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## Professionalism and Journalism Ethics in Post-Authoritarian Mexico: Perceptions of News for Cash, Gifts, and Perks

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After a long-standing history of corruption and complicity between the press and the state in Mexico, a changing environment of political democratisation and commercialism in the 1990s allegedly instilled new standards of professionalism in journalism. Scholars in certain disciplines claimed that greater autonomy, a universalisation of ethical codes, and the rapid decline of news for cash practices – known locally as *embute* and *chayote* – were slowly eroding the corrupt journalistic culture of the previous authoritarian era (Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002; Rockwell, 2004, Wallis, 2004). This view, however, disregards the micro human relations that take place in the source–journalist interaction and in everyday reporting practices. Rather than a wholesale adoption of professionalism and its accompanying ethical values, we instead find a gradually changing discipline in which practices are negotiated within a context marked by new ideals but also by strongly established traditions.

Two of these practices – both of which involve journalist–source relations – are often problematised in the literature as ethical dilemmas that would fall into the category of bribery in many contexts: first, news for cash and, second, gifts and other perks. Both are ordinary forms of journalist–source exchanges and both are influenced by the personal, organisational, and structural forces that help define post-authoritarian journalistic culture in Mexico.

## The authoritarian legacy

Mexican press development contrasts with that of the United States and other Western countries in that it never experienced a rapid process of industrialisation and mass readership, a clear shift towards commercialism, or the ‘professionalisation’ of the journalistic occupation via technological advances that rendered objectivity and political neutrality the norm (Allan, 1997; Chalaby, 1996; Hallin, 2000a; Schudson, 2001, 2005). Instead, throughout most of its history, the Mexican press has consistently remained an instrument of either contesting political factions or later of the single-party authoritarian system. These state–press relations impacted the culture of reporting and significantly undermined professional autonomy and ethical principles. As political scientist Chappell Lawson notes, ‘a web of subsidies, concessions, bribes, and prerequisites created a captive media establishment that faithfully reflected ruling party priorities’ (2002: 173). Through subtle and effective instruments of control, a culture of collusion – one that didn’t require formal or official state intervention in the media – developed (Fuentes Beráin, 2002; Orme, 1997; Trejo Delarbre, 1998). Indeed, editors and publishers frequently claimed to enjoy freedom and independence (Martínez S., 2005; Monsiváis 2003) while simultaneously receiving enormous governmental benefits. In return, the government expected congratulatory reporting of official events as well as the minimisation or silencing of critical and oppositional voices (Monsiváis, 2003; Rodríguez Castañeda, 1993; Rodríguez Munguía, 2007).

In this context, dispensing *chayote* – one-off payments – or *embute* – regular pay-offs given in return for planting stories, twisting story lines, or spiking embarrassing pieces (Fromson, 1996: 117) – were two typical means of controlling information. Editors and reporters received payment for interviews or as a supplement for their low wages. News organisations would respond by either turning a blind eye or agreeing *de facto* that their reporters and journalists should seek alternative sources of income (Baldivia et al., 1981; Cleary, 2003; Fromson, 1996; Rodríguez Munguía, 2007). Through this, news organisations saved considerable amounts of money. Therefore, as Daniel Hallin claims, ‘the officialist character of the Mexican press result[ed] not simply from government pressure, but from collusion between political and economic elites’ (Hallin, 2000b: 101).

During the authoritarian era, many of the most notable bylines in Mexican journalism were from authors who rose to privilege, rubbing

shoulders with the literati and intelligentsia and enjoying comfortable lifestyles – often at the expense of taxpayers. However, when lecturing others about good journalism, many of these veterans frequently appealed to ethical and professional values – integrity, ethics, independence, or impartiality – to describe their jobs and career trajectories, even if their own political columns generously praised the government. Indeed, these journalists’ close ties with those in political power and their claims of ethical behaviour were seen as unproblematic (Martinez S., 2005; Scherer and Monsiváis, 2003), and so far remain as such. Journalist Raymundo Riva Palacio observes that ‘for the bulk of Mexican journalists, the concept of “conflict of interest” does not exist in theory or practice ... The absence of this concept is a fundamental ingredient in the collusion between the media and the authorities’ (Riva Palacio, 1998: 113). Understanding these historical issues helps us trace the cultural development of journalism ethics in Mexico.

