

Chapter 17

Journalism Research in Mexico

Historical Development and Research Interests in the Latin American Context

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Journalism Research in the Latin American Context

In Latin America, journalism studies as a specific sub-discipline started in the 1990s as the result of rather isolated efforts. Before that time journalism was a subsidiary subject of communication research, a field in an early stage as well and considered to be marginal. Although a great deal of literature related to the press done before the 1950s has been found, most of it is of historical and cultural nature or in some cases refer to legal-political approaches, and emerged within very specific contexts (Aguirre, 1996). This is an explainable tendency in the context of the continuous social crisis in the region.

Three main factors have contributed to the delay in the definition of concrete research programs for the study of journalistic phenomena:

- 1 the “precariousness and increasing dependence” of general scientific Latin American research (Fuentes, 1998, p. 37);
- 2 the direction followed by academic studies on journalism and communication (Herrera, 1998);
- 3 the very little interest in the production of scientific knowledge showed by the media industry (Marques, 1992, p. 94).

Despite the very heterogeneous conditions of Latin American countries, it can be stated that empiric investigation on communication and journalism in the launching period (the late 1960s and the early 1970s) received a decisive influence from the UNESCO developmental parameters. Through the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), UNESCO sought the commitment of the mass media to encourage economic growth by spreading values such as productivity, efficiency, competence, and innovation (Marques, 1992, p. 96).

With regard to the development of journalism studies in Latin America since the 1990s, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and Venezuela stand out. This fact is consistent with their leading participation in the general scientific production of their region, even if the overall figures are rather marginal.¹

After Brazil, Mexico is one of the strongest contributors in Latin America to the development of specific research on journalism. To understand the emergence of Mexican journalism research, which started as – and partially still is – a fragmented research field, and its status quo, one has to describe its historical development and the respective institutional and socio-political conditions that often constrained further differentiation.

The Emergence of Journalism Research in Mexico – from Individual Efforts to a Specific Field of Study?

*The pre-theoretical stage – historical groundwork and
beginning politicization (the 1950s to the 1970s)*

Journalism research in Mexico is intrinsically related to the broader field of communication studies. A brief description of journalism education history in the country may explain this assertion. The first recognized Mexican journalism school was the Carlos Septién García, founded in 1949 (www.septien.edu.mx/). It was followed by a bachelor’s degree in journalism at the Autonomous National University (UNAM) in 1951 and, three years later, by a journalism school at the University of Veracruz. Besides the teaching of journalistic practice and tools, the curricula of the last two programs included scientific theory and methodology from a broad range of social scientific disciplines. However, further differentiation was inhibited, because since the 1960s, the incipient journalism programs were replaced by broadly conceptualized degrees in communication studies. The educational goal shifted to the formation of “social communicators” instead of “simple” journalists. This reorientation to more heterogeneous curricula was recommended by UNESCO and promoted through the International Centre of Superior Communication Studies (CIESPAL) in Latin America, which intended to close the gap that the arising electronic media brought to the teaching of journalism in traditional schools.

According to Fuentes, who conducted extensive document analyses of all accessible contributions of Mexican Communication studies, its pioneer period (1956–70) can be characterized by three pivotal tendencies (1988, p. 27):

- 1 normative and historical studies of the press;
- 2 applications of diffusion research in the rural sector;
- 3 first reflections concerning the structure and social function of radio and television.

Research related to journalism focused on describing and categorizing the newspapers’ history as well as the role of journalism during specific periods or in certain regions (Ruiz, Reed, and Cordero, 1974).

Mexican journalism research during the 1960s was shaped by the strong influence of theories and methodologies of US scholars, who conducted mostly

quantitative empirical research in the country (Fuentes, 1988, p. 28). In the 1970s, Mexican scholars were focused on the description and analysis of structural aspects of the media in general (Del Río, 1972), on the concentration of the daily press (Granados Chapa, 1972), on the ideological leaning, financing and forms of newspaper organization (Fernández, 1975). In concert with the advancement of electronic mass media, Mexican communication research began to establish its own paradigms. The increasing number of graduated communication researchers, specialized institutions and academic journals accelerated this development. But the growth in the number of communication programs at the university level in this period barely contributed to the improvement of research infrastructure.

