

Bribery, freebies, moonlighting and “media attentions” in post-authoritarian Mexico: perceptions of journalists about ethical behaviour¹

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the type of ethical concerns and principles most associated to the concept of professionalism among Mexican journalists. We argue that the perceptions of Mexican reporters about valid ethical practices emanate from their personal expectations and from their domestic journalistic culture heavily integrated into the political field that stems from a history of passive reporting and collusive press-state relations. We part from the position that the journalistic field and its actors consensually legitimate the rules of the game and the practices considered acceptable and transgressive, against to which each journalists evaluates professional and ethical practice. Thus valid ethical and unethical principles and behaviours stem from the relation between journalists and political structures, their talents as compared to their “un-professional” colleagues, as well as from organizational and occupational culture rather than from the adherence and observance of normative professional frameworks or universal principles.

Specifically, the paper looks at the now infamous widespread practice of bribery or “news for cash”, which for several decades characterized the state-journalist relations during the authoritarian one-party rule. Presenters, reporters, and news managers participating in this study reflect on the context, practices and conditions of bribery, especially those in which they considered bribe to be justified.

Likewise, we examine the conditions in which the practice of “moon-lighting”, especially among journalists who jump between newsrooms and press-offices, is either accepted or viewed as potential conflict of interest. Similarly we explore Mexican journalists’ perceptions on the acceptance of freebies and other “media attention” practices such as paid-for trips and gifts sent by sources, or equipped pressrooms. We examine whether such practices considered as unethical by literature undermine their perceived autonomy or are rather viewed as essential tools for job accomplishment.

The paper finds that while many of these practices are unproblematic for their (often lax) ethical standards, differences do arise among media occupations (editors, reporters, copywriters, news presenters), and between types of media (broadcast vs. print), each of which hold different views on the specific unaccepted practices in their work (plagiarism, uncorroborated information, un-credited audios, etc.). We did find, however, that Mexican journalists do tend to be very self-critical and aware of their overall shortcomings and show a strong willingness to debate and adhere to more realistic and context-bound ethical standards.

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2. Ethics as professionalism

While ‘professionalization’ is a term often associated with education and training, it is the lens by which several scholars have tried to understand journalism. As Weaver and Wilhoit contend, it “is a term journalists often use to describe the excellence to which they aspire” (1996: 12). Traditionally, for an occupation to be regarded as a profession like Medicine or Law, it had to fulfil some requirements, namely: autonomy, service orientation, body of common knowledge, licensing procedures, testing of competence, codes of ethical conduct, unionisation, education programmes and training (Boyd-Barret, 1970; Larson, 1977, cited by Singer, 2003). In the conflicting endeavour to delineate the traits that comparatively define the professional nature of journalism, Western scholars have long examined whether journalism qualifies or not as a profession, and whether the existing traits to define professionalism are still useful (Tunstall, 1970a; Soloski, 1989; Bromley, 1997; Aldridge and Evetts, 2003). Others, instead, have attempted to move beyond the binary craft/profession to suggest that journalism—as an occupation trapped between contrasting spheres and levels of influence: individual, organisational, societal, cultural, political or economic—possesses its own professional expectations, practices and discourses that distinguishes it from other classical professions (Schudson, 1978; Chalaby, 1996; Allan, 1999; Hallin, 2000a; Reese, 2001; Gans, 2007). For example, Mark Deuze (2005: 446–447) identifies universal traits that articulate a “shared occupational ideology among news-workers,” consisting of five ideal or typical elements: (a) to provide a public service; (b) to be impartial, neutral, objective, fair, and credible; (c) ideally to be autonomous, free, and independent in their work; (d) to have a sense of immediacy, actuality, and speed; and (e) to have a sense of ethics, validity, and legitimacy. An overall consensus exists among practitioners and scholars that in journalism, the adherence to and observance of ethical standards are intimately linked to the notion of professionalism and of autonomy.

Concerning variances of occupational autonomy among press models, seminal studies like that of Hallin and Mancini (2004) have attempted to connect the issue of professionalism and the pursuit of ethics with various types of political systems. For example, they propose several variables such as degree of *political parallelism* and *professionalization* to understand the connection between the economic, political and journalistic fields. According to the authors, *political parallelism* strongly influences journalistic roles, values and practices and is best observed when media personnel—such as journalists, editors, columnists—are active in political life, when career paths of journalists are shaped by their political affiliations or when their role orientations and practices are inclined towards an active ‘publicist’ role of influencing public opinion rather than as providers of neutral information. The authors’ *professionalization* variable defines journalists’ commitment towards a public service, examines the degree of journalists’ autonomy and authority on their work, their adherence to professional norms and ethical codes, and their commitment to fact-based and editorial detachment instead of partisan coverage. Conversely, low levels of professionalism correspond with the *instrumentalisation* of journalists who generally lack ethical codes and autonomy, a political rather than journalistic criterion guides their practice and their work serves particular interests rather than the public interest (Hallin and Mancini, 2004: 37).

In this logic, objective and ethical journalists would be professional whereas partisan journalists would be instrumentalised. The authors attribute to the United

States and to a lesser extent to Britain (and generally to the widely known as ‘liberal model of the press’) the lower degree of political parallelism and highest degree of professionalism. In opposition, countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Greece—some of them possessing strong colonial or cultural ties to Latin America—are more likely to display high levels of political parallelism, partisanship and instrumentalisation and therefore low levels of professionalism and ethics (Hallin and Mancini, Hallin and Papathanassopoulos; 2002; see also Hughes and Lawson, 2005).

