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Juan Carlos Barrón Pastor\*

# The Different Origins Of the Press and of Published Political Discussion in Mexico and the United States

The only security of all is in a free press.

Thomas Jefferson

Each of the states is obligated to protect its inhabitants in the use of the freedom they have to write, print, and publish their political ideas without the need for a license, review or prior approval of the publication, as long as they observe the general laws in the field.

Federal Constitution of the United States of Mexico, 1824<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The objective of this article is very modest: to develop an idea that might seem obvious but that, in the framework

of the 200 years of relations between Mexico and the United States, merits an initial review, with the reservation that there should be more deeper research into the matter in the future. That idea is that the media systems of the two countries were born and constructed in very dissimilar contexts, with different logics and dynamics,

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marking substantial differences in their operations and socio-political importance.

Before taking up the matter at hand, it should be explained that this article is part of a developing theoretical proposal by the author, which has been called socio-cybernetic criticism. The idea is to study the functioning and mechanisms whereby the media system, in the United States mainly, and in the second place, in North America as a whole, seeks to strategically steer transnational virtual social interactions in cyberspace in North America and, from there, decisively influence the planet's English-, Spanish-, and French-speaking populations. The media system is the product of the communicational interaction that does not take place in person in societies. Its functioning is not unilateral, but rather takes place in mutual interdependence and conflict with its surroundings, and the systems with which it interacts. It seeks to adapt to be able to continue and expand its power through transfers that occur in four programmatic fields. The first of these is that which codifies, regulates, and informs about what is happening.<sup>2</sup>

From this perspective, newspapers—which have been widely examined by communications scholars using different approaches that are not part of this reflection—can also be studied as an emblematic cultural product of the programmatic field that Luhmann called “news and reports,” which uses informational recursions to construct frames of preference about trivial events, giving them meaning.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneously, from a critical perspective, it is a good idea to re-approach a moment of the historical process, particularly one that is distant and that is strongly symbolic, where a mass identification was created, for example, the different nationalisms, which have since then become strongly rooted, and then to deal with the impact these identities have had in the press. In this sense, it seems very difficult to follow proposals

like those of Adorno and think that today these national identities are transitory, but they are. And in times like ours, it is possible that they may be on the verge of great transformations, such as they were two centuries ago, although in a very different way.

## Different Origins

To return to media systems, we can cite as contextual information and historical background that the use of the printing press for exercising journalism and the written publication of political opinions has a broad, diverse history in Europe that seems to date back to 1566 Venice. Since the seventeenth century, the first weeklies were produced in different Germanic cities and kingdoms, and in the Netherlands *corantos* or broadsheets were published daily. These were informational sheets that were precursors of newspapers. It is very possible that this was how the first Spanish-language official publications emerged as authorized reading material in the Spanish empire, both in Europe and its viceroyalties.<sup>4</sup> In that same century, the first newspapers began to emerge in Great Britain, where, like in other European countries, pamphlets and gazettes began to appear, not as an official means of communication, but above all as a public space for questioning, for political discussion, and for criticism of those in government, a practice that since then has shown itself to be very profitable and which also led them to be the object of persecution, censorship, and closures.<sup>5</sup>

Starting from there, we could begin to infer how the importance of freedom of the press in the independence political discourse in the United States and in Mexico contrast with each other. In the former case, as we will see further down, political discussion would take place in dozens of periodicals that would even be produced and used by different political actors, not only to express their ideas, but also as an entrepreneurial way of financing themselves. This would lead to the first amendment to the Constitution in 1789 ensuring the freedom of expression with no regulation, following the principles laid down by Benjamin Franklin. To situate ourselves in the context, in that same year in France, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen established a similar kind of freedom of expression, but limited by the dictate that “its exercise shall not alter the order established by the law,” which

led to multiple lawsuits and administrative interventions to supervise and authorize publications' content.<sup>6</sup>

In Mexico, seemingly following the French example, the obligation of states to protect their inhabitants so they could exercise freedom of expression was incorporated almost at the end of the 1824 Constitution. This included a potential, ambiguous caveat: "as long as they observe the general laws in the field," as cited in the epigraph at the beginning of this article. We should also remember that, in contrast with the U.S. first amendment that links freedom of the press to freedom of religion, in the Mexican case, from the very first independentist harangues until 1857, the Catholic religion was a constituent part of the Mexican state, and therefore, the only one authorized to express itself legally in public.

