

# Economically-Driven Partisanship—Official Advertising and Political Coverage in Mexico: The Case of Morelia

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Partisanship and dependence on government support have characterized Mexican media along its history. That is, on the one hand, the journalistic practice has been determined by the alignment towards a political stance. On the other, thanks to the intervention of the state, news outlets—especially newspapers—have survived in an economically difficult environment. Nowadays, the support from the government mainly comes in the form of official advertising, which has become a token to trade revenues for publicity. Therefore, this paper argues that media partisanship in Mexico has shifted from ideological to economic. Based upon a case study conducted in Morelia (the capital city of Michoacán), this article analyzes the impact of the official advertising on the political information published by the local newspapers.

*Keywords:* Mexican media, journalism, partisanship, coercion, official advertising

## Introduction

From the very beginning, partisanship has been one of the hallmarks of the Mexican journalism. Historically, media have supported different ideologies and politicians have used those outlets as their political trench. Nonetheless, as this paper will argue, the editorial alignment has not always been motivated by ideological coincidences, but by different soft means of coercion towards the press such as the allocation of official advertising. That is, news organizations in Mexico have learnt to exchange friendly coverage for commercial agreements with political elites. Based upon a case study focused on Morelia (the capital city of Michoacán), the aim of this article is to analyze the impact of the official advertising on the political news published by the five local newspapers. Correlating the investment of advertising and the coverage of the government/party elites allows understanding how the former determines the latter. In other words, the former political allegiance of the news organizations has evolved to the new economically-driven partisanship.

Therefore, the content of this paper is organized in four sections: Firstly, there is an overview of the main features of the Mexican press (partisanship, soft means of coercion towards the media, and official advertising). Secondly, it will explain the design of the study. Thirdly, the findings will be analyzed and discussed. Finally, there will be some concluding remarks.

## Mexican Press: Between Partisanship and Coercion

In order to understand the implications of the official advertising for the decisions within the Morelian

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newsrooms, it is important to have a general background of certain traits of the Mexican press. Therefore, this section offers an overview of the partisan character of the media in this country, the diverse forms used by the government to exert pressure over the journalists, and the arrival of the official advertising contracts.

### **Partisan Roots**

Partisan media are far from being an extraordinary event in Mexico. On the contrary, instead of the exception, it has been the rule from the very beginning of its existence. Just as the literature about Mexican journalism refers, partisanship is one of its hallmarks. Considering that most of the time newspapers were used as links between interest groups and the causes they were after, the partisan character of those publications turned them into mere ephemeral instruments, when certain minorities disputed regional power, and their editorial spaces were their political trench. That is, those publications were the forum in which politicians presented and defended their ideologies (Pineda & Del-Palacio, 2003).

Opinion press has deep roots in Mexico: Prior to the beginning of the Independence War (1810), partisan newspapers started developing with the only goal of diffusing liberal political ideas that were the fuel of the movement. Once the separation from the Spanish crown was consummated in 1821, different papers were published for supporting both conservative and liberal ideologies. "The typical feature of the newspapers from that time was the fact that they emphasized not only the news, but also editorials and partisan comments as well" (Bohman, 1986, p. 61). At the end of the 19th century, *El Imparcial*, considered as the first newspaper with mass circulation, was founded with the idea of providing only information. However, due to the political environment prior to the Revolution (1910-1920), partisanship was present in the rest of the printed media. When this new war was over, the factions within the revolutionary army published their own papers with their own political ideas. From the 1920s until now, diverse media have operated under specific ideological alignments that include all the shades of the political spectrum, from the left to the right (Rodríguez, 1993; Avilés, 1999; Lawson, 2002; Pineda & Del-Palacio, 2003; Pineda, 2005; Hughes, 2006; González, 2012).

As heirs of the revolutionary legacy, the members of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) built the "perfect dictatorship" and for seven decades they established a network of alliances with news organizations under an authoritarian veil. "Journalists in these societies were expected to support authority, not challenge it, because media were viewed as a tool for nation building. Information, or truth, became the property of the state" (Hughes, 2006, p. 49). In the same sense, Aceves (2000) considered that the authoritarian features of the Mexican regime which came after the revolution were fostered by a media system where news outlets were submissive and disposed to complicity, with scarce heroic cases of confrontation against the government.

As a result of that, Mexican press was docile and reporters were not used to do more than copying press releases or official statements. Media subordination towards the state fostered that, in practice, the news stories were not for the audience, but for the political elites, which became the main producers and consumers of this kind of information (Riva-Palacio, 1992; Adler-de-Lomnitz, Salazar, & Adler, 2004). In fact, politics were portrayed by news organizations, especially the national broadcast chain Televisa, as a fragmented reality: There was the realm of authority and the realm of politics, the former was integrated by the president and ministries, Congress and political parties belonged to the latter (Hallin, 1995).

Even though the press was clearly dominated by the government, there was no need to promote corruption, at least not at scandalous level though, because most of the news workers were convinced about the role they

were supposed to adopt<sup>1</sup>. Journalists' support for authoritarianism does not have to be coerced. Authoritarianism under the right conditions can be as legitimate to journalists as a more democratic model of news production (Hughes 2006, p. 51). But not only reporters, editors, or publishers were deferential towards the government, the PRI regime was also widely accepted by most of the population, a situation which favored its legitimacy (Camp, 1999; Vogler, 2007).

Regarding the coverage of political information, the effective domestication of the media by the PRI regime was evident in three aspects: official control of the public agenda, selective silence on compromising issues related to government and its performance, and a clear partisan bias in support of the official candidates during elections (Lawson, 2002). In general terms, there was an evident similarity among the editorial lines which inclined the news to an official and conservative alignment. However, during the late 1970s and early 1980s several printed media were founded as a reaction to this situation. *Proceso*, *Unomásuno*, and *La Jornada* aimed to offer a different approach to the information, detached from the official version and considered as "leftist". Being identified with the left, at that time, meant being away from the official version, rather than being aligned with a specific political ideology. Nevertheless, it did not take those publications so long to really incline to the left (Castro, 2006), a situation that was permitted by the state because it facilitated its legitimacy. That is, by allowing certain dose of oppositional voices, the regime could be perceived as democratic and tolerant. Whether through alignment or tolerance, news organizations were—and still are—subjects to the government's will, which was the result of the soft means of coercion that will be explained now.

### **Soft Means of Coercion Towards the Media**

Corruption between politicians and the press is not new in Mexico. There is a long list of episodes in which both actors negotiate allegiance in exchange of favors. Whether the politicians or the media promote this practice, there are different means of coercion which have been used across the time in this country. Therefore, this part of the section offers an overview of the ample catalogue of techniques that journalists and party/government elites use to exert pressure towards one another.