While this body of literature’s useful contribution has helped to understand variance between degrees of ethical commitment, it also overlooks the possibilities that even in post-authoritarian and partisan journalistic cultures ethical standards of accepted and unaccepted norms exist. It also overlooks the fact that professional and ethical principles are shaped by the individual, organisational and meta-organisational professional expectations. For example, in his critical analysis of newsrooms, John Soloski (1989) identifies professionalism as a managerial instrument of control and as a mechanism for ensuring that journalists operate in a disciplined and relatively standardised fashion. The discursive use of “professionalization” thus serves to alienate or legitimate group and practices or to deal with issues of internal power relations. Nolan (2008) recommends that rather than examining professionalism in relation to the accomplishment of particular traits, the focus should be on the extent to which various parties pursue ‘professionalising’ strategies, and the particular sorts of definitions of professionalism that are assumed, articulated and pursued in journalism. One of such studies attempts to examine ethical orientations as a distinctive domain of journalistic culture. The author, Thomas Hanitzsch (2007), attributes distinctive professional milieus across the world to the intersection of three domains that constitute journalistic culture, one of which is ethical orientations. According to the author, the ethical attitudes about accepted practices are imbued in a polarity of ideal types: *relativism* in ethics focuses on the extent to which individuals base their personal moral philosophies on universal ethical rules. The second dimension, *idealism*, refers to the consequences in the responses to ethical dilemmas. By applying his model of survey studies to journalists across the world, he and his colleagues conclude that country-level, ideological factors and a hierarchy of influences have the greatest impact on journalists’ degrees of idealism and relativistic thinking, rather than a unifying or universal ethical framework (Plaisance, Skewes and Hanitzsch, 2012).

Besides, in most existing literature about journalism ethics, categories of (un) ethical procedures comprise practices such as libel, publishing unverified information, using hidden microphones or cameras, using dubious sources, using personnel documents without permission or paying a source for information. Likewise, using a false identity, disclosing names of rape victims or criminals before the court has made a judgment², making facts or stories up, suppressing facts, using confidential business or government information without reference are also mentioned (Weaver and Wilhoit,

² In a context of growing drug cartel violence, journalist Marco Lara Klahr (2011) has endlessly campaigned for sensible reporting that avoids violations to human rights in ordinary court and judiciary reporting and media coverage of crime stories. He criticises journalists’ over reliance on official information that goes uncorroborated and unquestioned. He particularly reproaches the inquisitorial approach of both the police and the reporter in over-exposing and exhibiting detainees and crime suspects and for assuming –and reporting as such—that such suspects are automatically guilty without a previous trial or supporting evidence, or without questioning police methods or providing context about trial procedures, all for the sake of sensational coverage of crime stories, and for the dehumanisation of drug cartel victims and suspects, a staple of Mexican popular press and culture .

1996; Weaver, 1998; see also SPJ, 1996; Harcup, 2002). Fewer works, however, explicitly refer to collusion and bribery as hallmarks of unethical behaviour, perhaps reflecting the fact that the most dominant literature stems from countries where those practices were not the rule.

Furthermore, while the link between professionalism, ethics and autonomy is often taken for granted in literature, many key studies have found (Tunstall, 1970b, 1971; Sigal, 1973; Shoemaker and Reese, 1996) that despite journalists' claim to remain largely autonomous from government interference, or to work on news stories that unveil wrongdoing, it's ultimately procedures and routines strongly connected to bureaucratic procedures that heavily shape the newsgathering process (Harrison, 2000). Waisbord, for instance, argues that "while adversarial reporting requires the willingness of news organizations to be at arm's length from the state, newsgathering routines tie them at the waist" (2000: 94). In fact, an important strand of research pays particular attention to the interplay between individual agency of journalists and the political structures –be it political actors, bureaucratic organisations, spokespeople, print material or public releases. Its aim is to grasp their shifting relations of power and journalists' choice of source in relation to hierarchy of credibility. As the allocation of reporters to cover source beats nearly always mirrors the structure of governmental branches, autonomy becomes a professional principle often unattainable if the "information flows between political elites and news journalists [is] largely channelled and structured through the architecture of the state" (Manning, 2001: 108). This theoretical approach views the political field as essential to the news-making process assuming that politicians and journalists influence one another. As Schudson asserts, "the significance of studies of reporter/source interaction lies not only in detailing the dynamics of news production but in evaluating the power of media institutions as such" (Schudson, 2002: 253; see also Cook, 1998).

Many of these studies also implicitly interrogate notions of professional autonomy, the neutral position and distance of the reporter in relation to sources and informants. Schudson notes that study after study has proven that "the story of journalism, on a day-to-day basis, is the story of the interaction of reporters and officials" (Schudson, 1997: 14). His observation that the bureaucrat provides a reliable and steady source of news, and thus remaining close to such a source is to the advantage of the journalist, counters many of the classic accounts of journalistic autonomy as the essential ingredient of ethics. Other studies within this approach have concluded that powerful sources succeed in influencing the news agenda setting and their version of events, becoming 'primary definers' (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clark, Roberts: 1978) of news. Elite-sources are more likely to gain media coverage and access as their machinery understands media procedures and is able to mobilise more human and financial resources than non-elite sources such as NGO's or single individuals (Manning, 2001).

Elsewhere we have argued that Mexican journalists, like their peers across the world, struggle to materialise the normative principles of professionalism and ethics in actual practice, and thus their application and even their conception are subjective and often reflect personal self-projections and expectations in relation to their immediate environment (Márquez Ramírez, 2005; 2012a; 2012b). In Mexico, journalism ethics is taught and vastly examined in stylebooks, practical handbooks and deontological treaties, often as philosophical principles and standards to guide the occupation across Hispanic countries (Aznar and Villanueva, 2000; Restrepo, 2004; Riva Palacio, 1998; 2005; Martínez, 2009). However, very few studies attempt to examine the ethical principles of working journalists and much less of their practical assimilation in the context of an authoritarian political culture. However, as we argue in this paper, the

adherence to ethical principles in Mexico is strongly connected to a journalistic culture trapped in contesting forces of change, continuity and ambiguity stemming from a long-standing authoritarian journalistic culture. Salient features of complicit press-state relations were the newsroom's insufficient financial and editorial distance from political structures and actors, which in turn yielded in sycophantic coverage to the president, officialism, passive newsgathering and a long tradition of corruption and complicity. Many of these features have not been totally eroded –but actually intensified—with forces such as commercialism or political democratisation, despite optimistic authors claiming otherwise (Lawson, 2002; Wallis, 2004; Hughes, 2006).