### **The clash of generations: Bribery and news for cash**

For journalists in transitional or post-authoritarian democracies, a clash of values and beliefs is often evident among different generations. Scholars have concluded that, in many countries, younger generations of journalists, many of whom have university degrees, are imbued with a more ‘professional’ mindset and ethical values – or with principles and values that best adapt to the new commercial business models (Canel and Piqué, 1998; Pasti, 2005; Shamir 1988). In Mexico, the older generation of journalists is widely perceived as uneducated and corrupt; this sharply contrasts with the view that most contemporary journalists hold of themselves: highly skilled, committed, and educated professionals.

The scholarly emphasis on journalists’ generational differences is normally connected to the quest for a professional identity – one that is distanced from the media’s notorious and well-documented bad reputation and low credibility. The low esteem in which journalists are held by Mexican society is historically symbolised by the *chayote*. These infamous pay-offs were distributed through most governmental branches, and, as noted earlier, journalists viewed them as an entitlement that not only supplemented their low salaries, but compensated them for poor working conditions and job insecurity (Baldivia et al., 1981; Fromson, 1996; Hernández López, 1999). The institutionalised distribution of the

*chayote* and *embute* meant that ‘reporters did not have to chase after a story: it was handed to them by the (official party government) PRI on a silver plate, along with an envelope containing *el chayote*’ (Cleary, 2003: 65). Even today, the *chayote* remains the icon of an easily manipulable generation that had to bow to both its sponsor politicians and its newsroom bosses.

Contemporary journalists recall how editors and publishers were not only aware of the situation but encouraged their staff to seek pay-offs because they conveniently relieved those editors and publishers from having to increase staff salaries. Likewise, bosses would let reporters negotiate advertisement contracts with their assigned newsbeats in return for a fee. Although the *chayote* is currently a subject of journalists’ mockery and newsroom banter, journalists also tacitly complain that they have been unfairly stigmatised; in reality, editors, managers, publishers, and owners’ names have also featured on the government’s payroll, but they have carried none of the public shame (see Hernández López, 1999).

Testimonies from political journalists tell of the days when journalists travelled to provincial cities to cover ‘Affairs of State’ ceremonies or election days, with the full knowledge that, with the help of thankful politicians, envelopes would soon follow (Márquez Ramírez, 2005, 2012a, 2012b). Therefore, reporters competed with each other to get sent to the top-rank political beats, which distributed the biggest cheques. At their peak in the 1970s and 1980s, pay-offs to reporters became institutionalised, with editors’ and executives’ names often appearing alongside those of reporters in the fortnightly payroll lists. At the upper level of the newsroom hierarchy, loyalty was rewarded with luxury gifts or personal favours – taxi licences, bar memberships, housing privileges, junkets to resorts – and by means of more government advertisements to ensure the organisation’s survival (Fromson, 1996: 117).

Fifteen years after *chayote* began to earn widespread disfavour, the public continues to apply the word to any journalist whom they perceive as biased. Still, some elite journalists – newspaper columnists, radio presenters, TV executives, and anchors – are named and shamed for belonging to ‘the black list’ of those accepting pay-offs. These elites have no problem accepting *chayote* and will happily shift their party loyalties to the highest bidder. Public criticism and political scandals, therefore, become commodities to be traded.

Predictably, most journalists today quickly deflect the blame and portray themselves as part of a new ‘professional’ generation that has

defied the vices of the so-called ‘old guard’. Nonetheless, some younger journalists with university credentials still implicitly admit to having accepted pay-offs; *chayote* and *embute* were, they claimed, not only supplementary sources of income, but also the safest tools of survival in the journalism profession. Agreeing to accept pay-offs was sometimes the only way to be actively welcomed onto official tours and reporters’ pools, to be able to socialise with sources and colleagues, and to be given access to exclusive and privileged information.

