The Impact of the English-Language Press in Mexico

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There was something faintly surreal about sitting in my home in Mexico City in June 2012 and watching the anchor of the main nightly news show on Milenio TV tear into my credibility. "*The Guardian* has no source!" he said. I remember him repeating the phrase, perhaps even banging a hand on the table.

The veteran broadcaster was channelling this righteous defense of journalistic standards against stories I had written about deals promising politicians friendly exposure from the media giant Televisa.[1] The stories were based on digital documents obtained from a credible source and dating from 2005. The political fortunes of most of the politicians involved had since faded, but one of them — Enrique Peña Nieto — looked set to win the following month's presidential election after years of positive coverage on Televisa's networks.

But the stories didn't just cause a storm because of their timing, or because Televisa was in no mood to see its international image tarnished and could marshal many allies to its defence. What really set things off was the new anti-Peña Nieto student movement that had exploded a few weeks earlier. The movement, known as #YoSoy132 and fuelled by social media, treated *The Guardian* stories as validation of their complaint that Peña Nieto was a marketing construct being imposed on the country through monopolistic media control.

My pieces were picked up by most of the Mexican media that identified itself as progressive or independent, including the established weekly political magazine *Proceso* and the newish online news sites *Animal Político* and *Sin Embargo*, as well as crusading radio journalist Carmen Aristegui on her morning show on MVS Radio, and in her nightly slot at CNN en Español. They were also regularly cited by speakers at #YoSoy132 rallies as evidence of state capture by Televisa as the movement flipped the narrative of the election. Suddenly

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pre-election polls started showing a surge of support for veteran left-winger Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who had previously been trailing Peña Nieto by around 13 points.

The attention those stories received in the 2012 Mexican electoral campaign epitomized how English-language foreign media is often given an outsized role in Latin American politics. All the more so considering that *The Guardian* was hardly known in Mexico at the time. But the impact of US and British coverage has varied greatly across the region and, thanks to recent political trends and industry upheaval, it seems to be both waning and changing in fundamental ways.

English-language stories about Mexico, Central America, and Colombia are the most likely to "require a local response," in the words of the former Americas director of the Center for the Protection of Journalists Carlos Lauria. He attributes this to the centrality of the United States in their modern history. In the rest of the region, these stories usually have an impact in their ability to mould international opinion, rather than by feeding directly into internal political dynamics. But even in Mexico, home to more US/UK journalists than any other Latin American country, there is substantial variation in how much influence the English-language media has, not least because of deep differences in how much leaders care what it says.

Peña Nieto Courts the Press

In this respect Peña Nieto serves as a cautionary tale about a president caring too much. The man who put the once hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, back in power after a 12-year hiatus made building a positive international profile a central part of his program from the start, or at least his MIT- and Oxford-educated inner circle of advisors did.

If his predecessor, President Felipe Calderón, had made his term all about combating drug cartels, with disastrous effect, Peña Nieto was determined to make it all about economic modernization. This, he wrote in an opinion piece published in *The Economist* just before his inauguration, was "Mexico's Moment."[2] The same phrase starred in his inaugural address and remained at the centre of his foreign media strategy right up until it collapsed.

The message was initially fuelled by the government's success in building a cross-party pact to approve an ambitious structural reform package that delighted the economic orthodoxy praising free markets. The praise of the international financial media came raining down, particularly regarding a reform to liberalize the energy sector, approved despite deep-rooted nationalist sentiments associated with the sector.

But it wasn't only about cosying up to the markets. The relentlessness of the messaging abroad was also part of the political sell at home.

Whether it was first lady Angélica Rivera's inclusion on a best-dressed list in *Vanity Fair* or a *New York Times* story on the rise in skilled labour in Guanajuato, positive coverage abroad was fed back into Mexico.[3] It helped cement the sense that Peña Nieto had total control of his image however bad the security crisis, sluggish the economy, or mediocre his approval ratings. Even the widely ridiculed *Time* cover in February 2014 that featured the handsome young president under the headline "Saving Mexico" fortified a sense that the PRI machine was once again entrenching itself in power.[4]

And then the narrative suddenly changed. Just as Peña Nieto had harnessed positive foreign coverage to inflate his bubble, so negative coverage was harnessed by his critics to burst it and then grease the slide towards his ignominious departure from office in 2018.

