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Louise F. Montgomery

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By Louise F. Montgomery

Criticism of Government Officials In the Mexican Press, 1951-1980

Cabinet ministers receive more criticism in the Mexican press than does the President, but the latter is being criticized and the amount is increasing.

► In worldwide studies in which judges estimate press freedom, most Latin American nations score in the middle to low range, indicating limited press freedom. Mexico—the focus of this study—scored in the “free, many controls” category in Lowenstein’s study,¹ similar to the position it has achieved in other studies.

This study differs from previous attempts to determine press freedom levels in that it examines content systematically over a 30-year span. Freedom of the press is indicated by the presence of criticism of top government officials. Past studies have concentrated on inputs—the first three dimensions of press freedom identified by Kent²: legal sanctions and the extent to which legal and non-legal sanctions are applied. This content analysis of six Mexican newspapers argues that inputs might be useful in predicting content and possibly in explaining fluctuations; however, the prime test of whether a press is free is what it prints. The output is a clearer indicator of a newspaper’s degree of ideological difference with government,

the fourth press-freedom dimension Kent identified.

This study assumes that a press free to comment as it wishes on government will present a range of opinion, some praising and some criticizing government. No major changes occurred in laws regulating press freedom during the span of this study, 1951-1980. Non-legal interactions between press and government were marked by two major upheavals in the 1970s: government foreclosure of the El Sol chain and the ouster of the critical editor of a major newspaper, *Excelsior*, in 1976. Therefore, if inputs affect criticism levels, the effect of these two interventions should be seen in content.

Background

Mexican journalism literature points to great fluctuations in what the press writes about government. Torres, in perhaps the best concise summary up to the mid 1930s, said the path to press freedom had been “an endless zigzag.”³ Early in their tenure, presidents permitted press freedom, he said, but soon they became “supersensitive, touchy, tyrannical...incapable of serenely resisting criticism and of ignoring insults.”⁴ At various times since independence in the early 19th century, Mexican journalists have been killed, jailed, sent into exile, bribed and otherwise mistreated. At times, the press has been intemperate; newspapers were said to have

¹ Ralph L. Lowenstein, *PICA: Measuring World Press Freedom* (Freedom of Information Center Publication 166, Columbia, Mo., August 1966).

² Kurt E. M. Kent, “Freedom of the Press: An Empirical Analysis of One Aspect of the Concept,” *Gazette*, 18:65-76 (1972).

³ Teodoro Torres, *Periodismo* (Mexico: Ediciones Botas, 1937), p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.*

► The author is on the journalism faculty of the University of Missouri. She acknowledges research funding provided by the School of Communication at the University of Texas, Austin, where she was a doctoral student, and the assistance of her major professor, Dr. Wayne Danielson.

lost their virility in the post-Revolutionary era.⁵

Many studies characterize the contemporary Mexican press as subservient to government. Mexico's newspapers are called "public forums" for members of the dominant political party,⁶ and "factual deserts." Journalistic criticism of government, Stevens wrote, is confined to "sporadic barking, rather than sustained attempts to bite."⁷ The Index on Censorship said domestic news is manipulated by flattery, bribes and economic pressure "together with a common understanding of the news that's fit to print."⁸ The government withholds facts on which the press could base criticism, but official censorship has been unnecessary because of self-censorship, two critics wrote.⁹

The generally accepted assessment of Mexican newspapers' relationship with government is expressed in Merrill, Bryan and Alisky:¹⁰

Throughout Mexico it has become difficult in recent years to find criticism of public officials in daily newspapers, except for the few scandal sheets where partisan polemics border on defamation. . . . In general, the Mexican mass media traditionally do not criticize the President of the Republic directly, but do sometimes criticize his cabinet ministers.

