

# 1

## Civic Journalism and the Transformation of an Authoritarian Media Institution

When reporter Alejandra Xanic looked into the eyes of firefighters emerging from manholes all over Guadalajara, she could not believe government officials' assertion that the fumes from a gas leak had been successfully dispersed throughout the country's second-largest metropolis. While workmen from a nearby gas plant scurried about secretively, city emergency workers just looked puzzled. Instead of returning to her newsroom, Xanic stayed into the night and interviewed workers as they crawled up from the city's underground drainage system. Early the next day, April 22, 1992, twenty-six blocks of Guadalajara exploded. The blast killed more than two hundred people and left twenty thousand homeless. The explosion followed the very path Xanic's young newspaper, *Siglo 21*, had said it would on that morning's front page.<sup>1</sup> The Guadalajara gas explosion and the government's flimsy denial that the leak came from a state-owned plant—all reported in *Siglo 21*—became major issues in the next mayoral and gubernatorial elections. For the first time, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party), which had run Mexican politics with little challenge since 1929, lost both the city of Guadalajara and the state of Jalisco in the bellwether elections of 1995. Over the next five years, major city governments, congressional seats, and state governors' posts tumbled like dominoes to the opposition. In 2000, the PRI lost the epicenter of the authoritarian Mexican political system—the presidency. A new era of politics and journalism had been born, and reporters such as Xanic and newspapers such as *Siglo 21* had played an important part of how this came to pass. In the current democratic era, they

hold the key to whether an autonomous, assertive, and citizen-focused form of journalism recedes with the country's political transition or survives as more than a limited and marginalized way to produce the news.

Even casual observers could see that the authoritarian political system was under increasing scrutiny by a more assertive, diverse, and autonomous component of the press in the mid-1990s. A cluster of publications within the Mexican press had forced open a space for public debate and deliberation in the mid-1980s, and then widened the public sphere in the 1990s as society became more participatory and demanding. By giving voice to oppositional messages that challenged the PRI's monologue, the civic-oriented press eroded autocrats' ability to shape political reality through the control of information and national symbols in the mass media. These journalists portrayed participation outside of state-sanctioned organizations as legitimate, offered information needed to form reasoned political opinions, and enabled participation that held government more accountable for its actions via elections, protests, and autonomous organization by crystallizing opposition values into alternative options for political behavior.

### Clashing Models

My analysis of what happened to Mexico's media system is based on a conception of three models of journalism that existed in Mexico toward the end of the twentieth century: the civic, or civic-oriented, model, the authoritarian model, and the market-driven model.

In the civic model, news media provide information that helps citizens communicate their needs to government, hold government accountable, and foster deliberation and debate. This is accomplished by providing a two-way system of communication between government and citizens, acting as a monitor on governmental behavior, and providing information from many perspectives. To do this, newsrooms must demonstrate autonomy, diversity in the perspectives they present to the public, and assertiveness in news-gathering.

Alternatively, the authoritarian news model is characterized by the absence of newsroom autonomy, a representation of only points of view that support the positions of the current regime, and a passive approach to news-gathering. The model can be imposed from above (as in the case of repressive authoritarian regimes), by journalists themselves, when they believe in the mission of the regime or support it to further rent-seeking career strategies, or some mix of both.

The concept of market-driven journalism also involves the *quid pro quo*

of news for material gain, but in a liberal political system and market-based economy. Market-driven newsrooms exhibit a lack of autonomy, monitor powerful actors only when commercial ends are advanced (or, at least, not threatened), and provide a diversity of viewpoints to the extent that the market demands it. News may be subordinated to market pressures, for example, by dramatizing news accounts in order to increase ratings. It may be attentive to political actors who control economic incentives, such as when news interviews are traded for advertising contracts during political campaigns. Finally, market-driven news may be conditioned by ratings or corporate interests, as when reform-minded legislators are vetoed from newscasts for supporting anti-monopoly regulation. Variants of the model thrive in electoral democracies characterized by market liberalism and journalism paradigms that legitimize the subordination of news to commercial forces (McChesney 2000; McManus 1994). Cross-country analysis in the 1990s found that the intensifying market imperative worldwide supported the proliferation of new news genres—such as attack, scandal, and crime-focused news—that are thought to lower participation by alienating potential participants and misdirecting attribution of responsibility to individual (over systemic) causation (Ansolobehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1993).