"For years, the Mexican media were harshly (and justly) criticized for their association with the old regime" (Lawson, 2002, p. 7). The PRI years were widely known by the control over news organizations, nonetheless, coercion towards the press is a much older phenomenon. Just as partisanship, pressure has been present from the very beginning of journalism in Mexico. As soon as the independence from Spain was declared in 1821, one of the ephemeral emperor Agustín de Iturbide's first actions was to constrain press freedom. Thus, the opposition voices, the ones which not long ago fought by his side, could not express their disagreement to his plans (Bohmann, 1986).

By 1917, prior to the end of the Revolution, freedom of speech and press was supposed to be guaranteed by the new Constitution approved by President Venustiano Carranza. Despite the brand new official protection, since then, in practice every single head of federal, state or local administrations have controlled news outlets through different means. An interesting case was President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), who set the standards

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<sup>1</sup> A couple of examples of the docility towards the government were presented by Molina (1987) and Rodríguez (1993). The former described the routines and newsworthiness values of Televisa's newsroom in the early 1980s regarding the coverage of the federal government and the local authorities of Mexico City. The reporting at this television station responded to its owner Emilio Azcárraga Milmo's stance towards the regime, who also considered himself as a soldier of the PRI. On the other hand, Rodríguez (1993) offered a collection of anecdotes related to the cosy relationship between publishers and the president in turn, from Miguel Alemán (1946-1952) to Carlos Salinas (1988-1994).

of media management that would be applied by basically all of his successors, even the new governments emanated from the opposition. Two key elements fostered the control over news organizations: the Autonomous Department of Press and Advertising (Departamento Autónomo de Prensa y Publicidad), designed for controlling the official information, and Productora e Importadora de Papel S. A. (PIPSA), a monopolist state-owned company created for producing and distributing newsprint.

Pressure towards media was exerted by government through “refined and soft” instruments (Avilés, 1999, p. 7), selectively applied to specific news outlets which proved to be more effective than repression. Official advertising allocation, tax exemptions, free service of the state-owned news agency *Notimex*, low interest loans, and cheap newsprint mentioned above were some of the subtle means of control. Nonetheless, when the friendly instruments were not persuasive enough, some other mechanisms were activated and government reprisals tended to be noisier and even more threatening. Retributive tax audits, bills for accumulated debts of newsprint and, in very few occasions like the case of the coup to *Excélsior* in the 1970s, overt intervention, were some examples.

Besides these institutional tools, a more focused form of pressure was also widely practiced: the bribe. Known in the Mexican journalistic slang as *chayote*, this form of corruption consisted in offering money to journalists, editors and even photographers (there are even especial payrolls for selected reporters in most of the ministries) or favors (housing credits, especial medical care, meals in fancy restaurants, gifts, paid vacations, posts in the administration, etc.) in exchange for friendly coverage. To a different degree, depending on the time and budget, all branches and levels of the government use it all the time. Its effectiveness relied on the fact that, most of the time, new workers’ salaries were low and this extra money represented up to one third of their income (Trejo, 1992; Lawson, 2002; DeLeón, 2009). On the other hand, since more than media’s impact, politicians’ discretion was basically the main argument for allocating advertising or granting subsidies, then, facilitating information access was another form of control. Documents, interviews, and even press releases were frequently used to make aligned journalists’ job easier and blocking independent or critical ones.

Instead of a conflict of interests, the relationship between news organizations and government was determined by a confluence of interests (Riva-Palacio, 1997; Lawson, 2002; Reig, 2010), which dictated the collaborative way they interact with each other. Media owners were after a favorably business environment to make profits from, and political elites needed friendly publicity to legitimize and perpetuate their influence. Thus, both of them were ready to negotiate loyalty for revenues. In the absence of clear rules for the game, both media and politicians use one another and are used by each other too. Therefore, the nature of the journalist-politician relationship in Mexico is “a complex network of mutual benefits, commitments and favors, difficult to penetrate and even more difficult to reform” (Riva-Palacio, 1997, p. 22).

However, with only a few exceptions, neither the media nor the sources act as a solid and uniform group. On the contrary, individual interests are always above the common good, a situation that fosters mutual instrumentalization and exploitation. For that reason, “As a general rule, the journalistic message responds to the structural interests which are behind the media” (Reig, 2010, p. 7). Whether coercion, pressure, or instrumentalization, the truth is that all these terms point out a single concept: corruption, which is “the abuse of public power for personal gain or for the benefit of a group to which one owes allegiance” (Stapenhurst, 2000, p. 1). In the media environment, it means the use of the news power to curry favors or illegally benefit the interests of a government, public servant, political party, politician, enterprise, or individual to the detriment of the truth and the common good (López, 2001).

In more recent times, and despite the existence of others, official advertising has become one of the most effective means of coercion towards the media. For that reason, the following part of this section will present an overview of this concept and its impact on the journalistic practice in Mexico.

### **Official Advertising and Its Impact**

One of the core arguments of this paper is that the official advertising contracts represent a renovated form of *chayote*. That is, the allocation or withdrawal of government adverts has substituted the old bribe, but its aim remains the same: getting favorable coverage. For that reason, in order to better understand the relevance of the empirical evidence of the Morelian case, this subsection offers a general review of this concept and its implications for the journalistic practice in this country.

The literature about Mexican journalism reveals that the use of official advertising as a means of coercion towards the media is not a new phenomenon. On the contrary, government has exerted pressure through it since a long time ago. As a result of that, and at different levels, news outlets have been historically subjected to instrumentalization, not always involuntarily though. Even before the evolution of the concept of official advertising as it is now, Mexican governments have sponsored friendly media and punished critical voices. No matter what their ideologies are, conservative or liberal, presidents and governors have used public money for promoting partisan journalism.

Before going further into the issue of coercion through official advertising, it is important to define this concept: in normative terms, the aim of the official advertising should be to foster communication between government and its constituency, by informing the latter about the performance of the former. This means that people have the right to know and authorities have the obligation to inform about their activities, such as implementation of social programs, use of public budget, and law initiatives (Fundar, 2011). In so doing, public servants would boost accountability through this kind of publicity.

Therefore, the rationale of the authorities for having an official advertising contract is to guarantee that the government, at its three levels and despite the political times, has a permanent presence in media by getting good coverage through news stories and/or by having priority spaces for its advertisements. By a monthly or yearly investment, the newspaper offers certain amount of pages for the government to publish its press releases<sup>2</sup> and advertisements. The sum of money that each news outlet gets from the official budget depends on its reach and impact, so the biggest share goes to the most important media organizations.

