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Spot news versus reportage: newspaper models, the distribution of newsroom credibility, and implications for democratic journalism in Mexico

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Spot News Versus Reportage:
Newspaper Models, the Distribution of Newsroom Credibility, and Implications for Democratic Journalism in Mexico

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This article describes social-organizational models that Mexican newspapers have evolved in response to competition from electronic media. The spot news model competes through simulation and cannibalization, and it is organized for efficiency. Its routine of speed and steep hierarchy keep newsroom credibility centralized among newspaper leaders, which makes it difficult for new sources to convince reporters to listen to them, and for reporters, in turn, to convince editors to publish new sources. The reportage model, in contrast, competes with electronic media through differentiation, emphasizing investigation and analysis over speed. Its newsroom is correspondingly organized according to a slower schedule and a flatter hierarchy. The reportage model therefore decentralizes newsroom credibility by allowing reporters the expertise and autonomy they need to put new sources into print. Though these two models represent simultaneous reactions to market competition, they have opposing effects on democratic journalism as measured by pluralism and accountability.

Introduction

In recent years, practitioners and media scholars alike have bemoaned the state of the newspaper industry. A range of assailants are battering newspapers' profitability, they argue: newspaper companies' large debts owing to earlier newspaper acquisition sprees and more recent splurges on new technology, tumbling stock values as investors lose faith in the future of newspaper journalism, a younger generation uninterested in newspapers, and the global recession. But perhaps the greatest perceived threat is competition from other media. The decline of the newspaper began with the rise of television, but now, online content is siphoning advertisers and audiences, and the cost structure of online publication does not prop up newspaper profitability (Downie & Schudson, 2009; Jones, 2009; Kinsley, 2006; Preston, 2011). Underlying this doomsday documentation is a concern for potentially deleterious effects on the media's contribution to democracy.

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Though the above literature focuses on newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom, fears are not limited to these regions. During my 2006 media ethnography at Mexican newspapers, I found journalists there to also be worried about their financial future.[1] They saw their industry as teetering on the edge of a financial crisis propelled by competition from electronic media—television in particular. As is the case for their Anglo-American counterparts, the effects of environmental threats on the production of democratic journalism are mediated in part by corresponding changes to the social-organizational structure of their newsrooms.

In this article, after describing the crisis that Mexican newspapers faced, I explain the concept of *newsroom credibility*, the distribution of which is significantly influenced by the social-organizational models of newsrooms. I then describe the two organizational models that Mexican newspapers have evolved to cope with electronic competition. The more predominant of these two institutional responses, the spot news (*nota del día*) model, prioritizes news reported on events as they happen. This requires efficiency, and the spot newsroom is accordingly organized to emphasize speed and hierarchy. The more recent—and less realized—institutional response is the reportage (*reportaje*) model. It prioritizes articles featuring investigation and analysis, and as such, it is characterized by a slower pace, which allows investigation to occur, as well as by a flatter hierarchy, which enables beat reporters to develop expertise. In turn, I explain how these two models have engendered very different distributions of newsroom credibility, which have divergent implications for democratic journalism. This type of journalism enhances democratic processes in a variety of ways, but for the purposes of this article, I am most concerned with two mechanisms. The first of these is the enablement of pluralism—namely, the media's facilitation of the participation of a variety of voices in the public sphere. The second is the pursuit of accountability— namely, the media's ability to hold the powerful to account. This case study of Mexican newspapers focuses in particular on human rights reporting as emblematic of democratic journalism, given its concern with holding the state to account on the protection of human rights, as well as its potential for enhancing pluralism, since it draws on voices from civil society for its information.[2]

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[1] As part of my media ethnography, I interviewed 26 reporters and 26 editors at 16 of Mexico's newspapers and spent several months conducting participant observation in the newsrooms and on the beats of two of Mexico's highest-circulation newspapers, *La Jornada* and *El Universal*. This allowed me to triangulate and supplement my interview data with observations and artifacts. The newspapers addressed in this article are those from my sample that were primarily oriented toward the market for their revenue, rather than depending, as was traditional, on cash-for-coverage contracts with the state.

[2] Human rights tends to be reported at Mexican newspapers via an official human rights beat, assigned to cover domestic human rights developments by consulting governmental human rights commissions and human rights NGOs. This reporting is influenced by a variety of factors in addition to—and interplaying with—the social-organizational newsroom models outlined in this article (McPherson, 2010). These include editorial lines—namely, that human rights reporting meets democratic journalistic aims and, because of readership interest, economic goals. At newspapers financially beholden to politicians, human rights reporting can be silenced because of political connections to the targets of human rights accusations; this factor is much less relevant, however, at the market-oriented newspapers detailed here. Cultural influences play a role as well, particularly the slow-waning tradition of *oficialismo*—giving more weight to

The Financial Crisis Confronting the Mexican Newspaper Industry in 2006

Democratic journalism in Mexico faces a whole host of challenges, some characteristic of the industry worldwide, others particular to Mexico. The latter include the legacy of a semi-authoritarian party-state, governed by the recently re-elected Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI). Traditionally, PRI officials established mutually beneficial relationships with media outlets, exchanging cash for the promotion of positive coverage and the suppression of negative coverage (Hughes, 2006; Lawson, 2002). These financial-informational contracts persist in pockets, particularly in certain regions of Mexico and among journalists and politicians who still adhere to this custom. Recently, the violence surrounding the drug trade has contributed to making Mexico one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists, with 67 killed since 2006 (Greenslade, 2012). The challenge addressed in this article, however, is a more universal problem of dwindling profits and escalating competition.