3. Mexican journalism in context: the making of an authoritarian journalistic culture

Mexican press development contrasts with that of the United States and other Western countries in that it never experienced a rapid process of industrialisation and mass readership, a clear shift towards commercialism or the 'professionalization' of the journalistic occupation via technological advances or political neutrality (Allan, 1997; Hallin, 2000a; Schudson, 2001, 2005). Instead, throughout most of its history Mexican press remained consistently *instrumentalised* either by contesting political factions, or later by the single-party authoritarian system, displaying high levels of *political parallelism*, to use Hallin and Mancini's (2004) terms. The state-press relations impacted its culture of reporting significantly: as political scientist Chappell Lawson aptly notes, "a web of subsidies, concessions, bribes, and prerequisites created a captive media establishment that faithfully reflected ruling party priorities" (2002: 173).

Without the need of being formally and officially intervened by the State – indeed editors and publishers frequently proclaimed to enjoy freedom and independence (See Martínez S., 2005)—Mexican media received enormous governmental benefits which created a culture of dependency. From the press, government expected a congratulatory reporting of official events and a positive spin of the president's daily speeches, as well as the minimisation or silencing of critical and oppositional voices (Rodríguez Castañeda, 1993; Scherer and Monsiváis, 2003; Rodríguez Munguía, 2007).

Likewise, the government exerted control through various means. First, through the control and handling of criticism, spin and information administered to the media and the development of a net of loyalties among columnists and presidential reporters whom were granted privileged access to the spheres of power (Scherer and Monsiváis, 2003). Second, a systematic policy of surveillance targeted the most daring and critical journalists, publishers and editors, many of who were intimidated, threatened, censored, silenced or boycotted when overtaking the boundaries (Secanella, 1982; Rodríguez Castañeda, 1993; Orme, 1997; Trejo Delarbre, 1998). Third, at the economic level the state operated the production and the subsidizing of newsprint, often blackmailing or conditioning such subsidy to acceptable coverage of events (Zacarias, 1996). Fourth, economic survival of the media, especially newspaper and magazines, depended on the discretionary dispensing and allocation of governmental advertisement budgets and *gacetillas* –official pieces disguised as news (Keenan, 1997; Benavides, 2000). Fifth, the State warranted lax regulation and discretionary award and renewal of broadcasting licences and concessions. Sixth, *embute* or *chayote* constituted another means of controlling the spin of information, by directly paying off editors and reporters in exchange of interviews or with the excuse of supplementing their low wages. Besides turning a blind eye to 'chayote', news organisations saved considerable amounts by agreeing de facto that their reporters and journalists sought alternative sources of

income, such as a commission for landing advertisement deals for their organisations with the government agency they covered (Fromson, 1996; Cleary, 2003; Rodríguez Munguía, 2007). Therefore as Daniel Hallin claims, “the officialist character of the Mexican press results not simply from government pressure, but from collusion between political and economic elites” (Hallin, 2000b: 101).

In this paper we particularly examine the professional perceptions of journalists in relation to accepted or unaccepted ethical behaviour, particularly after political democratisation and commercialism in the 1990s allegedly instilled new professional mindsets, including greater autonomy and the decline of bribery and *chayote* (Lawson, 2002)

4. Methodology

This study is based on in depth qualitative-interviews with a sample of 90 journalists from twenty one national print and radio news organisations based in Mexico City: nine national newspapers, seven national radio organisations, and a small sample of four weeklies and one press agency.³ These outlets were selected from the universe of existing media organisations, because they are the most representative and have the best ratings and circulations. The seven radio news organisations participating in this study—ACIR, NRM, Radio Fórmula, Televisa Radio, Monitor-MVS, Radio Centro, and Imagen—are the most important in the country insofar as all of them have news-oriented stations or news programming and run at least three long newscasts (2 to 4 hours each) per day. Similarly, the nine national newspapers chosen are the most established and ideologically representative of the national press (*La Jornada*, *Milenio* *El Universal*, *Reforma*, *Excélsior*); plus two financial daily papers (*El Financiero* and *El Economista*), a regional paper (*La Crónica*) and an infotainment-oriented tabloid (*El Centro*). We also included a sample of freelance journalists (one per medium) from weeklies such as *Cambio*, *Día Siete*, *EmeEquis*, and state news agency Notimex.

All participants were interviewed face-to-face between August and October 2007. To ensure a more balanced representativeness, we sought to interview at least one journalist in a managerial or decision-making position from each news organisation, one in the middle or lower layers (producers and copywriters) and at least two political reporters. Due to access difficulties or availability this was not always possible, although we made every effort to interview the editorial director, a desk editor and two reporters for print media, and a presenter, a managing editor or producer and two reporters for broadcast media. In many cases, we surpassed the minimum requirements and interviewed more staff.

While participant observation was not the primary method of this research, when the interviews with journalists took place inside their workplaces—such as newsrooms or pressrooms in governmental buildings—we managed to conduct small-scale observation sessions, which entailed recording their activities, interactions and their in-site dialogs with peers and sources. In such places, like the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, the Mexico City Hall, the Electoral Institution, or the press headquarters

³ This paper intentionally excludes television newsrooms, for various reasons. First, traditionally it has been very difficult to gain access to television newsrooms and staff—Televisa’s customary reluctance to open itself to scrutiny and accountability is well known, and they left our calls unanswered

during a presidential overseas visit, we could observe several newsgathering procedures⁴. Some of these casual observations helped to develop our claims and arguments, put some of the obtained answers into context and to strengthen the interpretation of our extensive data. Likewise, we also drew from our previous research (Marquez, 2005) and professional experience as radio journalist to design questions and categories of analysis.