The introduction of the official advertising contracts and its use as a substitute of the bribes to individual reporters did not happen suddenly. It was a process that can be tracked down in the early 1990s during President Carlos Salinas' administration, when a series of regulations for granting money to news outlets and their staff were approved (Riva-Palacio, 1992, 1997; Orme, 1997; Orozco, 2007). Among others, the new guidelines prohibited paying newsmen's expenses whilst they were covering presidential tours and only allocating official advertising in the most important media. However, this new policy was vague and left a lot of room for authorities' discretion at the moment of deciding with whom and under which terms a contract for publicity should be signed (Villanueva, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> When a press release is published in its full-length, as a main story and in a preferential place—front/odd page or centre folds, it is known in Mexican journalism as paid news (*nota pagada* or *publi-reportaje*). It is usually published without the by-line, sometimes with a different layout and, ideally, with a caption like paid content or something similar. Nonetheless, at least in Morelia, this last feature never appears. For that reason, it is quite difficult for the average reader to distinguish a regular news story from a paid one. This situation was also noted at the national level by Riva-Palacio (1992; 1997) and Keenan (1997).

The arrival of these formal agreements between political and media power holders was supposed to inaugurate a different logic in the way political communications operate in Mexico, taking it to a renewed and more professional level. However, it has not been without a permanent halo of suspicion though, because this new kind of interaction did not only stay at a commercial level, it had evident implications in the stories that the people receive from the media as well. Since the very beginning, the contracts have been used as a means of coercion towards the media and, as a result of that, they have had an undeniable impact on the way political actors' activities have been covered (DeLeón, 2009).

Especially during the PRI regime, politicians used to negotiate coverage directly with reporters, because the latter was able to sell advertising besides reporting (Bohmann, 1986; Keenan, 1997; Lawson, 2002). It means that, since correspondents earned extra money if they could close a deal, they were allowed to act as salesmen as well. Under this system, three were the sources of income for journalists: regular salary, sales commissions (5%-10%) and, very frequently, bribes. Since news workers had to complement their incomes by selling advertising, their pens were compromised because their professional values were put at stake whenever they had to write a story about their customers, who only expected to be treated favorably. In other words, money determined newsworthiness and economic interest was more important than journalistic interest.

However, the weakening of the PRI regime two decades ago and the opposition victories at local and state level brought a different logic for the journalist-politician relationship, when instead of bargaining with the former, the latter started negotiating with their bosses (DeLeón, 2009). The political juncture strengthened media owners position by putting them right in front of their customers and letting them set the new conditions for the official advertising contracts. Notwithstanding, at the end of the day, these commercial agreements became instruments of control in both directions: On the one hand, politicians might have lost their influence towards individual reporters, but they also gained direct access to directors-general and editors, who actually decide which information is published or not. On the other hand, media owners may have set advantageous conditions for publicity contracts, but news outlets proved to be economically weak to survive without official advertising revenues too. In sum, these new official advertising contracts have made the interaction between news organizations and government/political parties more sophisticated, because their commitment towards a mutually supportive relationship is built upon a mercantile logic.

By selectively<sup>3</sup> investing in publicity in news organizations which could hardly survive otherwise, and which suddenly became friendly towards the official authorities after the injection of public resources, in practice, the government also structured the media market to an important extent. Nevertheless, being "rescued" by the state was not for free, because it necessarily implied an editorial alignment towards the official discourse. In short terms, exchanging advertising for favorable coverage became the rule for the interaction between news outlets and politicians. However, this relationship was a matter of power and control mediated by a commercial agreement. "Control through official advertising means the use of advertisements allocated in a news organization as a powerful instrument for rewarding or punishing its economy, based on its editorial criteria" (Torres, 1997, p. 91).

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<sup>3</sup> Since there is not any law or regulation which dictates the criteria for allocating official advertising, the decision of how much and in which news outlets the budget will be invested depends on the authorities' discretion (Fundar, 2011).

Besides the economic limitations, printed media have to survive in a difficult environment, because there is no mass circulation press in Mexico and the readership is reduced, mainly consisting of political, economic, and intellectual elites. “Newspapers had few readers, depended to a significant extent on official payments given in return for favorable publicity, and, with a few exceptions, were written more for the consumption of government press offices than for the reading public” (Hallin, 2000, p. 275). For this reason, no Mexican newspaper can survive only by selling copies, they all depend on their advertising revenues<sup>4</sup>, especially from the government at its three levels. In spite of being virtually unknown by the readership, some of them have the only goal of making money through the state. Even the so-called “independent projects” find it hard to exist without a share of the official budget, which in many cases represents covering the payroll, hence, a favorable coverage here is more than justified (Trejo, 1992). “Printed press exemplifies the rearrangement of old practices under new conditions. Its reduced readership and the consequential finance dependence on paid publicity make it susceptible of coercion by diverse powers and self-censorship” (Adler-de-Lomnitz et al., 2004, p. 291).

In order to see in practice the real impact of the official advertising on the media, a case study was conducted in Morelia. Its aim was to analyze the implications of the government paid publicity for the political news published by the local newspapers. Therefore, the rest of this paper will present the findings, but before that, the next section will summarize the design of the research.

### **The Design of the Study**

Before explaining the concept of “economically-driven partisanship” and its further implications for understanding the Mexican journalism, this section outlines the design of the study in terms of methodology and the city where it took place. Therefore, the content is organized in two parts: The first one offers an overview of the methodological scheme of the research, and the second presents a quick glance of Morelia, the place selected for conducting the research.

#### **Methodological Scheme**

In order to understand the impact of the official advertising on the content of the political information published by the Morelian newspapers, two techniques were used: on the one hand, a content analysis which aimed to evaluate the official advertising and the political news coverage; on the other hand, a set of 20 in-depth interviews was conducted with journalists, communications officers, and politicians.

Regarding the content analysis, the focus was on the amount, frequency and type of advertisements; and for the political information, attention was paid to the amount of news, agenda setting, and bias. In short, the interest was in the quantity and tone of coverage as a way of evaluating the partisan stance of each publication. The analysis included the five local newspapers (*Cambio de Michoacán*, *El Sol de Morelia*, *La Jornada Michoacán*, *LaVoz de Michoacán*, and *Provincia*), and was held from January to June 2010. Each newspaper’s political section<sup>5</sup> was revised every single day during the six months. Table 1 offers the sample size of the content analysis, which represents the amount of official advertisements and political news published by each

<sup>4</sup> This is not an exclusive phenomenon of Mexican newspapers: In the United States, 80% of printed media’s revenues came from advertising in 2008. In that same year, British national newspapers relied on this concept up to 41%, and local papers 65% (McAthy, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Only *La Jornada* and *Cambio* have a specific section with the label Politics, the rest include the information regarding this issue in their local information sections. In that case, a story was considered political when it was related to the activities and opinions of the government (federal, state, and local), legislative branch (Senators and federal and state Congress), and political parties.

newspaper during the period of study.

