

BOOK REVIEW

REVIEW OF ANDREW PAXMAN, *MEXICAN WATCHDOGS:
THE RISE OF A CRITICAL PRESS SINCE THE 1980S*
(CHAPEL HILL: THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH
CAROLINA PRESS, 2025), 340 PP.

From the 1920s to 2000 the Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI) ruled Mexico, establishing one of the most enduring regimes in Latin American modern history and a political system with unique characteristics. It was semi-authoritarian, as it tolerated limited dissent while repressing radical movements. It was corporatist, as it integrated unions and social organizations into the party-state. It was developmentalist, promoting rapid industrialization and sustained growth from the 1940s to the 1970s. And it built a peculiar relationship with the national press.

The government held a virtual monopoly on newsprint, financed several newspapers, and gave all kinds of institutional and informal “incentives” (or, simply, bribes) to journalists. This created a transactional relationship between the press and the PRI. On the one hand, newspapers constantly praised the president and aligned with the official party on important issues. On the other hand, the regime allowed a wide degree of freedom of expression to some columnists and famous journalists, who could criticize the government and specific politicians as long as they did not cross certain red lines, such as directly questioning the president or the army.

By the late 1970s, the PRI regime faced a triple crisis: loss of legitimacy after the 1968 student massacre, recurring economic downturns, and growing radical opposition movements. In response to pressures from civil society, opposition parties, and popular discontent, the party enacted a series of gradual political reforms over the following decades, opening the electoral system and expanding civil liberties, in a process known as Mexico’s democratic transition, which concluded with the PRI’s defeat in the 2000 presidential elections.

This process has mainly been studied from institutionalist and legalist perspectives, which is why Andrew Paxman's most recent book offers a refreshing approach. *Mexican Watchdogs* presents a detailed account of the changes that the Mexican press experienced during Mexico's transition to democracy and its aftermath. The book tells the "political and business history" of the Mexican press in order to explain how the PRI lost its grip on the media and how "influential publishers and remarkable journalists" seized the moment of political opening to win more independence and become more professionalized and critical. In this way, Paxman reexamines Mexico's democratic transition through the lens of the press, and shows how the rise of critical journalism was, at the same time, a product of Mexico's democratization and a force that further democratized Mexican public life, by opening new spaces for pluralistic debate and enabling more rigorous scrutiny of those in power.

The book's temporal arc spans from the late 1980s to the present. According to Paxman, during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), a confluence of factors gave rise to a more open, professional, critical, and pluralistic print press. These factors included President Salinas's concern for his image both domestically and abroad, his modernizing agenda—which generated considerable enthusiasm among many social sectors and media outlets—the controversy surrounding the signing of NAFTA, a generational and cultural shift among journalists who had come of age during the 1968 student movement, and the innovative vision of several media entrepreneurs who imparted a new character to the national newspapers. The political upheavals of 1994—the Zapatista uprising, the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the internal intrigues within the PRI, and the entry into force of NAFTA—gave the press an opportunity to prove its new independence and expand it further.

Paxman argues that the critical press matured and gained greater independence during the following two administrations: those of Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) and Vicente Fox (2000–2006). Zedillo considerably reduced the mechanisms of political pressure that the executive branch had historically wielded against the press. Fox continued this trend and took it a step further. During his administration, the print press attained an unprecedented degree of freedom of expression, which it used to scrutinize and criticize the first democratically-elected government with frequency and vigor.

From 2006 on, Paxman argues, freedom of expression suffered major setbacks. President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) sought to legitimize his war against drug trafficking, which led him to increase the allocation of official advertising and to intensify political pressure against media outlets and journalists critical of his security strategy. At the same time, the outbreak of

violence took a heavy toll on journalists, who faced threats and attacks from organized crime and local politicians with increasing frequency and severity. Under Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018), these trends continued; moreover, the president was so preoccupied with his image that he constantly pressured the press and expressed displeasure over minor news stories that supposedly undermined the dignity of the presidency. Official advertising spending in the media continued to rise as well during Peña's administration.

Paxman suggests that, alongside these setbacks for freedom of expression, during the 2010s, a number of digital outlets emerged and prioritized rigorous and professional investigative journalism. These outlets were particularly important in documenting cases of corruption by traditional political parties, which Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his party, Morena, leveraged to advance his political project and rise to power. Finally, President López Obrador (2018–2024) stoked polarization and deliberately attacked critical media and journalists in order to undermine their credibility, while also cutting official advertising budgets and redirecting them toward pro-government digital outlets and newspapers. This, compounded by the persistent violence suffered by journalists at the local level, has substantially deteriorated the environment for freedom of expression in Mexico.

Perhaps what is most notably absent from *Mexican Watchdogs* is a more robust theoretical framework. The work lacks reflection, for instance, on how the *public sphere*—conceived as a space of mediation between civil society and the state—was transformed by the emergence of a critical press, and on how this transformation did or did not alter the relationship between citizens and the state. Similarly, there is no sustained engagement with how the financing of the press by certain private actors contributed to neoliberal *hegemony* in Mexico. Nor does the author offer a broader reflection on the *role of the media in democracy*; rather, he seems to take for granted the parameters of what constitutes a free press and freedom of expression as defined by organizations that promote liberal democracy—that is, a specific type of democracy—such as Freedom House or Article 19.

That said, the book stands out for its extensive empirical grounding and its level of granularity. Paxman traces the temporal arc from the 1980s to the present by focusing on one or two major newspapers in each chapter, which allows him to offer a detailed account of each outlet's innovations in terms of financing, investigative journalism, editorial policies, and its relationship with political power and government institutions. In other words, the author develops his arguments through a significant case study in each chapter, lending the work a strong empirical foundation. Furthermore, the fact that Paxman himself was

a correspondent in Mexico in his youth and the more than 180 interviews he conducted for this book provide his case studies with a remarkable degree of texture, detail, depth, and vivid examples.

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