### **Civic Journalism *a la Mexicana***

Journalism as practiced in democratic societies has been called many things—democratic, liberal, libertarian, Western, public service, commercial, market-driven, etc.—reflecting variations in practice and conceptualizations of purposes, structures, ownership patterns, and methods to resist outside encroachment. I call the autonomous, assertive, and politically diverse form of journalism that emerged in Mexico to contrast authoritarian journalism “civic” because of its potential to enhance civic participation and government accountability to citizens, the civic objectives expressed by its principal practitioners, and its location in the upsurge of Mexican civil society and citizen participation. Mexico’s civic journalism communicated information between citizens and governors, and monitored government like a “watchdog,” thus facilitating two political dynamics of central importance to democracy: representation of citizens and government accountability to the public.<sup>2</sup> It accommodated news organizations and individual journalists who held ideological positions on the left, right, and center, and supported political competition in a democratic framework. From advocacy journalism, Mexico’s civic journalism borrowed a general commitment to the establishment of democracy. Civic journalism thus aggregates elements of three

theories of the press in a democratic society—watchdog, ideological, and advocacy—within its central mission of empowering participatory citizens.

Civic journalism *a la mexicana* did not utilize the same techniques, appear in the same formats, or have the same types of sponsors as the reform movement that appeared in late-twentieth-century U.S. journalism that sometimes calls itself “civic” or “public” journalism. Some of the philosophical foundations of the two forms are similar, but the specifics differ. While the United States movement arose in a context of declining civic participation and remained marginalized in smaller newspapers or specific projects, Mexico’s civic journalism emerged as Mexican society challenged an authoritarian regime and became the dominant form of newspaper journalism in the country. Mexico’s civic journalism was influenced by the awakening of civil society and simultaneously stimulated its development. This interactive notion of civic journalism and civil society better describes how journalism transformed during democratization in Mexico, at least momentarily.

The designation “civic” is mine; the participants in the transformation of Mexico’s media institution sometimes used the terms “independent” or “democratic” to describe themselves. More typically, they acted without conceptualizing their behavior as part of a larger societal process. Consciously or not, however, they were part of a wider civic movement in several respects. First, the transformation of journalism had implications for the development of a robust public sphere and, through that, democracy. In the influential discussion by Habermas (1989a, 1989b), the public sphere is a space within which citizens share information, which allows them to form reasoned political opinions and communicate desires and demands to their governors. A vibrant public sphere includes diverse political information that is unencumbered by control from centers of political, economic, or cultural power. The quality of the public sphere in modern, complex societies depends in large part upon the performance of journalists and the news media. The media are increasingly recognized as “reality defining” institutions for the majority of citizens, who are not political or social activists (McNair 1998, 55).

Second, participants in civic journalism expressed the objectives of a larger movement. For instance, the executive editor of the newspaper *Reforma*, Lázaro Rios, connected his newspaper’s informative mission directly to empowering citizen participation. When asked to select among various potential roles of the press in society, he chose “to inform.” He explained: “I believe society itself monitors political activity and that the people are wise. That’s why the role of informing is even more important than a monitoring role because with this focus the people are the ones who take the next step.” Ignacio Rodríguez Reyna, a reporter in the 1990s who later directed a critical

newsmagazine at the newspaper *El Universal*, believed the press should act as a counterweight to power in all forms to enforce the people's sovereignty. "Social groups should look to us, should use us, and we should get them to use us, as a way to constantly monitor power and through us to constantly express their impatience, their concerns, society's interests, or at least the interests of large groups in society, so that the people restrain power," he explained. Similarly, the managing editor of *La Jornada*, Josetxo Zaldúa, said the press "must monitor the behavior of the state, must maintain the attitude of a monitor of government . . . because the fundamental role of the press is to serve society, the citizen."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, the sweeping societal mobilization within which Mexico's new model of journalism arose underscores the civic essence of the approach. Clientelism, corporatism, and a state-centered ideology of social justice had attached most Mexican social, economic, and political organizations to the government or its party after the 1940s. The causes of the strength and durability of the PRI regime were many, including the legitimacy of the Mexican Revolution, constant economic growth for the urban middle classes until 1982, and the control of public space. Opposition behavior grew in the 1980s and 1990s because of economic stagnation, the increasing complexity of society, and changing international conditions.