Table 1

*Sample Size of the Content Analysis*

	<i>Cambio</i>	<i>El Sol</i>	<i>La Jornada</i>	<i>La Voz</i>	<i>Provincia</i>	Total
Official ads	515	655	503	740	596	3,009
Political news	1,760	1,534	1,356	1,403	1,400	7,453

This period was selected for two reasons: Firstly, because the interest was revising the published information in which the interviewed actors had a certain degree of involvement at that time, either in generating or reporting it. Secondly, the idea was also to evaluate the political news production during a normal time. That is not during an electoral campaign, when this kind of information has an excessive presence on the media and that might incline the results towards inaccurate parameters, which would not represent every-day reality. As Vliegthart, Boomgaarden, & Boumans (2011, p. 98) noted, compared with electoral coverage, research on “routine news periods” is scarce, even comparisons between both of them. Thus, looking at an ordinary period of time—when there are no elections near—provides useful insights of media routines.

The aim of using the content analysis was to obtain empirical data related to the political messages that were published on a daily basis in the local newspapers. This information represents what actually was presented by the media, not what the actors involved might have said about it. The reason of selecting the news stories and advertising responded to the interest in exploring how these news outlets present the political information, how dependent they are on the official advertising (considering it as their main income and also as a means of coercion), and what is the connection between the coverage and the amount of advertisements.

Related to the interviews—which were conducted between April and July, 2010—the idea was to collect the opinions of at least one journalist/editor from each newspaper, one politician or communications officer from the three main parties<sup>6</sup>, and the communications officers of the state and local governments. As a group, they were representative of the local political communications process and offered the diversity of opinions sought. However, during the fieldwork stage and as a result of the networking, different communications officers were included because they were basically the only option, since the access to politicians and authorities was very restricted for a non-journalist. That is the case of Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), which Congressmen and party leaders were the most reluctant to be interviewed for an academic research. It is important to stress that the interviewees’ identities will be kept anonymous and a specific combination of letters (J for journalists, CO for communications officers, and P for politicians) and numbers will be used whenever they are quoted in this article.

### **Morelia as a Case Study**

Morelia (the capital city of the state of Michoacán, located in the Middle West region of the country) represents an interesting case study for analyzing the relationship between official advertising and political coverage. Choosing this place responded to its particular blend of uniqueness and representativeness: On the one hand, it is one of the few places in Mexico that have been governed by the three main political parties (Institutional Revolutionary Party, National Action Party, and Democratic Revolution Party). On the other, it

<sup>6</sup> During the period of study, the three main parties—which had 90% of the state Congress seats—were National Action Party (Partido Acción Nacional, PAN), Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI), and Democratic Revolution Party (Partido de la Revolución Democrática, PRD).

can be considered as an average medium-sized city in terms of population (729,279 inhabitants, INEGI, 2010) and media outlets (five newspapers, five television channels, and 13 radio stations).

Being the capital city of Michoacán and also having experienced three apparently different approaches to public administration are strong reasons to consider Morelia as a research object in the communication field. Firstly, this is because the three main parties are equally strong at this level, which sets special characteristics to the political debate. Secondly, related to this point, the media system is constantly forced to adapt to the changing political environment, since the instrumentalization is one of its main features. It is important to address that the number of news organizations in Morelia, although apparently high under Western standards, is not unusual at all in Mexico because the average of newspapers in most of the capital cities is around three or four.

In terms of political communication, this city is also a good example of how local and regional media outlets manage to survive in an economically weak environment, which constantly puts at stake their commercial viability, a situation that opens the door to all kind of manipulation, both political and economic. As a result of this manipulation, the interaction between journalist and politicians tends to be shaped by the factors that foster this instrumentalization. Hence, as this research will show, the existence of different news organizations aligned to the official discourse, produce messages more related to the political actors, rather than the audience, which reflects the impact of the official advertising on the Mexican journalism. Therefore, the next section will present the main results of this case study.

### **The Findings**

This section presents the main findings of the research, which is organized in three parts: The first one is the analysis of the results and it includes, on the one hand, the general panorama of the official advertising in Morelian newspapers, and on the other, the correlation between the allocation of the ads and the coverage that the state and local government got during the period of study. The second part offers the opinions of the interviewees regarding the impact of the government's paid publicity on the news. Finally, the third part presents the discussion on the implications of the findings for the Mexican journalism.

#### **Analysis of the Results**

As previously mentioned, an official advertising contract facilitates publicity for the government through paid messages (advertisements and press releases). Its aim is to secure a permanent media presence, no matter what the political times are. It is worth mentioning that in Mexico the government at its three branches (executive, legislative, and judicial) and levels (federal, state, and local)—but also political parties—can sign one of these commercial agreements with whom they consider adequate.

This first part of the analysis of the official advertising offers a correlation between this issue and the coverage of the state and local governments which, in comparison with the state Congress and political parties, are the most important advertisers for the Morelian newspapers. However, before commenting on that, the next two charts offer the overall panorama of the paid publicity in the local printed media.

Regarding the official advertisers and their level of investment, there is a homogeneous trend in the five local printed media: Government at its three levels is, by far, the main investor in every newspaper because nearly all the revenues come from it (between 97% in *Cambio* and 91% in *El Sol*). Legislative branch and political parties had a reduced presence, especially the latter whose highest peak was in *La Jornada* (3%), whilst the former's rate was between 8% (*El Sol*), and 2% (*Cambio* and *La Jornada*) (see Figure 1). The next

chart (see Figure 2) breaks down the concept of government as an individual official advertiser.

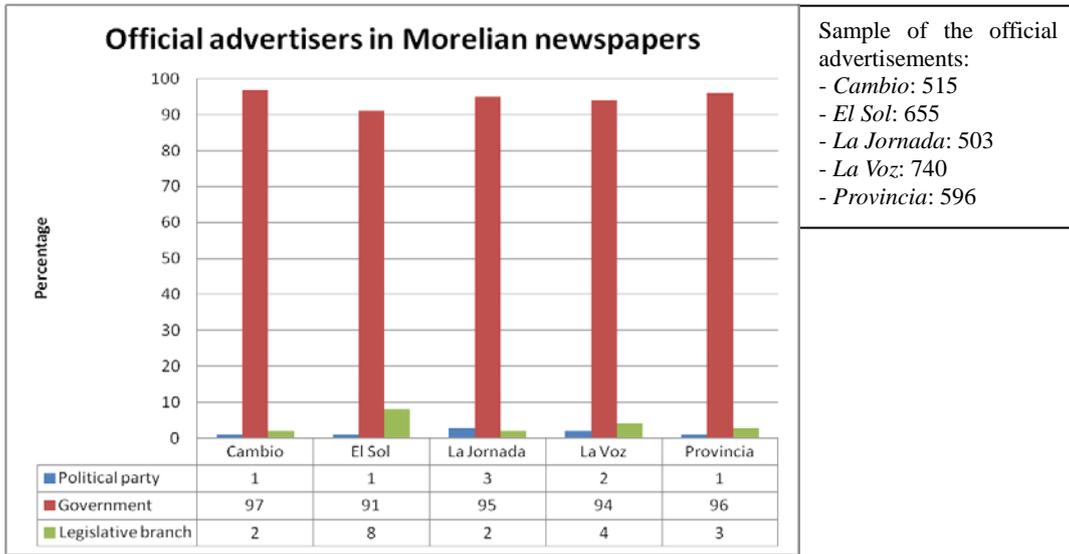


Figure 1. Official advertisers in Morelian newspapers.

