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Between Pacts and Censorship. The Fourth Power and the Sonora Group (1920–1924)

Entre pactos y censuras. El cuarto poder y el grupo Sonora (1920–1924)

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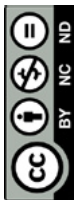
pp. 154–172

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Abstract

In May 1920, after the assassination of President Venustiano Carranza, the Sonora group came to power, led by middle-class men who had escalated politically thanks to the armed struggle. One of the main challenges of this group was its relationship with the press that still had among its ranks old Carrancistas. Far from opting for freedom of expression, Álvaro Obregón and his interior secretary, Plutarco Elías Calles, censored and controlled much of the country's newspapers. This article analyzes the press-government relationship and the strategies created by the Executive branch to prevent the "fourth estate" from getting out of hand.

Keywords: Mexican revolution, post-revolution, newspapers, Sonora group, Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Plutarco Elías Calles, political control, censorship

Resumen

En mayo de 1920, tras el asesinato del presidente Venustiano Carranza, ascendió al poder el grupo Sonora, liderado por hombres de sectores medios que habían escalado políticamente gracias a la lucha armada. Uno de los retos principales de este grupo fue su relación con la prensa que todavía tenía entre sus filas a viejos carrancistas. Lejos de optar por la libertad de expresión, Álvaro Obregón y su secretario de Gobernación, Plutarco Elías Calles, censuraron y controlaron gran parte de los periódicos del país. Este artículo analiza la relación prensa-gobierno y las estrategias creadas desde el poder Ejecutivo para evitar que el "cuarto poder" se saliera de sus manos.

Palabras clave: Revolución mexicana, pos-revolución, periódicos, grupo Sonora, Álvaro Obregón, Plutarco Elías Calles, control político, censura.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, periodicals and their distribution had an intimate relationship with the governing group in Mexico. Their management meant control over what could be disseminated and what should be censored.

A new age began in May 1911, when the Octogenerian Porfirio Díaz's rule ended. At this moment, the press was freed from its chains, and journalists enjoyed unlimited freedom of expression, especially during the Francisco Madero government. Authors consider this journalistic 'licentiousness' a factor that accelerated the government's decay and fall, originating from the armed conflict. The ascent of "usurper and jackal" general Victoriano Huerta to power is considered a regression to traditional media control methods, which were temporarily abolished with the victory of the Carranza faction and the establishment of the Constitution in 1917. The 1920s are often seen as a continuation of this press freedom.

Freedom of expression during the Madero regime (October 1911- February 1913) was almost total. However, President Francisco I Madero could not consolidate pacts, which prevented him from controlling the Fourth Power. This situation contributed to his discredit and subsequent fall. In contrast, Venustiano Carranza, a politician who emerged from the

“Porfiriato,” achieved national press management. He was always interested in obtaining an information monopoly. Supported by the 7th article from the Constitution of 1917 and, after that, in the Printing Act, Carranza ended a significant portion of the opposition press during his term (1917-1920). His assassination in May 1920 provoked a revolution in the journalistic scenery. There is no explanation about the 1920s, and it is still being determined whether the freedom of the press was genuine or if the State exerted iron-fisted journalistic control.

During Obregón’s four-year term, the relationship between national newspapers and the government changed. After the Obregón presidential race in 1920, the country’s press radically transformed. In early 1921, four leading newspapers were *El Universal*, *Excelsior*, *El Herald* (Mexico), and *El Demócrata*. However, the history of the press during the Obregón government and, in general, about the 1920s remains unexplored in historiography.

While the academic historiography of the Mexican Revolution has used newspapers as data sources for several decades, it was only in the 1990s that the press became an object of study rather than just a source for reconstructing events. Álvaro Matute and Javier Garciadiego published a couple of chapters in a book edited by Aurora Cano Andaluz (1995), which pointed out the necessary coordinates for understanding the press from the appearance of *El Imparcial* to the death of Carranza in Tlaxcalantongo.¹ However, neither work details the period after May 1920; the media of the Obregón four-year government is merely mentioned.²

Based on the above, to understand the principal newspapers that existed in the country during these years, it is necessary to refer to some classics from the Mexican Revolution, such as José C. Valadés and Alfonso Taracena, as well as some books by Matute and Georgette José, who used the press to explain political phenomena. In *Las dificultades del nuevo Estado* and *La carrera del caudillo*, Álvaro Matute offered us fundamentals to contextualize the press before Obregon became president. Georgette José, in his book about the presidential campaign of Plutarco Elias Calles from 1923-1924, gives essential contributions about the press of the time. However, he did not go into the subject in depth because it was not his topic.

As mentioned, the study of the press during 1920-1924 has barely progressed in recent times. Some information about Obregón’s relationship with the newspapers and journalists can be found in Bernardo Masini Aguilera and Arno Burkholder’s research about *Excelsior*. Ana María Serna’s articles from 2007 and 2014 also provide vital insights into the connection between power and the press, although from a more theoretical perspective.