Rota's 1970 content analysis of five Mexico City newspapers indicated that on many days, even the "prestige" newspapers avoided mention of the president or other high officials.¹¹ On the other hand, recent comments indicate a change. Aleman was criticized when he was president (1946-1952)¹² and Octavio Paz wrote that *Excelsior*, the most highly touted paper in Mexico City, published "what many others wanted to and could not say."¹³ Stevens said *Excelsior* was "frankly critical" of Echeverria, president from 1970 through 1976.¹⁴ Adler pointed to "a perceptible loosening of government censorship."¹⁵

Perhaps one reason observers disagree about how Mexican newspapers write about government is that their journalistic style differs from that practiced in the United States. Sentences are long, sometimes running for an entire two-inch block of

type. Instead of simple declarative sentences, writing is convoluted, with many dependent clauses. Such a style, Stevens suggested, masks criticism and makes commentary on government officials hard to interpret.¹⁶ Yet she also says newspapers comment on government "with prudence and euphemisms . . . without offending powerful people."¹⁷ Merrill et al. noted that news story leads are "involved," but they say editorials contain "some of the best writing in the country."¹⁸ Torres contrasted U.S.- and Mexican-style journalistic writing by calling Mexican journalists "men of letters" interested in form as well as substance.¹⁹

This study examines style only to determine whether comments are comprehensible to readers. It, further, sought to answer these questions:

- 1) Do Mexican newspapers criticize the president? While there are some indications that sporadic critical comments on the president appear in the press, most writing about Mexico's press says that the president is immune to criticism.
- 2) Are Cabinet officials criticized more often than the president? The assumption

⁵ Henry Lepidus, *The History of Mexican Journalism* (Journalism Series No. 49, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1928); Jerry W. Knudson, "The Press and the Mexican Revolution of 1910," *Journalism Quarterly*, 46:760-766 (Winter 1969).

⁶ Dick Reavis, "Stop the Presses," *Texas Monthly*, November 1978, p. 191.

⁷ Evelyn P. Stevens, *Protest and Response in Mexico* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), p. 30.

⁸ *Index on Censorship*, 4:76-77 (Spring 1975).

⁹ John Taylor, "Mexico: The Guessing Game," *Index on Censorship*, 5:34-38 (Winter 1976); Kyra Nunez, "Censura y Autocensura en la Prensa en Mexico," unpublished thesis, Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, 1977.

¹⁰ John C. Merrill, Carter R. Bryan and Marvin Alisky, *The Foreign Press: A Survey of the World's Journalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972 Printing), p. 181.

¹¹ Josef Rota, "A Comparative Study of Five Mexico City Newspapers: Makeup, Origin of News and Content Analysis," unpublished thesis, Iberoamericana University, Mexico, 1970.

¹² Richard R. Cole, "The Mass Media of Mexico: Ownership and Control," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1972.

¹³ Quoted without citation in Robert Pierce, *Keeping the Flame* (New York: Hastings House, 1979), p. 116.

¹⁴ Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Judith Adler, *Mexico in Crisis*.

¹⁶ Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁸ Merrill, Carter and Alisky, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

¹⁹ Torres, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

in much writing about the Mexican press is that newspapers criticize cabinet ministers since they cannot directly criticize the president.

3) Are comments on the president straightforward and clear, or are they ambiguous, difficult to understand? This question is prompted by criticism of the turgid Mexican journalistic style, which is said to be opaque to all except the politically involved.

Method

All editorials and columns that mentioned the president or a cabinet official then in office in six newspapers from 1951 through 1980 were examined.²⁰ Dates for the 10 issues a year included in the sample were randomly selected. The six newspapers represented the ideological range of mass-circulated newspapers published across the time span. *Excelsior*, although characterized during part of the century as conservative, has gained attention more recently for its opposition to the government and the Revolution²¹ and for reporting on diverse social classes and their problems.²² Under Julio Garcia Scherer from 1968 to 1976, the paper became increasingly identified with leftist causes. *Novedades*, a mainstream newspaper identified with business interests rather than social causes, "supports some of the essential ideas of social and economic transformation," Rojas Avendano wrote.²³ *El Nacional's* news approach is objective and its editorials reflect "the official point of view of the Mexican government."²⁴

The regional newspapers come from the mainstream of Mexican journalism; each is privately owned and partly supported

by advertising. *El Informador* is located in a state that gave the official political party less electoral support than the national average in each election during the study period. The newspaper merits the influence it has and "is probably preferred over all newspapers" in the state, Velasco Valdes wrote.²⁵

El Dictamen, Mexico's oldest newspaper, is located in the capital of one of Mexico's poorest states, Veracruz. The state has supported the official party heavily; electoral support for the party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, ranged from a high of 97.6% to a low of 89.9% for the PRI presidential candidates over the study period. The newspaper "has suffered great vicissitudes; employee conflicts, economic crisis, official persecution and hostilities and envy...but in each case it has maintained itself as an important and dignified newspaper."²⁶

