

Investigative journalism in Mexico: between ideals and realities. The case of Morelia

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyze the state of the investigative journalism in Mexico, especially the one practiced at the local level in the provinces. That is, rather than considering the so-called national press – located in Mexico City - which might not offer an accurate picture of the country as a whole, this study is based upon a case study conducted in Morelia, the capital city of the state of Michoacán. The empirical evidence will show that there is an evident divergence regarding the practice of the investigative journalism: on the one hand, journalists are aware of what this concept involves and they consider that they practice it on a regular basis; but, on the other, the content analysis prove otherwise. In other words, the account of what is actually printed significantly differs from the news workers' perceptions, because the former shows a poorly developed journalistic investigation practice. Furthermore, this is also the opinion of their sources, who argue that local press lacks of investigative stories and shows an evident “press release dependence”. As a result of this situation, this paper argues that journalism in Morelia is instrumentalized by the political power, which is also a reflection of the Mexican media system. In sum, the Morelia case will demonstrate that the investigative journalism in the provinces of Mexico oscillates between ideals and realities. As a result, reporters show low levels of professionalization.

Key words:

Investigative journalism, Mexican media, instrumentalization, local press, professionalization

1. Introduction

The relevance of investigative journalism is a widespread agreement amongst both reporters and academics. Thanks to its practice, the citizens can be informed in a deeper way about the issues that should matter to them and, thus, have a better understanding of their political, economic, social and cultural context. In order to do that, journalists are expected to go beyond the official statements and look for the other side of the stories they cover. Nonetheless, at least in Mexico, there is an evident gap between this ideal and everyday practice. In other words, the Mexican case – through the analysis of the local press in Morelia – shows that even though news workers acknowledge the importance of doing investigative reports, they actually do not do it as much as they think. Therefore, this paper presents the state of the investigative journalism in Morelia, the capital city of Michoacán, Mexico.

It is important to explain that the information presented here is part of a larger project focused on the analysis of the Mexican media system, which aimed to discuss on the changes and continuities of the journalistic practice (González 2012). Based upon a case study conducted in Morelia, the study presents an explanation of the Mexican journalism structured at two levels: macro and micro. The former represents the local media system, which is the way news outlets are organized and operate (Hallin & Mancini 2004); and the latter is related to the nature and logic of the journalist-politician relationship (Blumberg & Gurevitch 1995, Pfetsch 2004). Its central argument is that the media environment determines the way that news workers and their sources interact (González 2012).

The concept of media system is integrated by the following set of parameters: firstly, the structure of media markets which represents the development of the media markets, especially the mass circulation press; secondly, the level of political parallelism or the partisan stance of both news organizations and journalists; thirdly the journalistic professionalization which is built upon the notions of autonomy, newsworthiness values, professional norms and public service orientation; finally, the role of the state is the involvement and intervention of the government in the mass communication production process (Hallin & Mancini 2004).

The parameter related to the journalistic professionalization was evaluated in that research through two specific factors: the practice of investigative journalism and the

academic background of the local news workers (González 2012). Thus, this paper offers an overview of the findings regarding the first factor. In that sense, the content of this article is organized in five sections: a brief survey of the literature on investigative journalism and journalistic professionalization, a description of the methodology of the study, an overview of the results, the discussion of those findings and some concluding remarks.

2. Literature review

2.1. Investigative journalism

For many years, scholars and practitioners have engaged in an endless debate regarding investigative journalism. On the one hand, there is a trend towards considering it as a specific field of the journalistic practice, with its own logic and standards. On the other, some people argue that, since this trade necessarily involves investigation (the process of gathering, verifying and analyzing facts); every journalist is an investigative reporter then (Ettema & Glasser 1984, Reyes 1996 and Caminos 1997).

These perspectives are neither right nor wrong *per se*, thus, accepting or refusing one of them is just a matter of opinion. The rationale behind the former relies upon the criticism towards the passivity of news workers, who are reactive rather than proactive. That is, more than actually reporting on events, they just collect press releases or sound bites. Under these circumstances, journalistic investigation is the exception, not the rule and, hence, it should be considered a specific category. On the contrary, advocates of the latter argue that investigation is inherent to journalism, because a professional coverage of an event requires – amongst other things – a context, a clear separation of facts and opinions and the inclusion of at least two sides of the story. In other words, routine journalism is by nature investigative journalism (Reyes 1996, Caminos 1997 and Feldstein 2007).

Beyond this simplistic debate, there are at least three factors that separate routine journalism from investigative journalism: time, depth and originality. A proper investigative special report demands longer periods of time than the daily routine reporting, because gathering, checking, contrasting and analyzing reliable information cannot be done overnight. In that sense, due to the amount of facts and opinions, an investigative story is

expected to offer a deeper understanding of the topic. Therefore, the final product is an original piece of journalistic work, which the rest of the news outlets will not have, because it is the result of the medium's own agenda (Reyes 1996, Caminos 1997 and Feldstein 2007).

Although both "daily" reporters and "investigative" reporters concern themselves with hard news, the characteristic of hard news are very different as we move from daily reporting to investigative reporting. Because the hard news produced by investigative reporters tend to be less timely than the hard news produced by daily reporters, and because investigative reporters are able to utilize more and better resources than their daily counterparts, the hard news of the investigative reporter can be distinguished not only on the basis of its scheduling characteristics but on the rigors of inquiry to which is likely to be subjected (Ettema & Glasser 1984:9).

Besides the concepts of time, depth and originality, the notion of conflict seems to be inherent to investigative journalism, just as much of the literature points out: this is a practice 'which scrutinizes authority and delves into the failings of society' (de Burgh 2003:803). For that reason, this kind of reporters 'have to judge the information they obtain and make sure they have enough evidence to expose misdoings and to assign responsibility and blame' (Ekström 2002:271). In that sense, 'their explicit mission [is] to investigate beneath the surface and uncover hidden wrongdoing by powerful individuals and institutions' (Feldstein 2007:501).

Blumler & Gurevitch (1995) called this type of relationship between reporters and sources the "adversary model". For a reporter shaped under this tradition, the real story is always hidden in politicians' words and acts. Therefore, his/her professional duty is precisely to uncover the truth that lies behind the official version. By adopting this creed, journalists consider themselves as holders of a special political power that must respond to the audience right to know. In short terms, the adversarial model is the fuel for the watchdog journalism, which main goal is to offer a surveillance service to citizens. The people, in their search for reliable information, delegate that responsibility to news organizations. The starting assumption which gives sense to this paradigm is that party and

government institutions have a natural propensity to corruption, and since somebody has to watch them carefully, reporters need to be the first in line.

The adversarial viewpoint is primarily ideological, prescribing how journalists should regard leading politicians and government figures: the relationship should pivot on a conflict of interest between themselves and politicians that is assumed to be abiding. Journalists should never be in the pockets of the latter (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995:27).