This article’s central objective is to explain the complex relationship between the leading newspapers from the capital with the most extensive spread and the power —based on newspaper sources and, to a lesser extent, the files from the Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elias Calles y Fernando Torreblanca (FAPEC-FT)—. It mainly focuses on the strategies by the

1 The reader can find the cited references in this state of art in the bibliography.

2 Other classical books about the journalism of these years are by Diego Arenas Guzmán, *El periodismo en la revolución mexicana* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1967); Félix Palavicini, *Mi vida revolucionaria* (Mexico: Botas, 1937), and Gonzalo de la Parra, *De cómo se hizo revolucionario un hombre de buena fe* (Mexico: [s. e.], 1915).

executive power, specifically from the Ministry of Interior, to control periodicals.

This text has four sections. The first examines the government's Department of Press; the second concerns the relationship between the country's leading newspapers, *El Universal* and *Excelsior*, and the group in power. The third analyzes the control and disappearance of the periodicals *El Heraldo* (Mexico) and *El Demócrata*.

1. The Press Department: The Information Censor

The beginning of the 1920s had nuances and particular characteristics due to the armed conflict that ended with the triumph and rise to power of the Sonora Group after the Agua Prieta rebellion.³ When Obregón finally occupied the most coveted chair in the country in December 1920, he had dual authority: he became the constitutional president and retained his caudillo aura. To consolidate his power, he formed alliances with the army—the principal factor of power at the beginning of the 1930s—regional caciques, and various social groups around him. The connections with every important political actor were fundamental, and he achieved them through rewards and favors, using his charisma and political savvy. The main goal of these actions was to centralize the political power that had become fragmented after the armed struggle.⁴

To achieve this, along with the 'caudillo,' a group of trusted allies arrived, including future state secretaries and department heads. Some of these men had gained political capital during the last decade due to their actions and not solely because of the caudillo's support. In other words, their rise to political and military power was not entirely dependent on Obregón. The cabinet members carefully maintained a revolutionary reputation and even sought to enhance it. It was challenging for Obregón to unify these individuals and provide them with a consistent political direction. Despite the cabinet members' attempts to follow the president's orders, their personalities and ability to "negotiate and compel others" influenced their decisions.⁵

When Obregón became president, Plutarco Elías Calles occupied one of the most essential jobs in the political systems because the Interior Secretary "has acted as chief of cab-

3 The Agua Prieta Rebellion was a movement developed in late April and early May 1920 and led by Adolfo de la Huerta and Plutarco Elías Calles. It resulted from the conflict between the state of Sonora and the government of Venustiano Carranza. The consequence was the assassination of President Carranza in May 1920. This event was Mexico's last successful armed uprising against an established government.

4 Georgette José, «Campaña, rebelión y elecciones presidenciales de 1923 a 1924 en México», *Estudios de Historia Moderna y Contemporánea* 23 (2002): 84.

5 Saúl Jerónimo Romero, «Representación política y la Secretaría de Gobernación» en *La Secretaría de Gobernación: acción política del Gobierno Mexicano. Vol. II. La representación política en México*, coordinado por Carlos Martínez Assad (México: Secretaría de Gobernación, Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 2000): 193; Ricardo Pozas Horcasitas, *El triunvirato sonoreño* (México: Martín Casillas, 1983), 11-13.

inet and the second strongest man of the country, after the Republic president.”⁶ From that moment to September 1923, his political career and figure did not cease to grow nationally.⁷ Despite owing a considerable part of his political ascent to Obregón, Calles often acted with a high degree of autonomy within the cabinet. He did not always comply with the caudillo’s wishes but instead made decisions based on his political basis in the process of being built.

Article 2 of “Law of Secretaries of State of 31 December 1917” established that the Governorship would be responsible for designating and resigning other office secretaries, Federal District governors, and governors from territories. It would be accountable for linking the federal executive with the Congress of Union, the Supreme Court of Justice, and the states of the republic. Additionally, it would be responsible for legalizing the signatures of federal functionaries and governors, observing the fulfillment of general elections, taking administrative measurements to fulfill the Constitution, reforming the Constitution, and ensuring the protection of individual guarantees. Besides, it would be liable for publishing decrees, organic laws, federal codes, codes of the Federal District, territories, and expropriations because of public utility. Regarding justice, in relevant cases for the nation, the branch secretary was involved in the trial of federal prisoners, amnesties, pardons, commutations, and reduction of sentences for federal crimes, besides being responsible for penal colonies. In addition to the above functions, he was in charge of the Private Charity, the relationship with the Montes de Piedad, and critical migratory issues. In other administrative matters, he would manage the General Archive of the Nation, the federal government printer, and the publication of the *Official Journal of the Federation* and the *Judicial Bulletin*. Besides, he would control the media, mainly newspapers, the nascent radio, and cinema. It is critical to mention that aside from the secretary’s functions, he would have other confidential tasks, which included gathering information “not just from enemies and power groups, through espionage, but also about the public opinion.” He was responsible for monitoring and controlling loyal and opposing political actors and shaping a positive image of the government and its collaborators through media management.⁸

The Press Department depended on the Ministry of Interior, which informed the federal executive about what was happening in the national territory and beyond, headed by the Sonoran Clodoveo Valenzuela. This department has to disseminate the government views “in addition to the daily happenings and political incidents, as well as public management issues.”⁹

The secretary had 54 journalistic clippings from various country states to achieve these goals. The Department’s daily bulletins included the “most significant and convenient

6 Jorge Carpizo, *El presidencialismo mexicano* (Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1978), 74.

7 Plutarco Elías Calles a José I. Lugo, Mexico City, 25 de noviembre de 1920, FAPEC-FT, FP, gav. 83, serie 5, exp. 7 Secretarios de Estados. Nombramientos y renunciaciones (1919-1931), inv. 770, f. 15.