Communication was regarded from the perspectives of functionalism, structuralism and critical theories based on Marxism (Toussaint, 1975; Paoli, 1977). The latter were encouraged mainly by Latin American scholars who found political asylum in Mexico (e.g. Reyes Matta, 1978; Roncagliolo, 1978). Their research on international news flow, and the dominating news agencies of the industrialized Northern nations, is still considered to have a strong impact on the country's academic discourse on journalism (Fuentes, 1988, p. 33).

Further individual efforts concerning journalism in this pre-theoretical stage were focused on aspects of professionalization and education (González Casanova, 1965),² on the constitutional regulation of print media (Castaño, 1967) and semiotic analysis of the press (Rivadeneira, 1975). Others outlined basic concepts for investigating newspapers from a multidisciplinary perspective, including reflections about its societal functions and dysfunctions (Guajardo, 1967; Jiménez de Ottalengo, 1973).

However, the emerging research on journalism suffered from a lack of institutionalization, and was not able to explicitly define its objects of analysis. The field could not establish as a coherent discipline grounded on systematic approaches, clear tendencies, and comprehensive empirical data. The preferred and affordable methods were content and discourse analysis.

Consolidation and academic crisis – the search for new orientations (late 1970s to late 1980s)

Since the late 1970s, various scholars increasingly tried to influence the national communication policy and processes of democratization by intervening in the political debate. However, in tandem with the country's economic situation the inquiry on communication – including the still incoherent and fragmented field of journalism studies – got stuck in a *crisis* mainly because of curtailed governmental subsidies for research and the shutting academic labor market (Fuentes, 1997, p. 38).

The discussions regarding the need of democratizing communications encouraged by UNESCO intensified and led scholars to focus their efforts particularly on the reflection and research on media–government relationships and or dependencies. Many of the publications from this period had the character of political argument (Fuentes 1988, p. 35) discussing the need for a new informational law

(Solís, 1984) and the role of the press in democratization (Esteve, 1982). As the study of foreign images stimulated academic efforts in most of Latin America, Mexican scholars tried to examine as well how foreign news media shaped the nation's image (Luna, 1986) and drew attention to the obstacles that national communication policies set to a New World Information Order (NWIO) (Arrieta, 1980).

Most of the essayistic contributions and empirical studies in that period referred to ongoing political problems and controversies. Content analysis continued to be the dominating method and was mostly applied to examine ideological news biases (Delgado et al., 1981). Numerous studies on the news coverage of the 1985 devastating earthquake in Mexico City exemplify the impact of salient events on academic research (e.g. Ávalos, 1986).

Some scholars started to shift their attention to structural aspects and the societal impact of commercial and underground print media (Trejo, 1980). Others described roughly the characteristics of the Mexican press industry and suggested preferences of consumption (Olvera and Gómez, 1982). The state-owned paper industry (PIPSA) was analyzed as a structure of governmental control on the Mexican print media (Fuentes Fierro, 1983). Many scholars continued to approach journalism (mostly the press) from a historical perspective, which slightly decreased by the end of this period. Still little discussion and data were published about journalistic professionalization and ethics (e.g. Baldivia, 1981).

At the end of this phase, contributions started shifting the focus from printed to broadcast media, principally referring to the growing power of Televisa, the major television consortium in Mexico. Scholars discussed the inherent organizational and political structures, which favored power abuse and tried to demonstrate political biases within Televisa's news coverage (Trejo, 1985).

By this time, in the middle of the country's university crisis, researchers from Mexico City as well as Mexican graduates from the United States started to decentralize communication research by founding new academic programs in the western part of the country. The most notable were and still are the "Programa Cultura" (Culture Program) at the University of Colima and the "Centro de Estudios de la Información y la Comunicación" (Information and Communication Studies Center) at the University of Guadalajara, which quickly gained reputation and improved the productivity and institutionalization of the field (Fuentes, 1997, p. 39).