The financial crisis that Mexican newspapers were facing in 2006 was somewhat of a novelty for those that pioneered liberalization from the state in the decades leading up to Mexico's democratic transition. These newspapers were established or transformed by "change agents," as Hughes (2006) calls them, reacting to criticism from a public increasingly disillusioned by their government and its cozy relationship with the media, and also inspired by ideals of democratic journalism. These media leaders took a critical stance vis-à-vis the state, one made possible by revenue streams largely composed of private advertising and subscriptions, rather than governmental bribes. Their newspapers initially benefited from a monopoly on credibility, compared to other media, which that attracted readership and private advertisers in droves. Soon, however, other newspapers began to liberalize; according to one editor, Mexico City alone has 15 newspapers, five or six of which are "competitive"—in contrast to the prevailing trend in developed countries of only a small handful or even just a single major newspaper per city. As electronic media followed suit, competition for audiences and advertisers increased sharply. This competition, compounded by dropping readership rates on an already low base, was fuelling a sense of impending doom at the time of my research.

Television was the competition that really kept editors up at night, and the data on advertising expenditures shifting across media was, indeed, nightmarish. Though the total advertising spend increased across the radio, magazine, newspaper, and television industries between 2003 and 2006, the rate of growth for television advertising was double that for newspapers—40% compared to 21% (World Association of Newspapers, 2008). Year-over-year, television was getting a bigger share of the advertising pie, reflecting its relative attractiveness to audiences.

Mexican newspapers' disheartening statistics are part of a wider phenomenon. In effect, the U.S. newspaper industry suffers from a more extended and acute version of the same problem. Mexican newspapers' "intermedia competition" from television has been a feature of U.S. newspapers' conditions of production for many decades, but now both newspapers and television in the United States are losing to a third medium: the Internet (Ahlers, 2006; Demers, 1997; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Jones, 2009; Starr, 2009). Though, perhaps because the rate of Internet access in Mexico significantly lags that in the United States, Mexican newspaper journalists did not feel particularly threatened by online competition during my

the perspective of the state than to other sectors of society—which can stack the odds against human rights organizations as sources.

fieldwork, they were aware that trends north of the border were in their forecast. Therefore, journalists were attenuated to the market and were, as one editor put it, searching for "the genie that will help us understand how to develop the market and rapidly leave the competition behind." This search contributed to the development of alternative newspaper organization models, which I outline below. First, however, I describe my theoretical framework for assessing these newspaper models' influences on democratic journalism: the distribution of newsroom credibility.

The Distribution of Newsroom Credibility

I develop the concept of credibility with respect to the media in more detail elsewhere (McPherson, 2010). Here, it is sufficient to explain briefly what credibility is, how it relates to communication, and the role it plays in the newsroom in the transformation of information to publication. Credibility can be understood as the ability to be believed—in other words, the ability to create perceptions that one is telling the truth. Credibility is closely related to trustworthiness, and they overlap when the person or institution in question has a reputation both for being truthful (credible), and for having good intentions toward others (trustworthy).

To successfully communicate—i.e., to get one's message across—one must be believed. In fact, one of the most important determinants of newsworthiness, according to my informants, is the credibility of the source of the information in question. No matter how sensational or repercussive a piece of information, it will not be published unless those making publication decisions have judged its bearer as credible. Credibility is so important for journalists because their newspapers trade in no small part on credibility; it is a crucial reputational characteristic for attracting and retaining readers (ibid.).

In Mexican newsrooms, credibility assessments cluster around two relational sites, which I refer to as credibility checkpoints. These hinge on personal relationships: first, that between the source and the reporter, and second, that between the reporter and the editor. Credibility is an important part of these relationships, as each instance that information trades hands is based, in part, on the perceived believability of the parties involved. In the rest of this article, I demonstrate how the two newspaper organizational models described influence the distribution of what I call *newsroom credibility* among sources, reporters, and editors, as well as how these distributions of newsroom credibility influence newspapers' contributions to society's pluralism and accountability.