8 *Recopilación de leyes y decretos expedidos por los poderes Legislativo y Ejecutivo de la Unión de mayo a diciembre de 1917* (Mexico: Secretaría de Gobernación, 1917), 249-250.

9 Clodoveo Valenzuela, “Informe sintético respecto de las labores que desarrolla el Departamento de Prensa de la Secretaría de Gobernación,” Mexico City, 26 June 1921, FAPEC-FT, APEC, gav. 70, exp. 75 Secretaría de Gobernación, inv. 5362, leg. 2/21, f. 116.

news of the morning press,” and statements from officials, among other things. The aim of standardizing the information in the different states of the republic was to ensure that if a newspaper “distorted” the truth, there would be conclusive evidence throughout the country that the news was false.

Since August 18, 1919, in the context of presidential campaigns, the then-government secretary from Carranza’s cabinet, Manuel Aguirre Berlanga, attempted to secure a space in the press to disseminate information in the leading national newspapers. However, his efforts were unsuccessful due to the complex context of the later months caused by Carranza’s government’s strained relationship with some journalists. Additionally, the federal government refused to diminish taxes that limit journalism.¹⁰

With Adolfo de la Huerta as the interim president in June 1920, the Ministry of Interior gained a presence in the press, although never with a headline that distinguished the information provided to newspapers. A bulletin -or memory- appeared in the following years, discussing the department’s activities in charge of domestic policy. At the beginning of 1921, the Department of Press performed, in general terms, the following functions:

1. It transmitted daily bulletins about news, statements, and rectifications (when necessary) to the state newspapers.
2. It improved the relationships with the capital press by “supplying it with information on occasions of such a relevance that it has been used as a main news item” (front page, seven-column headline). This service was possible thanks to the communication with consuls and other Mexican representatives abroad, who sent “valuable journalistic material of current events.”
3. It kept daily and specific control over opposition newspapers published “mostly in the afternoon.” Regarding them, it provided “before 6 pm” a special service to the Secretary of Interior.
4. The press in the capital, the press in the states, and foreign press used translations sent by employees (consuls or Mexican representatives abroad) from “the most influential American or European newspapers and magazine”. This information was divulged throughout “Special Bulletins.”
5. It distributed “inside and outside the country” pamphlets and books that “exposed the country’s advancements and the path of the current regime.”¹¹

To carry out such tasks, the Secretary received daily issues of all the published newspa-

¹⁰ *El Heraldo de Mexico*, 19 August, 1919, 1.

¹¹ Clodoveo Valenzuela, «Informe sintético respecto de las labores que desarrolla el Departamento de Prensa de la Secretaría de Gobernación», Mexico City 26 July, 1921, FAPEC-FT, APEC, gav. 70, exp. 75 Secretaría de Gobernación, inv. 5362, leg. 2/21, ff. 116-117.

pers. Clodoveo Valenzuela was a public opinion analyst; he sent reports to Calles about newspaper activities, synthesized notes, and highlighted issues that seemed interesting to him. The work conducted by the Confidential Department complemented his efforts. Thanks to daily reports sent by Clodoveo Valenzuela to Calles, he handled the complex relationship between the press and the government.

Upon arriving at the republic's presidency, Obregón attempted to build a favorable image of himself and his administration. Besides, it put an effort into a pact with the owners of the leading newspapers, who did not always agree with the president. As a result, he toughened up, and he used "bold negotiation or public funding when he had tools to do so, and mutual beneficial agreements when it was possible [...], he understood soon that to eight thousand kilometers of warfare he had to add a similar dosage of favorable press: eight thousand liters of ink or tons of newsprint ready to project his leadership qualities among the readers of the media of the time."¹²

On the other hand, Calles acknowledged the newspaper's importance like any other revolutionary leader. As Sonora's governor in his different stages, he continually used the state press to improve his candidacy and revolutionary agenda because he believed in the importance of using the newspapers to consolidate a positive image of himself. Since August 1915, he used the Official Bulletin, directed by Salvador Escudero. Later on, *Reforma Social de Hermosillo*, *La Razón de Guaymas*, *La Palabra de Nogales*, and *Orientación* continually supported Calles's government in Sonora.¹³ This experience helped Calles, in his role as Secretary of the Interior, to maintain a good relationship between the government's relationship and the "Fourth Power."

Calles had just settled into his new job when various international press agencies approached him —including Walter Hyams & Company based in La Habana, Cuba, and the Argus Pressclipping Bureau in New York—. They offered Calles a detailed account of the most influential international newspapers to write down dossiers that compiled information about Mexico and himself. This proposal was alluring to Calles because it complemented Clodoveo Valenzuela's work. The Secretary of Interior opted for the New York agency, although it is impossible to verify this because of the limited preserved documentation.¹⁴

2. *El Universal* and *Excelsior*, the negotiation with contemporary newspapers

From 1917, *El Universal* was the newspaper with the highest production, printing 35,000 copies daily. At the beginning of the presidential campaigns, Félix F. Palavicini's newspaper was slightly favorable to Pablo González, the general. As the months went by, it assured its neutrality and did not publish opinions against Obregón, despite its animosity since the factional

12 Masini, *Un caudillo y dos periódicos...*, 106.

13 Cuauhtémoc González Valdez, «La prensa y la Revolución. El caso del periódico *Orientación* de Hermosillo Sonora (1916-1921)» (master thesis, El Colegio de Sonora, 2001).