### **Journalists, gifts, and perks**

Another ethical dilemma that routinely affects journalists’ perceptions of ethical standards is the acceptance of gifts, tokens, vouchers, all-inclusive tours, and other forms of ‘media attention’ provided by press officers and public relations managers. Accepting gifts from sources is a long-standing concern in journalism ethics; the received wisdom is that these gifts corrupt journalists and undermine the integrity of journalism (Day, 2003). However, there is no consensus on their practical significance. In contemporary Mexican journalism, it is commonplace for journalists from all news organisations and levels to be presented with small tokens and gifts on their birthdays or during the Christmas season.

For most journalists, such exchanges belong to the realm of public relations; it is a nice gesture, but rarely is it seen as obligating journalists to write or speak about their sources favourably. However, as sources strive to maximise coverage and visibility, other kinds of perks are being institutionalised, including payment for conventions, trips, and tours. Although Mexican journalists are aware of the ethical risks of attending all-expense-paid trips, they often see it as the only way to cover important news events. Only the most affluent news organisations fully fund their staff’s accommodation and travel expenses; many low-budget or more ‘resource-savvy’ organisations still rely on their news sources to pay reporters’ expenses. In these cases, editors continue to adopt the attitude that it is the source’s obligation to fund the reporter’s expenses if the reporter is going to devote time to covering a story.

The most visible newsbeat for which reporters’ travel is funded is the presidency; however, several other less prominent government ministries also take their reporter pools on tour. In this regard, the newspaper *Reforma* famously broke with the paradigm of accepting perks by setting

new rules for its reporters and prohibiting or limiting practices that rival organisations tolerate and encourage. Not only does *Reforma* dismiss staffers if they accept pay-offs, it also refuses any invitations, meals, freebies, tokens, gifts, or anything that could be seen as compromising the newspaper's independence or integrity. *Reforma*'s 'not even a glass of water' policy has created a good deal of controversy. Staffers defend the policy with pride; for rivals, the policy has set a standard against which to measure one's own behaviour.

The mundane interactions between beat reporters and press officers, and the mutual dependence that leads to exchanges of favours, are two of the lesser-known aspects of Mexican journalism. However, journalists have come to question the ethical validity of the dependency that state-funded press offices, gifts, and all-expense-paid trips create. It is in this micro-level of human interaction that ethical dilemmas often emerge. As the literature suggests, the most resourceful sources generate the most media attention; success depends upon the capacity of organisations 'to mobilise material and symbolic resources, and to exert control over the flows of information which may emerge from within their internal environments' (Manning, 2001: 138). Hence, it could be argued that reporters' attendance at well-catered events, in press offices, and on all-inclusive trips may positively affect the attention and coverage devoted to such events, regardless of their newsworthiness. In many cases, journalists would not have covered these events if their expenses had not already been paid.

## **Conclusion: Mexican journalism in the age of democracy**

This chapter has introduced two instances in which ethical principles, journalistic practices, and newsroom dynamics come together to help shape professional journalistic identity at both the individual and collective level. Today, Mexican journalists see themselves as generational change agents. These journalists – many of whom are university graduates – stand in stark contrast to their corrupt, ill-equipped, trained-on-the-job predecessors who were fond of bribery and manipulation. Today's journalists define themselves as professionals who strive to counter established power, seek to impart the truth without bias, and endeavour to overcome ordinary pressures and provide politically relevant and reliable

information to their audiences. However, political structures, occupational culture, and individual values clearly influence the extent to which this cherished autonomy and commitment to ethics can be practised. Therefore, it is not possible to speak about two separate generations – one unethical and the other ethical – but, instead, of one transitional generation where old and new elements blend. In Mexico, ethical and professional principles are contradictory and ambiguous (Márquez Ramírez, 2012b). They may not reflect an overarching normative philosophy but rather a set of nuanced and constantly changing standards that are set and legitimated by colleagues both past and present.

## Note

All web addresses in this chapter were last accessed in March 2013.

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