The Spot News Model

The newsroom organizational models I depict in this section and the next are ideal types often discussed among Mexican journalists in contrast to one another, as they differ in the ways that news is considered, sought, and published.[3] In practice, Mexican newsrooms do not adhere purely to one model. Rather, they can be differentiated according to their tendencies toward one or the other, whether actualized or aspirational. In the years leading up to my fieldwork, many Mexican newspapers exhibited aspects of or had moved toward the spot news model, including the newspapers discussed in this section: nationals *La Prensa*, *Milenio*, *Reforma*, *El Economista,* and *El Universal*, as well as the regional newspaper *Tiempo de Oaxaca*, which was relying on the spot news model to generate market revenue that could supplant payment from government officials. As detailed in the next section, *El Universal*, as well as

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[3] Journalist interviewees did not explicitly name these models, but for ease of reference, I have.

another national newspaper under new ownership, *Excélsior*, had more recently begun to experiment with a blended model that mixed aspects of the reportage model with a spot news core. Beyond the financial potential of this model, its integrants at these newspapers were interested in its prospects for producing democratic journalism.[4]

The spot news model is intended to attract audiences increasingly accustomed to electronic media, or what one editor calls the "immediate media." As an editor at *La Prensa* described it, "Most of our readers don't have the patience to get involved with long articles. We are competing with the radio and the television." Spot news proponents also have their newspapers' longevity in mind; as an editor at *Milenio* put it, a newspaper's readership will die off if the newspaper is not always looking to the next generation, one that he described as "more educated in the visual, who don't want to bore themselves." The spot news model thus competes with electronic media using two often-simultaneous tactics: simulation and cannibalization.

Competition Through Simulation

The simulation tactic of the spot news model is manifest in newspapers whose format resembles that of a television. Though this approach predominantly gained currency in Mexico post-millennium, its famous (or infamous, depending on one's point of view) progenitor, *USA Today*, dates from 1978. *USA Today* was explicitly designed to target the "television generation"; its vending machines were constructed, as its CEO described it, to seem like "a TV set on street corners, with newspapers displayed so that people would stop and look at them the way they do at a TV screen" (Brockus, 2008, pp. 4, 5–6). This newspaper's goals to provide "a maximum of facts in a minimum of words" and to look beyond just words for ways to convey the news in a newspaper resonate with Mexican journalists' description of the spot news model at their own newspapers (ibid., p. 4). A *Milenio* editor, for example, said his paper has "more graphics, briefer and clearer texts," while an editor at *La Prensa*, perhaps the most spot newsy newspaper I researched, described his newspaper as "very graphic; brief, clear, short articles in a simple language; direct; the most information in the least space." Other features of the simulation tactic's manifestation in Mexican newspapers include photo-articles (*foto-notas*), where a picture tells a story, as well as graphs, charts, and sidebar boxes containing bits of data relevant to the article in which they are embedded. In the years leading up to my research, some of Mexico's largest market-oriented newspapers had undergone redesigns toward the television-simulation spot news model. According to my interviewees, *El Universal* adopted a new format in 2002 with more images and color, as did *Reforma* in 2005, and *Milenio* in the same era. These redesigns were part of an offensive against television on multiple fronts, including the spot news tactic of cannibalization, described next.

Competition Through Cannibalization

The guiding principle of the spot news cannibalization tactic is the belief that, if newspaper audiences are going to be consumed by electronic media, newspaper companies might as well join the feast. Correspondingly, newspaper companies in Mexico, in a process of conglomeration that already

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[4] Unlike these newspapers, national newspaper *La Jornada* is a veteran adherent of the reportage model, which it has pursued as a means to produce democratic journalism since its establishment. It is therefore excluded from the category of reportage model newspapers discussed in the next section, though its practices are referenced when describing the organization of reportage journalism.

included horizontal consolidation, have founded cross-medium ventures. Organización Editorial Mexicana, for example, which owns 70 newspapers, including *La Prensa*, also has 24 radio stations, a television channel, 43 websites, and a news agency called INFORMEX (Organización Editorial Mexicana, 2007). In another example, *El Universal*'s parent company owns tabloid *El Gráfico* and produces both radio and television content, as well as an increasingly complex website. This website supplements the newspaper's content with video, photographs, and documents; with breaking news; and with articles cut from the newspaper on the basis of space. Though proponents of the spot news model justify electronic media simulation and cannibalization with the pursuit of financial security, these tactics jeopardize the security of democratic journalism.

Implications for the Distribution of Newsroom Credibility and Democratic Journalism

Newsroom organization under the spot news model is oriented around efficiency, as this model aims to provide the most information in the least amount of time. As a result, the newsroom's routine is fast-paced, enabling the production of sufficient quantity of copy for the newspaper institutions' growing numbers of outlets, and its hierarchy is steep, mitigating dissent over news decisions that can waste precious minutes. Though this organizational structure helps spot newspapers achieve their news quantity objectives, it unintentionally has deleterious effects on the quality of news as measured by democratic journalism, partially because of its centralizing effect on newsroom credibility.

Implications of the Spot News Model's Routine of Speed

One of the defining experiences of journalism, as one editor described it, is that "you are constantly racing against time." The time pressures are particularly intense for practitioners of the spot news model, due in large part to the demands of producing information for a multi-platform newsroom. One of the more extreme examples of a time-pressurized day comes from the human rights reporter at *Tiempo de Oaxaca*. She told me that she has to be out on the street by 8:30 a.m. to report on one article for her newspaper's radio news show. Then, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., she searches for information for her required daily minimum of four newsprint articles. Next, she has to prepare two more articles for the evening radio news show, which she records in advance if she can, but otherwise broadcasts live. Finally, she has to write up her newspaper articles before she is allowed to leave the newsroom, even just to have a cigarette. As has been documented elsewhere, time pressures limit the quality of reporting by influencing content choices, as simple and short stories can be gathered more rapidly, and imitation across news outlets, adopted as a time-saving device, is rife (Boczkowski, 2010; McManus, 1994). As I explain here, however, the spot news model's routine of speed also affects the quality of reporting because of the routine's influence on the relationships involved in the gathering and disseminating of news. Specifically, the time limits restrict pluralism in at least four ways, all of which prevent reporters from establishing relationships of mutual credibility with a wide variety of sources.