14 Masini, *Un caudillo y dos periódicos...*, 57.

fight between Carrancistas and Convencionistas (1914-1916).¹⁵ However, because of their experience, its owner and manager, Palavicini, and its director, José Gómez Ugarte, understood that if the newspaper did not align with the winning side, its days were numbered. By May 1920, *El Universal* accepted the Sonoran triumph without hesitation.

The relationship between *El Universal* and Obregón's government was ambiguous and constantly changing. Despite having been declared enemies since 1916, Palavicini's newspaper celebrated the arrival of an "energetic man of faith" to the presidency who complied with his call to consciousness. *El Universal* clashed with the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM); there was a lack of trust in Calles towards this newspaper since this confederation and his leader, Luis N Morones, were his main allies. Besides, the fact that Palavicini was a Carranza supporter and his behavior in the constituent congress of 1916-1917 made him an inconvenient figure for the Sonora group.

The likely sale of the newspaper was a constant since 1921. On October 20 that year, General Antonio I Villareal asserted that Palavicini offered *El Universal* to the government "through emissaries" for one million Mexican pesos. Obregón rejected the proposal because his government did not "purchase newspapers, nor was its budget allocated".¹⁶ At the beginning of 1922, on January 9, Palavicini published the offer to sell the daily for one million Mexican pesos on the front page. However, he did not mention who was the bidder. Former constituent representative ruled out the sale, notwithstanding, on April 2, 1923, Palavicini was ill and, on a long trip to Lake Chapala, Jalisco decided to take the offer that had been on the table for two months.¹⁷

The sale of the newspaper had various reasons, but the federal government's role in pressuring the newspaper is yet to be explored. In one "directory" meeting of the group established in 1922 to discuss how to act against the members of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC) —the most important at the time, but had significant political-ideological differences with the government— Morones asserted, according to Prieto Laurens, that this party had "a powerful help": the press. This institution, according to Morones, was the "last cave for reactionaries," which should be attacked like other Pelecean bastions. He stressed that they had to strike with an iron first this bastion, particularly *El Universal*, that seemed unassailable. About *Excelsior*, the Department of Manufacturing and Military Establishments chief assured there was no hurry because they could stop it without any trouble. He insisted that *El Universal* was extremely dangerous because of its editorial stance and the fact that Felix F Palavicini was its boss. Later, Morones told the government plan, a real boycott orchestrated by the State.

I have talked at length to General Calles with this respect, and our plans, which I believe will be supported unanimously by you, are the following: with a few workers from the

15 Regarding this, see: Elissa Rashkin, «Hacia una prensa revolucionaria: Dr. Atl y La Vanguardia en Orizaba (1915)», in *Prensa, revolución y vida cotidiana en Veracruz 1910-1915*, edited by Celia del Palacio (Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 2012), 215-259 and Luciano Ramírez Hurtado, «Prensa, revolución y censura. Artistas, intelectuales y obreros a la vanguardia de la propaganda política», *Caleidoscopio*, 19 (2006), 89-115.

16 Alfonso Taracena, *La verdadera revolución mexicana: 1918-1921* (Mexico: Porrúa, 1992), 372.

17 *El Universal. Espejo de nuestro tiempo: 90 años del gran diario de Mexico* (Mexico: MVS, 2006), 83.

El Universal workshop, the CROM will provoke a strike in this newspaper, arguing anything; the strikers will address the Central Comité. In support of *El Universal* strikers, the union of electrical workers will suspend power and light service to the newspaper's workshop. We will organize a demonstration and strike Palavicini and his supporters, expelling them from the newspaper by force. General Calles has assured me that General Obregon will demand the military command of the plaza and the General Inspectorate of Police so that if Palavicini asks for guarantees, they will not give any pretext.¹⁸ However, this was only carried out after the firm stance of General Francisco R. Serrano, who thought it would be better to get PLC defeated in Congress to give the final blow to *El Universal*. Finally, after the Pelecean defeat on 8 September 1922, a group of workers attached to the CEOM broke into the newspaper's premises and attacked the staff. They also hit the presses and sprayer water on the issue in preparation. Finally, they put a red and black flag on the building and prevented workers, including Palavicini himself, from entering the facilities.

Whether the story was true or not, *El Universal* stopped being a headache for the government. A "group of businessmen" bought the newspaper; apparently, a representative of the "El Aguila" consortium acquired part of the shares, with whom Palavicini had close ties from 1916; the machinery in which the newspaper was printed continued in Palavicini's hands.¹⁹ In the new administration, Miguel Lanz Duret was the manager, José Gómez Ugarte continued to be the director —his job since 1919— and Alberto Altuzarra was in charge of the Advertising Office.