Isaiah Thomas, the founder of Boston's *Massachusetts Spy* in 1770, listed 350 existing newspapers in the United States in 1819. Of these, 300 were classified as federalist or republican. Key actors, including founding fathers like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, and Thomas Jefferson, participated actively in building printing presses and as media actors, at the same time that they were constructing the country's political, institutional, and ideological bases.

Freedom of expression was not only an ideological issue, but also a very important economic matter. This is because the production not only of texts, but also of machines, installations, typefaces, ink, paper, etc., implied infrastructure, and often there would be disagreements precisely because of the publications' partisan implications. This often led to the polarization not only of the politicians-businessmen, but also of the editors, writers, and even the workers.<sup>7</sup> The companies that provided inputs, such as cotton and tobacco plantations for paper, the extraction and industrial transformation for making ink and machinery pieces, as well as the mail services and stagecoaches that participated in distribution, made this industry not only key for the country's economic growth, but also an important promotor and potential raiser of consciousness of the political interests of those involved and of the links between political ideologies, production practices, and the consumption of cultural goods.

On the other side of the border, as Álvaro Fleites explains, in New Spain, the royal monopoly on the press made the publication of dissident writings virtually impossible.<sup>8</sup> The expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 even brought about

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the destruction of the writings and works of the members of their order. Possibly as an echo of the publications that arrived from Spain, and due to the French invasion of the Spanish peninsula, political thought divided into three currents: the French-leaning tendency, the liberals, and the absolutists. It is often supposed that this could have influenced the thinking of the insurrectional movements like those headed by Miguel Hidalgo and José María Morelos. However, in 1810, in contrast with the hundreds of newspapers and thousands of readers in the Thirteen Colonies, the newspaper *El despertador americano* broke the monopoly of the royalist press, managing to print seven issues, and turned the already existing *Gazeta del gobierno de México* practically into a counter-insurgent medium. Later, publications like *El telégrafo* were created as part of the elites' reaction to discredit and impair the rebellions that would follow.

## Conclusions

The Mexican and U.S. media systems had very different origins and radically diverse system operations, which marked the history of both industries for the following two centuries. The U.S. industry started off from a tradition of discussion and polemics, seeking to create, cultivate, and convince demanding and pragmatic local political markets and businesses, which led it to become the media powerhouse that it is today. In Mexico, on the other hand, these practices and exercises in freedom of the press arrived much later. Mexican newspapers before independence seemed to be media for public relations that the elites used to inform their subjects.

Fortunately for freedom of the press, but unfortunately in terms of the loss of human lives, the press in Mexico today has become a very diverse, combative ethical force, which carries out heroic measures in defense of

the freedom of expression. Just in this century, Article19.org has documented the murder in Mexico of at least 153 journalists in circumstances possibly related to their work. One explanation could be that the local and national powers-that-be dream of returning to the origins when there was a monopoly of information and ethics. We must hope that our society is intelligent enough to never go back there.

Things are not so easy on the other side of the Rio Grande either. Corporate media have built an oligopoly that seems very far from the ideals that helped give birth to that country's media system. On the other hand, fortunately, just like in the past, hundreds of civil organizations and social movements treated like minorities keep up the work for freedom of expression from the rank and file and in their communities. They use information and communication technologies in new ways and in accordance with the political concerns and discussions of our time, within the challenges that contemporary surveillance capitalism imposes. ■■■