These ‘idealized visions of the journalistic St George tracking down the political dragon’ (Blumler & Gurevitch 1995:29) have one thing in common: the idea that valuable information ought to be hidden from the public eye by the authorities and powerful groups. Therefore, the ultimate goal of investigative journalism is to expose the facts that someone wants to keep secret. Especially because that information is the proof that something is wrong (Caminos 1997, Feldstein 2006, Schudson 2007).

As a result of exposing the hidden dirt of politics, investigative reporters are also known as “muckrakers”, since they are very passionate about – even obsessed with - the search of the dark side of hegemonic elites (Reyes 1996, Feldstein 2006 and 2007). In so doing, and on behalf of the citizens, they assume the responsibility of keeping the people informed by responding to the so-called “right to know” of the latter. Notwithstanding, there is permanent risk of journalistic radicalization when news workers consider themselves judges instead of reporters. ‘To be sure, the line between fair-minded investigative reporting and partisan witch-hunting or sensationalistic gossip-mongering can be a fine one, and it has been repeatedly crossed over the years’ (Feldstein 2006:106).

2. 2. Journalistic professionalization

This part of the section offers an overview of the concept of journalistic professionalization, which is important for outlining the core argument of the paper: the practice of investigative journalism in Morelia is not as developed as news workers think, because professional standards are more an ideal instead of a reality. Hence, professionalization and the practice of investigative journalism are interconnected issues. In so doing, the following pages will present a basic framework to define this concept.

‘Professionalism connotes the exercise of autonomy, the right of workers to control their own work, frequently by reference to norms developed by professional agencies external to the organizations in which they work’ (Tuchman 1978:65). Therefore, ‘journalists learn what their organizations want by observation and experience... New journalists quickly learn what the boss likes from more experienced staffers’ (Shoemaker & Reese 1996:92). Since sharing and internalizing particular routines within specific news organizations is the most important way of learning the trade, socialization is the key for understanding the journalistic professionalization then.

Furthermore, within the newsrooms the concept of a “professional” reporter also means being aware of what the rest of the media are doing. That is, he/she ought to monitor the news presented by other organizations for two reasons: firstly because if a news outlet publishes a story it means that its newsworthiness has already been judged by another journalist and, secondly, that story might as well become a “source” for other news (Schlesinger 1978 and Gans 2004). Being professional, hence, is mainly valued by peers and colleagues rather than the audience. As a result of that, ‘journalists forget that they are supposed to write for the readers and not for one another, which they tend to do more or less unconsciously’ (Champagne 2005:56). For this reason, there is usually a divergence between the interests of the reporters and the interests of the citizenry at large (Schlesinger 1978, Tuchman 2002 and Benson 2006).

Another key element for the journalistic professionalization is the concept of objectivity, which has fostered an endless debate regarding its existence and reach. Even though in practice there is no such thing as “journalistic objectivity”, reporters worldwide still cling to the belief that if they collect and present the information in a ‘detached, unbiased and impersonal manner’, they are being objective (Tuchman 1972:676). Nonetheless, reality points in another direction, because these praised cannons are the outcome of internal agreements, reached by people with their own interests and guided by their own ideologies, hence, their own subjectivities.

However, in order to prevent internal and external criticism, news workers are more than keen on following the journalistic standards they have been taught in form of routines, which determine their daily activities: offering more than one side of the story, presenting supplementary facts, using direct quotations from their sources, structuring the story in

descending importance order, and clearly separating facts from opinions (Tuchman 1972). Therefore, objectivity demands fulfilling these cannons, which could be summarized in two main requirements: on the one hand, factuality which implies the notions of truth and relevance. On the other, impartiality which involves a neutral presentation of the information through balanced and non-partisan news story (Westerstahl 1983).

One of the central arguments of the sociology of journalism is that the news is a constructed reality, which is shaped by different micro and macro factors, such as the journalists own interests, media partisanship, commercial contracts, and so on (e.g. Tuchman 1972, 1978 and 2002; Schlesinger 1978; Schudson 1989 and 2005b; Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Marín 2003; Schwarz 2006; Becker & Vlad 2009). For instance, Tuchman (1978:184) argued that news is a ‘shared social phenomenon’, because instead of mirroring an event, it only represents the view that a group (reporter, editor, publisher, advertiser...) has about it. For that reason, ‘news is both an individual product and an organizational product’ (Becker & Vlad 2009:59). Thus, ‘the fact that news is constructed suggests that it is socially constructed, elaborated in the interaction of the news-making players with one another’ (Schudson 2005a:186).

Therefore, as an average worker in a common factory, a journalist must deliver a new product every day. For that reason, he/she is attached to procedures that become rituals, which help him/her to do the job in a way that his/her editor, director and even readers could be satisfied (Tuchman 1972). The rationale behind these rituals is that they help him/her to find ‘the most efficient ways to come up with a satisfactory product on a regular basis at the lowest cost’ (Cook 1998:63).

If a news story is considered a product, rather than fortuitously created, it is the result of a process then. Hence, the fact that there is a systematic logic behind it means that it is produced under certain routines which organize and facilitate the journalistic work (Tuchman 1972 and 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Schudson 1989 and 2005; Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Gans 2004). Just as the news is a social construction, the routines that produce the stories are also the result of an agreement amongst the actors involved in the news-making process. Hence, ‘consensus’ is another relevant concept for the literature on journalism (Schlesinger 1978, Gans 2004). Nonetheless, this consensus is mainly

internalized through the every-day practice, instead of explicitly stated (Tuchman 1972 and 1978; Schlesinger 1978; Shoemaker & Reese 1996).

The contribution of these routines relies on the framework that guides reporters on the field, which is built upon a set of accepted and repeated activities. This is because ‘these practices and forms spin webs of significance’ (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007:58) and, thus, they become a sort of ‘news philosophy’ that shapes the nature of the stories that media publish and broadcast (Becker & Vlad 2009). As a result of that, journalists ‘could not reject the central tenet which legitimizes their activity because it plays an indispensable role in their belief-system’ (Schlesinger 1978:12). In sum, journalistic routines represent

[...] a judgement about the availability and suitability of sources, story importance or interest, as well as novelty, quality, and other product criteria. In addition, every story must be judged for its salience to the medium and format of the television program or newsmagazine. These considerations are necessary not only because they prescribe the essential ingredients of any story, but also because they express and represent the interests of the major participants in story selection and production (Gans 2004:280).

The concept of routines is also related to the notions of efficiency, deadlines, immediacy and beats. On the one hand, and in journalistic terms, efficiency means that a reporter is expected to deliver a story in a short time, based on reliable sources and without spending a lot of the company’s economic and material resources (Gans 2004). On the other, deadlines determine the phases of the news-making process because - as a product - a story is produced by a series of stages (fact-gathering, writing, edition, etcetera). This is the reason why ‘in the occupational mythology of the [journalist] time looms large among the wicked beasts to be defeated daily in the battle of production’ (Schlesinger 1978:83). Closely connected with these last terms is the idea of immediacy, which is another exigency regarding the time. It is related to shorten the time lapse between the actual occurrence of the event and the publication of the news story, which must also represent an accurate account of the former (Schlesinger 1978). Finally, the beats represent the diversity of themes and, hence, sources that the news workers report on. In other words, ‘a beat is a

method of dispersing reporters to organizations associated with the generation of news and holding centralized information' (Becker & Vlad 2009:64)

Considering the diversity of issues related to the concept of journalistic professionalization, Hallin & Mancini (2004) propose a set of three dimensions to evaluate reporters' performance in this area. Although the three of them are closely connected with the concept of investigative journalism, especially the last two are directly related to this practice.