At the beginning of May 1923, *Excélsior* insinuated that *El Universal* would support Adolfo de la Huerta in the next presidential election because the treasury secretary was behind the acquisition of the newspaper.²⁰ On May 10, *El Universal* denied such claims in an editorial, assuring that the purchase of the newspaper was not made with government resources and that the newspaper had no commitments or ties with any politician, much less with a presidential candidate.²¹ In the context of De la Huerta's rebellion²², Lanz Duret's newspaper openly supported the government side; once the military uprising was over, it supported Calles in his presidential candidacy. Under the new administration, Obregón found an ally in the national press through *El Universal*.

Excélsior, a "right-wing" newspaper of the time, was the second most influential newspaper, showing the most significant opposition to Obregón and Calles. After Carranza's assassination, the newspaper owned by Rafael Alducin published articles of public outrage due to the "cruelty" of the event and the fact that assassinations seek access to power.²³ Luis Cabrera,

18 Eduardo Clavé, *Nuestro hombre en Querétaro. Una biografía política de Félix Fulgencio Palavicini* (Mexico: Juan Pablos, 2019), 231-232, José C. Valadés, *La Revolución y los revolucionarios, t. VI. El Estado Constitucional, sus inicios* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de las Revoluciones de Mexico, 2010), 128-129.

19 Clavé, *Nuestro hombre...*, 229-232.

20 *El Universal. Espejo de nuestro tiempo...*, 95.

21 *El Universal*, 10 May, 1923, p. 3.

22 The De la Huerta rebellion was an armed conflict that developed due to the presidential succession in 1924. The rebels opposed the Álvaro Obregón "imposition" of Plutarco Elías Calles as president from 1924 to 1928. Adolfo de la Huerta, a close ally of Obregón and Calles, headed this failed and disorganized movement.

23 *Excélsior*, 22 and 23 May, 1920, p. 1.

ideologist and one of Carranza's main collaborators since 1913, wrote those pieces titled "La herencia de Carranza"; in them, he highlighted the virtues of the recently assassinated president and how unnecessary the assassination had been.²⁴

The animosity persisted during 1921. *Excelsior* published editorials that directly or indirectly criticized Obregón's government and, on several occasions, the Secretary of the Interior, whom they interviewed daily and on many occasions contradicted. Calles' interference in Congress and state politics were two of the topics most questioned in this newspaper.

A clear example of the tension between the press and the Secretary of the Interior was an event that occurred on June 28, 1922, when Enrique de Llano, director of an evening newspaper called *Las Noticias* and Alducin's partner since the founding of *Excelsior*, got out prison. The reason for his imprisonment had been the publication of articles in the newspaper above which, according to Calles, promoted:

[...] a manifest, frank, determined work against public tranquility, since in its opinion columns the people were openly invited to rebellion against the constituted Government, to the extent that public opinion itself demanded to contain the campaign undertaken by that paper. If we have resorted to bringing the newspaper's editor to justice, it is because it was impossible to continue tolerating his conduct; it is the legal procedure and not the one used in other countries and times to silence writers by criminal means.²⁵

The Secretary of the Interior declared that "the serious press" would be respected, even when it criticized the government's actions. Such newspapers deserved "all respect" and would be given "all the necessary guarantees by the authorities, not so the one that indulges in unbridled debauchery, and shielding itself in one of the guarantees granted by the Constitution, does active seditious work." Therefore, he believed it was necessary to distinguish between those honest newspapers that despite criticism did not break any law, and those that cover "in any print page to carry out with impunity a work of scandal and frankly incite the people to rebellion." To finish, Calles declared that the government did not aim to persecute independent journalists, nor would it allow them to encourage acts that would affect the country. In this sense, he used an "iron fist" to end any focus of written opposition.

Another example of journalistic criticism of the Secretary of the Interior took place in Mérida, Yucatán, specifically in the *Revista de Yucatán*, whose director Carlos R. Menéndez always opposed the Sonora group and constantly criticized the then federal deputy Felipe Carrillo Puerto, one of Calles' closest allies. In several letters, Carrillo informed Calles that Menéndez controlled small opposition newspapers such as *Claridades* and *La Opinión*, also

24 The articles were edited and published in Luis Cabrera, *La herencia de Carranza* (Mexico: Imprenta Nacional, 1920).

25 *Excelsior*, 28 June 1922, pp. 1, 8.

published in the peninsula, in which he pointed out the need for Calles to resign from his cabinet post. Apparently, due to these events, the federal government ordered an attack against the director of the *Revista de Yucatán* and its publications; these events were dismissed by Carrillo Puerto, who claimed that was a “self-attack” to tarnish the Obregonist government.²⁶

These events allow us to nuance the supposed freedom of the press that prevailed during the four years of the Obregonist government since journalists who criticized the government were regularly persecuted, censored, and punished. However, there was more tolerance than during the Carranza government - the Sonora group never used methods such as “rectification trips”²⁷—, and much had to do with the constant analysis and homogenization of information carried out by the press department of the Ministry of the Interior, which prevented the spread of opinions contrary to government policy.