This began when critics of the government and independent Mexican media seized on an Associated Press report in July 2014 that suggested that extrajudicial executions lurked behind the army's announcement that a patrol had killed 22 alleged gang members in a shootout in which no soldiers were hurt.[5] The same thing happened that September with foreign coverage of mass protests sparked by the disappearance of 43 student teachers, after they were ambushed by police, and anger at the way the president appeared intent on distancing himself from the crisis, rather than finding out what had happened.[6]

By November, Peña Nieto was also avoiding questions about a multi-million dollar mansion built for his family by a favoured government contractor and revealed in an investigation conducted by radio journalist Carmen Aristegui. The broadcaster had been blocked from airing the story on her radio show on MVS Radio but was still able to publish it on her news website aristeguinoticias.com.[7] She astutely took measures to prevent the report's launch from being ignored in Mexico, as well increased its impact, by first gathering together foreign correspondents to talk them through the investigation.

By early 2015, Mexican critics had begun to regularly cite *The Economist* to sum up the government's handling of its own troubles. "As *The Economist* says," they would muse, sometimes in English, "'They don't get that they don't get it.'" The fact that the phrase came from a quote inside a story, rather than a line penned by its author, underlines the extra cachet attained from that foreign seal of approval.[8]

Meanwhile, the PRI's once seemingly sophisticated PR machine only made things worse. I remember being urgently called to one lengthy off-the-record briefing by chief presidential advisor Aurelio Nuño in which he attempted to refocus attention of the assembled correspondents on the reforms but offered

no newsworthy incentive to do so, while also getting angry when questioned about the mansion.

AMLO Shuns the Press

Peña Nieto's successor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, could not have a more different attitude toward the foreign press. I struggle to recall more than a handful of interviews with English-language media over nearly 20 years of watching his political career, which includes a stint as mayor of Mexico City and three presidential campaigns. Nothing indicates that the veteran left-winger has any intention of starting now.

In fact since winning the July 2018 election by a landslide, López Obrador's interest in foreign coverage has so far stopped at the odd message designed to calm international markets, and occasionally calling on a foreign correspondent during the daily press conferences that he initiated upon taking office the following December.

While this reflects both his nationalism and the traditionally deep suspicion with which the Latin American Left views media associated with neoliberal orthodoxy, it is also about his personalized political style. As far as López Obrador is concerned, he will be the one to write the first draft of the history of his presidency.

The new president built his leadership through decades of touring the country and, more recently, an astute use of social media, and he always prefers direct communication with the public. His constant weekday press conferences, always live-streamed on social media to his base,[9] are an opportunity to do that as much as they are to answer questions from reporters who bring up local concerns about which he can then put his own spin.

The foreign press has no real place within this scenario. This disdain for outside observers is one of the reasons why López Obrador sailed through the broadly negative coverage the foreign media gave to his decision to cancel a US$1.3 billion airport project already under construction in Mexico City.[10]

But if being unfazed by what is said about him in the *Wall Street Journal* or, for that matter, in *Vice News* or *Hola*, provides some protection from foreign-media fallout, it doesn't mean he can always relax.

The biggest story to come out of Mexico for the international media in recent years has been the mass migration of Central Americans heading for the United States. The story took off in March 2018 when a Buzzfeed reporter accompanied the traditional Easter caravan of migrants that was much bigger than in previous years. His story titled "A huge caravan of Central Americans is heading for the

US and no one in Mexico dares to stop them" was picked up by Fox News, and then by Donald Trump.[11] Within hours editors were scrambling their correspondents and frantically calling freelancers in a race to match the story.

The organizers' subsequent decision to push on despite the political backlash further fuelled the phenomenon. Suddenly mass caravans had become the new mode of migration for Central Americans fleeing desperate poverty and extreme violence and the US media in particular was going to cover it every step of the way.

At first López Obrador, then in campaign mode, harnessed the human tragedy to back his appeal to the US government to help fund social programmes aimed at providing alternatives to migration. When that didn't work he got quieter. Then he went silent as Mexican authorities started cracking down on migrants and he faced accusations from human rights activists that he had acquiesced to doing Trump's bidding.

For a long time he was able to avoid the issue with little political cost to him because foreign media was still covering the story more closely than Mexican media, which has seemed to regard Mexico's role in the phenomenon as somewhat incidental.