- **Autonomy:** as someone else's employees, journalists will never have a complete control over their work. Notwithstanding, an important degree of autonomy could be reached when they, as individuals and/or a collegiate group, by self-determination conciliate their own interests with the institution they work for.
- **Distinct professional norms:** reporters in a specific media system tend to share similar ethical principles such as the clear separation between advertising and editorial content, the protection of confidential sources or the common standards of newsworthiness.
- **Public service orientation:** it represents the extent journalist are aware of their own role as civil servants, who need to show trustworthiness to their audiences, by providing them with accurate and useful information.

3. **Methodology**

In order to have a complete panorama of the state of investigative journalism in Morelia, a twofold methodology is required, which includes both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The former was a content analysis regarding political news and it focused on the amount of stories, agenda management and bias. The analysis included the five local newspapers (*Cambio de Michoacán*, *El Sol de Morelia*, *La Jornada Michoacán*, *La Voz de Michoacán* and *Provincia*), and was held from January to June 2010. Each newspaper's political section was revised every single day during the six months.

This period was selected for two reasons: firstly, because the interest was revising the published information in which the interviewed actors had 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 everyday reality. As Vliegthart, Boomgaarden & Boumans (2011:98) noted, compared with electoral coverage, research on ‘routine news periods’ are 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 (Gans 2004).

The aim of using 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 portrayed and framed by the media, not what the actors involved might have said about it. In that sense, the following table offers the sample of the content analysis, which represents the amount of political news published by each newspaper during the period of study (January-June 2010).

	<i>Cambio</i>	<i>El Sol</i>	<i>La Jornada</i>	<i>La Voz</i>	<i>Provincia</i>	<i>Total</i>
Political news	1,760	1,534	1,356	1,403	1,400	7,453

Table 1 Sample size of the content analysis

On the other hand, the qualitative approach included twenty in-depth interviews with political reporters/editors of each newspaper, politicians, state and local government communications officers, and state Congressmen/communications officers of the three main political parties, which at that time had 90% of the state Congress seats (Democratic Revolution Party 35%, National Action Party 30% and Institutional Revolutionary Party 25%), whilst the rest hardly have any presence (Congreso del Estado 2008). The interviewees were seven journalists, nine communications officers and four politicians. Due to a consent form signed by the informants before the interview, their 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.

It is worth stressing that this paper considers the term ‘investigative journalism’ not as a particular category of special news stories, but in wider terms. That is, as it was mentioned in the literature review, there are two perspectives regarding this concept: firstly, it is considered as a specific kind of journalism and, secondly, simply as an adequately performed journalistic practice. Under this scheme, the findings will be analyzed according

to the latter. The rationale of this decision relies on the fact that, during the pre-test stage of the content analysis, it became evident the lack of investigative news stories published by the local press. Therefore, it was decided to evaluate this issue under the standards of the second perspective.

Finally, 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 investigative journalism practice in Mexico. The rationale of choosing this place responds to Morelia's particular blend of uniqueness and representativeness: on the one hand, it is one of the few places in Mexico that has been governed by the three main political parties (Institutional Revolutionary Party, National Action Party and Democratic Revolution Party). On the other, it 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 thirteen radio stations).

In order to offer a context of Morelia's printed press, the following table presents an overview of the editorial profile of the five local newspapers. This profile is built upon their editorial line, content and some significant facts that distinguish them from the rest:

	Editorial line¹	Content	Other comments²
<i>Cambio de Michoacán</i>	Left oriented: Its owner and current director-general, and the members of its editorial board, are identified with the PRD (Democratic Revolution Party).	-Compared with the rest of the papers, it frequently publishes investigative reports, especially in its Sunday edition. -Variety of subsections for specific niches (students, young people...) - <i>Soft news</i> has a limited space, but it does not include showbiz or social gatherings.	-It is currently the only one which is not daily, because it is published from Sunday to Friday. -It also offers a couple of supplements focused on women and regional information.
<i>El Sol de Morelia</i>	Aligned towards the state government in	-It gives prominence to crime stories and presents them with	-It belongs to the Mexican Editorial

¹ As it would be perceived by the average reader, but as also commented by the interviewees.

² These comments only correspond to the period of the content analysis (January-June 2010). From that time to the present day, some of these publications might have undergone certain changes, such as the quantity and content of the supplements.

	turn.	gory pictures. Actually the back page is dedicated to this kind of news. -Scarce publication of investigative reports.	Organization (Organización Editorial Mexicana, OEM), which has sixty newspapers in the country. -Frequent typos and clumsy writing.
<i>La Jornada Michoacán</i>	Left oriented: It was founded thanks to the support of the first PRD state government. Besides it is a sister paper of <i>La Jornada</i> , known by its links to PRD.	-On the contrary of the local news, the regional information has a reduced coverage. -Politics and culture are its more important sections. -Not as much as <i>Cambio</i> , but it has a frequent publication of investigative reports.	-With the exception of culture and some sports, other <i>soft news</i> do not have place in its pages. -Since its whole content is only around 24 pages and, when buying it, the reader also gets the national edition of <i>La Jornada</i> , in practice the local version of this paper seems a supplement of the latter.
<i>La Voz de Michoacán</i>	Aligned towards the state government in turn.	-It is the only one which reaches the whole state and, thus, offers more regional information. -Balance between <i>hard</i> and <i>soft news</i> . -Investigative reports are published at least weekly.	-Besides the regular edition, almost every day it offers a supplement (health, tourism, football...).
<i>Provincia</i>	Aligned towards the state government in turn.	- <i>Soft news</i> sections such as sports, showbiz and social gatherings have priority places within the edition. - <i>Hard news</i> , especially politics, gets limited attention. -In spite of its format (it is the only broadsheet) the stories are shorter when compared with the other newspapers.	-Besides the regular edition, it frequently offers a supplement (social gatherings, football...). -The owner of <i>La Voz</i> is also one of the shareholders of this newspaper and one of his sons is the director.

Table 2 Editorial profile of Morelian newspapers

4. The findings

The aim of this section is to present the results of the fieldwork related to the practice of investigative journalism in Morelia. Due to the complexity of this issue, the content is organized in four subsections: Morelian journalists will define this concept in their own terms. Secondly, based upon their answers, it will be presented an overview of the frequency of this practice at the local level. The third part of the section includes the content analysis findings. Finally, in order to offer a different perspective, politicians and communications officers will evaluate local reporters' performance in terms of investigative journalism.

