

U.S. PERIODICAL REPORTING ON MEXICO, 1960-1985

Norris C. Clement and Iliana L. Sonntag*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines sixteen U.S. periodicals during the period 1960-85 in order to test two hypotheses:

-That Mexico's increased newsworthiness would manifest itself in a greatly expanded frequency of articles in the latter part of the 1970s and again in the early 1980s

-That the major emphasis of the articles throughout the period would be on U.S. economic and geopolitical interest in Mexico. The periodicals examined were grouped according to "news weeklies," "general interest periodicals," "business periodicals," and "international relations periodicals," while the data on frequency of articles were compiled according to subject and geographical areas and presented in five-year time periods. The first hypothesis was rejected for the period 1976-80 but accepted for 1981-85. The second hypothesis was accepted for both periods.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo se hace la revisión de dieciséis rotativos de Estados Unidos durante el periodo 1960-1985 con el fin de probar dos hipótesis: 1. Que el interés periodístico de México se manifiesta en una mucho mayor frecuencia en la aparición de artículos hacia finales de los años setenta y de nuevo en los inicios de los ochenta. Y 2. que el énfasis de los artículos comprendidos en este lapso recaería sobre los intereses económicos y geopolíticos que Estados Unidos tenía en México.

Los periódicos revisados se agruparon en "semanarios de noticias", "periódicos de interés general" y "periódicos sobre política internacional"; mientras que la información sobre la frecuencia de aparición de los artículos se compiló de acuerdo al tema y zonas geográficas agrupada en quinquenios.

La primera hipótesis se rechazó para el periodo 1976-80, no así para el 1981-85. La segunda hipótesis se aceptó para ambos periodos.

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Most experienced North American observers of political-economic conditions in Mexico recognize that Mexico-related topics are much more newsworthy now than, say, ten or twenty years ago. The authors, who have resided in the United States-Mexican border region throughout the last two decades, witnessed an apparent explosion of press coverage at the local level during the 1976-81 period. For example, one study that counted articles limited to "United States-Mexican border problems" in San Diego's only morning and evening daily newspapers during the 1965-77 period showed an average of eight articles per year from 1965-75 and fifty-two per year in the 1976-77 period.

This explosion of press coverage seemed to emanate from four very newsworthy developments in Mexico during the 1970s:

- Devaluation of the peso, the first since 1954. Mexico's announcements of vast reserves of fossil fuels.
- Increased public awareness in the United States of an apparently growing stream of undocumented migration from Mexico to the United States,
- Increased awareness in the United States that Mexico was rapidly becoming one of the United States' major trading partners.

It was from this vantage point that the authors set out to test two hypotheses regarding national trends over time in the U.S. periodical literature during the period 1960-85. The hypotheses are:

- That Mexico's increased newsworthiness would in fact manifest itself in a greatly expanded frequency of articles in the latter part of the 1970s and again in the early 1980s (Hypothesis 1, or H1).
- That the major emphasis of the articles throughout the period would be on the United States' economic and geopolitical interests in Mexico (Hypothesis 2, or H2).

In this article we first describe the procedures utilized in selecting the periodicals included in the study and in collecting and compiling the data. Then we present the data in tabular form, analyze it, and derive certain conclusions regarding the hypotheses stated above. It is hoped that the study will aid the understanding of United States-Mexican relations by researchers and public policymakers in both countries as one dimension of the larger picture on how U.S. perspectives on Mexico are formed.

Literature Survey

In order to determine if other surveys of this kind had been conducted previously, we perused InfoTrac, an electronic index to general periodicals on videodisk that covers the years 1985 to 1989. We also conducted a computer search through Dialog, using the *Public Affairs Information Service* database. Anticipating that such articles, if indexed, would be assigned the descriptors "Mexico-Foreign Opinion," "Mexico-Research," and "Mexico-Relations-United States," the same were used. Although a large

number of articles on Mexico, appearing in more than 130 publications, were cited, the searches did not yield any references to studies such as this one. On that basis we assume that no similar survey has been conducted, at least in English¹

Method

A total of sixteen periodicals published in the United States were selected in four categories:

- The three top news weeklies, selected purely on the basis of their circulation. These were *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *U.S. News and World Report* (with circulations of 4.5 million, 3 million, and 2 million, respectively, in 1983 when the study was initiated).

- Six general interest periodicals, selected on the basis of their in-depth treatment of issues and their differences in political/ideological perspective. These were (with frequency of publication and size of circulation): *Atlantic Monthly* (monthly, 325,000), *Commonwealth* (biweekly, 100,000), *Harpers* (monthly, 140,000), *The Nation* (weekly, 45,000), *National Review* (biweekly, 100,000), *New Republic* (weekly, 95,000).

