

Crime Coverage on the Press and Public Opinion at the Beginning of the Mexican Modern Press

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Within the context of the beginning of Mexican capitalism, crime coverage by the press occupied a significant role as an effective instrument of social control. As a cultural mediation system, it contributed toward building the collective imagery. It actively participated in the social construction of reality within a context in which capitalism implied a huge social inequality, and at the same time it controlled public opinion. The Mexican press streamlined its techniques and enlarged the number of copies produced and sold, and at the same time it became an agent of the social representation of order and disorder.

If one accepts the idea that the logic of a collective thought system is the psychology of the information within a social group (Rouquette, 1992), a way to approach the knowledge of any society is to study the transmission of its symbolic forms.

Here, it can be thought that symbolic forms are produced by individuals within specific contexts and that they are transmitted through means that enable their expression and reproduction (Thompson, 2002, p. 25). In this sense, we could take Geertz as a basis and consider culture as the symbolic character of social life – as a set of meaning patterns that are exchanged in the social interaction – and mass communication as “the establishment of institutions based on cultural transmission technical media oriented to the production and general divulgation of such symbolic forms” (Thompson, 2002, p. 23).

Based on these premises, an approach to modern Mexican culture at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century may start by researching the relationship between the mass media and social reality, as well as the mass media products, their contents, their divulgation, and their reception. Thus, this paper will be a basic discussion of these issues, particularly the press, because the press was the mass media of that time and because it implies a symbolic construction in itself.

Press is always linked to other social practices, particularly the exercise of power, because it exercises power in many ways on the reading public to which it is addressed. In that particular time, Gabriel Tarde considered the idea that public opinion was already in the communication field, when he analyzed the crossover of the people’s beliefs in the expression of political opinion and the development of the media in which such opinion was expressed – in that time, media was the press (Tarde, 1901). In this case, the Mexican press, which started its technical modernity at the beginning of the 20th century, developed within the political context of a dictatorship and strong repression.

According to Raymond Williams, following his classification of communication institutions, we could place the Mexican press of that time under a paternalistic model, one which intends to protect and guide the masses as cited in Stevenson (1998) but also with a strong commercial interest. Under President Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship, Mexico was

governed by an authoritarian organization that exerted harsh order in pursuit of Diaz's ideology of progress. The press reflected the government's goals and interests. Diaz understood the ideological force that the press carried (*El Nacional*, 1881), and thus tried to control the information and contents of the press through repression and subsidies, creating newspapers that were directly or indirectly financed by his government.

This period was noteworthy for many reasons. It was the beginning of Mexican capitalism when this country was looking for a place in world imperialism as a country that produced raw materials and as a land attractive to foreign capital investment in highly productive industries. It was also the time of law amendments, of taking away production means from a large sector of the population, and of privatizing economically basic industries such as mining. But it was particularly a time of a highly unequal distribution of income among social classes, a great exploitation of many by a few, and open repression.

Young capitalism led to a significant exploitation of labor and the construction of a repression machine. The army became disciplined and professional, new security groups were formed, and an organization was created to exercise more control on society. Repression provoked a very peculiar way of social violence that was not only expressed in the punishments applied to the general population but also in the resistance to and even infringement of the rules.

In any social group, the study of its criminals leads to knowing the values considered positive by that group. Thus, upon reading the information contained in the press, we find crimes that reflect the attitudes of Mexican society during the time, as they show the relationship between penalization and public feeling, the opinions of observers, and in general, the public opinion on penal law.

In that period (1880-1910), all industries underwent a modernizing process, and periodical press was not an exception. So, together with the political newspapers that had appeared in the second half of the 19th century, there were others with "light information above polemic, the inclusion of techniques of the U.S. yellow journalism, industrial manufacturing, a large number of copies, lowest possible price, support of power disguised as impartiality and an objective point of view" (Toussaint, 1989, p. 7). There were newspapers published daily, weekly, and biweekly; some were only created with political purposes, others had a reforming purpose, and even others were about polemic and opinion topics. The use of materials from the international news agencies spread (*El Heraldo Mexicano*, 1911). The custom of using subsidies to corrupt journalists increased and involved everyone from writers and politicians to gazette owners and reporters (Toussaint, 1992).

