

# Modern Mexico A Look at Media-Government Relations

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Relations between the media and the government have a history of tension, knowing silences and also violations. Reviewing them can help us understand why the media has certain sociopolitical characteristics and its messages are structured the way they are.

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## MEXICO'S HISTORY OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

The bases for modern journalism began to be established during the Mexican Revolution, which in its first phase guaranteed freedom of the press. Newspapers with revolutionary ideology emerged and those that opposed Madero were tolerated. During this period, official mouthpieces for the different revolutionary leaders were created.<sup>1</sup> As of

1913, a tendency began for the press to align itself with particular political parties. *El Universal*, founded in 1916, and *Excélsior*, first published in 1917, both still in circulation today, were the first great national newspapers produced along industrial lines; journalists became full-time employees and a division of labor was introduced that included editors, directors, information chiefs, editorialists, columnists and reporters.

During the administrations of Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, some newspapers were censored or closed down. In 1926, a serious rift in government-press relations occurred when *Excélsior* and *El Universal* began to espouse an editorial line different from the government's about the conflict between church and state: they supported the Cristero movement, which expressed the Catholic Church's social influence, as opposed to that of the secularist state. In 1927, during the conflict, newspaper articles were subjected to strict censorship.<sup>2</sup>

As of 1929, government press policy changed. With the foundation of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR), the forerunner of today's Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the press was used for the system's corporatist process. According to Fátima Fernández Christlieb, 1929 was the crucial year not only because of the foundation of *El Nacional*, the fledgling PNR's official voice,<sup>3</sup> but also because newspapers that belonged to the established press were brusquely forced into line by the government. This was the case of *Excélsior* in 1929, during the Calles administration, and in 1976 under Luis Echeverría, and that of *Novedades* in 1944 when Miguel Alemán was the Minister of the Interior.

President Lázaro Cárdenas, for his part, broadened out the instruments for controlling the press: he established the Autonomous Press and Publicity Department to centralize state information to the press. His successors would reinforce this control: Manuel Ávila Camacho, through the General Information Office, controlled by the Ministry of the Interior, and Miguel Alemán, through the ministries' press offices. Through government control of production and distribution of newsprint, Cárdenas and later presidents discovered a decisive form of influence. The monopoly on paper production in Mexico has precedents that illustrate the competition among the great news-

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papers of that period. With the creation of the company Paper Producer and Importer (PIPSA) and the Autonomous Press and Publicity Department, Cárdenas created two new channels through which he could exercise influence over the media.

During the Ávila Camacho administration (1940-1946), then-Minister of the Interior Miguel Alemán engineered a coup at the daily *Novedades*, founded in 1936 by Ignacio P. Herre-rías, to use it for his political ambitions as a presidential candidate. Just as Calles had with *Excélsior*, when he was president, Alemán took over *Novedades*, which at that point became his official mouthpiece.<sup>4</sup>

In 1949 under Alemán, the first journalism school, the Carlos Septién

School of Journalism, was founded. "Special" and regular payments to journalists were also instituted at the same time that critical journalists were the victims of open repression and "accidents."<sup>5</sup> Paradoxically, in 1952, Alemán felt it was his destiny to designate June 7 as "Freedom of the Press Day," which continues to be celebrated until today.

Repeated incidents of repression against journalists and publications occurred under the administration of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970). After *Excélsior* criticized the 1968 massacre of Tlatelolco, in 1969 its building was the target for a dynamite bomb. The government accused

the left of the attack, even though most accounts lay the responsibility at its own door. In this same context, employees of the Communist newspaper *La Voz de México* (The Voice of Mexico) were arrested on July 26, 1968, when state security forces occupied and destroyed its printing presses. Prior to that, in 1966, the magazine *Izquierda política* (Political Left) and its editor, Manuel Marcué Pardiñas, had already been the victims of repression.

During the first phase of the Echeverría administration (1970-1976), established newspapers enjoyed almost unrestricted freedom of press. The alternative press, specifically the weekly *¿Por qué?* (Why?), and *Excélsior*, however, were treated very differently, as we shall see.