- Three business periodicals were chosen: *Business Week* (weekly, 800,000), *Forbes* (biweekly, 700,000) and *Fortune* (biweekly, 674,000).

- Finally, four periodicals concerned with international relations were selected *Foreign Affairs* (five per year, 85,000), *Foreign Policy*² (quarterly, 25,000), *Orbis* (quarterly, 3,500), and *World Affairs* (quarterly, 9,900).³

In general, an attempt was made to include periodicals which had a wide circulation and were widely read by the informed U.S. public, the U.S. business community and foreign affairs specialists.

Data Collection. The data were collected by a total of forty students in a senior/graduate class at San Diego State University on "U.S.-Mexico Economic Relations," during the spring of 1982 and again in the spring of 1987 (only for the period 1981-85). The articles were retrieved by using the following indices for backfiles of periodicals: *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Business Periodicals Index*, and *Public Affairs Information Service*.

Each student was assigned a periodical or a portion thereof. Students were individually instructed by the librarian to go through the indices in order to identify articles and then verify their findings by going through the

1 Since completing this survey a study has been published in Spanish as a Cuaderno de Trabajo by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. See José Carlos Lozano, *Imágenes de México en la prensa norteamericana: Análisis comparativo de la cobertura de México en Time y Newsweek de 1980 a 1986*. Tijuana, El COLEF, 1988.

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3 Ulrich's *International Periodicals Directory*, 22nd edition, 1983.

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Each student was assigned a periodical or a portion thereof. Students were individually instructed by the librarian to go through the indices in order to identify articles and then verify their findings by going through the actual bound volumes or microfiche. They then produced a copy of the article and a summary and analysis of each article according to a prepared form. The forms, the articles, and the students' analyses were checked twice during the semester by the co-authors, and spot checks of the accuracy of the students' library work were carried out by the graduate assistants.

Data Compilation and Analysis. The data were collected and verified according to the method noted above and then classified according to: a) time period, geographic emphasis, and sources (e.g., 1960-65, U.S.-Mexico border, and *Time* magazine), and b) major emphasis of the article in terms of several subtopics-general (broad overviews of changing socioeconomic conditions), culture (emphasis on the arts and/or anthropological findings), trade/investment/tourism, migration, energy, border relations, Mexican economy, and "other" (e.g., relations with Cuba). In this way we were able to determine the frequency of articles, the specific areas of interest of the various magazines, and how these changed over time. Students were asked to include articles which dedicated at least an inch of space to a Mexico-related topic and to classify them according to geographic and subject emphasis.⁴ The categories were formulated on the basis of the authors' impressionistic interpretation of U.S. press coverage mainly during the period 1976-82 when the increase of Mexico-related subjects first occurred. While it must be acknowledged that the inclusion and/or exclusion of certain articles and their placement in the two categories involved elements of subjective evaluation, the fact that each judgment was agreed upon by the two authors and one graduate assistant ensured a certain consistency. Nevertheless, certain methodological deficiencies did emerge and will be discussed in the conclusions to this paper. Note that the tables show only the number of articles, irrespective of their length.

Tables were then prepared which show subtotals for each group by time periods and for each magazine, although these are not shown here, and for each subtopic. These data are presented in tables 1-5. More sophisticated quantitative analysis was not utilized due to the small number of observations and the elementary nature of the classification system.

Findings

Table 1 summarizes the entire data set, presenting the frequency of articles in all time periods, for all periodicals, and for all categories. Rather surpris-

4 Where the emphasis was on the relationship between the two countries, and therefore not geography specific, it was classified under "U.S./Mexico."

number of articles on Mexico, appearing in more than 130 publications, were cited, the searches did not yield any references to studies such as this one. On that basis we assume that no similar survey has been conducted, at least in English.¹

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(to 16 percent) in 1976-80 with the devaluation of the peso. This apparent preference for nationally related news is borne out by the comparatively larger number of articles in the 1961-65 period, when the major topics covered centered around the situation in Cuba and Mexico's relations with that country and, secondly, the controversies surrounding the termination of the Bracero Program. Similarly, the period 1966-70 was dominated by events related to the 1968 Olympic games -including the student demonstrations and the Tlatelolco massacre- and the presidential (Echeverría) election campaign.

In analyzing the articles published by the different types of periodicals, we have disaggregated the information into four tables. Table 2 summarizes the information for the four "news weeklies," table 3 for the six "general interest periodicals," table 4 for the three "business periodicals," and table 5 for the four "international relations periodicals." While there are many interesting observations that could be made here, we will confine our comments to the following:

- The four news weeklies published approximately 52 percent of all articles for the entire 1960-85 period, while the general interest periodicals contributed 17 percent, business periodicals 29 percent, and international relations periodicals 4 percent. There are, of course, several reasons for this:

- The frequency of publication provides the news weeklies an opportunity to publish more articles.