In summary, the press increased the number of copies sold, modernized its techniques, and increased its contents of sensational news. The government-controlled press co-existed with opposition newspapers, which existed temporarily, until the directors and employees were imprisoned. Opposition newspapers included *El Diario del Hogar* and *Regeneración*, which diffidently criticized the government, as well as *La Bandera Nacional*, *El Combate*, and *El Federalista*, which criticized the behavior of policemen. The newspapers created by the government, such as *La Gaceta de Policía* and *El Gendarme*, proudly announced the achievements in the fight against crime, while Catholic newspapers, such as *La Voz de México*, merely described the crimes. *Siglo XIX* only dealt with crimes solved by the police to protect it, describing robberies with excessive detail, while *La Jeringa*, an opposition newspaper, did not say anything about any crimes committed. Another opposition

newspaper, *El Arlequín*, only included one crime committed in each issue, while the largest government-subsidized newspaper, *El Imparcial*, devoted itself completely to the sensationalist description of crimes and praise for each and every good deed of the government.

As for crime, according to Hall in his thesis about communication, as cited in Stevenson (1998), press in the Porfirio Díaz Era expressed the fears and concerns of the high class, building a certain kind of vision of reality; for example, when the government took away land from the indigenous peoples to build railroads, and the misery caused by unemployment of a large portion of the population caused general discontentedness, the newspaper *La Libertad* dared to say: “Hatred to white people and superstitious fear of the railroads in the indigenous people get complicated when people wander in misery because they do not find a job due to the railroad companies; meanwhile they do not find another way of making a living and become bandits” (*La Libertad*, 1884, p. 3). This kind of comment provoked fear of alleged racial hatred; inspired in the purest positivism, it considered the indigenous people ethnically prone to laziness.

When writing news, only the discourse of the parties involved in the events was taken into consideration; i.e., instead of listening to the government agents and the alleged criminals, the press only wrote from the perspective of the repression machines. The press continued to transmit the dominant ideology, excluding any possibly different discourses. However, the narration of the acts of a certain criminal who would become the imaginary depository of the ideas of justice and hope for equality – the famous thief that protected the poor called “Chucho el Roto” – became a stimulus for the imitation of his deeds (*El Nacional*, 1881).

It was also in this time that the sensationalist press started, according to Habermas (Stevenson, 1998), as the expression of a cultural impoverishment and as an obstacle for a possible rational communication among human beings by the intervention of money and power. It was a press that tried to instill moral panic. It always reported something about crime increase and, in order to have better sales, it looked for scandals, writing about bloody facts in a quite exaggerated and inaccurate way, and for the first time, Mexican history was shown in pictures – photographs or drawings – portraying the crimes or disasters; after all, for communication the events were not that important – what really mattered was the way in which they were narrated.

The main exponents of this kind of press were *El Demócrata* which, by 1911, had already shown photographs of wounded people on the front page, and in its section devoted to informing about crimes, displayed headers intended to attract the reader’s curiosity and sick interest. The newspaper *El Imparcial* dedicated 50% of its contents to describe disasters and crimes, used tragic or bloody photographs on the front page, and scattered scandalous information throughout all the pages (*El Imparcial*, 1911).

Another newspaper, *El Diario*, tried to get scandalous news at any cost and, given the lack of information sources, its page four always showed an advertisement offering money to readers in exchange for news that “[was] of interest such as fires, homicides, suicides, frauds, etc.” (*El Diario*, 1895, p. 4). In fact, more than offering truthful information, sensationalist journals intended to catch the readers’ attention and increase their sales by invoking what Francesc Baratta would call “the aesthetics of crime” (Baratta, 1999, p.50). It

is funny to observe that the sensationalist newspapers were the ones sold at the lowest price and had the highest number of copies published.

News about criminals was presented many times outside of a social context and created artificial waves about crime, perhaps to cause feelings of insecurity and fear in order to justify punishment and in an effort to achieve the “moral cleanliness of society.”

Although it is true that this analysis is about a period of time that occurred one century ago and there is no possibility for direct interviews with the readers now, we can only conclude that the press linked to the government tried to consolidate the relationship of domination, and that people’s interests were only reflected in a few short-lived opposition journals with few published copies. However, the proposal of the Frankfurt School about the passivity of the reading public in regard to mass media can be fully rejected in this case.

Social behavior and history demonstrate that the readers of the time were not passive: petty crime such as small robberies or critiques of the government continued to increase during the dictatorship, regardless of the efforts to condemn and threaten them in the majority of the mass media. The media, subsidized by the dictatorship, could not achieve ideological unification because unequal economic conditions provoked a wide variety of cultural paths. Actually, their discourse was only used by the dominant class to justify social inequality and repression.

Messages were perceived in a way differing from what was intended due to the poverty in which the majority of the population lived. Readers responded to cultural and political conditions, and the social revolution that ended the dictatorship demonstrated that there were many discourses that authoritarianism could not silence. The state could never stop the debate of public opinion. One hundred years later, we have to wonder whether our press is similar to the press of the Porfirio Diaz Era, and if it will have the same effects.

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