In this context, autonomous social movements and nongovernmental organizations working on issues such as housing, debt relief, the environment, and neighborhood problems created a new discourse to press for solutions to concrete problems. Rather than oppositional political ideologies, these organizations demanded short-term, pragmatic solutions. They distanced themselves from the ideological movements of the past, which were easily repressed or co-opted by the Mexican regime (Olivera 1997; Avritzer 1997; Ochoa and Wilson 2001; Williams 2001). These activists anchored their oppositional discourse in a politics of citizenship rights and the rule of law, which undermined the regime's claim to be both originator and guarantor of social justice. From 1980 to 1990, 89 human rights groups formed, and another 161 formed in the 1990s. These groups focused on the rights of refugees, torture victims, indigenous people, women, gays, and other sufferers of government abuse or societal scorn. The majority of the members were young and university educated, and their leaders tended to be what Chand calls "institutional entrepreneurs," who capitalized on a more favorable domestic and international environment (Chand 2001, 205–6).

The work of the Mexican Academy of Human Rights illustrates how change advocates in the 1990s anchored pleas for participation and accountability in discourses of legality and citizenship rights. One of the academy's

programs monitored television, which the activists argued had social responsibilities because of the use of public airwaves. Academy president Sergio Aguayo and researcher Patricia Cruz spoke in an educational video about bias in the two main television newscasts during the 1994 election:

AGUAYO: The constitution guarantees us access to information. And because of the importance of the communications media in elections processes, the Mexican Academy of Human Rights has reviewed the respect of this right since 1991. The academy is a plural, nongovernmental organization that has promoted the respect of human rights in Mexico since 1984.

CRUZ: The law is very clear. All of the news that is transmitted by the mass media, particularly by television, has to be truthful, objective, and not change or distort the facts. All of this stems from the right to free expression in Article Six of the Mexican Constitution. To obtain reliable data, we developed scientific research methods whose systematic application allows us to obtain data that clearly demonstrates the way that equality, truthfulness, and impartiality was violated in the more than fifteen elections that have taken place since 1991.

AGUAYO: In this program we submit to you a selection of the manipulated images that the two main television networks transmitted about the presidential election of 1994. Our purpose is to offer you information to orient you in the art of viewing the newscasts.<sup>4</sup>

The group also distributed a *Guide for the Analysis of Electoral Content in the Electronic Media* before the 1994 election and, prior to the 2000 election, the educational pamphlets *The Communications Media and Citizen Education*, *Manual for Citizen Communication*, and *Ethical Practices in the Media*.

Like the human rights academy, autonomous civic groups of diverse origins had come together to press for free and fair elections as a solution to their problems by the mid-1990s. In response to the widespread electoral fraud of the 1980s, an umbrella group called the Alianza Civica (Civic Alliance) grouped seven large civic networks (over four hundred individual civic organizations) to mount the country's first citizen observation of a presidential election in 1994. Thousands of nonpartisan volunteers watched polls, monitored the vote count, statistically checked voter registration rolls, and documented biased coverage on television and in the press (Aguayo 1995).

The Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, or Zapatista Army of National Liberation) also mobilized and aggregated the burgeoning civic sector in the 1990s, but through a military approach. The EZLN marched into four southern Mexican townships on January 1, 1994, demanding equality and justice for Mexico's indigenous peoples. The government responded by bombing nearby villages as the Zapatistas retreated. Then the public got involved.