First, time constraints mean that the more informational "bang for the buck" sources or events can provide, the more time a spot news reporter will allocate to covering them. For example, the *Tiempo de Oaxaca* reporter, in a indication of her efficiency, said, "Sometimes I can get them [her quota of four articles] all done in one hour if I go to one event and interview several functionaries there." The human rights reporter at *El Economista* told me that, of all the sources corresponding to the multiple beats she is assigned, she favors the Ministry of the Interior, because "many things come out of there." She therefore

spends most of her time camped out in that agency's pressroom, making phone calls to cover her other sources, and she visits the National Human Rights Commission or the Supreme Court for 30 minutes at a time only when the Ministry of the Interior is light on news. In the spot news model, reporters are thus motivated to focus their time and attention on a few high-yield sources (Gans, 1979; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Tuchman, 1978).

This limited selection of sources is reinforced by a reporter-source phenomenon I call *informational returns to scale.* Sources, like reporters, are skeptical by rote, particularly in Mexico, where the media has a history of complicity with the state. The more time a reporter invests in a particular source, the more information that source is likely to give her, and the more likely the reporter is to be exclusively privy to any of that source's scoops. This is why reporters "do public relations" with their sources, as one reporter described it, with the aim of "little by little" making their sources think of them as "trusted persons" ("*persona[s] de confianza*") who will not "betray them." I experienced this phenomenon firsthand on the day I accompanied *La Jornada*'s Supreme Court reporter to the courthouse. He told me that, regrettably, I would not be able to go with him to his afternoon interview with one of the justices on the extradition case in process. He explained that this was because the justices would clam up if he brought someone they did not know. Their trust, he said, is very hard to earn, and he has earned it because he has been working on the Supreme Court beat for twelve years. I asked this reporter how, exactly, he had gained the justices' trust, and he said that, in the beginning, they would say very little to him and then read the next day's *La Jornada* to see how he used their information. Through consistent performances of trustworthy credibility, such as keeping promises of anonymity, this reporter was able to prove to the justices that he would not use their information to their detriment, and they began to open up to him more and more. This reporter said that he could, in theory, easily secure a front-page story with some of the things that the justices had told him in confidence, but that a front-page story was not worth losing a source he has cultivated for twelve years. This source-oriented "public relations" work dedicated to building reporters' credibility requires time that spot news reporters may not have. Therefore, they may see the best way of generating newsworthy information as spending more time with fewer sources, rather than less time with more sources—a second way that the spot news model limits source pluralism.

Third, the routine of speed means that sources not already on the high-yield, high-return source shortlist have little chance of publication. This is because reporters do not have much time to engage in trial and error evaluations of potential sources' credibility. An editor at *El Universal* described this evaluation process, rooted in journalists' skepticism-by-nature:

> You, in good faith, could give a voice to a person and [it turns out that] what he is doing is a business, not taking care of anyone's human rights. . . . You have to first investigate the organization if it is not well-known and go to see that—if it is an organization that says that it helps drug-addicted children rehabilitate—you have to go see that there is a building with addicted children inside; that there are doctors, specialists, talking to the children; that you go and talk to a child who says, "I am here because I am addicted"— this part is very important to investigate.

This source credibility evaluation is particularly necessary in the case of human rights sources, which have been repeatedly discredited with allegations of corruption by the political individuals and institutions they

target (Amnesty International, 2008, 2011, 2012). It is not hard to see, however, that spot news reporters do not have time to fit this process into their schedules on a regular basis.

Fourth, the routine of speed means that the skills of the revered—but expensive, in terms of both time and money—investigative reporter are no longer as valuable. As in the U.S., the dedicated investigative beat is disappearing in Mexico; the investigative group at *El Universal*, for example, was dissolved, according to a reporter there, because it was not producing in the same rhythm as other sections. Investigative reporters were traditionally allocated more time and independence to do their research, enabling them to build up relationships of credibility with a wider variety of sources. Eradicating investigative beats has the consequence of closing up associated source-reporter credibility checkpoints, thus limiting source pluralism. In sum, by encouraging reporters to build credibility with high-yield, high-return sources; by discouraging credibility evaluations of new sources; and by eliminating the investigative reporter position, the spot news model's routine of speed limits the relationships of newsroom credibility that have traditionally been possible at the source-reporter level. The steep newsroom hierarchy I describe next reinforces this tendency, while also restricting reporters' newsroom credibility in their relationships with their editors.