Investigative journalism according to local reporters

An important part of media's public service orientation is the practice, on a regular basis, of the investigative journalism norms. However, it is important to stress that its practice, as the interviewees acknowledged, is not exclusive of the political beat. Since 'investigation assumes that some of the information that is important to citizens is not normally visible to them and may be deliberately hidden from them' (Schudson 2007:140), local reporters in Morelia are also aware of its importance for their readership. Nevertheless, as the findings will show, the frequency of its use is not exactly as high as they claimed and, as a consequence of that, newspapers are easy prey of instrumentalization by the political actors. In other words, the lack of investigative journalism fosters a significant dependence on the official version and, hence, the agenda management process is clearly dominated by government and party leaders; who use media as their internal mail.

J2 considered that 'investigative journalism means going beyond the daily news. It is choosing a theme and keeps on following it during a period of time'. Therefore, *J7* stressed that this kind of reporting is not solely built upon covering a current event; it implies presenting a more complete view of the complexity of that event. In so doing, as *J5* argued, three main aspects are needed: documents and/or evidence, at least three sources of information or versions, and enough time to gather, organize and write the facts. *J4* and *J6* added that the documentation required must explain the context of the issue, both historical and current. The investigative story should offer enough testimonies and anecdotes of the

actors involved as well. For that reason, it is very important to have and contrast different opinions from specialists, government officers, academics and citizens.

‘Investigation comes from our own agenda, it is the information that this newspaper produces and will not be found in any other news outlet. This is what makes us different from the rest’, *J1* said. This interviewee also explained that, through press releases or statements, government and companies try to emphasize their virtues or what is important for achieving their own goals. In that sense, investigative journalism promotes a wider vision of reality, where different opinions converge and not only the official version. Notwithstanding, reporters are not supposed to do this just for a personal revenge or because someone is paying them for it. In both cases, their objectivity is at stake: for the former, the information will tend to be excessively unfavorable and, for the latter, very friendly. That is why, *J1* concluded, investigation is not only related to ‘what is wrong’ (corruption, scandals, crime...), and it might as well be about ‘what is right’ (political achievements, economic development...).³ That is, something that has a real social impact, otherwise it is meaningless.

In Michoacán there is a misunderstanding about what investigative journalism is. Many reporters think that it is just writing about the organized crime or drug cartels, but they seem to ignore that it might be about any field they would like to write about (*J2*).

According to the interviewee, editors should not impose the topics for the investigations; it has to be journalist’s decision instead. It is better when the reporter decides about his/her story, because it is only him/her who perceives the pulse of the sources, he/she knows all the underground issues that ‘the politicians do not want them to be public’. Even an editor with good connections and with a good relationship with reporters, would never be fully involved with every single source. Due to the inherent demands of the profession, *J5* explained that this practice should not only be constrained by long term investigations, because reality runs faster than any plan and the reporter needs flexible strategies to cover the stories. For that reason, this interviewee’s suggestion is that

³ The tendency to emphasise the “wrong” to the detriment of the “right” is not exclusive of Morelian press. Patterson (2000:14) concluded that, instead of partisanship, American journalists show ‘a pronounced tendency to report what is wrong with politics and politicians rather than what is right’.

investigative journalism ought to be done 'on the go', as the social or political juncture unfolds.

This informant also perceived that local investigative journalism is now entering into a new stage, thanks to the internet and the new laws of transparency and information access. Both of them are tools that old journalists did not have, but the problem is that the new ones do not use them as much as they could either. Especially the latter is not very used because the bureaucratic process of asking and getting official data is long and difficult. Even more, sometimes the information provided is not complete or simply denied without further explanations. However, *J3* pointed out that the ideal conditions for practicing it are absent most of the times, because no local newspaper gives its reporters enough time and money to do it. Here is when, rather than a specific category, investigative journalism becomes routine journalism:

It does not mean that in your daily work you do not cover the topics in depth, because investigation is inherent to your job. Hence, doing investigative journalism under the ideal conditions is not possible, because there are not such conditions, but you have to do it anyway. Despite your newspaper's limitations - and yours - you do it, you go there, ask questions and get the information. Finally, the lack of resources makes you find your wiles.

Related to this point, *J2* explained that the difficulties of practicing it are directly linked to the information production chain. Local reporters are expected to submit between three and five news stories every day and their income tends to be low (460-560 USD per month), so they can hardly reach their daily quota and they do not feel any motivation to do something that requires an extra effort. Besides the journalists' hard professional conditions, media directors-general have a lot to do with this problem too: 'none of the local newspapers directors-general is actually a journalist. All of them are businessmen and they do not understand how difficult it is to get good information. They are more interested in quantity than quality'. Despite all the limitations, *J5* insisted on the importance of this practice: 'investigative journalism has helped forge my name, because respect and credibility are built up day-by-day'. Even though the readers do not care who wrote the story, it is important for the peers' recognition, since reporters are mainly evaluated in the

newsrooms, both theirs and their competitors (e.g. Tuchman 1972, Shoemaker & Reese 1996, Champagne 2005).

Frequency of use

Regarding the frequency that local newspapers practice investigative journalism, there is hardly an agreement amongst the interviewees, because each news outlet works under its own routines and promotes it in a different degree. The following table summarizes this issue:

	Frequency	Rationale
<i>Cambio de Michoacán</i>	-Weekly	-Sunday edition is where most of the special stories are published. -Reporters and editor decide the topic and day of publication.
<i>El Sol de Morelia</i>	-No specific frequency	-Depends on the public agenda. -Editor/director-general decides the topic and day of publication.
<i>La Jornada Michoacán</i>	-Weekly or at least every two weeks	-Director-general, reporters and/or editor decide the topic and day of publication.
<i>La Voz de Michoacán</i>	-Weekly	-The newspaper publishes a weekly special story, but from a different reporter every time. -Reporters have three weeks to work on their story; hence, once it is published they are supposed to be preparing the next one. -Reporters and editor decide the topic and day of publication.
<i>Provincia</i>	-No specific frequency	-Most of the times reporters decide the topic and day of publication, but the editor may suggest certain themes.

Table 3: Practice of investigative journalism by Morelia's newspapers.

As the table shows, each publication follows its own logic related to the practice of investigative journalism. In terms of frequency, with the exception of *El Sol* and *Provincia*, the rest of the newspapers offer an investigative report at least on a weekly basis. This is also closely connected with the rationale of its practice, because the formers lack of a clear set of routines for doing it. That is, rather than an institutional policy, it seems to be a discretionary and reactive exercise. Therefore, as the content analysis will show, these news

outlets have the lowest performance regarding this issue. On the contrary, *Cambio*, *La Jornada* and *La Voz* have more organized investigative reporting routines which becomes evident thanks to the frequency of publication of this kind of stories and the process behind their production. Thus, these three newspapers tend to have a higher performance compared with the formers.