The 49 reporters recruited for this study were initially selected on the basis of their involvement in the coverage of the 2006 presidential elections, but by the time the interviews were conducted most of them had been re-assigned to another newsbeat⁵.

5. The clash of generations: bribery and news for cash

In existing literature, the realities of clashing systems of values and beliefs expressed by different generations of journalists have been pinpointed as symptoms of transitional or post-authoritarian democracies. Scholars have concluded that, in many countries, younger generations of university graduates are imbued with a more 'professional' mindset and ethical values or with principles and values that best adopt to the new commercial business models (Canel and Piqué, 1998; Shamir 1988; Pasti, 2005).

In Mexico, too the scholarly emphasis on an old vis-à-vis a new generation of journalists is normally connected to the quest for professional identity that derives from the need to get away from the media's notorious and well-documented bad reputation and diminished credibility. The traditional low esteem held for journalists by Mexican society is historically connected to the figure of 'chayote,' the infamous payoffs distributed in most governmental branches that recipients took as their entitlement to supplement their low salaries and compensate for poor working conditions and job insecurity (Baldivia et al., 1982; Fromson, 1996; Hernández López, 1999). The institutionalised distribution of 'chayote' –one-off payments– and 'embute' –regular payoffs given in return for planting stories twisting angles or spiking embarrassing pieces– (Fromson 1996: 117) meant that "reporters did not have to chase after a story: it was handed to them by the PRI on a silver plate, along with an envelope containing *el chayote*" (Clearly 2003: 65). Yet 'chayote' remains the icon of an easily manipulable generation that had to bow to both their sponsor politicians and their newsroom bosses. Our interviewees recall how editors and publishers were not only aware of the situation, but encouraged their staff to seek 'chayote' and not to miss the payroll, since it conveniently relieved them of having to increase their salaries. Likewise, bosses would let reporters negotiate advertisement contracts with their assigned newsbeats in return for a fee. Although 'chayote' is currently a subject of journalists' mockery and newsroom banter, other participants also point out that reporters have been stigmatised unfairly, as editors, managers, publishers and owners' names also featured on the government's payroll but carried none of the public shame. A radio reporter who started her career in the early 1990s when 'chayote' was declining but still common, comments:

⁴ Among these we witnessed door-stepping interviewing when politicians happened to pass by building corridors, the dynamics of press-conferences, the distribution of press-releases and stenographic versions of events, speeches, and media interviews; as well as journalists socialisation and information exchange with their peers and their routines for writing and sending stories back to their newsrooms.

⁵ Out of our sample of 49 reporters, nine covered the presidential beat by the date of the interview, seven the Senate or Upper House, three the Chamber of Deputies or Lower House, three the Home Affairs Ministry. Moreover, eight reporters covered the activities of political parties' leaders, six did so in Mexico City Hall or local Congress; four were assigned to electoral authorities; four to education, health and other ministries, three to the crime and justice beat and 3 were investigative freelance journalists.

Chayote is in extinction nowadays, but in the past it used to be a form of severe control, not only for reporters, who were the last beneficiaries from it. But the truth is that the first ones to get all the benefits of payoffs were always the media owners, news executives or political columnists who were paid loads of cash to protect a certain politician or speak wonders of him. But as the skinniest dogs that get more than their share of fleas, it was always reporters who got all the blame, how unfair! If someone had to be denigrated and lose their prestige, it was inevitably the reporters, not the bosses. (Political Reporter 6, Radio 'L')

A newspaper reporter, like several other respondents, recalls the days when they travelled to provincial cities, the press having been invited by different states' governors or by the president himself to the annual ceremony known as the 'State of Affairs Speech,' or to election days in provincial cities, in times when the PRI was the only contender and winner of elections. In these events 'chayotes' were abundant, but distributed by PRI's press officers to the 'deserving' few as a reward for the most congratulatory dispatch. As a result, reporters had to compete to get sent to the top-rank political beats where a large piece of the cake could be brought back to the newsroom:

My boss used to say: 'Go and get the chayote back here or you won't be on travel assignment ever again, why is it that your colleagues always bring a part back and you don't? It's getting inconvenient for me to send you out because you're coming back empty-handed.' Those were the rules, how terrible, and to some extent it's still the same. (Political Reporter 2, Newspaper F)

Yet, at their peak in the 1970s and 80s, such payoffs to reporters became institutionalised within the core of bureaucracy, specifically due to the connivance of editors and executives whose names often appeared, along with reporters, in the fortnight payroll lists. At the upper level of the newsroom hierarchy, loyalty was rewarded with luxury gifts or personal favours—taxi licenses, bar memberships, housing privileges, junkets to resorts—and by means of greater governmental advertisement to ensure the medium's survival (Fromson 1996: 117).

Virtually none of the participants denied that chayote ever existed, but they normally associated it with an older generation of journalists whom they no longer see. While 'chayote' is iconic of the past, being called a 'chayotero' is currently one of the worst insults a Mexican journalist can receive, and the public continues to apply the word to any journalist in cases of perceived bias in the news. However, the practice of bribery appears to have been eroded with the political opposition's arrival in office in 2000. Yet, according to the respondents, the internal reason that might have triggered its gradual decline in the mid-1990s was the arrival of younger, more ethical university graduates to the newsrooms. These journalists claim never to have accepted it when offered, but told numerous tales of colleagues who did, and several of them even named columnists and presenters who belonged to 'the black list' and nowadays still receive 'chayote' or some form of payoff. They complain of how radio presenters who publicly celebrate independence, condemn governmental intervention and protest censorship have no problem being paid off and happily shift their party loyalties to the highest bidder. A radio presenter whose name was repeatedly mentioned by participants as a chayote receiver comments:

For years everyone has been saying I was in the infamous PRI list of monthly payoffs and I've been accused of being offered a Mercedes and of receiving costly gifts in the past. But the truth is, government press officers compiled those lists of

payoff recipients. They approached you, they made you an offer, you refused, but quite conveniently they didn't tell their bosses you'd refused, they wouldn't delete your name from the list if you refused. Why? Because that way they didn't have to return back the cash to their ministries, they were the ones who pocketed it and put the blame and smear on us. I know many colleagues who did take it, but I never, ever accepted a gift or anything compromising. I do get sent Christmas presents though, but it's usually an ugly tie or a tacky pen. (Senior TV and Radio Presenter)

Predictably, most journalists who spoke about the subject were quick to deflect the blame and portray themselves as part of a new 'professional' generation that defied the vices and bad habits of the old guard and rejected their practices. Nonetheless, a few did admit implicitly that in the past they had accepted payoffs, as this was at some point part of any journalist's career, whether they liked it or not. Three journalists⁶ with careers of 14, 15 and 17 years candidly attested to the implications of payoffs in the process of socialising with sources and colleagues, and the consequences for those who dared to decline them:

For reporters sometimes [getting a chayote] had merely to do with public relations purposes [...] Accepting it meant you got access to information, they won't put obstacles in your way, you are put straight away on travel assignment, on official tours, you get a seat on the press pool and get all the interviews you want and, in short, you move freely in the business. So you got to do it because, uh, let's face it, if you are isolated from press officers, you're never going to make it. (Participant x)

[...] In those days your colleagues didn't look nicely at you [should you refuse the payoff], because it was such common a practice, that if you didn't accept it, they labelled you as a scab (Participant y).

[...] I don't believe...I really think... uh, I think most reporters keep a certain degree of independence after all... [Chayote] is something that does not compromise you, because [you as a journalist] see it as a part of your salary...Besides, what reporters can get from bribes is nothing when compared to the fortune owners make via political advertisements. But it is always us the reporters who get all the blame. (Participant z)

During the authoritarian rule, unfavourable working conditions were such⁷ that refusing payoffs not only was an unviable option, but could also lead to the withdrawal of certain privileges, such as information access, scoops, networking and exclusive interviews with officials. While today 'chayote' brings shame on journalists' professional history, in former times even those with the most prestige, talent and authority were on the government's 'payroll.' Those who considered themselves independents and critics did not see the payoffs as problematic if everyone else was doing it too. Therefore, the changing attitudes and views towards certain actions are intimately connected to notions of both the self and the collective entity to which journalists belong.

⁷ A Survey of Mexican journalists (Baldivia *et al.* 1981: 136-146) found that only 16% of journalists were paid a wage sufficient to feed their families, but 43% admitted to owning a house and a car, a fact that surveyors took as evidence of an external source of income.

6. Journalists, gifts and media attentions

Another ethical dilemma that routinely affects journalists' perceptions of professionalism is the acceptance of gifts, tokens, vouchers, all-inclusive tours and other forms of "attention to media" paid by press officers and PR managers. Accepting gifts from sources and the consequences of doing so are long-standing concerns in journalism ethics. Although some scholars have argued that gifts corrupt journalists and undermine the integrity of journalism (Day, 2003), there is no consensus as to their practical significance. Several reporters and radio presenters admitted that they regularly accept presents sent by ministerial press offices on their birthdays or at Christmas. Most participants agreed that sources sending small presents do not necessarily entail an intention to induce journalists to write or speak about them favourably, but are instead considered a 'nice gesture' of public relations. These respondents comment:

The presents I've got—because indeed I have accepted some—are minor gifts that I don't think compromise my ethical principles. Someone can get me a tie and I wear it the next day, but that doesn't compromise me or change my editorial posture or deflect my criticism. And if someone reproaches me for accepting their gifts but then speaking bad about them on air—it hasn't happened yet but if it ever does—I'll return their presents. (Senior Radio and TV presenter, Radio 'K').

[...] When I covered the Teachers Union, their leader sent me gold earrings for my birthday. I thought 'shall I keep them or return them? What to do?' At Christmas you do get sent bottles of wine and things like that. Maybe it's another type of 'chayote,' but I see it like PR attention that does not compromise you. (Political Reporter 4, Radio 'L').

As sources strive to maximise coverage and visibility, other kinds of 'media attention' are institutionalised, such as the payment of expenses for conventions, trips and tours. This practice is commonplace in newsrooms across the world. Only in the United States, a survey of broadcast news directors found that half of the respondents thought nothing bad of getting free tickets to cover news/sports events, while a fifth considered getting free tickets to cover news events was acceptable (Wulfemeyer, 1989). A reporter with enough experience of attending all-paid trips to news events comments on the defining boundaries of unethical behaviour:

I used to be a business reporter. If the Association of Businessmen is going to have its annual conference in Guadalajara, three days, and the Association flies you there and brings you back, that trip is part of your job. But if you are given an all-inclusive trip to Cancun with your wife and children for 15 days, then both are trips, but they are quite different things. If you don't take the first, then you can't do your job, but if you do take the second, it's useless for your work. (Political Reporter 3, Radio 'O')

My news coordinator said, "If [presidential candidate Francisco] Labastida pays your travel and expenses, and hotels and meals are paid by the PRI, then we go and cover his tour. But if he doesn't pay then we don't go. When Fox paid all our travel expenses, we did go, but if he didn't pay, then we didn't cover his campaign. That's the very truth. Newspaper reporter 2, Newspaper 'T'

Although several print and radio managers said that they devoted funds to paying their staff's accommodation and travel expenses, strong evidence was found suggesting that many more low-budget media organisations still rely on their news sources to pay the reporter's expenses, air travel being just one example. Some even consider it to be the source's obligation if they are to expect coverage and time allocation to what looks like secondary or minor information. For example, a radio reporter confided that her news organisation did not cover Vicente Fox's campaign because—unlike the PRI's campaign—Fox' team refused to pay for their reporter' expenses. Although the more visible newsbeat on which to take reporters is the presidency, several other less prominent ministries also take their reporter pools on tour. In this regard, newspaper *Reforma* famously broke the paradigm of accepting media attention by setting new rules for their reporters and tightening permissiveness for certain practices that rival organisations tolerate and encourage. Not only does it dismiss staffers in the event of accepting payoffs and *chayotes*, but it also refuses any invitations, meals, freebies, tokens, gifts or anything that could be seen as compromising their independence or integrity. Their 'not even a glass of water' policy is highly controversial among colleagues, while others salute it. *Reforma* participants explain this policy with pride, while for rivals it has set a standard by which to determine one's own behaviour:

My newspaper has been very serious and clear: our relation with the sources has to be separated from money. That has been aptly inculcated in the staff and has pressurised other media to follow suit. It is absolutely prohibited to accept money or gifts, something I think is very positive, because journalistic relations do not get distorted. That used to be a common practice during the old regime (Political Reporter, *Reforma*⁸).