Professionalization and increasing sociological influences in Mexican journalism research (late 1980s to mid-1990s)

The 1980s university crisis brought Mexican scholars to look for alternative concepts and methodological approaches. Some began to adopt theoretical frameworks from the United States and Great Britain because these countries were the main source of internationally distributed research literature and had a wide range of accessible universities at their disposal. A number of Mexican researchers graduated abroad in this time (Cervantes, 2000, p. 170), among them Gabriel González Molina, who studied the organizational and structural conditions of

news production in Televisa (1985) and introduced the concept of news values in Mexican journalism research (1986). His work has its roots in early British news production studies and cultural studies approaches (see the chapter of Wahl-Jorgensen and Franklin in this book). González Molina's strong impact on subsequent journalism research in Mexico is discernable through the efforts of various scholars who contributed to a new field termed "sociology of news production" (Hernández Ramírez, 1997), in which the pivotal focuses of research are the journalistic routines of news production, the processes of news gathering, the selection and edition of news and relationships between reporters and their sources. The first empirical studies on news production conducted inside the newsrooms and on the impact of organizational routines on news as a product of social reconstruction were approached mostly by ethnographic methods (Hernández Ramírez, 1995; Cervantes, 1996; Lozano, 1996).³ This branch of research represents the first established and comparatively steadily discussed framework of journalism research in Mexico.

At the same time, many studies focused on the presidential elections of 1988 (Arredondo, Fregoso, and Trejo, 1991) and 1994 (Acosta and Parra, 1995). Their predominant concern was the balanced representation of political parties and ideological bias in the news coverage of television programs and the press. Nonetheless, the main objects of analysis in those works were political communication processes instead of journalism. Similar research, guided by different interests, tried to explain how political journalism was legitimating the power of the ruling regime (Trejo, 1995–6) and the impact of news media on political participation (de la Peña and Toledo, 1991). More than ever, the societal influence of Televisa and its strong ties with the government called the attention of the academia (Ortega and Gutiérrez, 1987).

Comparing this period of communication research in general with earlier periods, the disciplinary focus shifted considerably to sociological approaches. During 1986–94, Fuentes identified 37.4 percent of 1,019 analyzed documents with a sociological focus (1996, p. 19). A similar trend can be observed for journalism research. Although the quantitative output stayed comparatively low, the coherence and methodological approach makes it a research line of growing importance.

In addition to the growing influence of sociological approaches, this phase can be described by an increasing professionalization of both communication as well as journalism research. One indicator is the growing number of empirical studies (Fuentes, 1996, pp. 19–20), which for research on journalism mostly means content analyses and ethnographic methods. Comprehensive surveys or observation designs are still embryonic, mainly due to the difficulties of getting access to media organizations. However, considerable progress can be observed on the institutional level because scientific associations (e.g. AMIC and CONEICC) arranged regular conferences and increased the number of specialized academic journals. Those publications have played a key role in the institutionalization of communication and journalism research as the lion's share of academic output was published there between 1986 and 1994 (more than 50 percent of publications in communication studies). Most contributions were published in *Comunicación*

y *Sociedad* (Information and Communication Studies Centre, CEIC) at the University of Guadalajara, *Estudios sobre las Culturas Contemporáneas* (Culture Program at the University of Colima), and *Revista Mexicana de Comunicación* (Manuel Buendía Foundation) (Fuentes, 1996, pp. 10–12).

The take-off of specific research on journalism and the influence of the socio-political milieu (mid-1990s to 2005)

One of the most rambling aspects of incipient Mexican democracy is the present legal system of social communication. This is why it is not strange that 12 percent of all research done during 1995–2001 – a lively period in the process of the democratic transition – had focused on such aspect (Fuentes, 2003, p. 24).

The debate about the right to information, which started in 1977, became less important at the beginning of the 1980s. However, it remained latent in the academic agenda and regained strength in the second half of the 1990s when some political actors looked for a deep legal reform to regulate the way the media operates (Esteinou, 1998). For the first time, the topic was analyzed from the perspective of comparative law approaches to information (Villanueva, 1998).