Content analysis

In order to evaluate the levels of investigative journalism of the local printed media, content analysis measured the number and type of sources they normally use and the political actors whom the news talks about. It is important to stress that, rather than “special reports”, this paper considers “investigative journalism” as the correct practice of routine reporting. It is also worth reminding that the following figures come from the review of the news stories published in the political sections of the five newspapers during the period of January-June 2010. Contrary to what journalists said about the importance of the investigative journalism and its frequent practice, the findings showed a divergent perspective.

As it was commented before, one of the minimal requirements for practicing it is to offer at least two sides of the story (more than one source of information), which was not the case in most of the news published during the period of study. Nevertheless, this situation is consistent with a recent study on journalism cultures in Mexico, Chile and Brazil, which concluded that ‘several results that turned out to be contradictory could be understood as an internal struggle between what the journalists feel they should do (or want to do), and their everyday practice’ (Mellado, Moreira, Lagos & Hernández 2012:74).⁴ Therefore, the following chart offers a rather different version of what the interviewees of this study mentioned:

⁴ In a similar but wider study, Hanitzch & Mellado (2011:420-421) suggested that ‘prospective studies should address potential gaps between journalists’ perceptions of influences and the objective realities of journalism’s limited autonomy’. This is because ‘we may simply not comprehend the discrepancy between *professional values* revealed in surveys and actual journalistic practice’ (Schudson 2005:184).

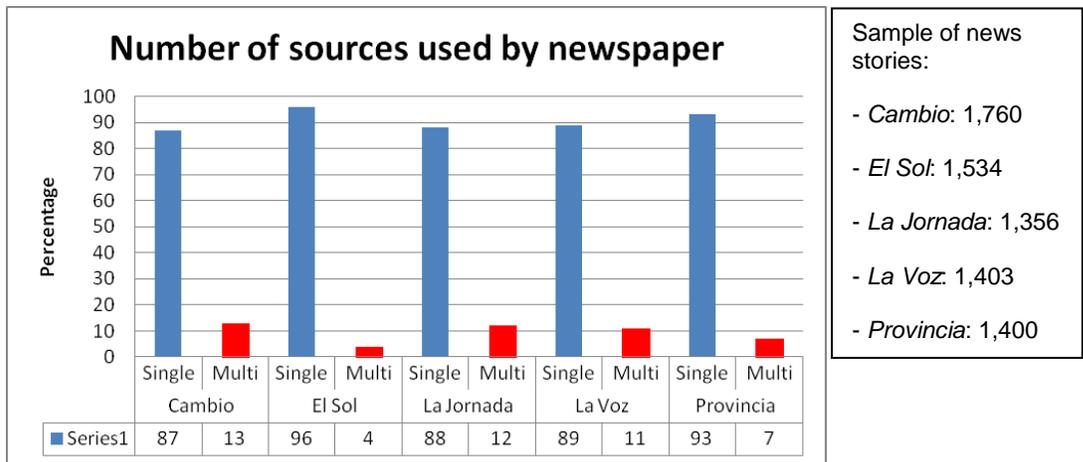


Chart 1 Number of sources used by Morelian newspapers.

The chart speaks for itself: there is an evident lack of different opinions and versions in the news that the local printed media offer to their readership. Nearly all of the stories rely only on a single source of information, which means that doing investigation is not exactly the newspapers’ top priority. It is worth explaining that number of sources represents the different versions included in a news story, which could be single (only one side) or multi (two or more sides of the story).

As the following chart will show, a common practice in Morelian media is covering an official event, which is an activity organized by government officials or political parties’ leaders for publicizing their achievements (opening new facilities, providing economic resources for peasants, appointing new cabinet members...) or sharing their opinions. Since a lot of important actors attend this kind of activities, reporters can collect several opinions regarding the central issue of the event or other topic of the public agenda. But all of those voices represent only one version or side, because the attendants belong to the same group (businessmen, high rank officials, members of interest groups and so on). Nonetheless, alternative voices are absent in the news simply because they were absent at the event.

For a better understanding of this point, the next chart breaks down the concept of source, this represents the different ways that the local reporters use for obtaining information. These sources are basically press releases and conferences, exclusive interviews, official events coverage, unofficial source (leaks, rumors or anonymous informants) and the newspapers’ own investigation (the stories which are the product of

their own agenda). As these figures will show, the significance of measuring the frequency of use of different sources news workers rely on is that their reporting routines become clearer.

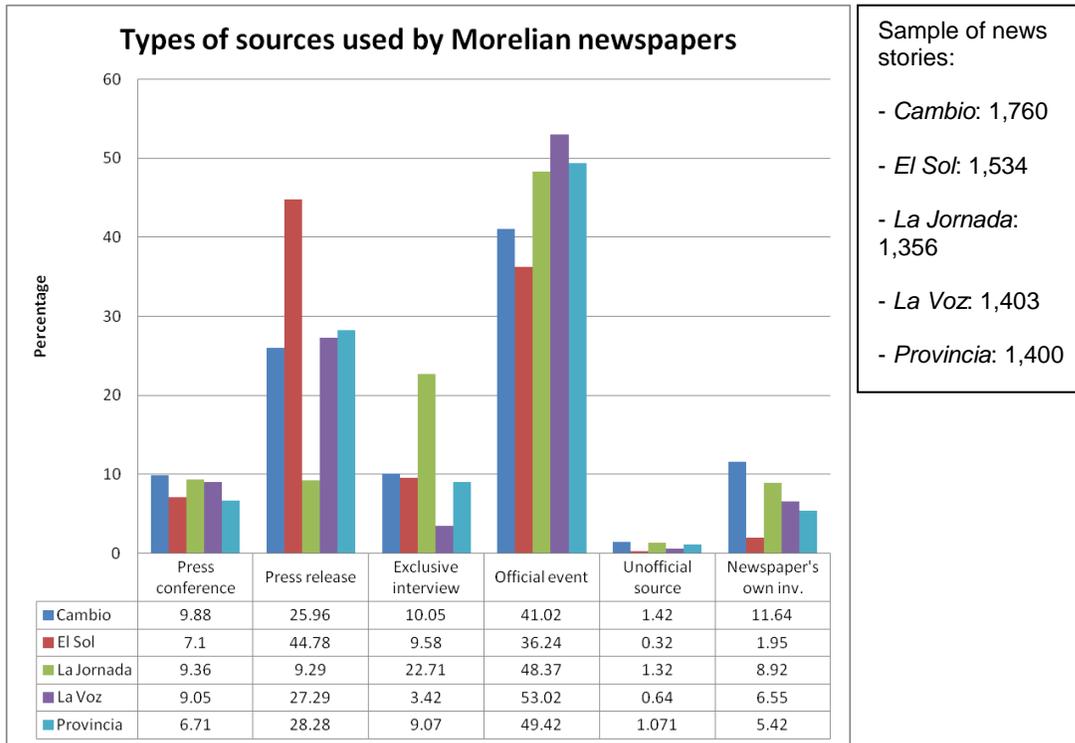


Chart 2 Type of sources used by Morelian newspapers.