El Norte in Monterrey was known in 1972 for its yellow journalism and for having been the voice of a wealthy industrialist; it was not known for its objectivity, one critic said.²⁷ However, by the 1970s, the newspaper had modernized and begun to reflect the views of business, particularly the preference of private capitalism over state business. Nuevo Leon, where Monterrey is located, has become one of Mexico's wealthier and least PRI-dominated states. In 1976, only 74% of the presidential votes went to the PRI candidate, compared with 85.1% nationwide. Conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) dominates in Nuevo Leon to a greater degree than in most parts of Mexico.

Mexican graduate students at the University of Texas had no difficulty identifying editorials because most were marked "Editorial" and others were distinguishable by their multi-column format and placement on a marked page. Only columns run on the editorial page or the op-ed page were included. Since the study's main purpose was to determine whether Mexican newspapers criticize top government officials and since editorials are the part of the newspaper where the periodical's official position is explicitly pre-

²⁰ The newspapers in the study are: *Excelsior*, *Novedades* and *El Nacional* from Mexico City; *El Informador* of Guadalajara; *El Dictamen* of Veracruz and *El Norte* of Monterrey.

²¹ Mario Rojas Avendano, "El Periodismo," *Cincuenta años de revolucion*, Vol. 4, Mexico, 1962, p. 626.

²² Julio Rio Reynaga, "Anotaciones sobre los medios de informacion en Mexico," *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Politicas*, Año 18 (July-September 1972), p. 6.

²³ Rojas Avendano, *op. cit.*, p. 630.

²⁴ Rio Reynaga, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁵ Miguel Velasco Valdés, *Historia del periodismo mexicano* (Mexico: Apuntes, 1955), p. 200.

²⁶ Velasco Valdes, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

²⁷ Rio Reynaga, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

sented, editorials and editorial columns were analyzed.

The coding sheet asked the analysts to specify what official was the object of commentary and to indicate the intensity of that comment on a seven-point scale. One represented the strongest criticism level, four was neutral (a balance of criticism and praise or no criticism or praise) and seven represented the strongest praise. Criticism was defined as a negative evaluative statement; criticism was often telegraphed by such terms as "ill advised" or "destructive." Praise was defined as a positive evaluative statement and was often accompanied by such words as "wise" and "timely." In some cases, a government official was not specifically criticized but was linked in an article to a negative policy or behavior; if the impression left of the official was negative, coders were instructed to indicate a low degree of criticism (mild criticism, a "3," or strong criticism, a "2"). The same procedure was applied to the praise categories.

The initial coder-reliability test between two coders produced a Pearson's r of .71; retraining as a third coder was trained brought correlations between each of the three pairs to .81. Rarely did coders disagree on whether an article was critical or laudatory; most differences were of one step on the scale. One coder might mark an article a "2" (strong criticism) while another marked it "3" (mild criticism).

Altogether, 1,425 editorials and columns were analyzed. Inability to obtain many issues of two of the regional newspapers, *El Norte* and *El Dictamen*, reduced the sample. However, data are identified by newspaper in most tables that follow, and the data are not tested for statistical significance. Thus the effect of sample deficiencies is minimized.

Findings

Several surprises and some confirmations occurred. Criticism in *Excelsior* under Garcia Scherer was much greater than that in the other two Mexico City newspapers. Criticism in *Excelsior* jumped from 39% under the Diaz Ordaz presidency to 56% under Echeverria, the presi-

dent rumored to have backed the ouster of Garcia Scherer (see Table 1). Criticism dropped to 42% under Lopez Portillo, whether because the new editor was less critical or because the newspaper was more closely attuned to the new president's philosophy.

Generally, newspapers were at their least critical under Lopez Mateos, one of the more liberal and socially conscious presidents over the study period. Conservative *Novedades*, however, was at its most critical under the charismatic Lopez Mateos. In 1960, coders found only three articles dealing with the president although all 10 issues were included in the analysis; the mean score of the articles was 3, the lowest annual mean for *Novedades* except for 1978.