The new standpoint tries to go beyond the merely political arguments and tries to support the necessity for a modern and democratic legal frame, based on the identification of the legal causes that organically link the media with the Mexican post-revolutionary system (López Ayllón, 2000). Thus, the discussion centers on such aspects such as the legitimate subsidies from the state to the press around the world, the right to the journalist's professional secrecy, journalism ethics and self-regulation of the media (Aznar and Villanueva, 2000), unionism or corporate association of journalism and the lack of a right to reply and of legislation on the access to public information.

Ambiguity and obsolescence in legislation related to communication,⁴ the collusion of interests between media owners and political power, and the embryonic culture of Mexican society on information transparency are facts that explain why after almost thirty years of the first debates over the right to information, there are still more works being produced of a rather argumentative than empirical nature. It also explains why the research done on journalism is still associated with socio-political factors.

With the progressive loss of hegemony of the PRI in the country, the mechanisms of the press-government relationships have been gradually revealed. This issue has always been the center of interest of researchers on journalism, but the context of the democratic transition and the increasing international watchfulness on this process have encouraged the publication of academic-political essays that have begun to developing theories about the historical structural model of the subordinated relationship of Mexican media to the public power (Carreño, 2000). Works about the local press having the same approach are in fact scarce (Sánchez, 1997).

The election process held in Mexico City in 1997, in which for the first time ever since the revolution a government of the left (PRD) attained the power, caused acute academic observation of the media coverage. The reductions of self-

ensorship of radio news (Sosa, 1997) in contrast to the television news programs (Acosta and Vargas, 1998) were phenomena that became very noticeable. This political episode was the context for an incipient application of methodologies for the study on the reception and consumption of television news (Inestrosa, 1997), as well as for some isolated attempts to know the patterns of exposure of radio audiences to news programs as a means of political information (Aceves, 1997).

The victory of the PAN party in the federal election of July 2, 2000 – after 71 years of uninterrupted government by the PRI – generated expectations of change among all the social organized sectors. As to the field of communication and journalism, it opened the possibility to regain law projects to regulate social communication, to guarantee the people's access to public information and to demand public officials accountability.

Through academic work and proselytism, a group of scholars and national newspaper publishers – the self-styled Grupo *Oaxaca* – advanced to Congress the discussion of the issue of access to public information. As a consequence on June 12, 2003 the federal law for the access to public information came into effect. This event is of great significance because it takes part in the process of the transformation of the Mexican state and in the shaping of public opinion, and because research connected to the making of effective legal norms will undoubtedly come as a result. In turn they will naturally widen the range of possibilities of journalistic practices (Villanueva and Luna, 2001).

It is in this period that the influence of Anglo-Saxon knowledge on the sociology of news production – brought by Gabriel González Molina – increasingly spread at both theoretical and methodological levels (Hernández Ramírez, 1997; Cervantes, 2000). Several empirical works were developed, mostly postgraduate theses with modest but consistent contributions to the construction of the sociology of news production within a Mexican context. These studies deal with phenomena such as the news production of the local press (de León, 2003), the local television, photojournalism, news values in local crime news, source-reporter relationships, and reflection on news as a form of knowledge (Zacariás, 2001–2). Additionally the phenomena of technological convergence raises questions about transformations in the process of newspaper production (Zaragoza, 2002).

The reception of journalistic discourse in television news was first analyzed by Vernik (1998) and Orozco (1998). Later, sponsored by the most important television consortium (Televisa), Lozano began – in a systematic cumulative manner – the development of a research trend on the “consumption of news programs in Mexico,” including the negotiations of meaning of different types of audiences and their discourse perception regarding the credibility and objectivity of news-cast programs (2001a).

Media treatment studies moved from the concern for news balance, toward the analysis of tabloidization of political news (Lozano, 2001b). The main focus was the presidential election within the process of political and social changes in the country (Trejo, 2001).