- Most, but not all, articles published by the news weeklies are shorter in length than articles published in the other categories, where articles sometimes run five or ten pages.

- Most of the trends noted above are determined therefore by the news weeklies and the business periodicals, which together accounted for approximately 81 percent of the total number of articles published.

All four types of periodicals showed a marked preference for articles on Mexico itself, while articles on U.S.-Mexico relations/flows were least important. Interestingly, international relations periodicals demonstrated absolutely no interest in border-related topics, while news weeklies published the highest proportion of articles related to the border.

- In the period 1981-85:

- Two periodicals, *Atlantic Monthly* and *World Affairs*, did not publish even one article which dealt with Mexico in a significant way.

- Time*, *Business Week*, and *Newsweek* published the most articles among the weeklies (with 65, 58, and 56 articles, respectively).

- The total number of articles increased most in the news weeklies and least in the business periodicals as compared to the 1976-80 period.

- Topics in the "other" category which received most attention were Central America, drug enforcement, Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, natural disasters (e.g., fires and earthquakes), and environmental problems.

- The year with the highest total of articles published was 1982, when Mexico was trying to manage its *de facto* default on its external debt.

Thus, the largest volume of articles came at a time when the news from Mexico was almost totally negative (i.e., announcing default on the external debt and threatening the stability of the entire international financial system), not -when the news was positive (i.e., 1976-80, when the petroleum boom was occurring. The implications of this finding in terms of U.S. images of Mexico are significant and profound.

Conclusions

Let us now return to the two hypotheses set out in the introduction. The first, H1, obviously must be rejected for the period 1976-80 but accepted for 1981-85. By the criteria employed here to measure the increased newsworthiness of Mexico and Mexico-related topics, frequency of articles in the U.S. periodicals selected obviously did not respond in the expected fashion until the early 1980s when Mexico almost defaulted on its external debt.⁵

Not so surprising, nor dramatic, however, is the finding that articles on Mexico per se outnumber, at a ratio of approximately 2 to 1, the other geographic categories throughout the time period studied. This reflects the emphasis on national coverage as opposed to "regional" coverage (i.e., the border region) and a general scarcity of information on, or lack of understanding of, the links between the United States and Mexico.

The second hypothesis, H2, that the major emphasis of the articles would be on the United States economic and geopolitical interests, seems consistent with the data and with our own impressionistic analyses of the content of the articles. During the period under study, there was a shift away from articles in the "general" and "culture" categories and a marked increase in articles on "energy," "migration," and the "Mexican economy" and toward "U.S./Mexico." While this will not surprise those who have followed Mexico and Mexico-related news coverage in recent years, it tends to give the impression that fifteen to twenty years ago Mexico was of interest to U.S. readers primarily as an interesting place to visit or even retire, while today it is seen as more vitally intertwined with our day-to-day lives in economic, political, and occasionally military terms.

Finally, it should be noted that our impression in reading the entire set of articles was that the general tone of the reporting did not change significantly during the period under study. That is, during the period 1960-85 great strides were made in Mexico in terms of economic and technological development, and one would suppose that the underlying affect of reporters' language would reflect those changing objective conditions. While we believe that the coverage adequately reflected the changes taking place in Mexico, there was no dramatic shift in perspective, or affect.

⁵ The Lozano study (see note 2) concluded that more than 50 percent of the space dedicated to reporting on Mexico addressed topics related to "crisis and conflicts." Although the methods employed in that study are much different than those employed here, that conclusion does not appear to be inconsistent with our findings in this study.

Nevertheless, these observations are impressionistic and no systematic analysis of content was applied.

In conclusion, then, it can be said that the data indicate that coverage of Mexico-related topics in the periodicals selected increased somewhat from 1971-75 to 1976-80, although it actually decreased with respect to the earlier periods, 1960-65 and 1966-70. The dramatic increase, however, came in the period 1981-85, when it first appeared that vital U.S. interests could be threatened by the deteriorating situation -the "crisis"— in Mexico. Additionally, the type of coverage shifted from a cultural, travelogue emphasis to Mexico as an economically and politically significant power important to U.S. interests.