[...] We aren't as exquisite as the guys at Reforma to the point of 'I can't even accept a coffee from you because you corrupt me' but I do think that the generation of corrupt journalists is in decline. Maybe the corruption nowadays is in the top layers of the media (Political Reporter 3, Newspaper 'E').

There is a wider array of informal relations and much more inoffensive and commonplace practices that also fall under the 'media attention' umbrella. This has generated contradictory opinions among Mexican journalists, as they are not isolated cases. When most press conferences, briefs, public meetings and speeches are held, the event usually takes place in a venue that includes free food and beverages. Likewise, most governmental agencies spare a press office room in their building for the use of journalists where they can find desks, computers, printers, faxes, telephones and even personalised workstations for reporters covering a specific newsbeat. These facilities tend to be used as everyday workplaces from where they write and send their dispatches, meet with their competitor colleagues, potential sources and press officers and monitor other media. Thus press office rooms become the place where journalists spend most of their day, being attended by resourceful press staff that readily deliver releases and wires to their desks⁹ and arrange media interviews. The mundane

⁸ Unlike previous cases of participant labelling, this reporter is identified by his actual organisation's name only because the medium is relevant to the narrative.

⁹ I could corroborate this information during the repeated visits I made to different pressrooms across Mexico City, where I not only interviewed reporters but also saw in action many of those I had already interviewed in cafés or in their newsrooms. Four interviews took place in the Chamber of Deputies pressroom; three other

interactions between beat reporters and press officers, and their mutual dependence, are some of the lesser-known aspects of Mexican journalism, and thus should be considered for future analysis and claims of autonomy. Indeed, studies of transitional media have paid little attention to changes and patterns in reporting practices and values associated with them. In this regard, journalists have come to question and validate the physical dependency that state-funded press office rooms and computing facilities entail. The opinions range from those who believe that facilities for press representatives are compulsory to those who believe that it is the media organisations that are obliged to equip their staff:

The press office room in City Hall is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen. Before, with the PRI, you could help yourself to bottled water, coffee and typewriters. But nowadays [the Mayor] thinks that if he gives us all of this people are going to think he's trying to buy reporters. But hello mate! As far as I'm concerned, it's nothing like that, it's for your own sake, we are here to publicise your own information! (Political reporter 3, Radio 'L')

[...] You go to the pressroom and they give you a glass of water. Does that glass of water compromise you to speak well about an official? Is this glass of water a chayote? As a reporter, shouldn't you take your own bottled water and take it to the press office? Why are there coffee and biscuits in there? Shall we go that far? (Political Reporter 2, Radio 'N')

[...] There are people who complain a lot about not having computers or printers in the press office rooms. But quite honestly governmental branches and public buildings are not really obliged to provide reporters with a special workplace, let alone computers, Internet connection, printing paper, and so forth. That's why I got my own laptop, although my newspaper didn't give it to me, it's mine (Political Reporter 3, Newspaper 'I').

One reporter who gave the interview for this project from Mexico City's press office room, which nowadays is equipped with computers and desks for the reporters assigned to cover the Mayor, pointed out the space where not long ago her colleagues used to sit for purposes other than to discuss the news:

It's no secret many pressrooms transformed into taverns on late Fridays; fifteen years ago, this very table we are now sitting looked like the ones from pubs.

interviews took place in the Senate pressroom; three in the Federal Electoral Institute pressroom; one in the Secretariat of Home Affairs pressroom; one in the City Hall pressroom; one in the PRD (Party of Democratic Revolution) pressroom; and one in the National University pressroom. Considering the average time of 80 minutes I spent with each interviewee, and 30 minutes of waiting time, around 26 hours were sufficient to observe and take notes regarding the dynamics of pressrooms: particularly in the governmental offices (not so much in IFE and UNAM), the pressrooms were very busy. Each media outlet is assigned a personalised workstation for their staff, and all employees appeared busy typing at their computers or talking on the telephone, while press officers and staff handed out, sometimes to the journalists' desks, as in the case of the Chamber of Deputies, the latest transcription of the event in question, press conference or corridor interview. All the pressrooms in question were equipped with computers, workstations, coffee facilities, radios, TV sets displaying news channels, at least one landline telephone and trays containing press releases and the day's press clippings for the related beat. In all these institutions the Press Office is normally called 'Social Communication' in its Spanish name, and the office in charge of handling reporters and writing releases is normally called 'Direction of Information,' whose head is the closest source reporters have at hand when working.

During the last PRI administrations (1994-1997), there used to be alcohol here, reporters could play pool, domino[s] and poker, and had women to their disposal. And the cash, games, women, alcohol, everything, was on taxpayer's bill of course [...] And the shocking thing is, nowadays there are some reporters who still talk of the old days with a certain tone of nostalgia, as if they were longing for their comeback (Political Reporter 4, Radio 'L'.)