It is apparent from Tables 1 and 2 that two of the regional newspapers, *El Informador* and *El Norte*, were more critical than even *Excelsior* during many years. Perhaps the geographic separation from the national capital lessens the fear of recrimination, or perhaps these traditionally independent cities simply have markedly different political philosophies from that of the president. *El Dictamen* in Veracruz, where Aleman was state governor before he became president, was much less critical during the time of this study than either of the other regional newspapers. Apparently this newspaper's philosophy is more closely attuned to the prevailing political line than it was under its legendary founder, Juan Malpica Silva, who was once jailed for his opposition to the federal government.

El Nacional, not surprisingly, had the most articles in the analysis but published the least criticism, while *El Informador*, *El Norte* and *Excelsior* published a greater share of criticism than their share of the sample (see Table 3). These data establish that Mexican newspapers, contrary to many observers, publish criticism of the president and of cabinet officials.

The newspapers treat the president more gently than cabinet ministers, but the president is the recipient of a great deal of criticism. Of the 975 articles analyzed that focused on the president, 4%

TABLE 1

Percent of Newspaper Articles Critical of Government Officials
By Newspapers^a and Presidential Term

President	Nature of Commentary		1	2	3	4	5	6	Articles n ^b
1951-1952	Criticism		69	14	0	63	44	75	
Aleman	Praise		31	86	0	37	56	25	
		N	13	17	0	15	9	8	62
1953-1958	Criticism		33	2	0	65	0	36	
Ruiz Cortines	Praise		67	98	100	35	100	64	
		N	63	50	61	31	8	9	222
1959-1964	Criticism		21	20	0	27	35	21	
Lopez Mateos	Praise		79	80	100	73	65	79	
		N	94	48	57	17	19	15	250
1965-1970	Criticism		39	5	0	29	14	33	
Diaz Ordaz	Praise		61	95	100	71	86	67	
		N	48	62	41	21	21	3	196
1971-1976	Criticism		56	12	2	61	9	91	
Echeverria	Praise		44	88	98	39	91	9	
		N	75	86	94	38	31	10	334
1977-1980	Criticism		42	17	0	48	50	81	
Lopez Portillo	Praise		58	83	100	52	50	19	
		N	36	77	112	20	16	31	292
Total articles examined			329	340	365	142	104	76	1,356
Total Critical Percentage			39	12	2	50	23	61	23
Total Critical n			128	42	2	76	25	54	327

^a1. *Excelsior* 3. *El Nacional* 5. *El Dictamen*
2. *Novedades* 4. *El Informador* 6. *El Notre*

^b69 neutral articles were excluded from these computations.

were coded as "strongest criticism." Altogether, 15% of commentary on the president was critical, compared with 35% for cabinet officials. Forty-seven percent of the commentary on the president was at the strongest praise level, compared with 31% of the commentary on cabinet ministers. The expectation that columns would be more critical than editorials was confirmed.

Of the editorials commenting on the president, 10% were critical; of columns, 23% were critical. Of those dealing with cabinet officials, 28% of editorials but 50% of columns were critical.

The remaining research question dealt with writing style, whether criticism was direct or indirect. Coders were instructed to mark literary allusions or other opaque

criticisms as "indirect." Table 6 indicates that 36% of the criticism of the president was direct, compared with 57% of critical commentary on cabinet ministers. Thus, two-thirds of critical commentary on the president is, as popular knowledge says, "indirect." At the praise end of the spectrum, two-thirds of presidential commentary is direct while a slightly greater proportion of cabinet commentary is direct. Therefore, it appears that Mexican writers are not afraid to write directly about the president but that they are more likely to be direct when praising than when criticizing.

Conclusion

Contrary to popular belief, Mexican newspapers, in the judgment of Mexican readers, criticize the president while he is