About one hundred thousand people marched throughout the country within days of the uprising, demanding that the government halt the bombing and the two parties come together to negotiate. Hundreds of civic organizations sent representatives to monitor the ensuing peace talks and attend “civil society forums” that EZLN hosted over the next three years. Attendees wrote proposals on indigenous rights, citizen participation, political democracy, social democracy, and human rights. Subcommander Marcos, a spokesman for EZLN, explained how the unexpected response from civil society caused EZLN leaders to reassess their tactics: “Dawn, January 1, was a life-death coin toss. Life would require something radical, like the fall of the government and the onset of a transition government. Or death. They would destroy us. We never considered that the coin might not fall, that a new force would emerge, that society would dictate that neither side would destroy each other. We faced a situation where neither side could annihilate the other and we had to talk.”<sup>5</sup>

As they reported on events like the EZLN uprising, many journalists in Mexico were pleased that their work supported social movements and activists in areas such as human rights, feminism, ethnic justice, and the environment. In the Guadalajara elections in 1995, radio reporters worked with civic election monitors, denouncing polling station irregularities on the air in real time. A reporter who helped found the civic newspaper *Reforma* in 1993 reflected, a decade later, that she was happiest when she covered civic activists.

I am very much a defender of human rights. I have that as a vocation. So [my professional orientation] could have come from my family and, obviously, could have been cultivated more in my schooling and even more still by practicing my profession. But it’s really a personal vocation of service. For example, I covered NGOs and human rights for a time, and this was the moment when I was the happiest I’ve ever been because I really felt that I was performing a service by denouncing abuses, or denouncing the systematic abuse of human rights and things like that.<sup>6</sup>

The newspaper *La Jornada* openly supported the Zapatista movement, but journalists for many other publications revealed that coverage of the uprising had a profound impact on their conception of journalism. Alejandro Paez, a young Mexican reporter, helped cover the EZLN for a U.S. newspaper before becoming an editor at several civic Mexican publications. A few years after the uprising, he reflected, “all of the journalists, Mexican and foreign, were affected emotionally upon seeing an underworld that had been so forgotten by everyone, including journalists, the government, NGOs. It changed us. There was a period of great enchantment with the movement. It was a moral debt paid for what we hadn’t done before.”<sup>7</sup>

A connection with civil society seemed to permeate civic journalists' professional identities during Mexico's political transition. When 126 journalists at fourteen of Mexico's more independent newspapers were asked in 1999 to identify with whom they felt most committed professionally, 1 percent said people of their own political values, 18 percent said their own publication, 19 percent said themselves, and 60 percent said "society, including those who have values different from myself."<sup>8</sup> In the same survey, a majority of journalists indicated that they felt least compelled to critique nongovernmental organizations (rather than political and cultural institutions), although they defended their autonomy from these groups.

The actors who propelled journalistic change in Mexico may not have envisioned themselves as members of a movement, but they were part of a multilayered process that was closely intertwined with the country's civic awakening. They were energized by society's movement toward democracy, and, through their innovative newsrooms, gave society back the information that citizens needed to end the seventy-one-year-old single-party regime.

### **From Media Institution to Hybrid System**

Civic-oriented journalism was not the only innovation that arose from gradual democratization and incomplete market-based economic reform. As the authoritarian media institution disaggregated, it was replaced not with a new monolithic institution, but with a "hybrid" media system of organizational clusters responding to alternative models of belief and behavior. The hybrid media system is made up of civic, market-driven, and adaptive authoritarian media organizations.

The dominant form of journalism under Mexico's PRI regime was authoritarian from the 1940s until the 1990s. Most newsrooms produced news that exhibited a lack of autonomous, assertive, or diverse viewpoints of the regime. The PRI did not often overtly coerce newsrooms to ensure this kind of coverage because many owners' and journalists' self-interests were served by supporting the state (Fernández and Paxman 2000; Riva Palacio 1997).<sup>9</sup> The civic model evidenced itself as an alternative to the authoritarian form of journalism in the early 1980s, as a generation of journalists whose values opposed those of the PRI learned about more independent styles of journalism and, in some cases, obtained the organizational resources necessary to change subservient newsroom cultures. As politics and the economy liberalized in the 1990s, incentives for news production changed and the legitimacy of separating the newsroom from state domination increased. These two