The discourse and content analysis prevails among the few methodologies used for empirical work, sometimes enriched by the perspectives of the agenda-setting

approach (Aceves, 2003), socio-semiotics, pragmatics and linguistics. International news flow in the Latin-American press was still studied (Lozano, 2000); and so was the coverage of Mexico in the American news system (Arredondo, 2002).

Some outstanding content analysis studies done in this period dealt with the media coverage and discourse strategies of the Zapatista rebellion in 1994 (Gómez Mont, 1999; Gutiérrez, 2004); the spectacular discourse of television news programs (de Gasperín and Torres, 1999); the fiction-making of reality (Aponte, 2000), and the press treatment of the alternation of the ruling party in 2000 (Santillán, 2004).

Although the Internet is currently the most studied of all media by Mexican researchers (coming just after television), some of the specific analyses on the changes that the World Wide Web has brought to journalism focus on the transformation of the professional journalist profile (Croví, 2002). But, in general, this research is still very scarce and only descriptive (Islas et al., 2002).

The gradual distancing between the press and political power evidenced the need to reflect upon the status or situation of journalism as a profession. Therefore, the difficulties to professionalize Mexican journalism (Torres, 1997), the working conditions and union organization of news workers were described (Hernández López, 1999). A historical reconstruction of journalism education testified to the lack of appropriate Mexican teaching models (Hernández Ramírez, 2004). In this context the roots of the journalistic practices in Mexico were explored from the perspective of Bourdieu's “campus and habitus” concepts (García Hernández, 2000).

Although argumentative discussions around ethics of journalism were still common, work of a more theoretical nature as well as empirical surveys started to appear (Arroyo, 1998). One of these systematizes the reflection of classical authors and intends to construct a model on the social responsibility of the mass media based on Norbert Elias' theoretical perspective (Fernández, 2002).

Historiographical studies moved from the descriptive level and tend then to evaluate and classify the work produced in the past one hundred years (Cruz, 2001). They seek to historically analyze journalism as a cultural product, based on its relationship with power and to document women's participation in the national press. Only exceptionally the history of broadcasting journalism was documented (Sosa, 2001).

Conclusions and Prospects

On the basis of this review, we can state that Mexican scholars seem to lack a strong interest in journalism as a clearly defined object of study and have been strongly oriented toward current societal dynamics and the political transition in Mexico. Along with the dependency on the fluctuating and skimpy academic resources, several factors have impeded the consolidation of research traditions and formation of basic theoretical frameworks and methods to approach journalistic phenomena. Among those factors, we may count the lack of a consolidated

journalistic profession, the ambiguous curricula in journalism education, the obsolescent legislation on communications, and the structure and ownership of Mexican mass media.

Mexican research on journalism continuously was influenced by concepts and approaches from foreign countries such as the critical perspectives of Latin American researchers (e.g. Fernando Reyes Matta), the empirical research tradition of the United States or influences from the earlier British journalism studies – in Mexico mainly introduced by Gonzales Molina. In addition, the development and communication policy of UNESCO had considerable impact. It is true that these influences inspired a substantial amount of journalism-related research in the country, but they probably contributed to hinder the emergence of originally Mexican and consistently investigated theories or methodological approaches.

Contemporary journalism research in Mexico is still emergent. Global shifts on journalistic practices might influence institutional interest on this field. However, academic efforts to consolidate a specific trend of study will continue to be isolated for a long while, and the influence of socio-political milieu will undoubtedly prevail.

Notes

- 1 According to Fuentes (1998, p. 37), data from the Science Citation Index in 1978 indicate that only 1 percent from the recorded publications were produced in Latin America, and out of this figure “92 percent corresponds to Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Chile and Venezuela,” from which only a minor proportion stems from social science.
- 2 Empirical studies on professionalization of Latin American journalists were contributed by non-Mexican researchers: Day (1968) as well as McLeod and Rush (1969a, 1969b).
- 3 Authors such as Lippmann (1922), Tuchman (1978), and Schudson (2002), among others, are considered as the conceptual roots here.
- 4 The print law dates back to 1917, and the one on radio and television to 1960.

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