TABLE 2

Mean Criticism Score by Newspaper and Year^a

Year	Newspaper ^b							n
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1951	3.00	5.44	--	3.20	4.33	1.33	3.78	23
1952	3.43	5.07	--	3.18	4.33	3.80	4.07	45
1953	4.62	5.38	6.90	5.20	--	5.67	5.51	39
1954	5.67	5.77	6.43	4.71	--	3.00	5.75	61
1955	4.65	5.72	6.44	2.50	--	5.00	4.98	47
1956	4.14	6.80	6.78	5.33	5.72	5.00	5.51	43
1957	4.86	5.67	6.50	2.25	--	3.00	5.07	30
1958	5.86	6.13	6.90	2.33	--	3.40	5.28	36
1959	6.35	6.86	7.00	5.00	--	4.70	6.15	53
1960	6.21	3.00	7.00	4.38	5.00	4.17	5.38	45
1961	5.17	5.25	6.90	4.50	6.25	6.00	5.65	46
1962	4.40	3.83	6.33	0.00	5.14	--	4.92	37
1963	5.80	6.09	6.88	5.40	4.50	--	5.98	41
1964	5.08	6.67	6.90	4.25	3.00	--	5.74	34
1965	5.18	6.00	7.00	5.80	6.33	--	6.06	36
1966	6.75	7.00	6.75	6.00	--	4.33	6.38	24
1967	4.80	6.55	6.40	3.60	4.25	--	5.43	30
1968	4.56	6.67	6.33	3.50	5.67	--	5.50	26
1969	4.87	5.47	6.43	4.33	6.50	--	5.48	46
1970	4.29	6.58	6.80	4.67	6.44	--	6.11	56
1971	4.38	6.50	6.50	5.00	6.60	--	5.24	46
1972	4.13	6.00	5.67	6.00	4.17	--	5.22	37
1973	3.29	6.00	6.35	3.33	7.00	--	5.12	51
1974	3.33	5.17	6.27	1.00	7.00	--	4.70	40
1975	3.83	6.00	6.30	2.83	6.33	--	5.02	64
1976	3.90	5.13	6.63	3.81	6.00	--	5.40	81
1977	3.33	5.04	6.26	2.56	3.70	3.50	4.61	74
1978	4.67	2.52	6.31	4.50	4.60	2.33	5.18	84
1979	5.17	5.45	6.45	6.67	--	1.91	5.21	62
1980	4.56	5.65	6.39	4.80	7.00	2.43	5.30	88

^a1 represents strong criticism, 7 represents strong praise.

^b1. *Excelsior* 3. *El Nacional* 5. *El Dictamen* 7. Average
 2. *Novedades* 4. *El Informador* 6. *El Norte*

in office. The six newspapers analyzed for this study have been critical, to varying degrees, over the 30 years of this study. The trend seems to be toward more criticism. Cabinet ministers are the objects of

criticism more frequently than are presidents, but 15% of commentary on presidents was critical. Likewise, criticism of the president is more likely to be indirect than is criticism of cabinet officials.

TABLE 3

Percent of Sample
and Percent of Criticism by Newspaper

Newspaper	Percent of Sample	Percent of Criticism
<i>Excelsior</i>	23.9	39.0
<i>Novedades</i>	25.5	12.8
<i>El Nacional</i>	26.0	.6
<i>El Informador</i>	18.7	23.2
<i>El Dictamen</i>	7.6	7.6
<i>El Norte</i>	6.2	16.5
	99.9	99.7

n = 1,425

TABLE 4

Percent of Commentary
On President and Cabinet Ministers
At Each Level of Criticism

Criticism Level	President	Cabinet Ministers
Strongest Criticism	4	10
Strong Criticism	4	12
Faint Criticism	7	13
Neutral	6	4
Faint Praise	12	11
Mild Praise	20	21
Strongest Praise	47	31
	100%	100%
	(n=975)	(n=276)

(Missing data: 174)

TABLE 5

Percent of Editorials and Columns at Each Level of Criticism
By Object of Commentary

Criticism Level	President		Cabinet		Other	
	Edit.	Col.	Edit.	Col.	Edit.	Col.
Strongest criticism	2	7	6	18	11	12
Strong criticism	2	7	9	18	17	15
Faint criticism	6	9	13	14	17	18
Neutral	2	10	3	5	3	2
Faint praise	10	13	12	7	7	12
Mild praise	21	19	22	17	19	12
Strongest praise	57	34	35	21	27	29
	(n=543)	(n=431)	(n=189)	(n=87)	(n=108)	(n=66)

(Missing data: 1)

TABLE 6

Percent of Criticism and Praise That Is Direct and Indirect

	Critical			Neutral			Praise		
	Pres.	Cab.	Other	Pres.	Cab.	Other	Pres.	Cab.	Other
Direct	36	57	63	67	71	33	62	68	62
Indirect	64	43	37	33	24	67	38	32	38
Total N	153	96	78	45	7	4	763	167	91

(n=1,404)

(Missing data: 21)