This changed in May 2019 when Trump threatened to impose tariffs on Mexican imports if the country didn't block the migrants from reaching its border. Mexico scrambled to show the US president it was doing just that and, no longer able to avoid the topic, López Obrador ditched the humanitarian tone and instead framed his migrant policy as one of pursuing the national interest by prioritizing the need to maintain good bilateral relations with the U.S. He still, however, managed to skate over the humanitarian consequences of doing Trump's biding, which were singled out time and again in the English-language media, and faced little backlash about this at home.

This could, of course, change, but until it does López Obrador is unlikely to engage with the complexities of this story, and still less with the foreign press's close coverage of it, unless he really has no choice but to do so. It is a strategy diametrically opposed to Peña Nieto's disastrous attempt to appear statesmanlike and proactive to international observers by inviting candidate Trump to Mexico in 2016, which ended in his humiliation in both the international and national press.[12]

Bureaus Shrink, Freelancers Increase

Political trends and styles aside, the recent, massive industry changes of the recent past are also encouraging a reduction of the influence of English-language media in Mexico. When I moved to the country in 2000 there was a strong core

of US print outlets, and the odd British one, that maintained bureaus staffed by established correspondents aided by administrators, assistants, and even chauffeurs.

Today only the likes of the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post* have more than one staff correspondent, and a very limited budget for their operations. Even the news agencies are feeling the pinch. The Associated Press had six English-language reporters in Mexico back then, and has three now. The agency had satellite bureaus in all Central American countries; now it maintains two.

For a while it looked like the newer digital media powerhouses would partially replace the legacy bureaus. Vice News, Huffington Post, Buzzfeed News all set up permanent offices with staff positions in Mexico City between 2014 and 2017. They have all since closed.

Fewer resources means that correspondents have less time to investigate the underbelly of political and economic power and so are less likely to publish revelations that have a major impact. At the same time, Latin America is enjoying a boom in locally generated investigative journalism meaning that foreign probes no longer seem so special.

Across the region dedicated reporters are throwing themselves into investigations as profound and rigorous as anything the foreign media produces. The flowering of independent outlets online, and journalistic collectives often supported by grants from international foundations, is particularly vibrant in Mexico. And this despite the constant stream of murders of journalists in the provinces.

The most notable of these investigations include "Las empresas fantasmas de Veracruz" and "La estafa maestra," published in 2016 and 2017 by *Animal Político*. The first helped turn then Veracruz Governor Javier Duarte into a fugitive before he was arrested in Guatemala in April 2017. The second, investigated in alliance with the NGO Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, is at the basis of a number of corruption cases gathering force against former members of Peña Nieto's government.

Though their work has yet to have equivalent political or judicial ramifications, the investigative journalists at *Quinto Elemento Lab* have supported numerous rigorous probes ranging from the deepest dive yet into the Mexican arm of the Odebrecht scandal to the hidden mafias controlling prison food. Several individual names also stand out, including Diego Enrique Osorno, Marcela Turati, and Ana Lilia Pérez.

The cull of U.S. bureaus in Mexico is also helping to blur the distinction between foreign and local media by spurring an ever greater international dependence on freelancers, who are often younger and far less likely to have access to sources within the economic and political elite, but are also less removed from ordinary Mexican life than the old foreign press corps.

Living in less exclusive parts of town, travelling to assignments by bus rather than in hired cars, and often working a second job, this new generation of freelancers is also more likely to embrace a vision of journalism as explicitly advocating social change. This means that editors will tend to receive pitch lists that are light on politics and economic power, while heavy on ideas for stories about social injustice, and low-level criminality, as well as off-beat musical trends and lifestyle trends.

Due to weaker ties to particular outlets, journalists investigating hard news stories are more exposed and vulnerable. Though I was not on staff during the many years I worked for *The Guardian*, my editors stood by me when Televisa flexed considerable economic muscle in threatening legal action over my 2012 stories. I was also always confident that the paper would come to my aid if I got in trouble covering a drug-war story. Today it is common for media organizations to require contributors to sign a contract that explicitly states all reporting is undertaken at their own risk.

The increased dangers have, however, encouraged closer ties between correspondents and local reporters. The Mexican chapter of the London-based Frontline Club's Frontline Freelance Register — a support network of freelancers originally set up in 2003 as a response to the vulnerability of freelancers working in war zones — was launched earlier this year with more Mexicans than foreigners signed up.[13]

Blurred Lines: Activist Correspondents?