The administrations of Luis Echeverría and José López Portillo (1976-1982) witnessed significant movements and changes in the Mexican media. State participation in the media grew and the supposed “mixed” model of communications was formalized. At the same time, the practical monopoly of private television was consolidated and its influence extended to the broadest variety of cultural expressions and entertainment. On the other hand, attempts at political reform and a broader political participation of alternative forces questioned as never before the structure and function of communications mechanisms in a country where, at the same time, the right to information was formally established,

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a right whose practical meaning is yet to be determined.

It was not until 1975 that the first bill about the right to information was introduced into Congress; it was an attempt to regulate repression against the press and to modernize the communications law which was so ambiguous that it lent itself to different interpretations.

It is fundamental to mention here the conflict inside *Excelsior* in 1976 when the paper stepped up its criticism of corruption among union leaders and governors. After being expelled from the paper, Editor-in-chief Julio Scherer and some of his staff, as well as staff from the CISA press agency founded the weekly *Proceso* (Process) in

November of that year. A year later, another group of former *Excelsior* contributors and staff headed up by Manuel Becerra Acosta founded the daily *Unomásuno* (One-Plus-One) in November 1977, a newspaper that was a valuable, critical source of information during the López Portillo administration.<sup>6</sup>

The López Portillo administration was very tolerant at first, but government offices’ bribing journalists represented a significant attack on an unrestricted freedom of press. When the economic crisis broke out openly in 1982 and reports surfaced about bad management and corruption in the Mexican oil company Pemex, *Proceso* attacked the president directly. This

time the government sanctioned the magazine by withdrawing all its advertising. That same year, the opposition magazine *Política* (Politics), the radio program *Opinión Pública* (Public Opinion) and the communications nongovernmental organization Cencos were all the object of government reprisals. It was at the end of the López Portillo administration that the Mexican Constitution was amended to include an eight-word reference to the communications media: “The State shall guarantee the right to information.”

From the beginning of his administration, Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) publicly proclaimed that freedom of expression was one of the most dearly held freedoms of our democra-

tic system and that it would be maintained unfettered, free of pressures and restrictions. In his speeches, De la Madrid repeated that without a free, responsible press, there was no true democracy and that freedom of opinion was not something to be bargained over or bought. Actually, many facts reveal the very deficient conditions in which journalists had to work. Suffice it to mention the number of journalists murdered: 6 were killed during Echeverría’s presidency; 12, under López Portillo; 24, under De la Madrid; and 50 under Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In 1986 the offices of Publicaciones Llergo, publisher of the magazine *Impacto* (Impact), which in February of that year had put out a supplement entitled *1985: un año trágico para México* (1985: A Tragic Year for Mexico) were raided. The company was later attached by the government and editor Mario Sojo and assistant editor Javier Ibarrola forced to resign; the operation finished with the confiscation of the company and its “sale” to a dummy purchaser from the Ministry of the Interior.

The 1988 elections were important for the media. From the beginning of the campaign, it was clear that they would be unique in Mexican political history not only because of social unrest, but because of the gradual awakening of broad political sectors. In January 1988, the National Action Party’s presidential candidate, Manuel J. Clouthier, organized a campaign against *24 Horas* (24 Hours), the pro-government news program broadcast by the private corporation Televisa.

The political role of the written press had declined because of a lack of dynamism and quality in the political material it published with the excep-

tion of a few times (1968, 1985, 1988) when its orientation and content had been questioned. The last of those moments were the elections that brought Carlos Salinas into the presidency. The Salinas administration (1988-1994) was one of the most repressive. He took office amidst one of the greatest political and informational controversies in the history of Mexico since the Revolution and a profound credibility crisis, which extended to the mass media. From the beginning of his administration, he exercised censorship (against Radio Educación and television's Channel 11). There were also pressures and intimidation against reporters from the *Excelsior* and *La Jornada* dailies. With regard to the right to information, this government not only did not move forward, it actually retreated.

During the Salinas administration, 645 attacks against the press were detected; under Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), by 1999, 764 attacks had been perpetrated against the media and journalists to inhibit freedom of expression and information.<sup>7</sup> The figures are of concern because of their magnitude, which shows a framework of aggression and non-compliance of the minimal guarantees universally recognized as necessary for the exercise of freedom of the press and information.

