) *Encourage journalism education.* Mexico's best hope for obtaining more professional newsmen is through the

expansion of journalism education. Mexico has only six journalism programs at the college level now: National University of Mexico; Women's University; University of Veracruz; University of the Americas, formerly Mexico City College, an English-language institution; Carlos Septien García School of Journalism, a Catholic institution, and Instituto de Capacitación de Periodistas, a correspondence school. Schools and industry should make a joint effort to encourage journalism-liberal arts education.

5) *Promote better mechanical equipment.* With government and private loans, cooperative printing plants with cold-type composing machines and off-set presses could be set up to serve several dozen population centers. Each plant could print half a dozen small dailies and weeklies for independent publishers. Naturally, such a plan would require guarantees against abuses.

To accelerate progress in journalism Mexico needs fewer newspapers but better newspapers. Run-down dailies and weekly blackmail sheets do not serve the public interest. Most of all, Mexico needs more newsmen with integrity. This is a formidable challenge, but Mexico has faced formidable challenges before.

Only the Bloody Details

► According to an article in the Summer issue of JOURNALISM QUARTERLY, there are 229 correspondents in Latin America who send information to the United States. And yet, as many people have pointed out, "When a revolt occurs in one of the Latin American republics, readers are told the bloody details and left to guess why it happened."

Senator Humphrey has said that only one percent of the news in U.S. media deals with Latin America. It is a rule of thumb in journalism that the importance of news is measured by the play it receives in the media. What are the media saying when they devote one percent of their space to news from Latin America? Aren't they saying that the 200 million people who live across the Rio Grande are of no real consequence? . . .

It is incumbent upon schools and departments of journalism throughout the hemisphere to help improve the quality and quantity of inter-American communications.—TEÓDULO DOMÍNGUEZ, Argentine journalist, at 1963 AEJ convention.