trends further diversified the mix of newsroom orientations, stimulating the diffusion of civic journalism through a second-wave of civic-oriented newsroom formation and creating the new, market-driven journalism model. In the late 1990s, market-driven journalism emerged in Mexico to challenge the PRI regime and the media system it created. Market-driven journalism, like civic journalism, was linked to changes in wider society, such as the shift from state protection and promotion of the economy to a greater, if uneven, role for market mechanisms in economic production. This market shift weakened state controls on news production, and simultaneously increased the power of private sector advertisers.

Market-driven journalism manifested itself most strongly in network television. Just two networks competed for national television audiences and advertisers in the late 1990s, and management believed the best way to increase ratings was by presenting more balanced electoral coverage while shifting the news agenda toward sensational topics such as crime and personal tragedy. Civic-oriented broadcast journalists had little choice if they wanted to work in television. They could absorb the hyper-commercial culture, limit their civic impulses to the reduced opportunities existing within network newsrooms, or leave to establish alternative projects in radio or independent television with smaller audience reach.

Like civic journalism, market-driven journalism in Mexico has its own particular traits and can also claim to have helped undermine authoritarian government by giving greater voice to the electoral opposition. The mere fact that the opposition was featured on network television in the late 1990s gave viewers more complete political information upon which to make electoral choices.<sup>10</sup> Yet market-driven journalism lacked the straightforward autonomy and assertiveness of civic journalism. In addition to more balanced electoral coverage, in the 2000s market-driven television became more tabloidized. Newscasts began to air political scandals when others uncovered them, especially when videotaped images were leaked and individual moral failures could be highlighted. Rarely, however, did broadcast television investigate powerful actors on its own. Moreover, market-driven broadcasting distorted the public agenda by focusing on conflict, drama, and a fragmented, event-oriented view of reality. At the same time, the networks used the news to promote or protect corporate interests. Usually the promotion had to do with highlighting the work of their corporate foundations. The most far-reaching instance of protecting corporate interests occurred in December 2005, when in just one week corporate lobbyists pushed an overhaul of the broadcast concessions system through the lower house of Congress that might have

cemented a television duopoly into place for the next four decades. On the major newscasts, however, almost nothing was said about the enormous public response that stopped the effort in the Senate (Villamil 2005a, 2005b).

Authoritarian traits in Mexican journalism did not fade easily in the face of civic and market-driven innovation. Leaders of newsrooms that followed forms I call “inertial” or “adaptive” authoritarianism held to the tenets of the authoritarian press institution, even while more innovative newspapers followed civic-oriented approaches. Today, in many parts of the country, local commercial television stations, government-owned television stations, and local newspapers still trade journalistic autonomy for partisan or personal advantage. The causes are various. As electoral competition increased in the 1990s and the standards of journalism changed, some private sector media owners, newspaper editors, and station managers remained blind to the strength of new incentives or decided to profit by trading news for personal gain with new power holders. Directors of government-run television were named by state governors, who continued to use broadcast news as propaganda despite criticism from partisan opponents, academics, and civic groups.

Despite the continued presence of authoritarian journalism in some sectors, my interviews found that the normative orientations of rank-and-file journalists had shifted significantly toward civic journalism by the 2000s. Unfortunately, these journalists rarely had the professional autonomy that would have allowed them to openly combat authoritarian or market encroachment on civic journalism norms when mandated by owners or state directors. An absence of professional autonomy and conflicting norms and practices characterized the hybrid media system as Mexico headed for another presidential election in 2006.

## The Study Design

Mexico in the 1990s was a fortuitous locale and epoch in which to study journalistic change in real time. I worked in Mexico between 1993 and 2005 in stays as long as three years and as short as a day. During this time, the world’s longest single-party regime slowly crumbled, society and politics became much more participatory, and journalism changed profoundly. The relationships between journalists, media organizations, and societal-level transformations would have been difficult to discern had they not been gradual, visible, and measurable within media content.