Implications of the Spot News Model's Steep Hierarchy

Journalism is a practice that depends on hierarchy: Information is hierarchized, sources are hierarchized, and Mexican newsrooms are also subject to a strict hierarchy. Though, to some extent, this newsroom hierarchy maps onto Mexico's hierarchical society, it is also, as one editor explained, necessary for efficiency:

> The *junta* [editorial meeting] is very simple. We consider what we have, and the director
> . . . does an evaluation and in a friendly tone says, "Well, I think this and that," although
> truly the decision is his. Someone has to be the top of the hierarchy at the newspaper to
> make decisions, and it's him.

Near the other end of the newsroom hierarchy, more often than not, is the human rights reporter. The relegated position of the human rights beat is likely attributable to a combination of factors: to its novelty relative to longer-lived and more prestigious beats, such as the presidency or the legislature; to its focus on civil society rather than political institutions; and possibly to lingering allegiances to the government related to the culture of *oficialismo* at certain newspapers that elicit the demotion of human rights criticism in comparison to more favorable coverage. A vast distance of background and experience often separates reporters from their editors (tellingly, one editor I interviewed referred to her reporters as "*los muchachos*" ["the kids"]), with the result that it can take a long time for reporters to convince editors of their own credibility.

Trustworthy credibility within the newsroom is hard-earned at Mexican newspapers, and it must be accumulated over time via consistent performance. One's position in the newsroom hierarchy corresponds with one's newsroom credibility, as the Society and Justice editor at *El Universal* explained in the context of describing how he got his job:

> The woman who was working in my current job went to go live in the U.S., and the
> director offered me this job because of the types of subjects I had been working on and
> because, furthermore, in this specific job, there was a need for a person who is very

trusted. [. . . For other positions] you could bring an outsider in. . . . But for this position you need people who have been within the institution, because this has to do with topics of justice. When you have worked a while at a newspaper, it is clear that you don't have any interests outside of the newspaper. [You have] proven honesty [and are not . . .] going to compromise yourself with the sources or . . . with the General Attorney's Office, or worse, with the bad guys, with the *narcos* [drug traffickers]. One of the things that [the director] said to me when he hired me was precisely this: that in this area the paper needs a person that the paper knew previously, professionally, and who has demonstrated a 100 percent clean trajectory.

The reluctance with which trustworthiness and credibility is endowed in the newsroom may stem from *El Universal*'s institutional memory of the financial-informational contracts that used to rule Mexican journalism, including that newspaper. Old habits—old suspicions—die hard; as one editor there said, "It is harder to renew an old paper than to change a new one." As a result, this editor told me, it is "common practice" for editors to "discredit people from the very beginning." "It is normal," she said, "that you bring an exclusive article and they question it down to the tiniest particle. If you have an interview with someone, they say, 'How much money did you give him?'"

Of all reporters, human rights reporters often possess among the least newsroom credibility with both sources and editors. This is because theirs is usually a starter beat, and they therefore tend to be neophytes, assigned the beat until they find their footing and can be promoted to a more prestigious beat. Their subordination in the newsroom hierarchy has at least four negative effects on human rights reporting.

First, new human rights reporters have little experience with newsroom credibility, and therefore, they have trouble identifying which sources have been deemed credible by their newsrooms. This is not something they are explicitly taught, but rather, something they have to learn via experimentation. For example, when I asked a reporter who had been on the human rights beat for five months what made human rights sources trustworthy (following her telling me that this was a determining factor for their appearance in newsprint), she responded with laughter, saying, "I don't know!"

Second, sources' skepticism means it is particularly difficult for new human rights reporters to convince sources to confide in them; these novices have no reputation in journalism whatsoever, so sources cannot check their credibility by querying colleagues or assessing their past coverage. As one reporter told me, "When they [sources] don't know who you are, it is very hard to get information." Given that, as another reporter stated, a good address book is 80% of good journalism, these human rights reporters lack the contacts they need to write publishable articles. The human rights reporter at *El Universal*, who was not a complete novice at the time of her assignment to the human rights beat, but had been promoted from the Mexico City section to the national section, told me a story demonstrating that she experienced these difficulties all the same. About two or three months after she started on the beat, Mexican human rights worker Digna Ochoa died under suspicious circumstances. This reporter said that she was just starting to understand the topic and identify its key players, but that she had not really established the relationships with human rights sources she needed to gather information. Despite the fact that this was one of Mexico's major human rights news stories, her newspaper therefore published much less on it than competitors whose human rights reporters had been on the beat for longer.

In their early days on the job, human rights reporters might propose new human rights sources to their editors that they think are credible. Because of editors' skepticism of both reporters and untested sources, information that emanates from sources other than those already on editors' shortlists of accredited sources is unlikely to cross the credibility checkpoint between reporters and editors. For example, the human rights reporter at *El Economista* described writing an article on violations committed against migrants in Mexico based on information from a particular NGO. Her superiors summarily rejected the article because of its source, saying that the NGO in question "likes to attach itself to whatever theme to become famous." She elaborated: "If they are not considered trustworthy sources, or if their word [is not considered] to have worth, it is very hard for me to fight for the article or to get them to take my information seriously." When I asked her about the effect of this incident on her coverage of human rights, she said that it made her decide to stop covering human rights as much as her other beats: "If you bring information that you think is good and should be of public knowledge . . . but the newspaper says 'No' . . . then you start looking around at other topics." This third limitation on the pluralism of human rights coverage stems from the fact that, ultimately, the hierarchy means that it is the editors' perceptions of sources' credibility that matters, rather than the perspective of the reporters who actually have their fingers on the pulse of the human rights beat.