Likewise, *Excélsior* called Calles “red” and “bolsheviki” on several occasions and published an article by an American journalist named Boyden Sparkes that analyzed his personality and highlighted his “Bolshevism.” *Excélsior* entitled the article “Calles, the hope of the Mexican Reds.” Therefore, in March 1923, *El Universal Gráfico* took advantage of the controversy and sought an interview with Calles through a questionnaire so that he could give his opinion about such qualifiers to “prevent as much as possible, that unfair disorientations and above all reactionary partisanship be channeled, when the object to be pursued, in our concept, is that of a loyal, straightforward and purely Mexican criterion orientation.” The document comprised six questions, all related to the concept of Bolshevism and whether its application was correct in the Mexican case. Likewise, and provocatively, the newspaper asked him about his political and personal relations with the Socialist Party of the Southeast and the Mexican Labor Party, as well as with the CROM and the General Confederation of Workers, of anarcho-sindicalist tendency.²⁸ Calles did not answer the questionnaire, but a year later — in the context of his presidential campaign— he made statements in *El Demócrata* in which he affirmed that Bolshevism was misunderstood in Mexico and that the concept could not be used so loosely.²⁹

At the beginning of 1924, already in the context of the De la Huerta’s rebellion, Calles wrote a letter to President Obregón due to criticism and uncomfortable questions. There, he warned him of the “insidious work” being done through the pages of *El Universal* and *Excélsior* and asked him to consider “taking measures against them” as they were indirectly

26 Felipe Carrillo Puerto a Plutarco Elías Calles, 3 de agosto de 1921, FEPEC-FT, APEC, gav. 12, exp. 25 Felipe Carrillo Puerto, leg. 2/7, inv. 830, f. 71.

27 They consisted of “arresting the journalist, taking him away with a guard, taking him the next day to a barracks in solitary confinement, and after two days the guard took him to a military train in which he was taken to different parts of the Republic, always in solitary confinement and with a guard in sight; he was constantly threatened with being taken down halfway to be shot or hung from some tree [...]. After a month of walking, and when the man was more frightened than a rat, he was taken to Mexico, where he was released on the condition that he promised not to interfere again, for good or ill, with the Supreme Government.” Salvador Pruneda, *Periódicos y periodistas. “Intimidades”* (Mexico: Editores de Revistas Ilustradas, 1975), 58.

28 *El Universal Gráfico* Director to Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexico City, 28 March, 1923, FAPEC-FT, APEC, exp. 161, periodical issues, leg. 6/6, inv. 388, ff. 271-273.

29 *El Demócrata*, 18 April, 1924, 1.

constantly inciting rebellion. Calles concluded his message by stating, “I am of the opinion that they do not deserve the respect they are given [...]”³⁰

After the death of Excelsior’s founder and owner, Rafael Alducin, in April 1924 as a result of a fall from a horse, Francisco Mancilla suggested to Calles that due to the current electoral situation, the government should buy the newspaper, and although the purchase was “a bit difficult” due to its cost and

The resistance that the widow and particularly the director and editors will put up; nevertheless [he believed] that at the cost of any sacrifice, it must be bought, and that we, your supporters, must do everything on our part to this end, whether with money or with other elements. Your initiative, made with all discretion, in order not to fail, must have satisfactory results.³¹

Calles was grateful for Mancilla’s advice but, in the end, ruled out the purchase of the newspaper since it was impossible then. This event made it clear that another of the government’s strategies for eliminating the opposition press was taking over the newspaper companies.

3. Censorship and control. *El Demócrata* and *El Herald* (Mexico)

Another newspaper of great significance was *El Demócrata*, a medium created during the armed struggle in 1913, thanks to the work of Rafael Martínez “Rip-Rip.” This company underwent multiple changes throughout its existence. Until 1920, it was the most influential Carranza newspaper after the disappearance of *El Pueblo* in May 1919. Newspaper pages criticized the attitude taken by Calles in April 1920, particularly after the appearance of the Agua Prieta plan. In an editorial entitled “Una timbre de infamies,” Calles was called a notable “exemplar of a disloyal race” since his political-military achievements had been reached thanks to Carranza’s support; therefore, he was “obliged to behave like an honest and patriotic citizen.” On the contrary, he was “the first to fail to fulfill his commitments and to exhibit himself as the most perfect example of disloyalty and dishonor.”³²

With Carranza’s death, *El Demócrata* did not disappear but ultimately changed its editorial stance. In May 1920, the disagreement between Gonzales and Obregonistas over Mexico City impacted Carranza’s final champion. Since May 7th, *El Demócrata* began to modify its political stance; a day later, its pages reported the occupation of its offices by men close to

30 Plutarco Elías Calles a Álvaro Obregón, Monterrey, N. L., 1º de enero de 1924, f. 13, FAPEC-FT, APEC, Anexo, fondo 02, serie 04, exp. 5, Obregón y PEC. Rebelión delahuertista, inv. 759, leg. 5/16, f. 290.

31 Francisco Mancilla a Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexico City, 31 de marzo de 1924, FAPEC-FT, APEC exp. 26 Francisco S. Mancilla, inv. 3400, ff. 1-2.

32 *El Demócrata*, 24 de abril de 1920, 3.

General Pablo González; however, the control of Gonzalismo was fleeting.³³

The organizational adjustment in *El Demócrata* between May and July 1920 affected the transition from Gonzalezism to Obregonism. The new director, Froylán C. Manjarrez, replaced Luis Andrade, the former director close to General Pablo González.³⁴

After a month and a week, Froylán C. Manjarrez left office due to the renewal of the entire administration of *El Demócrata* on July 22, 1920. Vito Alessio Robles was appointed the new managing director, and Guillermo Rousset continued as administrator. In contrast, Enrique de Llano (at night) and J. Ramírez Cabañas (during the day) were appointed as editorial secretaries.³⁵ As *El Demócrata* sided with the new group in power, it marked the definitive transformation of the last Carranza newspaper in Mexico City.