## Notes

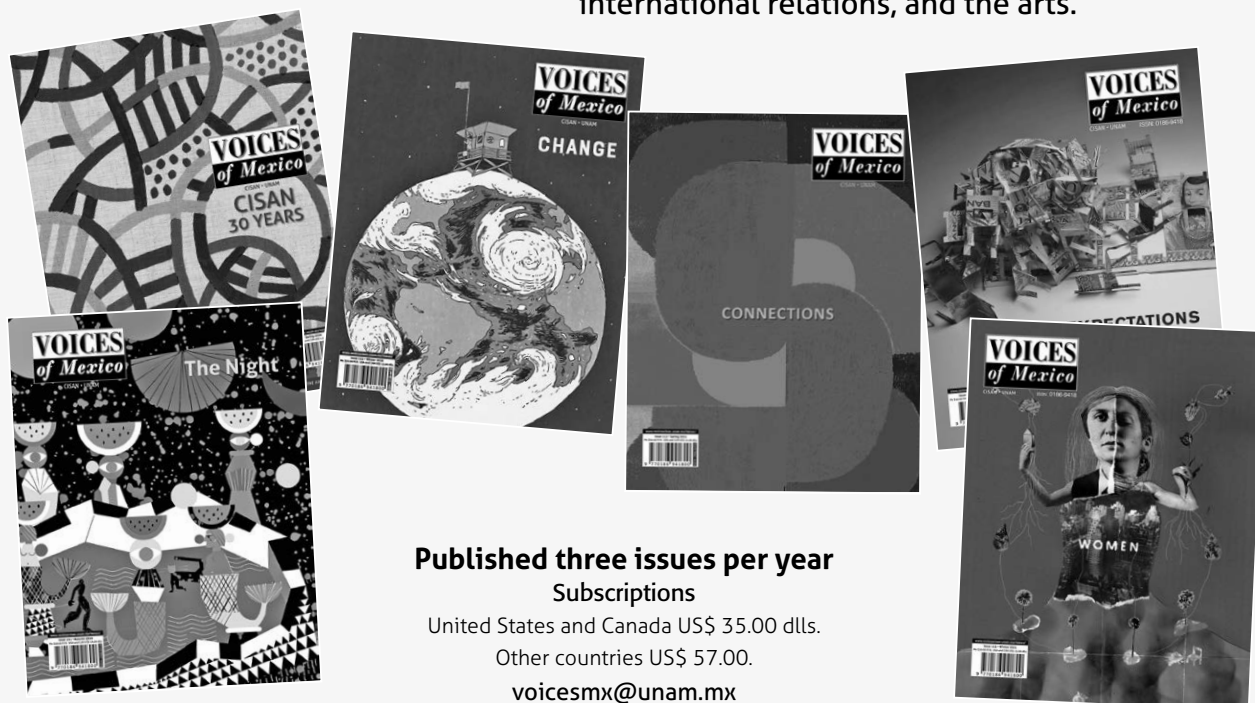
- 1 Art. 161-IV.
- 2 Juan Carlos Barrón Pastor, *Sociocibernetica crítica: un método geopolítico para el estudio estratégico del sistema de medios de comunicación no presencial en América del Norte* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, Universidad de Zaragoza, 2018).
- 3 Niklas Luhmann, *La realidad de los medios de masas*, Javier Torres Navarrete, trans. (Mexico City: Anthropos; Universidad Iberoamericana, 1996).
- 4 Z. Simeček, "The First Brussels, Antwerp and Amsterdam Newspapers: Additional Information," in *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, vol. 50, fasc. 4 (1972), pp. 1098-1115.
- 5 Moira Goff, "Early History of the English Newspaper," in *17th and 18th Century Burney Newspapers Collection* (Detroit: Gale, 2007).
- 6 Jorge Antonio Climent Gallart, "Análisis de los orígenes de la libertad de expresión como explicación de su actual configuración como garantía institucional," *Iuris Tantum. Revista Boliviana de Derecho*, no. 22 (2016), pp. 236-253, <[http://www.scielo.org.bo/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2070-81572016000200011&lng=es&tlng=es](http://www.scielo.org.bo/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2070-81572016000200011&lng=es&tlng=es)>, accessed May 21, 2022.
- 7 Stephen Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution," in B. Brennen and H. Hardt, *The American Journalism History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 8 Álvaro Fleites Marcos, "La prensa novohispana y española ante la revuelta de Miguel Hidalgo (1810-1811)," *Procesos históricos* no. 32 (2017), pp. 3-24.

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