The fourth way that the spot newsroom's hierarchy inhibits human rights reporting is via the limitations on human rights reporters' autonomy that accompany their subordinate position. Reporters' lack of influence is a source of some frustration, as expressed by one journalist remembering her stint in a spot newsroom:

> There was always someone higher up who would change all the pages. Coordination was always lacking between the reporters and the editors on what we wanted. Although we planned a theme and dedicated much time and effort to it, sometimes it was not published because there was no space—and this tired us all. Because sometimes the editors are very separated from the work of the reporter and don't value it.

Beyond their inability to determine human rights sources' credibility on their own terms, reporters' lack of autonomy can negatively impact human rights reporting by limiting reporters' opportunities to cultivate topical expertise. The human rights reporter at *La Prensa*, for example, told me that, while she was working for her editor's predecessor, she heard about the diploma in human rights for journalists taught by collaboration between NGOs, the Human Rights Commission of the Federal District, and one of Mexico City's universities. When this reporter asked her editor if she could participate, he flatly refused, replying, she said, with: "Why are you going to take that? This does not concern you—it is a waste of time." This answer quite sharply reflects the spot news model's hierarchical forms of control and concern with the efficient allocation of time.

In sum, the spot news model's routine of speed, alongside the relegated, subordinate position of most papers' human rights beat reporter, prevents human rights reporters from establishing relationships of credibility with new sources. Even if a reporter did initiate such a relationship, the information arising from it would not easily cross the second credibility checkpoint between information and publication—that between the reporter and the editor. The steep hierarchy of spot newsrooms, impacted by editors' skepticism of both reporters and sources, means that newsroom credibility is centralized in the hands of editors. Rather than rely on their reporters' judgment of new sources' credibility, therefore, editors rely on

their own perceptions of these sources. Since they are not walking the human rights beat, editors often base these perceptions on reputations and rumors, including the discrediting discourses commonly levied against human rights organizations (McPherson, 2010). The spot new model's centralization of credibility therefore restricts source pluralism as well as the greater accountability that a diversity of sources can produce. This model, as implemented in Mexican newsrooms, was detrimental not only to democratic journalism, but also, as some journalists I interviewed told me, was increasingly demonstrated to be detrimental to economic goals; it was not having the desired effect on readership numbers. Given their perception of the spot news model's failure to compete with electronic media, these journalists were pushing, instead, for the reportage model.

The Reportage Model

Like the spot news model, the reportage model was born of the need to compete with the burgeoning television and radio industries in Mexico. It is, however, practically the polar opposite of the spot news model in terms of competitive tactics, its perspectives on the best use of time and the optimal steepness of hierarchy, and its effects on the distribution of newsroom credibility and democratic journalism. While the spot news model competes with these electronic media by emulating them, the reportage model competes on the basis of differentiation. The reportage model's emphasis on investigation and analysis favors a slower pace, allowing for more research, and values reporter expertise, leading to both greater autonomy for reporters and a flatter newsroom hierarchy. In contrast to the spot news model, the effect of this organization is to decentralize newsroom credibility, devolving more to reporters and sources. This allows more sources to get their information through both credibility checkpoints, and as a result, human rights source pluralism increases, supplying a wider variety of information with which to hold the state to account through the news.

Competition Through Differentiation

The reportage model is driven by three ideas: first, a realization of what the newspaper, as a physical object whose production is subject to the restraints of resources and routines, cannot do; second, a faith in what this particular object can exclusively do vis-à-vis other forms of media; and third, an estimation that there is an attractive gap in the market of news products. Proponents of the reportage model argue that television and radio's main strength—their immediacy—is also their weakness. Electronic media are very good at quickly providing information on who, what, when, and how, but they are worse than newspapers at answering, "Why?" For example, a *La Jornada* reporter told me of her experience covering a protest march side-by-side with a colleague who works for a radio station. While she took notes in her notepad, her colleague was transmitting information on the march live. She explained the thoughts this experience spurred in the following way:

> I don't think the written press can compete with the immediacy and the speed of radio and TV. It is logical . . . but this journalism of speed has much imprecision. And the television gives only 20 to 30 seconds of image. The press has another role. You probably already know there was a march. The article should tell you more: "Who were they? What do they want? How did their negotiation go?" Because if not, what is it [the newspaper] for? If you know there was a march, why read the paper tomorrow?

As an editor at *El Universal* put it, electronic and print media, due to their different technologies, have different "utilities." Printed media are never going to be able to break news more quickly than electronic ones; one editor at *El Universal* went so far as to say that newspapers should abandon spot news completely, because, "by the next day, it is old." On the other hand, "missing" from the immediate media's "pure information," as another editor put it, is "analysis and reflection." Newspapers, because their newsprint pages allow them lengthier texts, and—at least in theory—because they run on once-a-day production schedules, rather than on 24/7 schedules, have the space and the time to provide this analysis and reflection.