As shown on the very first chart (number of sources), *Cambio* is the local newspaper which has the highest rate of different sources of information (13%) and, as a result of that, it has the highest rate of own investigation (11.64%), whilst *El Sol* shows the poorest results in these issues: 4% in multi sources news and 1.95% in own investigation. Thus, there is a direct correlation between the number of sources and the prominence of the media’s investigative work: the wider the diversity of information used for the stories, the more frequent is the practice of the investigative journalism canons.

There is an evident trend in covering press conferences, because the rates for all the media outlets oscillates between 6.71% (*Provincia*) and 9.88% (*Cambio*), having a distance between the highest and lowest of only 3.17%. Another aspect that shows homogeneity is that unofficial sources (leaks, rumors, anonymous informants...), are not widely used by

anyone: a little bit above of 1% is the difference between the highest (*Cambio*, 1.42%) and the lowest (*El Sol*, 0.32%). Although the intermediate rates are consistent, the highest and lowest peaks of three issues are very distant from each other: related to the use of press releases, there is a 35.39% gap between *El Sol* (44.78%) and *La Jornada* (9.29%). For the case of the exclusive interviews, the distance between the highest (*La Jornada*, 22.71%) and the lowest (*La Voz*, 3.42%) is 19.29%. Related to the official event coverage, the gap is 16.78%, where *La Voz* has the highest rate (53.02%) and *El Sol* the lowest (36.24%). The fact that the official events get a lot of coverage in Morelia is not an extraordinary finding, since it is a common pattern in media systems such as the American where

sources also gain an advantage in the competition over access to journalists when they are sufficiently able and ingenious to create activities that exist solely, or mainly, to be covered by the news media – which are therefore called media events (Gans 2004:122).

Closely connected with the concept of source is the issue of the actors involved in the news, which are the figures who participate in the political arena and whom the news talk about. Thus, the following chart shows the political actors and their presence during the period of study, measured by the percentage of mentions on the news stories.

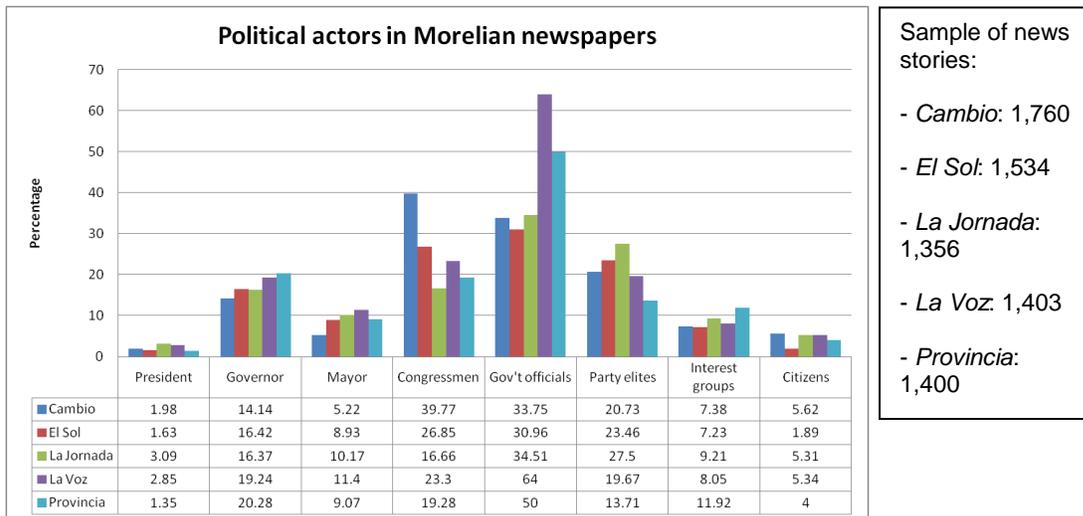


Chart 3 Political actors in Morelian newspapers.

Prior to the explanation of the results, it is important to stress that the percentages indicated in the last chart are individual frequencies, thus their sum is not 100%. The reason is because the news stories do not always include only a single political actor, on the contrary, one story may talk about two or more of them. Hence, the number refers to the amount of times the actor was mentioned, but it does not mean that he/she was the only one in that particular news. In statistical terms, when more than one item could be accepted as a valid answer in a single question, each item should be measured individually.

The political actors included in the charts might be organized in three categories: individual actors (president, governor and mayor), groups (Congressmen, government officials – federal, state or local - and party elites) and others (interest groups and citizens). Regarding the individual political actors, there is a neat homogeneity in the way newspapers covered the president, governor and mayor. All the media outlets showed the same trend: the governor had always highest levels of presence in the news, followed by the mayor and, far from them; the president had the lowest coverage. In terms of rates, the governor oscillated between 20.28% (*Provincia*) and 14.14% (*Cambio*), the mayor 11.4% (*La Voz*) and 5.22% (*Cambio*), and the president 3.09% (*La Jornada*) and 1.35% (*Provincia*). Another neat homogeneity appeared in the way interest groups and citizens were covered. All the newspapers presented the same trend: the former got better presence (between 11.92% in *Provincia* and 7.23% in *El Sol*) than the latter (between 5.62% in *Cambio* and 1.89% in *El Sol*).

A different situation appeared when newspapers covered the diverse groups of political actors. *El Sol*, *La Voz* and *Provincia* presented the same trend: government officials had the highest rates, followed by Congressmen and party elites. *Cambio* and *La Jornada* showed different patterns: for the former, the tendency was Congressmen, government officials and party elites and, for the latter, it was government officials, party elites and Congressmen. Despite their ranking in each news organization, government officers got a good coverage: between 64% (*La Voz*) and 30.96% (*El Sol*). Congressmen and party elites had a fair presence: between 39.77% (*Cambio*) and 16.66% (*La Jornada*) for the former, and between 27.5% (*La Jornada*) and 13.71% (*Provincia*) for the latter.

Finally, as will be discussed later in the next section, if a journalistic practice is supposed to be 'civic', it needs to have the citizens - their interests and needs - as a central

actor of the news (Lawson 2002, Hughes 2006). In that sense, the content analysis findings proved that reaching that stage in Morelia is still far away. This is because the members of society have a very poor presence in the stories that newspapers print on a regular basis. They only become involved in the news just as beneficiaries from government policies or victims of a tragedy, natural or manmade. But not as active participants in developing or, at least, discussing those policies. In sum, this trend showed the domination of the political discourse by the government and party elites.

This situation is also consistent with places like the UK, where ‘institutional and government sources consistently outnumber all other types of news source in news texts’ (Davis 2000a:45). The American case is also similar, since ‘the cumulative pattern that determines availability and suitability makes the public official the most frequent and regular source’ (Gans 2004:144-145). In addition,

[...] the consistent finding that official sources dominate the news is invariably presented as a criticism of the media. If the media were to fulfil their democratic role, they would offer a wide variety of opinions and perspectives to encourage citizens to choose among them in evaluating public policies (Schudson 2005b:182).