El Demócrata kept a favorable attitude towards the Obregonist government but was never entirely benevolent towards Calles, despite carrying out a detailed coverage of his trip through the southeast at the beginning of 1921, as will be seen later. However, the figure of the Secretary of the Interior diminished in the following months, first due to the various illnesses he suffered but also because he did not have a good relationship with the Alessio Robles brothers, Vito and Miguel, who were close to the central nucleus of the PLC and performed editorial work in the newspaper. De la Huerta assured Calles with concern that if he did not proceed with an “energetic policy” to counteract the “furious attack” of the Peleceans through *El Demócrata*, it would be complicated to modify the opinions against the government since there was no newspaper completely aligned to it.³⁶

In 1923, the affinity of some of the newspaper’s collaborators with members of the Partido Nacional Cooperatista (PNC) - the political party that rose in Congress after the fall of the PLC - distanced the newspaper from the government, particularly during the third quarter of that year when the presidential campaigns preparation began. The sounds of war drums could be heard in the distance.

On the other hand, after the fall of the Carranza government, *El Heraldo* (Mexico) favored the triumphant Sonorans. However, it was critical of Obregón’s actions and the personalist politics prevailing in the country, a situation reflected in the aftermath of Obregón’s electoral triumph. The newspaper noted with sadness that the race was not characterized by enthusiasm or public interest because he was the only candidate who could compete for the presidency since no real political party with well-defined ideals had been formed.³⁷

33 *El Demócrata*, 8, 9, 16 y 24 de mayo de 1920, 1.

34 *El Demócrata*, 14 de junio de 1920, 1.

35 *El Demócrata*, 22 de julio de 1920, 1.

36 Adolfo de la Huerta to Plutarco Elías Calles, Hermosillo, Sonora, June 8, 1921, in Carlos Macías Richard, *Plutarco Elías Calles. Correspondencia personal (1919-1945)* (Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Sonora, Instituto Sonorense de Cultura, Fideicomiso Archivos Plutarco Elías Calles y Fernando Torreblanca, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991-1993), I, 48-49.

37 *El Heraldo de Mexico*, 6 September 1920, 1.

El Herald (Mexico) was the only newspaper not to praise Obregón at the time, but this stance was short-lived. In September, General Salvador Alvarado decided to sell the company, possibly to avoid being accused of seeking the presidency for the umpteenth time.³⁸ One potential buyer was Álvaro Obregón himself, to whom he sent a letter saying: “I do not wish to continue to support *El Herald* (Mexico) because, although it has only been destined to support our ideals since its creation, it will not cease to be considered my personal organ. Two groups want to take over *El Herald*, but only for profit. I am afraid that the paper will fall into the hands of our enemies; I thought it might be in your interest to buy *El Herald*.”³⁹ Obregón refused Alvarado’s invitation because, according to the Sonoran, he considered himself “incapable” of taking over the paper, firstly because he believed that public officials should not run newspapers, and secondly because he did not have the resources to maintain such a large enterprise.⁴⁰

Alfonso E. Bravo eventually bought *El Herald*. From August 1920, the Compañía Editorial Mexicana was no longer listed as the property of Alvarado, who claimed to have sold it because of his close ties to the government in power: he was appointed Secretary of Finance.⁴¹

This purchase opened a new era for *El Herald* de Mexico, during which it promoted the candidacy and leadership of Álvaro Obregón for the presidency. The relationship between the government and the paper was reflected in the appointment of Jesús Z. Moreno, one of the essential special agents within the Ministry of the Interior and a cooperative deputy, as editor of the newspaper.⁴² This link demonstrates the significant influence and control Calles had over the newspaper.

However, Moreno’s assassination caused the newspaper to go out of control. It also fueled fears in the Sonora group that the daily would be in opponents’ hands. Hence, the same day that the director was assassinated, on 24 May 1922, Adolfo de la Huerta wrote a letter to Calles in which he advised him to continue the same working group at *El Herald* de Mexico and to appoint a man he trusted as director: “I think it would be convenient to ensure the orientation of the newspaper ‘*Heraldo*’, that by taking the steps you deem convenient you appoint today Alfonso Iberri to take charge of ‘*Heraldo* de Mexico’ leaving all the staff that Z. Moreno recommending you to take great care in the administrative part.”⁴³ Within a few days, Iberri

38 Francisco Iván Méndez Lara, «Salvador Alvarado y las elecciones de 1920, una candidatura olvidada», *Secuencia*, 99 (September-December 2017), 129-159.

39 Salvador Alvarado a Álvaro Obregón, Mexico City, 17 September 1920, FAPEC-FT, FAO, serie 11030100, exp. A-19 Salvador Alvarado, inv. 2046, f. 4.

40 Álvaro Obregón a Salvador Alvarado, Mexico City, 21 September 1920, FAPEC-FT, FAO, serie 11030100, exp. A-19 Salvador Alvarado, inv. 2046, f. 5.