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Despite the deep-rooted nature of the interventionist state model, the 1994 elections offered a chance to

note its limitations. For Alma Rosa de la Selva, the media was overwhelmed by circumstance during the presidential elections; the mechanisms of the relationship between the state and the media, while they ended up being efficient, were slightly blurred, just as journalistic practices were shaken by expectations.<sup>8</sup>

As with any stage of change, the 1994 elections were a good time to see how the media acted, particularly with regard to election day, August 21. For Blanca Aguilar, "*La Jornada* and *Proceso* were definitely the trenches from which [journalism] resisted with dignity before validating the results of the elections. Others (*Excelsior* and *El Universal*) accepted [them] without

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question and without offering alternate information to make comparisons."<sup>9</sup> The nongovernmental organization Civic Alliance's reports pointed out the marked influence of the official Institutional Revolutionary Party in much of the capital's press; however, during the ups and downs of the electoral campaign, attacks on the president and the single-party system stopped being taboo for the press.

The Mexican economic crisis of December 1994, which set off the "Tequila Effect," had sharp repercussions in the media: a drop in investment, layoffs and, in general, severe adjustments that also affected relations with the government. The period of tension demanded a new strategy, which con-

sisted in instituting a healthy practice: monthly press conferences for the reporters covering the presidency. On June 7, 1995, Ernesto Zedillo said he would hold regular press conferences with the aim of the government being more open to the scrutiny of the public. However, after three (in June, July and August) in which he was questioned exhaustively about different issues, he held no more, and he also closed an important institution for presidential communication, the Presidential Chronicle Unit, in charge of writing the history of the chief executive's activities. This unit had had 45 employees, all of whom were laid off.

On June 20, 1996, a decree was issued creating the federal govern-

ment's Press Office, whose aim would be formulating, regulating and orienting government communications policy and establishing relations with domestic and foreign media. This office would foster the liaison between the different federal and state press offices and other public institutions in order to unify strategies and actions. Mexico's political parties called the new institution a dark, dangerous and suspicious instrument of control.

Today a transition to a new state of affairs in communications is unfolding. However, just as in social and cultural matters, protectionist, monopolistic practices continue to exist in the context of a more participatory society and increasingly consistent, better

articulated collective bodies demand a new communications set-up. This would include changing the pro-governmental nature of the public media so that it can truly respond to the interests of society, defining precise norms for access to public information, giving state support to specialized or community publications, creating space in the electronic commercial media for organized social groups and legal recognition for community radio and other media.

The communications policy of President Vicente Fox's first year in office will be a matter for another article. A short look, however, tells us that the relationship is tense and complex, judging by Fox's November complaints about

the media criticizing superficial aspects of his presidency and disregarding the important issues, although there is also a clear tendency to freedom of criticism in the media. **NMM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Nueva Era* supported Francisco I. Madero; *El Imparcial*, Victoriano Huerta; *El Constitucionalista* and *El Demócrata*, Venustiano Carranza; and *El Radical* and *Tierra y Justicia*, Francisco Villa.

<sup>2</sup> For example, President Calles accused journalists Félix F. Palavicini, founder of *El Universal*, and *Excelsior* contributors José Elguero and Victoriano Salado Álvarez of insurrection and ordered their deportation to the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Fátima Fernández Christlieb, *Los medios de difusión masiva en México* (Mexico City: Juan Pablos Editor, 1982), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 104 on.

<sup>5</sup> Karin Bohmann, *Medios de comunicación y sistemas informativos en México* (Mexico City: Conaculta-Alianza Editorial Mexicana, 1989), p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> Verónica Martínez, Angélica Pineda and Omar Martínez, "Recuento de daños a las libertades de expresión y de información en 1999," *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación* 64, Fundación Manuel Buendía (July-August 2000), p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Alma Rosa de la Selva "Transitar hacia el cambio," *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación* 38, Fundación Manuel Buendía (Mexico City), 1995, pp. 33-35.

<sup>9</sup> Blanca Aguilar, "Renacimiento del papel político en la prensa de la coyuntura electoral de 1994," Florence Toussaint, comp., *Democracia y medios de comunicación: un binomio inexplorado* (Mexico City: La Jornada Ediciones-UNAM, 1996), p. 56.