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# Conflict Resolution and the Prestige Press: *El Universal* and the Mexican Oil Crisis, 1938

By Michael Leslie

In a test suggested in part of Galtung's theories of national press performance, this content analysis of a prestige Mexican newspaper's coverage of the 1938 nationalization of foreign oil interests found that the newspaper at first retreated to a government-support position, but within two months had regained a more independent stance. The study therefore finds some support for Galtung's argument about elite influences on the press, prestige newspaper like *El Universal de Mexico*, during times of national crisis.

►Galtung's<sup>1</sup> model of conflict resolution suggests that when one sector of the elite has ascendancy over another, that sector's statements and positions will be more frequently represented in the elite<sup>2</sup> press. Coser<sup>3</sup> refers to the same phenomenon when he says that movement toward resolution of conflict is evidenced when statements of opposing sectors appear in the press in a balanced way.

Similarly, Galtung says, the attributes of the elite press, i.e., its press characteristics, will change as the power and influence of the ascendant group within the elite increases. Thus, when government influence is ascendant, the elite newspaper will look more like a government newspaper. When business or labor is ascendant, the elite paper will look more like a business or labor paper.

In general, according to this model, during a period of conflict, the prestige paper should take on more of the attributes of the locus of political and social power of the society in which it operates.

The Mexican Oil Nationalization Conflict of 1938<sup>4</sup> in which the Mexican government took over the United States, British and Dutch oil companies operating in Mexico, presents an opportunity to test the applicability of Galtung's model of conflict resolution to the prestige press. During this conflict, foreign and Mexican business interests vied for ascendancy against an increasingly vociferous and demanding labor movement, mediated by the nationalist government of Lazaro Cardenas.<sup>5</sup>

First, both elite Mexican and foreign business interests were entangled in the oil dispute<sup>6</sup> and they constituted part of the prestige press'

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constituency and readership. As advertisers, they were also a significant source of revenue for the prestige newspapers and could probably command some editorial considerations. They also had the money to make "embutes" or payments to journalists in exchange for favorable coverage.<sup>7</sup>

Second, labor was led by the powerful union organizer, Vicente Lombardo Toledano. In fact, the presidential decree which finally nationalized the foreign oil companies may have been forced on Cardenas by the militant union leader under threat of a nationwide strike if he did not comply.<sup>8</sup>

Third, it was crucial for the Cardenas government that its own views on how to handle the conflict prevail, to prevent the fragmentation of the coalition on which the prestige of his Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the stability of Mexican society, and indeed the authority of Cardenas himself was based.<sup>9</sup>

The Mexican government has always had the ability to restrict newsprint, credit and government subsidies, eliminating any need for direct government censorship or control over prestige press content.<sup>10</sup> Given the historical propensity of the Mexican press to align itself with the apparatus of political power,<sup>11</sup> the Mexican prestige press should have been responsive to President Cardenas' views.

It was thus hypothesized for this study that Mexican prestige newspaper *El Universal* would align itself with government during the oil conflict and that this alignment would be reflected in one of the following ways:

1. During the conflict, *El Universal* would retreat from prestige to governmental journalism, or
2. During the conflict, *El Universal* would exhibit the attributes of both prestige and governmental journalism.

### A Brief Description of *El Universal*

Following the tumultuous period of the Mexican Revolution (1914-1917), Felix F. Pavalicini founded in Mexico City *El Universal*, a morning newspaper which was to become one of Mexico's two greatest dailies. Its rival was *Excelsior*, patterned after the *New York Times*.<sup>12</sup>

In politics, *El Universal* was conservative. It dedicated itself to the reconstruction of Mexican society.<sup>13</sup> The *International Yearbook of*

1. Johan Galtung, "Institutionalized Conflict Resolution: A Theoretical Paradigm," *Journal of Peace Research*, 2:348-397 (1965).

2. Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Symbols of Democracy*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1952), p. 29; John C. Merrill, *The Elite Press*. (New York: Pitman Publishing Co., 1968).

3. Lewis A. Coe, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1956), p. 49.

4. Lorenzo Meyer, *Mexico y Los Estados Unidos en el Conflicto Petrolero (1917-1942)* (Mexico: Colegio de Mexico, 1972).

5. Nathaniel and Sylvia Weyl, *The Reconquest of Mexico: The Years of Lázaro Cardenas*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

6. Merrill Rippy, *Oil and the Mexican Revolution*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972).

7. Marvin Alesky, *Latin American Media: Guidance and Censorship*, (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), pp. 28-50.