Proponents of the reportage model see an untapped readership market for this type of reporting and therefore envision it as a viable alternative to the spot news model for pursuing their economic goals. One editor at *El Universal* had launched an internal campaign encouraging his newspaper to embrace the reportage model, based on data he collected from other countries about readerships' changing needs with respect to their newspapers:

> I presented studies [to the newspaper's leadership] that the *Washington Post* and another newspaper from Japan did on the utility of newspapers in the average day of a person. By 8 or 9 a.m., people were in the know via radio or television. For lots of people, the first thing they do when they get up is turn on the television for the news, and then they listen to the radio on their way to work in the car. Only five percent are informed via the newspaper. Then the radio and the internet dominate when people are at work. Then on the return home, it is the radio, then, at 8 p.m., there are a larger number of people who read the paper. What does this mean? [It means] that, in the morning, people no longer give themselves the luxury of eating breakfast with the newspaper and getting the news there. . . . The majority of people are reading the paper when they are [back] in their houses and can finally sit down.

As this editor went on explaining, the person who reads the paper after work is "not looking for an article that says, 'The president said…' or 'Congress approved the law,' that he has already seen throughout the day," but rather, the reader wants "a long analysis, well-written and well-documented. . . . It might take you twenty minutes to read, and when you finish reading it, you think about it and generate your own opinion about it."

In fact, in 2006, *El Universal* was experimenting with balancing spot news and infotainment with a new reportage section. About a year previously, the newspaper's leadership agreed to create a dedicated "*Sociedad*" ("Society") page. This page exclusively featured stories originating from the "Society and Justice" area of the newspaper, within which the human rights beat is situated. As one of the editors who pushed for it explained, "This Society page is a recognition that we have to make more narrative journalism with more investigation, that doesn't have as much to do with the day-to-day of politicians— that takes politicians out of the front pages." In the next part of this section, I explain how the organization impelled by this model impacts the distribution of newsroom credibility and thereby democratic journalism.

Implications for the Distribution of Newsroom Credibility and Democratic Journalism

Democratic journalism, such as human rights reporting, fares much better under the reportage model than it does under the spot news model, thanks to the reportage model's slower pace and flatter hierarchy. As newspapers move toward the reportage model, newsroom credibility is distributed more evenly between editors, reporters, and sources. This redistribution occurs as a result of the reportage model's stress on quality over speed, which allows reporters to build more relationships with their sources, and on expertise over hierarchy, which encourages editors to believe reporters' designations of credible sources.

Implications of the Reportage Model's Emphasis on Quality over Speed

If the spot news model's motto is "the most information in the least time," the reportage model's motto could be "the best information in the time it takes." Reporters are given days or weeks to cover a story, instead of hours, which means that they can understand a story in much greater depth than they could under the spot news model. Part of their research involves consulting a wider variety of voices, moving beyond the high-yield, high-return sources on the spot news shortlist to interact with sources whose credibility is unknown, but who may have unique information that might lead to either a new story or a new angle on an ongoing story. Reportage reporters have the time to engage in the source evaluation process outlined above, allowing them to sort credible from non-credible sources based on performance, rather than on innuendo. They also have the time to build up relationships of credibility with these sources, who trust them with more and more information as these relationships grow. The slackened schedule of the reportage model therefore creates opportunities for sources to cross the source-reporter credibility checkpoint, and as I explain next, this model's flattened hierarchy allows the information they provide to more easily pass through the reporter-editor checkpoint, as well.

Implications of the Reportage Model's Emphasis on Expertise over Hierarchy

Whereas the hierarchy in the spot news model is deliberately strict in order to facilitate efficient decision-making, the newsroom hierarchy of the revitalized reportage model is deliberately flattened in the pursuit of a better quality of information. Reportage newsroom hierarchies are leveled in part because of the value they accord to reporters' topical expertise. Reporters are encouraged to take time for topical training, as the more experience and specialization reporters have, the higher the quality of their investigations, analysis, and narratives. As one champion of this model explained it, reporters must "train . . . with people who have worked on certain topics, must be in more contact with specialists . . . [must have] real contact with the people who have studied [the topic]." At *El Universal*, for example, the human rights reporter had openly attended the human rights course that was forbidden for the *La Prensa* reporter; at the time of my research, she was also preparing to travel to Geneva for training on human rights provided by the United Nations. Like time, expertise facilitates human rights reporters' exposure to a wider variety of sources; it also equips them with the knowledge necessary to better evaluate sources and assess information themselves, rather than simply taking their sources' word for it. Expertise also enhances reportage reporters' autonomy, as their editors see them as the authorities on their topics, best able to make judgment calls on credibility and newsworthiness. In contrast to the spot news model, which can see proximity to sources as corrupting and discrediting, the reportage model sees proximity to sources as something that can endow the publication with knowledge-based authority, and therefore, as an enhancer of credibility.