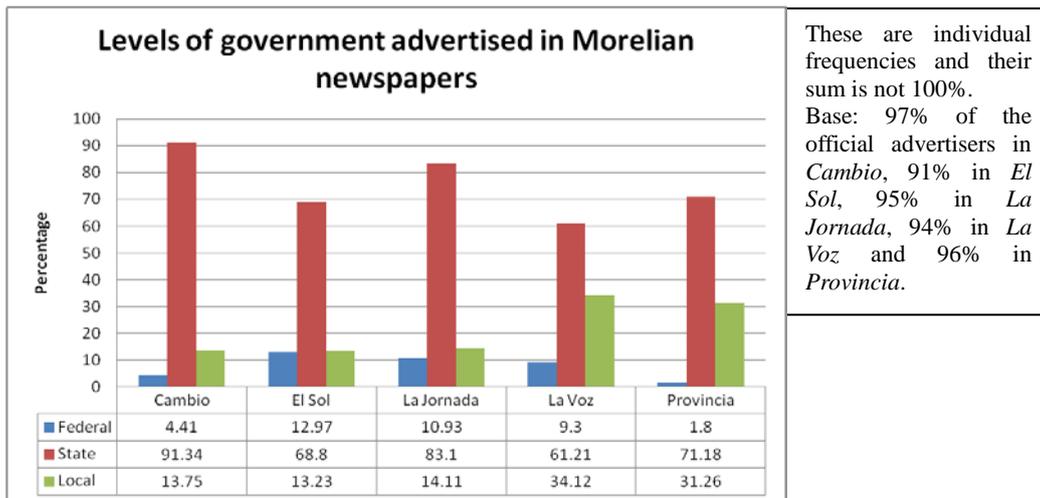


Figure 2. Levels of government advertised in Morelian newspapers.

State government is the most important sponsor of the local newspapers which revenues from official advertising mainly came from. Their dependence to the state budget oscillated between 91.34% (*Cambio*) and 61.21% (*La Voz*). On the contrary, local government’s investment was more selective: Whilst *La Voz* and *Provincia* got the biggest slice (34.12% and 31.26%, respectively), the other three received significantly less money but in an equitable way (14.11% *La Jornada*, 13.75% *Cambio*, and 13.23% *El Sol*). A more or less similar trend appeared with the federal government which gave more money to *El Sol*, *La Jornada*, and *La Voz* (12.97%, 10.93%, and 9.3% respectively) than the other two (*Cambio* 4.41% and only 1.8% *Provincia*).

The following two charts present the figures related to the presence of the governor, mayor, and their staff on the political news sections and their levels of allocation of adverts. Therefore, the percentages for advertising represent the level of investment of the government (state and local) per publication and the

coverage that the head and members of the administration received during the period of study. Since, as it was commented before, the investment in publicity by the state Congress and political parties is reduced, they were excluded from the analysis.

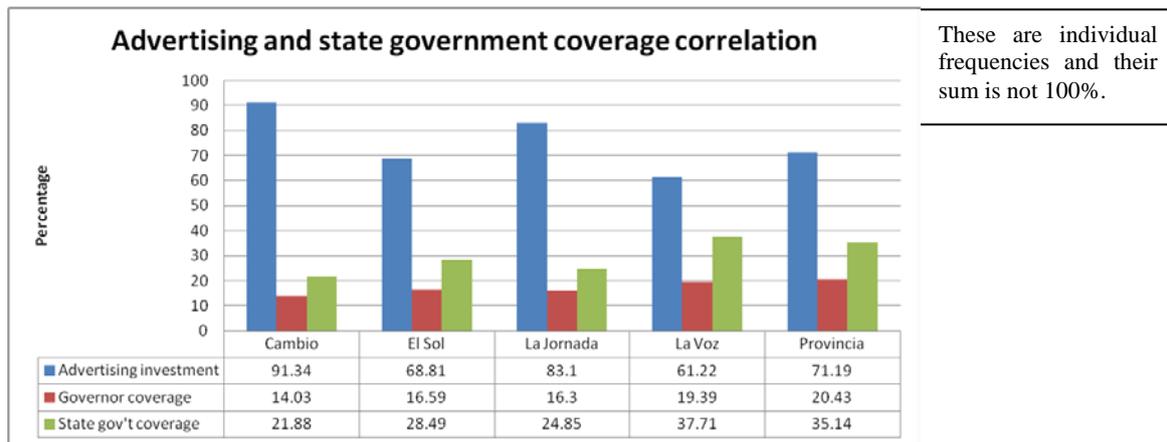


Figure 3. Advertising and state government coverage correlation.

In graphical terms, Figure 3 summarizes part of the central argument of this article: The old practices of media coercion through bribes have in the official advertising their modern version, because it has the same goal of the *chayote*. That is, fostering constant and friendly coverage, but used as an official and formal contract. Since there was a homogeneous investment in all the five newspapers, there was a homogeneous coverage then. State government advertising rates represented between 91.34% (*Cambio*) and 61.22% (*La Voz*) of the official advertising revenue. The presence of the governor as an individual actor oscillated between 20.43% (*Provincia*) and 14.03% (*Cambio*); and the different members and offices of state government got between 37.71% (*La Voz*) and 21.88% (*Cambio*). Furthermore, the coverage was not only quantitatively similar among the local publications, but also in qualitative terms. It means that the news stories about the head of the state government and his staff had an evident trend towards a favorable bias. In other words, they usually received a friendly coverage and the scarce criticism only came from the opposition, never from the media.

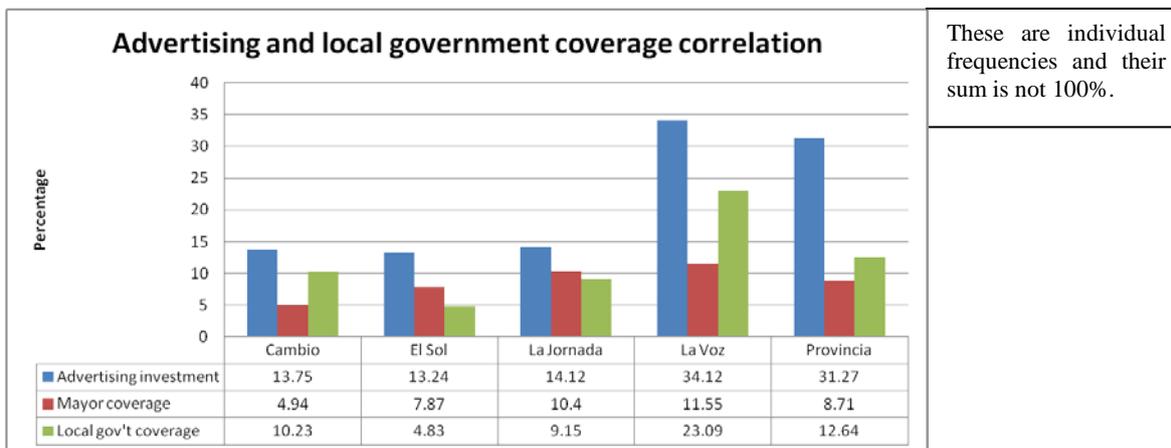


Figure 4. Advertising and local government coverage correlation.