Other actors’ opinions

This part of the section presents the viewpoints of communications officers and politicians regarding Morelian media’s performance. When they were asked to evaluate the local press, they all raised the issue of investigative journalism. Their opinions are empirically useful and valid because the interviewees are either former journalists or highly informed news consumers. In other words, communications officers have a significant journalistic background and, thus, their expertise allow them to provide a solid argument about this issue. On the other hand, and even though politicians are not expected to be “media experts”, they are directly involved in the news-making process as information sources, plus they are heavy consumers of information. Therefore, just as the formers’, the latter’s’ points of view contribute to the overall analysis of the local investigative journalism practice.

Interviewees' answers pointed at an evident agreement: newspapers in Morelia are not practicing this kind of reporting. 'Journalism is much more than collecting politicians' opinions, there is a lack of investigation here. There is no such thing as investigative journalism in Michoacán, nobody does that', *CO3* said. The reason is that reporters are only worried about going to official events to get participants' reactions. They do not look for any extra information. *CO5*, a former journalist, insisted on the same point:

Local media need to do more investigation, because that could boost their own agenda and their stories might have a deeper impact inside the Congress or state government... Local journalism only runs after current events. Daily news is that: what the politician or public officer said, it is not information sought by reporters.

According to *CO4*, there must be more investigation in the local press, which means more documentation. The news should not only rely on a single comment or opinion, nor using unreliable sources. Hence, reporters have to look for more facts or figures, not just depending on the press release. Therefore, "press release dependence" is only one of the main factors that impede the transformation of local media, because their personnel wait until the very last minute to get the official statement from the press office. 'Is not that they want the story or they want to have more details', as *P4* pointed out.

This interviewee also suggested that sometimes correspondents harshly criticize public servants not just because they were ordered to or for personal reasons, but because of the lack of another version. If they only rely on one side of the story, the other side may become invisible or mute then. Nevertheless, the origin of this poor work is not always the reporters' fault. *CO1*, another former journalist, explained that most of the times media's routines do not allow them to do more than that. Since reporters have a specific news quota, it is impossible for them to have the chance to find every actor involved and offer a more complete story, and even do it on a daily basis.

Finally, even though this point will be addressed in next section, *CO7* considered that official advertising contracts are also behind the lack of investigative journalism: 'a lot of the information that media in Michoacán publish comes from official advertising contracts, the official version, and most of the times they neglect other issues... Only few of them have a clear editorial line and offer balanced information'.

4.- Discussion:

The implications of the findings will be analyzed in this section. In so doing, the content is divided in two parts: the first one will present an evaluation of the journalistic professionalization of local reporters based upon Hallin & Mancini's (2004) parameters of autonomy, distinct professional norms and public service orientation. On the other hand, through the Morelian case, the second part offers a discussion on the instrumentalization of the Mexican news outlets by the State government.

Levels of professionalization

Regarding the levels of journalistic professionalization explained earlier, Hallin & Mancini (2004) suggested a set of three parameters for evaluating this issue, which include autonomy, distinct professional norms and public service orientation. According to the data collected from the field, this is Morelian reporters' performance:

- **Autonomy:** even though this issue will be stress further in the following subsection, official advertising is the main coercion factor that determines how autonomous media and their staff could be. It means that political information coverage and framing is openly shaped by this element. To a lesser degree, some of the interviewees commented off the record that drug cartels also have an impact on news outlets, because they have become a strong power stakeholder which has its particular means of "persuasion".
- **Distinct professional norms:** as the content analysis proved, and reinforced by the interviews too, there is a lack of investigative journalism in Morelia fostered by an evident dependence on press releases and official events coverage. This situation promoted the use of only one version of reality, neglecting the other side of the story.
- **Public service orientation:** related to the last points, it could be said that the civic orientation that Lawson (2002) and Hughes (2006) found in their studies of Mexican news organizations is not the common rule here. In part due to the reasons explained just before, but also because of the lack of citizen presence in the local news which, by the way, reinforces the general absence of the public in the

news stories around the world.⁵ In other words, regular people are nearly non-existent for local printed media - as the content analysis demonstrated - since they are basically portrayed as victims of a tragedy or recipients of a government program.

In sum, the empirical evidence supports the argument of the low levels of professionalization in the local media system; which is characterized by a reduced autonomy towards the government and other political actors (as a result of a high official advertising dependence), lack of investigative news reports, and an almost invisible citizen representation due to a poor public service reporting orientation. Just as it was mentioned earlier, these three aspects are related to the concept of investigative journalism, but especially the last two which are, indeed, the core of this journalistic practice. It was also commented that there are different ways to evaluate media's professionalization, but this paper relies upon Hallin & Mancini's framework, which proposes this approach.

Nonetheless, it cannot be said that professionalization and investigative journalism are synonymous, but they are clearly interdependent. That is, the adequate practice of the latter – considered either as a specific category or just as a routine exercise – foster the former.

Therefore, these findings challenge previous assumptions regarding a general trend towards media modernization in Mexico. For instance, in her optimistic view of Mexican newspapers, Hughes (2006:51) commented that contemporary reporters and publishers have transcended the authoritarian features of journalism which were the norm during the PRI regime. Nonetheless, as this case study demonstrates, they are still the common rule and present the same features that she thought they were already history:

⁵ The absence of the regular citizens in the Morelian newspapers is consistent with the Mexican press, which content is produced for the political elites' consumption, rather than for the constituency's interests (Trejo 1992, Hallin 2000 and Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar & Adler 2004). In that sense, and using Bourdieu's ideas, the process of production and reception of the political news are homologous. This is because there is a predisposition of the audience to look for this kind of content, due to the shared social, cultural and educational background between its members and journalists (Benson 1999 and 2006). Although this is out of the scope of this paper, and at least for the Mexican case, it is worth mentioning that Bourdieu's assumption regarding the issue of coincidence between the producers' and receivers' profiles was right only if the "real" audience – mainly politicians and public servants - is considered; which fosters 'elite discourse networks' (Davis 2000b:286). However, the situation significantly differs from the "perceived" audience (individuals who do not necessarily belong to the political arena, but whom reporters think they are their actual readers) because the sense of coherence between them is less clear.

Mexican journalists took a passive, noncritical approach to reporting that relied either on the stenographic transfer of speeches and press releases to the news pages, or code-like political columns written for the already initiated. Journalists forged subordinate relationships with sources that would have been considered conflicts of interests if the media have not been in symbiosis with the State.

Instrumentalization of Mexican press

This part of the section offers the argument regarding the instrumentalization of the Morelian media organizations by the state government, a situation that becomes evident by analyzing the local investigative journalism practices. Therefore, a clear obstacle to journalistic professionalization is instrumentalization, which can be defined as the control that external actors might exert over the media, in order to intervene in the political communication process. Those outsiders can be government institutions, political parties, interests groups, and other kind of organizations which seek political influence (Hallin & Mancini 2004). But not only political reasons foster this situation, commercial purposes threaten media as well, and even both of them simultaneously. Through the advertising budget pressure, the editorial content may be frequently pushed to certain directions that were not originally planned (González 2013).