Industry changes may also be encouraging the rise of foreign correspondents who, less tied to institutional career paths, put more emphasis on their own reporting as individuals and the impact they hope it has. In Mexico this is notable among female freelancers.

Nina Lakhani's work for *The Guardian* from Mexico and Central America is pretty traditional on one level. But the former psychiatric nurse turned correspondent also explicitly sees one of the responsibilities of the job as trying to effect positive change. This has led her to pursuing stories that are often focused around victims and on-the-ground activists in an effort to bring attention to their struggles. It helps explain her choice of murdered Honduran environmental activist Berta Cáceres as the subject of a book, due to be released in the autumn of 2019.

Video and text freelance reporter Andalusia Knoll, who started the Frontline Freelance Register, also ticks many of the boxes of traditional balanced journalism, such as seeking commentary from government sources in response to allegations of abuse. Yet the New Yorker makes no secret of her sense that she is

a champion of the idea that the stories of victims should receive as much airing as possible. After several years in Mexico she, like many journalists, felt she had a book in her. It is hard to imagine an old-style correspondent, however, writing a graphic novel based on the 2014 disappearance of the 43 student teachers and their families' struggle for justice.

Andrea Noel has gone even further to blur the line between what counts as reporting and what counts as life, as well as what is foreign and what is not. A talented young US reporter who writes for new-media outlets, Noel became a Mexican story herself in 2017 when she took to Twitter to expose a sexual assault she suffered on a Mexico City street, as well as the travails of reporting it to police. In the numerous interviews on Mexican media that followed, as well as in her own written account, she drew minimal attention to her role as a foreign correspondent.[14]

Another recent phenomenon among freelance correspondents in Mexico is their increasing willingness to demand more realistic payment for their work. It is far more common today than it was even five years ago to hear how freelancers are pushing editors for higher rates for longer stories with the argument that the current paltry sums paid are not worth their time.

None of this is to argue that the English-language media are on the point of forgetting the traditional motifs of their outsized role in Latin America. I cannot imagine a time when stories written by staff correspondents and relying on privileged access to the political or economic elite do not interest the *New York Times,* or a time when such pieces published in that paper do not have more impact in Mexico than they would have had they been published in local media first.

But it also seems clear that the radical reduction of institutional resources dedicated by English-language media to Mexico inevitably affects how often this is likely to happen. This tendency is further reinforced by domestic changes in context, such as the rise of locally generated rigorous investigative reporting, and the election of a nationalistic president who doesn't very much care what is said about him in New York, Washington, or London.

The increasing reliance on freelancers, meanwhile, appears to be having two main impacts. On the one hand, stories from freelancers published in the big media outlets tend to have far less punch than those written by staff correspondents. They are operating on a shoestring, are less likely to have high-level sources, and lack the relationships with the institutional powers-that-be that would ensure that their work is given prominence.

And yet there are also signs that freelancers in Mexico are carving out a less traditional niche for themselves that is more individual, as well as more politically and socially engaged. And while this trend also tends to blur the lines

between what is foreign and what is local, it may end up as the beginnings of a third category that is neither one nor the other.

Notes

1. For the initial exposé, see Tuckman, "Computer files link TV dirty tricks to favourite for Mexico presidency," *The Guardian*, 7 June 2012, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jun/07/mexico-presidency-tv-dirty-tricks; for that story's reception in Mexico, see Tuckman, "Pressure on Mexican presidential candidate in Televisa media row," *The Guardian*, 8 June 2012, www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jun/08/mexico-presidential-candidate-media-televisa.
2. www.economist.com/news/21566314-enrique-peña-nieto-mexicos-newly-elected-president-sets-out-his-priorities-mexicos-moment.
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4. http://content.time.com/time/covers/pacific/0,16641,20140224,00.html; cf. www.vice.com/read/saving-mexico-selling-mexico-slaying-mexico
5. For a timeline of the scandal see "Momentos clave en la investigación de Tlatlaya," 1 Oct, 2014, Associated Press, www.apnews.com/bee8c728f7544360a2fd9a3d01ab1333; cf. www.proceso.com.mx/376958 and https://aristeguinoticias.com/1909/mexico/militares-los-mataron-uno-por-uno-en-edomex-esquire/
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