The case of the local government is also consistent with the assumption of the role of advertising contracts

in determining the news: the more investment, the more coverage. Since *La Voz* and *Provincia* received more money (34.12% and 31.27%, respectively), they offered the best coverage of the local government (23.09% and 12.64%, respectively) then. This tendency was also evident at the moment of analyzing the bias of the news stories, because the municipal administration had a friendlier coverage in the newspapers in which it allocated more advertisements. However, since the investment was significantly less than the state government, sometimes these publications—and opposition as well—criticized the local government. Nonetheless, the mayor received a rather uniform coverage—both quantitatively and qualitatively—which oscillated between 11.55% (*La Voz*) and 4.94% (*Cambio*), which made him the second most important individual political actor, after the governor. The reason is that he is considered as an important local politician and opinion leader.

Finally, as it will be commented in the following subsection, government paid publicity shapes the coverage that authorities get. This is because the allocation of adverts determines the coverage, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. This situation significantly differs from other political systems such as the British, where “unlike advertising, news coverage is free” (Davis, 2000, p. 52); or the American, where neither sources nor reporters are expected to pay for the exchange of information (Gans, 2004). In addition, and according to the interviewees, these contracts can be used for exerting pressure either towards the news outlets or the politicians. That is, on the one hand, the former might harshly criticize a public servant until he/she signs a commercial agreement with them. On the other, politicians use this kind of adverts as a shield against criticism from the media. Furthermore, and as it was mentioned before, even the literature suggested that the government has used the official advertising for punishing or rewarding friendly news organizations (e.g., Bohmann, 1986; Trejo, 1992; Rodríguez, 1993, 2007; Torres, 1997; Lawson, 2002; Hughes & Lawson, 2004; DeLeón, 2009; González, 2012).

### **Impact of the Official Advertising According to the Interviewees**

This part of the section presents the answers given by the interviewees when asked about the impact of the official advertising on the Morelian newspapers. As a result of this, an almost complete agreement was found: Official advertising does have an impact on local newsrooms. However, who exerts the coercion through this means could be analyzed from two opposite points of view. The “expected” reaction to this issue is thinking that politicians are the ones who corrupt media by signing or cancelling advertising contracts. Nevertheless, there is also another side of the story, not very often mentioned in the literature, in which actually the latter blackmails the former through this instrument. Since corruption needs two players, the one who gives and the one who takes, the extent official advertising influences editorial decisions depends then on those two actors, none of them more innocent or guilty than the other. For that reason, in order to understand this situation, both perspectives will be presented in the following pages.

In the late 1970s, during an official event with media owners and journalists, and referred to the advertising contracts, José López Portillo (the Mexican president from 1976 to 1982) said “I do not pay you to beat me up”, referring to a complaint about the allegedly harsh criticism he received from the media, in spite of his investment in official advertising. His sadly famous phrase, in which the Mexican journalistic slang simply means exposing or criticizing a public servant—with or without reason—is still widely used to explain this technique of coercion. As J2 pointed out: “If you print a story ‘Beating X’ officer up, he calls you and says: ‘Hey! I am not paying advertisements in your newspaper and then getting beaten up by you’”.

Under the logic of whoever pays is in charge, J6 and J7 commented that governments abuse media through

the official advertising. By using these contracts as a means of coercion, high rank authorities demand a preferential treatment when reporters cover their activities. This situation has fostered a relationship between news outlets and politicians based on economic interests, in which the former lives in a comfort zone built upon the latter favors. That is, a patron-client relationship.

According to J4, that is why news organizations are concerned about avoiding their customers' heart feelings with the stories they publish: "When we try to criticize the government, editors and directors-general suppress certain information which could hurt susceptibilities and risk contracts". Nevertheless, this situation does not apply for every political actor, because not everyone has enough money: "Parties which do not have that economic power are always front page if they perform corruption acts". In that sense, CO3 considered that "by signing a contract, the newspaper is not supposed to beat up any politician or officer, not even with a rose petal... Through these commercial agreements, disguised censorship, government exerts control over the media". This control oscillates between limiting the scope of information, framing it or even censoring it, whilst the media have to accept the terms and conditions set by the one who pays.

At least four of the interviewees, current and former reporters, openly accepted that they had experienced being censored when they presented compromising stories related to government officers or candidates in electoral campaigns. The reason was always the same: official advertising contracts. J5's reaction summarizes journalist's feelings towards this situation:

It was the first time that I realized that censorship actually does exist, I experienced it. Once I naively believed that it did not exist and I wanted to think that working for the best and most prestigious newspaper in Michoacán involved just that, having the freedom of information... Now I can show off that my head in the newspaper represented a 200,000 [Mexican Pesos (\$15,209 USD)] monthly contract.

For that reason, "Official advertising does not have 'certain' impact on newsrooms, it has a 'total' impact! Media are terrified for their own subsistence, because only very few of them are auto-sufficient", J3 added. The chosen few that have some other sponsors could manage to survive without government investments, not for long though. This is because, at the end of the day, there is not any other advertiser who could match official budgets, at least at the state level. That is the reason why "prostitution also exists in journalism: when you are going to decide the edition of the day, you have to reserve the space for the official paid news stories, which take most of your available space", J1 said. In so doing, most of the information produced by newspaper's own staff comes second in importance order, at least in economic terms. The reason is that none of the published press releases is free and all of them have been already paid.

In short, the extent of government involvement in local newsrooms depends on media's economic resources. Since most of them are not self-sufficient companies because their daily paper sales are not high, and they have a lot of expenses (payroll, consumables, taxes...), they have to rely on government subsidies. Very frequently, those subsidies represent their most important means of survival. News outlets like *Cambio* and *La Jornada* with low circulation rates<sup>7</sup> have, therefore, a limited readership and an evident lack of commercial advertisers. This situation facilitates the dependence on official advertising contracts. Notwithstanding, there is an evident price to pay, because investments are not charities. Thus, advertisers are in a strong position to

<sup>7</sup> *Cambio* has a circulation of 8,891 copies and *La Jornada Michoacán* 7,233 (PNMI, 2010).

raising certain demands or asking for special treatment, when they perceive their interests may be at stake because of the media's information.