In his seminal book about how the most resourceful sources generate more media attention, Paul Manning claims that success depends upon the “capacity or inability of organisations to mobilise material and symbolic resources, and to exert control over the flows of information which may emerge from within their internal environments” (2001: 138). Hence it could be argued that reporters' attendance of well-catered events, press office rooms and all-inclusive trips may positively affect the attention and coverage devoted to such events, regardless of their newsworthiness: journalists would not have covered less important events if their expenses had not already been paid. For example, a study of these matters by Shin and Cameron (2003) in Korea might give us a snapshot of how Public Relations officers think. They believed in the positive influence of payoffs, gifts, paid tours and other ‘media attention’ for volume of coverage and favourable news content. In other words, while Koreans and Mexicans may not have much in common, they do share a belief that such minor things do not influence the content of their stories, even though sources do expect favourable coverage of their events in return.

7. Plagiarism and ‘being there, on time’

An ethical principle that distinguishes the older generation of uneducated and corrupt journalists from the highly skilled professionals journalists portray themselves as being is to actually do the job one is paid to do. While most participants are clear that getting payoffs constitutes unprofessional practice, the very issue of ‘professional’ arose multiple approaches. When asked what makes a journalist professional or when the issue of professionalism was raised during interviews, we gathered a great variety of views and even more illustrative anecdotes of what they class as professional and ethical in direct connection to what they deem unprofessional. For example, many participants pointed out specific stances, practices and attitudes they disapproved. A widely cited anecdote and reference point is when many interviewees mocked the ‘old guard’s’ dubious reporting methods, mentioning a tabloid colleague who, back in 1994, famously titled his front-page story on presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio's assassination in Tijuana “*I saw him fall down*,” the implication being that the journalist had been a first-hand witness to the politician's shooting.

As it eventually turned out, after being called by the police to testify, he denied being present; he had used the headline simply as a ‘literary device’ for the news. His failure to be an on-site ‘witness’ to one of the biggest stories in a decade was not just the mistake of an ‘unprofessional’ tabloid reporter, but a habit of the reporters accustomed to be handed the news. According to first-hand testimonies, most reporters assigned to cover the PRI's campaign—arguably one of the most prominent newsbeats in those days—were shopping right across the border, in San Diego, when the murder took place, and yet they reported back to their newsrooms as if they had been at the site. The shopping anecdote illustrates the ephemeral nature of journalists' credibility. Furthermore, the practice of ‘making up’ or ‘inflating’ the news was frequently cited as unethical practice that participants eagerly identified in others. Speaking of the high-

profile politician Raúl Salinas de Gortari's¹⁰ release from prison, a reporter's account illustrates his notions of professionalism:

When Raúl Salinas was released from prison, he had to return to court to sign for the first time after his bailing. It was early morning and, surprise! It was only me and two others on site covering an event of such a magnitude [...] plus one photographer. I feel sorry for him; he had to share his pictures with everyone else. Our mobile telephones were ringing all morning asking us to pass them the information.

Q. But why didn't the press show up?

Well, it's early morning, the courts are quite far, and you've got to drive for hours in the traffic. Unfortunately, there are many, many reporters from all media [...] that are used to transmitting their dispatches from their beds at home and failing to show up to where the events are occurring. They are used to the fact that real professionals, true information professionals (like me) go to get the news, find the news, and do their job. (Political Reporter 2, Radio 'L')

As a form of professionalism, one of the first notions that emerged when interviewing participants is the way they describe themselves as unique, creative individuals, distinguishable and professionally more competent than others. They embody the exception to a rule of unethical work, passivity and conformity that characterised the 'old guard.' When describing the type of work they take pride in, or when talking about their day, they purport to be knowledgeable and resourceful. They claim to be professional because they demonstrate talent, creativity, imagination, initiative, readiness, promptness, adaptation, efficiency and several other traits needed to face the intense workloads, deadlines and challenges of their working lives.

I am a reporter who tells the truth, because I have the context, the background and the key referential frames to inform the public. (Political Reporter 1, Radio "L")

Journalists aim to show professional aptitude by standing out from their colleagues: nose for news, willingness, initiative or relentlessness. The less a reporter relies on his colleagues, the more respected and recognized he is among colleagues. But when reporters abuse such a practice or frequently fail to show up at events, they become stigmatized and colleagues will be less inclined to help them. However, a widespread coincidence in the description of their production routines suggest that they either plagiarize their colleagues' stories when they report on air, or they plagiarize and edit the stories the newspapers publish on their Web sites for their clients. —a process also branded as *churnalism* by Davies (2008) or *news cannibalization* by Phillips (2010).

Plagiarism is far more common in the newsroom, where copy editors are searching the wires and Web sites for stories to be included in their news bulletins. Regularly, a news organisation's policy is to monitor other media to minimize the effect of missing potentially newsworthy stories. However, the common and assimilated as one's job practice is to not only monitor, but to plagiarize a story, re-write it in the best

¹⁰ On June 10-15th, 2005 Raúl Salinas de Gortari, the brother of the former president, was cleared of the charge of murdering PRI's secretary, José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, and of the charges of money laundering and embezzlement. He was thus released from prison after serving 10 out of a 50-year sentence.

of cases, and present it as one's own without giving due credit to the original source. All the news workers who participated in this study saw the "copy and paste" method as common practice and as a part of their job that entailed no ethical dilemma or professional compromise, even though in some cases they admitted that they had copied the wrong information. This way, rumours, speculation, unconfirmed or potential libel stories are rapidly accepted as "facts" in radio bulletins or printed in competitors' websites. Editorial managers not only permit, but also have established the use of the Internet as a source of information and not as source of research or reference.