Obviously, to the extent media organizations are instrumentalized in this way, professionalization will be low: journalists will lack autonomy, political rather than distinctively journalistic criteria will guide the practice of journalism, and media will serve particular interests rather than functioning as a public trust (Hallin & Mancini 2004:37).

Regarding the Mexican case, this situation was the main feature of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) regime that ruled the country during seventy years. In terms of control of the media, this regime developed mastery in using soft means of coercion, such as bribery, newsprint access and recently official advertising allocation (Bohmann 1986, Trejo 1992, Rodríguez 1993, Lawson 2002, Hughes 2006, González 2013). At the local level in Morelia, the empirical evidence showed that in spite of the arrival of a different political party to the state and local administrations, the use of the news outlets as the

internal mail of the high rank officials and party elites is still the hallmark of the media system in this city.

‘Although studies do give prominence to primary definers as shapers of news content, few have concluded that journalists are mere stenographers of power’ (Covert & Washburn 2007:69). Following this assumption and as commented earlier, local reporters in Morelia are not particularly keen on investigative journalism principles, because they actually do not need them in order to do their job. Since most of the government officials and politicians are more than ready to provide information to reinforce their own images or weaken someone else’s, political correspondents just have to make phone calls or drop by the press offices to get ready to print statements.

In order to explain the Mexican media system, and Morelian as well, an instrumentalist model suits best (Hallin 1995). This is because there is a direct control over the content of the news by government and political elites which, in agreement with owners and editors, shape the information that is going to be published or broadcasted. Under these circumstances, there is a permanent risk of instrumentalization when local media personnel, instead of actually being journalists, willingly or forced they only act as government spokespersons by parroting official statements.

Instrumentalization, hence, is one of the key features for understanding Morelian political journalism, which suffers from a “press release-dependence”. By simply reproducing the official version, without presenting different sides of the story or even giving follow-up, news organizations are frozen in the PRI regime time, when the head of the administration - whether federal or state - used to dictate the headlines (Bohmann 1986, Trejo 1992, Rodríguez 1993). Since ‘the government’s spin is gospel’ (Castañeda 1997:138), then, it is not a surprise that ‘pro-government self-censorship continues to characterize much of the printed press, especially in the provinces’ (Orme 1997:16).

Patterson & Donsbach (1996) alerted about the risk of claiming bias on news coverage by only relying on content analysis, which simply detects patterns and trends, but is less effective in explaining causes. In that sense, the argument about the poor investigative journalism practice is reinforced here with the interviews with the political communication actors, who agreed with this idea.

There is a widely spread commonplace about the so-called media influence on society and, thus, on politics: ‘mass communication media influence on politics is so significant that today it is accepted that there is a subduing of the political practice towards media because, firstly, they impose their formats and, secondly, they define the agenda’ (Peschard 2000:89). This might be true elsewhere, for instance, in the UK and the Netherlands where media have imposed their logic on politics (Brants & Voltmer 2011). Nevertheless, as these findings proved, more than media influence, in Morelia there is just media submission instead. This is especially true at the state government level, because it was the main player in the agenda management process, whilst state Congressmen and political party members – mainly PRI and PAN - are considered just as mere opinion providers. Notwithstanding, at first glance, if someone has to pay off the newspapers because of fear of some kind of damage, it could be said that there is an influence indeed. However, due to the instrumentalization – just as Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar & Adler (2004) noticed during the 1988 elections - Mexican political elites use the media as internal mail to exchange messages with their peers, not to communicate with their constituency. Therefore, due to their limited circulation and readership, the impact of the local printed media on the public opinion is less threatening than the impact on their bosses and adversaries. In sum, and as a reflection of Mexico, Morelian journalistic practice could be considered as ‘loyal and opportunist’ because ‘it tends to defend authorities, and serves as a messenger for the political and economic elite’ (Mellado, Moreira, Lagos & Hernández 2012:63).

Therefore, the practice of investigative reporting – or the lack of it - depends to an important extent on the commercial agreements between media owners and government authorities. In other words, more than a public service tool, it is used as a means of coercion towards politicians, because media owners ask their journalists to do investigative reports in order to harshly criticize a specific public servant. After the story – or even a series of stories – is published, an official advertising contract is signed between the news outlet and the politician (González 2013).

On the other hand, Lawson (2002) and Hughes (2006) claimed that Mexican journalism was moving towards a more civic orientation. In so doing news outlets and their staff started regarding the society not as victims or recipients of government programs, but as active citizens who demanded a more balanced coverage and strict scrutiny of

authorities' performance. Their assumption is not wrong *per se*, but it is limited and it led them to raise generalizations barely supported in reality. Although both of them studied different newsrooms across the country, their sample was clearly biased, because they only included similar newspapers which shared the specific conditions for reinforcing their hypotheses. For instance Lawson (2002) only used *Proceso* and *La Jornada* (both openly left oriented and anti-regime publications) in his argument about Mexican media's increasingly civic framing coverage, which obviously was high. Nevertheless, he did not include in his content analysis any other organization with a different editorial line, which could have offered a more balanced result. Nonetheless, this is a common mistake that foreign observers usually make:

Foreign correspondents with barely adequate Spanish can read – or have translated – critical editorials in *La Jornada* or damaging investigative reports in *Proceso*... As a result, many foreigners have the impression that there is a freewheeling debate taking place in the Mexican media (Castañeda 1997:138).

That is precisely why, in order to avoid such risk, this research included all the local newspapers, no matter their ideological inclinations. Thus the findings could be as representative of the Morelian reality as possible. In so doing, instead of vague generalizations, the results pointed at a trend supported in both quantitative and qualitative ways. If, as these scholars optimistically claimed, civic journalism involves turning media's look towards civil society - just as the ones they worked with - local journalistic practice goes in an opposite direction then. As commented before, when analyzing the actors represented in the political news, the citizens were the least cited by the local printed media. On the contrary, when they were not ignored, they were portrayed just as Hallin (2000:275) found fifteen years ago:

Ordinary citizens played a limited and clearly subordinate role in *Televisa's* representation of Mexican society and politics. Most often they appeared in representations of the clientelist system by which the government delivered benefits to select groups of citizens as a reward for their political loyalty.

5.- Conclusions

The practice of investigative journalism in Morelia oscillates between ideals and realities, because reporters acknowledge its importance and they consider they practice it on a regular basis; but, on the other hand, the stories that are published by the local newspapers showed an evident lack of it, and even their sources agreed that news workers actually do not do any investigation. Thus, due to pro-government publications with nearly identical political coverage, Morelians do not have reliable and trustworthy information sources, which could help them to understand their historical moment and keep public servants accountable. In other words, since there is no such thing as investigative journalism, newspapers are mere government messengers, because the clientelistic environment promotes this practice. Therefore, the idea of the transformation of media in Mexico is challenged by the evidence of the same old journalistic practice, determined by an overt instrumentalization exerted by the government and the lack of investigative journalism.

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