8. Robert Paul Million, *Vicente Lombardo Toledano—Mexican Marxist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); Marjorie Ruth Clarke, *Organized Labor in Mexico*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1934), p. 101-103).

9. Frank Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964).

10. E. W. Sharp, "Mexico," *Journalism Quarterly*, 15:2228-229 (1938).

11. Robert N. Pierce, *Keeping the Flame: Media and Government in Latin America* (New York: Hastings House, 1979).

12. Henry Lepidus, *The History of Mexican Journalism*. (*Journalism Series 49*) (Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Bulletin, 1928).

13. Felix F. Pavalicini, *Mi Vida Revolucionaria* (Mexico: Ediciones Botas, 1937).

*Editor & Publisher, 1927*, says *El Universal* had a circulation of 60,000 while *Excelsior* had 40,000. Both papers had Associated Press franchises and the services of various syndicates, in addition to correspondents throughout Mexico, the United States and other parts of the world.

In summary, *El Universal* was a Mexican elite newspaper, comparable to other recognized prestige newspapers of the time, such as *Le Monde* and *The New York Times*.

### Method

The two research hypotheses were tested by content analyzing the "prestige" and "governmental" attributes of oil-related themes in *El Universal*, every-other-day three months before and three months after the oil nationalization decree of March 18, 1938. In structural terms, a theme is an assertion, a statement, a proposition, an idea, an argument, or an aspect of an issue, including headlines, subheads and leads.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the theme was understood as subsumed under a group of manifest assertions about the actors in the oil conflict. Those actors included the Mexican government, labor unions, Mexican political and administrative bodies, foreign governments, foreign oil companies, Mexican businesses and the Mexican public.

Prestige or governmental press attributes were based on definitions offered by Pool.<sup>15</sup> The scheme consisted of 17 prestige press attributes, grouped into four categories, and 5 governmental attributes, grouped into one category. The categories were defined as follows:

1. INDEPENDENCE (different for government in voice, variety of elite expression, no editorial decision on news coverage, above nationalism, presents opinion of individual reporter).

2. MODERATION (avoids sensationalism, does not lead opposition, moderate in tone, not sharply against government, presents conservative business viewpoint).

3. POLICY ORIENTATION (political/economic news, elite and non-elite policy statements, gives consideration to basic issues, considers all sides of the issue).

4. SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT (urges cooperation with government, editorially states government policy, supports government in foreign affairs).

5. GOVERNMENTALISM (closed to non-governmental views, little comprehensive discussion, propagandist for government, bulletin board for government elites, vehicle for indoctrination, agitation, and dogma, wary of deviant ideologies).

Headlines, leads and subheads dealing with the conflict were coded for their "prestige" or "governmental" press attributes. Frequencies were then tabulated for each of the five categories during the pre-, mid- and post-crisis periods.

For example, the headline "Mexico Will Defend Her Honor," described the Mexican government's response to oil company threats of military intervention. It exhibits the governmental attribute of propagandizing for the government and was thus coded 'governmental.' The

14. Richard W. Budd, Robert K. Thorp and Lewis Donahue, *Content Analysis of Communications* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

15. Ithiel de Sola Pool, *The Prestige Press: A Comparative Study of Political Symbols* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), p. 62.

headline "Foreign Press Questions Propriety of Expropriation," presents the prestige press attribute of allowing for variety of elite expression and was thus coded 'independent'. This coding procedure was followed with each of the themes contained in the sample.

Themes were multiple-coded, according to the number of attributes they contained. Two hundred and nine themes were identified and coded. Ten percent of all themes were randomly selected and recoded by an independent coder as a reliability check. The percentage of inter-coder reliability obtained was 88%.

Comparisons were then made between the frequency distribution of these attributes before and after the March 18, 1938 declaration, to analyze the overall change in prestige and governmental press attributes exhibited by *El Universal* and to test the two research hypotheses regarding prestige press performance in times of conflict.

## Findings

As seen in Table 1, the performance of *El Universal* in covering oil-related issues prior to the decree was in line with Pool's definition of the prestige press, i.e., one that demonstrates editorial independence, is moderate in its discussion of issues, is policy-oriented and supports government. Themes reflecting governmentalism were outnumbered by non-governmental themes. In short, *El Universal* prior to the nationalization decree fulfilled the requirement for classification as a "prestige paper" in its coverage of oil-related news.