41 *El Demócrata*, 5 May 1922. A few days later, an editorial said: “Now that this newspaper has been detached from this high official, it resumes its status as an organ completely independent of the public administration, totally detached from the needs of state politics, with no obligations whatsoever to the men in power, and attentive only to the pact that every honest newspaper makes with society when it offers its pages to it.” *El Herald* de Mexico, 2 October 1920, 3. Alfonso E. Bravo, manager of the newspaper, had a long career in business and advertising. Manuel Carpio, who initiated the paper’s shift towards Obregonism in 1919, was confirmed as editor of the publication.

42 Pruneda, *Periódico y periodistas...*, 69-70.

43 Adolfo de la Huerta to Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexico City, 24 May, 1922, FAPEC-FT, APEC, gav. 6, exp. 161 asuntos de periódicos, leg. 4/6, inv. 388.

was already listed as director in the newspaper's indicator.

The Obregonist editorial line was maintained, as in *El Demócrata*, until the beginning of the 1924 elections. *El Herald de Mexico*, due to its old linkages with General Alvarado, seemed to become a bastion of Adolfo de la Huerta's presidential aspirations, and some people even claimed that the latter was the owner. In addition to the above, the premises housing the advertising departments of *El Herald de Mexico* and *El Demócrata* had not paid rent for the last two months, "it being assumed that in De la Huerta's time [as Secretary of the Treasury], there were certain combinations in this respect."⁴⁴

The electoral situation of 1923-1924 again involved the various newspapers in the capital. In this context, the "death" of *El Herald de Mexico* occurred, while Callistas and Delahuertistas disputed *El Demócrata*. Once the Callistas had neutralized the corporatist group in Congress, on the orders of Calles himself, members of the Centro Director Callista—led by José Manuel Puig Casauranc—acquired the shares of *El Demócrata* for approximately 225,000 pesos; the coope-delahuertistas had put on the table the significant figure of 220,000 pesos. At the end of November, the newspaper's director, Vito Alessio Robles, abandoned his post after three and a half years to attend solely to his work in the Senate as representative of Coahuila. Benigno Valenzuela succeeded him as director and, from that moment onwards, began to cover to the actions of the Obregon government against the delahuertistas and later published the propaganda of the Callista Director Centre.⁴⁵

On the other hand, *El Universal* published that the Callistas had bought another newspaper, in addition to *El Demócrata*, *El Mundo*—an opposition newspaper that had uncovered the presidential aspirations of Adolfo de la Huerta—owned by Martín Luis Guzmán, to dissolve it practically after its purchase. Francisco W. Carpio had paid for it, probably with the support of Alberto J. Pani, to "unmask De la Huerta's position." After the "headless rebellion" began, *El Herald de Mexico*'s machinery stopped, and the paper disappeared due to falling behind on rent and electricity payments.⁴⁶

Thus, the newspapers that survived the beginning of the new electoral situation were *El Universal* and *Excelsior*. On the other hand, in 1920, *El Demócrata* returned to the hands of the Sonorans loyal to Obregón and Calles. It thus ceased to represent the opposition and became entirely devoted to supporting the government against the Delahuertista rebellion and, later, to spreading Callista propaganda.

In addition to these national newspapers, other state newspapers were of significant importance in the regions where they were distributed, such as *El Porvenir* in Monterrey, *El Dictamen* in Veracruz, and *El Informador* in Guadalajara. Almost all of them had a good rela-

44 Adolfo de la Huerta to Plutarco Elías Calles, Mexico City, 24 May, 1922, FAPEC-FT, APEC, gav. 6, exp. 161 newspaper issues, leg. 4/6, inv. 388; John W. F. Dulles, *Ayer en Mexico: una crónica de la revolución, 1919-1936* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1977), 178.

45 José, *La campaña presidencial de 1923-1924 en Mexico* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1998), 70.

46 *El Demócrata*, 6 December, 1923, p. 1; José, *La campaña presidencial...*, 70-71.

tionship with the federal government and, therefore, with the Secretary of the Interior. These newspapers were generally sympathetic to Calles' work at the head of the Secretariat and supported him on his way to the Presidency of the Republic. The exception was *El Porvenir*, which had some friction with the Sonora group.

Conclusion

The previous pages have highlighted the close links between the press and political power. The control of newspapers in Mexico has been a constant from the 19th century to the present day, and the four-year term of Álvaro Obregón was no exception. Similarly, the binomial political-press history as a proposal for analysis has been clarified in this work since it is nearly impossible to separate the two lines of explanation.

This article began by analyzing the creation of a department within the Ministry of the Interior to monitor and keep the group in power informed of what every Mexican newspaper, and some foreign ones, published about current events in the country, as well as opinions about the Sonora group, especially Obregón, and Calles.

Obregón's four-year period was not entirely a period of journalistic freedom; on the contrary, on several occasions, some newspapers were censored, and not infrequently, attempts were made to destabilize newspaper companies. This fact was demonstrated in sections two and three of this article by analyzing the relationship between the government and the newspapers *El Universal*, *Excelsior*, *El Demócrata*, and *El Heraldo de Mexico*. The first two managed to "survive" the government's onslaught, but the latter were not equally fortunate.

Finally, it should be stressed that this article seeks to propose an analysis of the press linked to public administration, in this specific case, from the Ministry of the Interior. This connection is rarely established, and allows us to explore the "fourth estate" from a novel perspective.

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