Greater reporter autonomy and the decentralization of credibility are built into the hierarchical structure of reportage newsrooms—an organizational feature portrayed in practice at *Excélsior* in 2006. Rather than working individually and reporting directly to editors, as in the spot news model, *Excélsior*'s reporters were working in teams to cover a topic. Each team was headed by the most experienced reporter. This reporter served as a liaison between the team and the editorial staff in order to facilitate negotiations, rather than to channel commands. One *Excélsior* reporter described her experience on the Society team as consisting of "lots of interchanges with my section peers," and, she said, "It is very open with the bosses as well." Every week, the *Excélsior* Society section reporters would meet to talk about the articles they were planning and to trade feedback and contacts. Their representative would then bring their week's reporting agenda to their editor, who, seemingly somewhat superfluously, "has to assign us the topics that we tell her to."

At that time at *El Universal,* this team reporting structure was a twinkle in the Society and Justice editor's eye, but he very much wanted to see it come to fruition. He described his ideal human rights team, which would consist of three reporters focused on investigative journalism, as operating in the following way:

> They would suggest to me where we have to go work. . . . They would say, "Look, what we are going to propose is that the next investigation will take one month, and we have to go to Chiapas because, in that month, I think we will prove that in such-and-such community religious liberty is being infringed, and we think that the government of the municipality is helping such-and-such sect impose itself there because all those who don't go to that church are being pushed out of the city."

This team, whose establishment the editor considered a goal for the "mid-term," required higher-level authorization because of its cost. The editor had high hopes, however, that it would eventually be approved, because, he said, "it is a positive that we are generating for the paper. It is an investment. It is not an expenditure." The decentralization of newsroom credibility and autonomy in the reportage model means that news decisions flow up the newsroom hierarchy at a greater rate than in the spot news model. Source information must still pass through two credibility checkpoints to attain publication, but reporters' time and expertise are allowed to help it get past the source-reporter checkpoint in this model, while reporters' greater stores of newsroom credibility and autonomy vis-à-vis their editors allow them to more easily clear it through the reporter-editor checkpoint.

In sum, the reportage model's redistribution of newsroom credibility among those involved in human rights journalism increases source pluralism. Increased pluralism can also increase accountability, since new sources, such as smaller human rights organizations operating on a regional basis, can provide new information on local situations of human rights violations unknown to the large organizations on the spot news editors' shortlists. As such, democratic journalism benefits from the reportage model response to competition from electronic media. In 2006, however, it was still early days for the movement to adopt the reportage model in a spot news culture, and the reportage model was not without opposition. Old understandings of how journalism should be conducted take time to dissipate. For example, *El Universal*'s Society and Justice editor told me that the Society page was established only after lots of internal debate at the leadership level. "There are always people that are very conservative in terms of journalism, and they think it is the same now as it was 20 years ago," was how he explained those who wished to block

the proposal. Resistance to new models can also come from below; editors at both *El Universal* and *Excélsior* told me that they were pushing reporters to embrace their autonomy and pursue reportage, but some of these reporters persisted in subscribing to "old philosophies": They continued to ask for assignments rather than developing their own ideas, and they still submitted spot news articles. As another editor described it, "These are those journalists . . . who were trained to go to the press conferences [and] put the microphone up to the politicians."

Conclusion

In this article, I described the social organization of human rights reporting at Mexican newspapers. The more prevalent spot news model competes with electronic media through simulation and cannibalization. As such, it must be organized for efficiency. The resulting routine of speed and steep hierarchy keep newsroom credibility centralized among newspaper editors, making it difficult both for sources to convince reporters to consider them, and for reporters to convince editors to consider new sources. On the other hand, the reportage model, still more pursued than practiced at the time of my research, competes with electronic media through differentiation, emphasizing investigation and analysis over speed. Accordingly, its newsroom is organized to fit a slower schedule and a flatter hierarchy. The reportage model therefore decentralizes newsroom credibility by allowing reporters the expertise and autonomy they need to include new sources in publication.

Both the spot news and reportage models developed in response to the same context of commoditization, competition, and technological change, yet they have the opposite effects on the production of democratic journalism. Their opposing effects have theoretical implications; they shed light on the two mainstream sociology of journalism approaches' clashing perspectives on the effects of market competition on democratic journalism. The critical approach would predict the limiting effects of the spot news model, while the liberal approach would expect that market competition benefits democratic journalism, as it does under the reportage model. Both theoretical approaches are therefore applicable in this scenario, yet neither of them fully explains it. How can this be the case? Identifying how market influences on democratic journalism are mediated by newsrooms' social organization gets us one level deeper into understanding how the market can instigate simultaneous opposing effects on democratic journalism. Looking at the effects that a newsroom's organization can have on the distribution of newsroom credibility is a further link in the chain connecting market competition, newsroom social organization, and pluralism and accountability. Specifically, social-organizational models that centralize newsroom credibility are detrimental to democratic journalism, while those that decentralize it benefit democratic journalism. Identifying which of these processes is occurring helps the researcher know which mainstream theoretical approach to turn to for further insight. Finally, including assessments of the distribution of newsroom credibility in analyses of new newsroom models—whether driven by financial crises or the social media explosion of today—will provide a more robust understanding of their implications for democracy.

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