8. Conflicts of interest

During the authoritarian days, many of the big names in Mexican journalism rose to a state of privilege, rubbing shoulders with the literati and the intelligentsia and enjoying comfortable lifestyles –often at the expense of taxpayers. However, when lecturing others about good journalism, many of these veterans frequently appealed to ethical and professional values – such as integrity, ethics, independence or impartiality – to describe their jobs and trajectories, even if their own political columns were generous in praise for the government. Indeed, the dilemma posed by their close ties with the political power and their claims of ethical behaviour was unproblematic (Scherer and Monsiváis, 2003, Martínez S., 2005). Raymundo Riva Palacio observes that "for the bulk of Mexican journalists, the concept of 'conflict of interest' does not exist in theory or practice [...] The absence of this concept is a fundamental ingredient in the collusion between the media and the authorities" (Riva Palacio, 1998: 113). The most accomplished, cultivated journalists and publishers of their day could one day claim to be independent journalists, then perform as press officers for the government in question, and then return to journalism shortly afterwards.¹¹

After political democratisation in the 1990s led to the diversification of actors and centres of power, now the Congress and its represented political parties now play a real, tangible counterbalance. There is an agreement in the way that political communication has transformed, in the micro-level, the relationship between reporters and their sources. In the Congress, low-ranked congressmen befriend and socialise with political reporters with the intention of being interviewed, and while the off-record practice constitutes a great deal of print journalism input, the formerly shy, press-phobic politician currently stages a pro-active role in seeking to be interviewed by influential newspapers and reporters. In return, reporters strengthen relations with politicians, have access to confidential, exclusive information and even to broaden their career prospects and become the politician's press officer or advisor.

Covering politics gives you status. You are recognised, you get fetched high in your medium, and obviously you generate relations that later on in life might be useful. You never know when you might decide to pass from being reporter to

¹¹ A few examples of journalists shifting jobs between newsrooms and politics without representing any conflict of interest was editor Gregorio Ortega, founder of the political magazine *Así* in 1940. He was later appointed Chief of Communications for President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, but returned to journalism to continue writing 'innovative interviews that offered the most unexpected, brilliant twists and turns' (Martínez S., 2005: 74, my translation). Another master of several generations of reporters was Francisco Martínez de la Vega, a self-made journalist at *El Nacional* that interrupted his career in 1943 to become the private secretary to a PRI governor, but a decade was writing critical pieces about the Security Secretary. Furthermore, a well-known case is that of Carlos Denigri, one of the most influential political columnists, who stood out for his literary prose and interviews, such as with Martin Luther King Jr., but enjoyed all the privileges and economic benefits due to his close ties with the presidential circle.

public official and that politician you befriend today can help you out and recommend you to someone, or appoint you as their press officer, so who knows, in this occupation the salaries aren't the best around and a job like that pays four times as much. (Political Reporter, Newspaper 'D')

The politics of politicians, not social politics, is what gives the paper prestige, in concordance with the findings of Silvio Waisbord in South America: "Journalists observe that some social exposés are often dismissed by colleagues as easy stories for anyone comes in daily with, let's say, poverty or street children, while not too many citizens or journalists have access to information about wrongdoing inside the folds of power" (Waisbord, 2000: 97). Journalists admit that they have lost touch with reality by mimicking the source beats they cover and speaking on their own behalf, rather than on behalf of people, thus becoming a micro version of their informants. Likewise, as many become the media advisers or press officers for their informants without necessarily resigning to their media jobs, their attitude towards prioritisation of official events and elite discourses increases. The following two quotes illustrate both social detachment and source imitation:

Most of the journalists are middle-classes, or lower middle classes or upper classes, but I think the culture of the Mexican people is to think in oneself, hardly does one think on the person next to me, or behind me. And I think that most journalists only pursue a good story for the sake of it, regardless of whether it's of some benefit for the majority of poor people. I think that if media were genuinely interested in poverty, we should be reporting in much more in-depth coverage about poverty. There is plenty of material here to do so (Political Reporter 4, Newspaper 'F').

[...] Crime reporters start to speak the police jargon, start acting with arrogance [sic] just like them, the ones in the Congress beat speak and dress like Deputies, financial and business reporters become 'snobbish', it's an interesting phenomenon of *chamaleonism* (Political Reporter 3, Newspaper 'A')

9. Conclusions

This paper has briefly analysed some sites wherein ethical principles, journalistic practices and newsroom dynamics conflux in the shaping of professional identity. Mexican journalists see themselves as agents of generational change. As the university graduates they mostly are, they point out sharp improvements from their corrupt, ill-equipped, trained-on-the-job predecessors who were fond of bribery and manipulation. When choosing to define themselves as part of a consensual occupation, a clear professional image emerged, at least rhetorically: they strive to counter the established power, hence placing themselves as the watchdogs of the State, they seek to impart the truth without biases, and their everyday work is an endeavour to overcome the ordinary pressures in order to provide politically relevant and reliable information to their audiences. This suggests that, despite being conceived as an individual projection, journalistic professionalism is actually related to the larger demands and conditions imposed by organisational and cultural settings. Likewise, this study has examined the extent to which the cherished autonomy and ethics that are espoused by traditional conceptions of professionalism are influenced by journalistic practices that emanate from political structures and occupational culture. Therefore, it is not possible to speak about two separate generations of unethical vis-à-vis ethical, but in one transitional

generation where “old” and “new” elements blend.

Although the practice of payoffs and chayote is actually in decline, at least in the national press, the shared perceptions about the existence of a perverted journalistic culture as expressed in less than professional mindsets, dubious reporting methods – pack journalism, plagiarism— and convenient negotiations of autonomy (media attentions, paid for gifts) significantly contrast with existing claims of rising assertive reporting, regained autonomy, and the professionalization of newsrooms (Lawson, 2002; Wallis, 2002; Hughes, 2006). We observe that, in adhering to uncertain and often subjective ethical principles, journalists continue to display passivity of sourcing and newsgathering patterns, over-reliance in uncorroborated information or accommodate in some way or another to the political actors and institutions that are most convenient to their own political and economic interests (See also González Macías, 2011). Journalists thus rather adhere to mutually consistent and consensual practices—for our case, the legitimate newsgathering processes, sourcing patterns and reporting narratives. However, a great deal of ambiguity and confusion for journalists often exists, especially in the application and observance of ethical norms. We thus that a hybrid model of journalism exists in Mexico, one which fully integrated into other fields such as the political and wherein pragmatic professional and ethical principles prevail.

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