Every single government wants to have the media on its side and, in so doing, it uses certain instruments which sometimes are unethical... It is natural that the government invests in official advertising to publicize its activities and programmes, but that is also a double edge knife: "If you do not talk favorably about me, I simply stop buying advertisements from you". (P2)

According to this interviewee's opinion, those agreements are neither good nor evil per se. It all depends on how they are used by the actors, because a contract may be used just for branding, as a regular advertising campaign. But it may also foster an unethical relationship between the politician and the news outlet, facilitating special favors, such as suppressing or framing information, which have an evident impact on the news. From this point of view, money seems to be the key element for determining the relationship between both actors. For the case of the local government, P4 and CO6 considered that at this level it is more difficult to have an impact on newsrooms, because the advertising contracts are way lower than the ones that state government signs on a regular basis. That impedes local authorities exerting greater pressure towards media.

Official advertising contracts do exert influence, I can testify that, because I am member of the Social Communications Committee of the state Congress, and sometimes some fellow Congressmen ask us to call a specific news outlet to make a complaint about a story that they think it is unfair or inaccurate, and they use as an argument the financing for advertisements. (P3)

Exploiting the advantages of the official advertising is a sweet temptation for every government, no matter the party. Even though the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), during its hegemonic years, developed mastery in media control, whenever the opposition was in charge the same pattern presented itself. P2 confessed that:

Whilst we were opposition, we harshly criticized this misconduct, but once we gained power the situation changed; and now, as government, we cannot help ourselves from falling in the same temptation of covering our backs with this contract. (P2)

These new so-called left orientated governments that now rule Michoacán are much worse, they are more fascist than the PRI... They are more intrusive and they were supposed to be more liberal. If it was up to them, if they could only decide, they would not hesitate in dictating every single front page; but it is not like that, they still have to deal with us [journalists]. (J3)

However, as previously mentioned, corruption needs two players and their roles are exchangeable. In that sense, official advertising contracts can also be used by the media to exert pressure towards politicians. Although very common as well, this side of the story is usually avoided in the literature about Mexican media. CO7 stressed that there is indeed certain pressure when the political party or ministry does not have a contract with a specific news organization. But when they do, their opinion counts in stopping a story or, at least, the editor or director-general warns them about what will be published the next day, and that helps too. However, once again, it only depends on the economic resources they have.

CO1, a former reporter, explained that local newspapers use their own journalists to beat up certain politician or government officer in order to get a contract from them. The logic is that the reporter is asked to do an investigation about a specific political actor and dig until something comes out, especially something compromising. After the publication of the story or even a series of special reports on the same issue, the

director-general and the politician or the communications officer of the government agrees to sign a contract, and suddenly the harsh criticism leaves the place to a friendlier coverage. This situation, also commented by other interviewees and perceived by scholars (Bohmann, 1986; Lawson, 2002; DeLeón, 2009), leaves reporters out of the corruption game, at least to certain extent. Since now the agreements are reached by owners and politicians at the higher levels, individual journalists do not have the active participation they use to have several years ago, when they were the ones who directly negotiated coverage with the government officers. Even though it is now a common practice between news organizations, not all of them do it with the same frequency or intensity. Again, as CO6 pointed out, the newspaper's economic strength determines the ethics of its coverage: "Those which make hard criticism are the smaller ones, which only want your money and they would do anything to expose you".

It is true that official advertising contracts could be used as means of coercion, both towards media and politicians, but their nature is different. Some of the communications officers interviewed thought that when they are used in a more ethical way, they are actually a very useful tool for their work, because they could be part of a wider institutional image campaign.

More than influencing the newsrooms, you use them for branding. A good official advertising contract helps you in getting better spaces on the editions and spreading your message in a more effective way, but they do not help you in shutting media's mouths up. (CO8)

Regarding the importance of having a well-structured communications campaign, rather than just a contract, CO9 considered that the latter is just one among other ways for publicizing government's activities, which means something much more elaborated than just sending press releases. Government requires a more ambitious strategy for branding its institutional image, in which public relations and more targeted actions have a critical role. The interviewees agreed that, at least in theory, advertising and news coverage are two different things and should be separated from each other, but in practice the latter is clearly determined by the former, and the empirical findings of this case study reinforced this idea as well.

It definitely should not be like that, because you are not buying pens or editorial lines, only spaces for placing your information. Both actors, media and politicians, must be very clear about it; so everyone should know what is buying and selling. (CO4)

### **Discussion of the Findings**

As a result of the content analysis and interviews, it can be said that the local newspapers showed an overt allegiance towards the state government. However, this final part of the section argues that, rather than ideological, this alignment has economic roots. That is, due to the official advertising contracts, the sale of their editorial lines has fostered the "economically-driven partisanship".

If Lawson's (2002) assumption about considering the market as the key for building a Mexican Fourth Estate and media opening is right, Morelia seems to be doomed then. Despite the apparent external pluralism among the local press, which would involve different approaches to the news fostered by specific political ideologies, the empirical evidence showed that their editorial lines are for sale and, at the end of the day, there is an evident alignment towards state government. Therefore, the idyllic image of the reader's interests reflected on the news is still an aspiration. Brown (2011) also considered this issue: "Partisan alignment is a rational business strategy in a market large enough to support multiple competitors" (p. 71). However, local media market is reduced and it is not capable of maintaining competence among news outlets. For that reason, their

only chance to survive is exchanging their allegiance for revenues, but not from selling copies, from selling their pages to the best buyer instead.

Mexican newspapers lag behind those in many other parts of the world. The Mexican government does not confront a critical press, not because it is more determined to silence criticism than other governments, but because it has been so successful with subtle measures. The government can exercise control over what it wants to be published because the press has no desire to give up its share of the bargain, the press cannot bear the idea of unbridled competition. (Riva-Palacio, 1997, p. 29)

Journalists and politicians do not share ideologies, only interests, said one of the interviewees. He was right. Whether political or economic, but especially the latter, interest is the key for understanding partisanship. In that sense, the relationship between them is determined by the perception of a mutually beneficial interaction, which could result in revenues for one part and publicity for the other. Since media organizations are considered more as business, rather than public service organizations, customers—not audiences—have the last word. For that reason, editorial lines are flexible and easily adapt to the ever changing political environment. Putting it bluntly, newsrooms decisions are more and more up to advertisers, but less and less up to journalists.

Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) were right when they said that there is a sense of correspondence between the role of reporters and politicians during the political communication process<sup>8</sup>. Hence, party and governmental elites are expected to act as information providers in a watchdog press environment. Under this logic, the conflictive or collaborative relationship has an ideological origin. Nonetheless, in the capital city of Michoacán, the empirical evidence proved otherwise. The Morelian case showed that instead of ideological, the interaction is mainly shaped by economic factors. Therefore, the former political parallelism has shifted towards the new “economically-driven partisanship”, in which allegiance is now solely determined by money. In that sense, the informants stressed the point that conflicts between media and politicians had an economic origin most of the times. Thus, whenever money stopped flowing, the beating-ups immediately started, once investments returned, harsh criticism magically went away.

State government coverage in Michoacán is an example of this situation, because content analysis showed that when correlating advertising rates and coverage, there is a neat uniformity—both quantitatively and qualitatively—regarding the way this administration was portrayed by newspapers. Due to a homogeneous investment in official advertising in all the publications, the state administration and its personnel were framed in a more than friendly way. On the contrary, since the local government selectively invested more in *La Voz* and *Provincia*, the coverage it received presented that same pattern: higher levels of presence on them than on the rest.

The situation repeats at a national level too. Sandoval (2002) stated that this phenomenon reaches shameless levels especially during electoral campaigns, when coverage is everything but balanced. Thus, differences in coverage and framing are only explained through differences in advertising investments, which means that the more money, the better the portrayal. The reason, as Champagne (2005) put it, is that “Economic

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<sup>8</sup> By assigning a specific communication role, each actor of the political communication process (audience, media, and politicians) adopts a set of attitudes and expectations that would determine his/her participation in the process, which might be complemented by the others' position. For instance, a partisan public would expect the journalists to be editorial guides and the politicians to act as gladiators (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995).

ensorship... is stronger and much more merciless” (p. 51). Hughes and Lawson (2003), also, found this trend in their study about television news and the 2000 presidential election in Mexico:

For privately owned stations, financial incentives—including both advertising revenues and potential favours from government officials—were most important in shaping coverage. For state-owned television broadcasters, coverage depended straightforwardly on whether or not governors intended to exploit the station for political ends, which they typically did. (p. 82)

That is why Lawson (2002) suggested that, when there is a convergence of journalistic ideals regarding the role of news outlets in society, civic-minded reporters could change the routines within their own organizations—no matter the ownership—and earn greater levels of independence. Once again, this romantic view reinforces the idea that reality transcends fantasy. Even though neither public nor commercial media are immune to partisan practices, ownership is not the key for understanding partisanship either, it is their financial resources instead which give them their higher or lesser informative freedom. In simpler terms, adopting a watchdog or lapdog position towards political elites depends basically on each news organization’s solvency to face economic contingencies, not just on their goodwill.

Just as the literature review pointed out, official advertising and partisanship are interdependent concepts, deeply rooted in Mexican political journalism. The use of the former as a means of coercion towards the media could also be conceived as a reflection of the patron-client structure which, despite the regime change, still determines power relations in the country. Based on this idea, official advertising contracts might as well be considered as the modern times *chayote* (bribe), but on the contrary of the old one which was received directly by individual news workers, this one is now negotiated at institutional levels and, hence, acquires an official character. Nonetheless, its purpose stays the same: influencing the political news production process.

Although it was not its ultimate goal, the empirical evidence of the Morelian case offered the foundation for explaining the shift of the receivers of the bribe known as *chayote*. In other words, by correlating the information provided by the interviewees, it could be argued that the shift from the old bribes to individual reporters to the use of the official advertising as a means of corruption has a threefold explanation: Firstly, it is easier to negotiate a single contract directly with the media owners or directors-general than with several individual news workers. That is, since ownership is not a shield against instrumentalization, instead of dealing with a group of many reporters, party/government elites negotiate these commercial agreements with their media peers. In other words, journalists are suppressed as intermediaries between politicians and news organizations. Moreover, news workers are now mere instruments of their bosses because, in order to sign a contract, the latter uses the former for “beating up” a political figure. Finally, the fact that these contracts are official and, thus, public accountable, gives them an “institutional” character.

Secondly, this shift might as well be fostered by some kind of modernization process in which new institutional communication techniques have been adopted by the press offices of the government. In other words, these departments have slowly moved towards a marketing oriented performance. That is, instead of mere press releases writers, their staffs have started developing more elaborated campaigns in which public relationship, advertising, and graphic design tools have been exploited. In so doing, rather than depending only on the coverage, communications officers boost publicity by this means too.

Thirdly, the increasing rate of university graduate reporters who are supposed to be more ethically concerned than their predecessors (the empiricists who learnt the trade on the field), might have also fostered an incipient professionalization of the Mexican and Morelian media system. Notwithstanding, holding a communications or journalism degree is by no means a guarantee of professionalization. Nonetheless, it definitely facilitates it because—at least ideally—the new reporters were taught about the importance of the ethics in the journalistic practice. But once again, no matter how ethical the new reporters are, they are still the weakest link of the chain and, in the media owners' eyes, they are disposable when their ethical values get in the way of an official advertising contract.

Finally, the existence of this “economically-driven partisanship” also reinforces the general assumptions of the political economy of communication, because it emphasizes the concepts of “control and survival” (Mosco, 2009, p. 3). The former is related to a political process of relationships between key actors—reporters and politicians in this article—and the latter refers to the economic subsistence of the news organizations. Herman and Chomsky (1994) considered that both the reliance on advertising and government agenda are important factors of the propaganda<sup>9</sup>. In that sense, whether public or commercial, media messages are mere reproductions of “the ideology of the paymaster” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 231). For that reason, as was commented earlier in this section, “The concern for financial performance has become so dominant that journalism gets neglected for the sake of the company profitability” (Sparrow, 1999, p. 103). Furthermore, Wald (1987) concluded his analysis of the news marketplace by arguing that the purpose of the news organizations “is to make money, not to express ideas” (p. 16).

### Conclusions

Thus, the Morelian case demonstrated that the media in Mexico still work under a partisan logic. However, rather than ideological, this partisanship is economically-driven. That is, the alignment is not fostered by political visions, but by economic reasons. In that sense, the official advertising has become the coin to exchange revenues for publicity. Since government authorities' discretion determines the allocation of these adverts, both news outlets and high rank public servants use these contracts as a means of coercion towards one another. This is possible because the specific conditions of the media market boost this phenomenon. In other words, instead of a business strategy, the dependence on the official advertising is a matter of survival. Finally, this situation also proved that, in spite of the arrival of different political parties to the government (federal, state, and local), the relationship with the news outlets remains basically the same. In short terms, it means that, rather than evolution, Mexican media are still frozen in the PRI regime era.

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<sup>9</sup> According to these authors, the propagandistic role of the mass media is generating social support for the particular interests of the ruling elite, integrated by the state and businessmen. Their *Propaganda Model* is based upon a set of *filters*: concentrated media ownership, reliance on advertising, dependence on official agenda, the use of flaks for dealing with journalists and allegiance to the principles of capitalism (Herman & Chomsky, 1994).

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