Table 1  
Percentage Of *El Universal* Themes With Prestige and Governmental Attributes, Before and After Oil Nationalization Decree

Themes	Before Decree n=35	1 Month After n=107	2 Months After n=42	3 Months After n=25	$\chi^2$	p
Independence	88.6	65.4	78.6	92.0	12.9	.01
Moderation	77.1	82.2	95.2	100.0	10.7	.01
Policy Orientation	74.3	49.5	73.8	64.0	11.4	.01
Support for Government	42.9	86.0	76.2	60.0	28.0	.001
Governmentalism	45.5	66.4	71.4	48.0	7.9	.05

*El Universal* declined somewhat in its "prestigeness" at the peak of the crisis, losing some of its independence and policy orientation and taking on more of the attributes of a governmental press. It also became more moderate, abstaining from criticizing the government's decision in any way and in fact supporting President Cardenas' handling of the issue. However, by the end of the third month following the crisis, *El Universal* had regained its independence, eschewing governmentalism and balancing its support for government. In fact, it demonstrated remarkable resilience in recovering the prestige press attributes it exhibited regarding oil-related themes prior to the nationalization decree.

## Discussion

During the first month following the nationalization decree, *El Universal* showed a marked decrease in the number of independent and policy-oriented oil-themes, with an increase in those lacking these char-

acteristics. On the other hand, themes supportive of government and showing moderation increased while those without such attributes declined. There was also a marked increase in the number of themes with governmental attributes.

Because the prestige press was expected to be supportive of government in foreign affairs, the increase in themes with this attribute is not surprising. Similarly, because of the gravity of the issue of nationalization, moderate treatment of oil-related themes by the prestige press also was anticipated.

The observed decline in policy-orientation, the increase in governmental themes and the decline in editorial independence support our hypothesis that the prestige press would converge toward becoming a "governmental" press during a time of conflict.

During month two following the nationalization decree, *El Universal* began recovering its prestige press attributes, demonstrating in its oil-related themes an increase in editorial independence, an increase in moderation and an increase in policy orientation. The decline in editorial supportiveness for government was offset by an increase in governmentalism. The continued presence of a large degree of governmentalism in oil themes continued to lend support to our hypothesis of prestige press, governmental press convergence in time of crisis.

During the third month following the decree, the number of oil themes demonstrating independence and moderation continued to grow, while *El Universal* became more balanced in its support for government. The observed decline in governmentalism indicates continued prestige press recovery of pre-crisis values and does not support the hypothesis that the prestige press would become a governmental press during a time of conflict.

## Conclusion

The Mexican government, the oil companies, the oil workers union and other influence groups all attempted to influence oil related coverage in *El Universal* during the oil nationalization conflict of 1938.

The Mexican government and the oil workers had access to powerful tools for influencing *El Universal's* content during the conflict, since under the Mexican political system, the very existence of a free press was severely constrained. The government's ability to restrict newsprint, credit and government advertising subsidies eliminated any need for direct government censorship or control of *El Universal's* oil-related content.

The ability of organized Mexican labor to strike or boycott non-compliant newspapers and the support given organized labor by President Lázaro Cárdenas must have also tempered the willingness of *El Universal* to express unpopular views regarding the expropriation issue.

*El Universal's* editors and reporters were probably inclined to write about the expropriation issue from a nationalistic perspective. After all, *El Universal* was a child of the Mexican Revolution. Its founder and his staff were products of the revolutionary era and were probably partial to the achievement of nationalist goals, even to the detriment of the purely journalistic norms of fairness and impartiality.

Given that context, it is not surprising to find that the prestige newspaper *El Universal* lost some of its "prestige" attributes at the height of

the conflict and took on more "governmental" attributes. The expropriation of foreign oil companies by the Mexican government was a broadly popular action, widely supported by the Mexican people. One would have expected *El Universal* to support the government, given what we know about the social and political function of the prestige press<sup>16</sup> and the close government-press articulation obtaining in Mexico at that time.

What is noteworthy about the performance of *El Universal* during the conflict is that it regained its prestige attributes so rapidly once the zenith of the conflict had passed. It did not remain governmentalized, but reasserted the prestige values of independence, moderation, balanced support for government and policy orientation as soon as the conflict subsided. Thus, it demonstrated that the prestige press in a revolutionary polity can both retain its integrity and contribute to the process of conflict resolution. In short, it can operate as a fourth estate even in conflict conditions.

16. George Gerbner, "Press Perspectives in World Communication: A Pilot Study," *Journalism Quarterly* 38: 313-322 (1961); Ithiel de Sola Pool, *The Prestige Papers: A Survey of their Editorials*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1952); Wilbur Schramm, *One Day in the World's Press: Fourteen Great Newspapers on a Day on Crisis*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1959).