TABLE 1
ALL PERIODICALS*

	1960-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	Total
<i>Geographic Emphasis</i>						
Mexico	114(65%)	87(65%)	51(68%)	59(55%)	156(56%)	467(61%)
U.S./Mexico	22(13%)	26(20%)	13(17%)	31(29%)	96(35%)	188(25%)
Border	39(22%)	20(15%)	11(15%)	17(16%)	26(19%)	113(15%)
Subtotal	175(100%)	133(100%)	75(100%)	107(100%)	278(100%)	768(100%)
	[151]**					
<i>Subject Areas</i>						
General Interest	20(11%)	21(16%)	12(16%)	4(4%)	11(4%)	68(9%)
Culture	15(9%)	8(6%)	2(3%)	7(7%)	4(1%)	36(5%)
Trade/Invest./Tourism	42(24%)	41(31%)	17(23%)	15(14%)	30(11%)	145(19%)
Migration	8(5%)	4(3%)	5(7%)	12(11%)	42(15%)	71(9%)
Energy	4(2%)	2(2%)	2(3%)	13(12%)	17(6%)	38(5%)
Mexican Economy	25(14%)	11(8%)	19(25%)	26(24%)	74(27%)	155(20%)
Border Relations	12(7%)	12(9%)	1(1%)	3(3%)	6(2%)	34(4%)
Other	49(28%)	34(26%)	17(23%)	27(25%)	94(34%)	221(29%)
Subtotal	175(100%)	133(100%)	75(100%)	107	248(100%)	768
	[151]**					

* Figures represent the number of article/percentages are expressed in parentheses.

** Note that the period 1960-65 is a six year period. If only articles from 1961-65 are included, the total for the period falls from 175 to 150 which does not significantly affect the findings.

TABLE 2
NEWS WEEKLIES*

	1960-64	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	Subtotal 1960-80	Total 1960-85
<i>Geographic Emphasis</i>							
Mexico	52	47	30	21	76	150	226
U.S./Mexico	7	9	7	15	51	38	89
Border	30	12	9	13	23	64	87
Subtotal	89	68	46	49	150	252	402
<i>Subject Areas</i>							
General	14	21	10	3	9	48	57
Culture	7	2	1	5	2	15	17
Trade/Invest./Tourism	15	11	9	3	9	38	47
Migration	4	1	4	7	32	16	48
Energy	1	1	1	4	5	7	12
Border Relations	8	5	-	-	4	13	17
Mexican Economy	12	7	8	14	31	41	72
Other	28	20	13	13	58	74	132
Subtotal	89	68	46	49	150	252	402

*Includes: *Newsweek*
Time
U. S. News and World Report

TABLE 3
GENERAL INTEREST PERIODICALS*

	1960-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	Subtotal 1960-80	Total 1960-85
<i>Geographic Emphasis</i>							
Mexico	33	10	10	12	26	65	91
U.S./Mexico	5	2	1	7	11	15	26
Border	4	3	1	1	1	9	10
Subtotal	42	15	12	20	38	89	127
<i>Subject Areas</i>							
General	5	-	-	-	2	6	8
Culture	7	5	1	2	2	15	17
Trade/Invest./Tourism	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Migration	5	1	1	3	9	10	19
Energy	-	-	-	2	3	2	5
Border Relations	1	1	-	3	2	5	7
Mexican Economy	5	-	6	5	7	16	23
Other	20	8	3	4	12	35	47
Subtotal	42	15	12	20	38	89	127

*Includes: *Atlantic Monthly* *The Nation*
Commonwealth *National Review*
Harpers *New Republic*

TABLE 4
BUSINESS PERIODICALS*

	1960-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	Subtotal 1960-80	Total 1960-85
<i>Geographic Emphasis</i>							
Mexico	29	30	11	26	44	96	140
U.S./Mexico	10	15	5	9	25	39	64
Border	5	5	-	3	2	13	15
Subtotal	44	50	16	38	71	148	219
<i>Subject Areas</i>							
General	1	-	1	-	-	2	2
Culture	1	1	-	-	-	2	2
Trade/Invest./Tourism	27	30	8	12	20	77	97
Migration	-	2	-	2	1	4	5
Energy	3	-	1	7	8	11	19
Border Relations	3	6	1	-	-	10	10
Mexican Economy	8	4	5	7	33	24	57
Other	1	7	-	10	9	18	27
Subtotal	44	50	16	38	71	148	219

*Includes: *Business Week*
Forbes
Fortune

TABLE 5
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PERIODICALS*

	1960-65	1966-70	1971-75	1976-80	1981-85	Subtotal 1960-80	Total 1960-85
<i>Geographic Emphasis</i>							
Mexico	2	3	1	4	10	10	20
U.S./Mexico	-	-	-	3	9	3	12
Border	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Subtotal	2	3	1	7	19	13	32
<i>Subject Areas</i>							
General	-	-	-	1	-	1	1
Culture	-	1	-	-	-	1	1
Trade/Invest./Tourism	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Migration	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Energy	-	-	-	1	1	1	2
Border Relations	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
Mexican Economy	2	1	1	5	3	9	12
Other	-	1	-	-	15	1	16
Subtotal	2	3	1	7	19	13	32

*Includes: *Foreign Affairs*
Foreign Policy
World Affairs
Orbis