Two central questions guided my inquiry. How did Mexican journalism change during the years of broad societal transformation? Why did Mexi-

can journalism change? No single methodology could answer both of these questions. Strict hypothesis testing might have missed dynamics that had not come to light during previous research, especially since so little work has been done on the causes of journalistic change. Instead, I used a content analysis to detect patterns and directions of change in media messages and deeper ethnographic techniques to identify the incentives, tacit understandings, and inherent values guiding news production. This is similar to the approach that David Altheide recommends in his book *Qualitative Media Analysis* (1996). In the last chapter of this book, I apply the model constructed from the Mexican case to press systems in three Latin American countries that have undergone democratic transitions, in order to explore the generalizability of the model and look for clues about the fate of civic journalism in Mexico.

Content analysis provided a detailed snapshot of media behavior during the regime-ending 2000 presidential campaign, as well as a broader picture of the period, from before the political transition through the years of profound societal transformation. I studied newspapers in the greatest detail because they were the first mass media type to diverge from the passive, subordinate journalism of Mexican authoritarianism and became reference points for the politically active population during the transition. Moreover, it was only in the printed press that civic journalism manifested in a sustained and important manner. Television provided an important contrast to the direction and timing of change in the printed press, and was the primary source of political information for less active mass audiences. Comparing the transformation of newspapers and television revealed organizational dynamics that otherwise might have remained hidden.

I chose four newspapers for the content analysis because insider accounts suggested they represented the range of variation of news production in Mexico, and together reached 65 percent of newspaper readership in greater Mexico City, the country's largest and most influential media market. The newspaper *Excélsior* represents the authoritarian approach. Following government intervention in newsroom leadership in the 1970s, *Excélsior* was known for stenographic coverage, support of the PRI regime, and myriad relations compromising autonomy. *El Universal* represents a transitional case. In the late 1990s, the newspaper underwent a directed change project guided by outside consultants and a reformist editor. Finally, *Reforma* and *La Jornada* represent civic-oriented newsrooms. Despite ideological differences, both newspapers were known for assertiveness, autonomy, and presenting diverse viewpoints about the PRI regime.

To test for variation in news coverage, I defined alternative models of news production based on three elements found in scholarly studies of

**Table 1.1 Central Elements of Alternative Press Models**

	<b>Diversity</b>	<b>Assertiveness</b>	<b>Autonomy</b>
Civic	Yes	Yes	Yes
Authoritarian	No	No	No
Market-Driven	Variable	Variable	Variable

national press systems and types: newsroom autonomy from powerful actors, assertiveness in the search for news, and diversity in representations of the PRI regime. I chose depictions of the regime rather than partisanship or ideological orientation because a media organization's stance on regime change most distinguished Mexican news producers during the transition. Ideological differences became more important after the PRI lost power. Table 1.1 lays out the approach of each model of journalism to each element.

In civic newsrooms, journalism supports an informed and participatory citizenship, and all three characteristics are present. The authoritarian news model, however, does not display any of these characteristics. Rather, in this model, newsrooms present only the vision of the state and allied sources of power, passively transmit messages from the regime and its allies, and are subordinate to outside (primarily state) controls. News produced under the authoritarian model blocks both informed political deliberation and demands for accountability. Market-driven journalism reflects political pluralism and assertively seeks news when such behavior attracts audiences and advertisers. It is autonomous from the state as a political power, but not from advertisers (whether those advertisers are from the private sector, political parties, or government entities).

I relied upon ethnographic techniques to answer the question of why the media changed. I first went inside two Mexico City newspaper offices and conducted structured interviews and participant observation. One field site was the traditional newspaper *El Universal*, which attempted to transform its newsroom culture and behavior during my fieldwork. The other was a well-established, civic-oriented newspaper, *Reforma*. At each site, I interviewed all of the top editors and the majority of reporters who covered political beats. I also did more limited field work in the left-leaning civic newspaper *La Jornada* and its sister newspaper *El Sur* in Acapulco, Guerrero.

Successful field research sometimes requires a little luck, and I had that at Mexico City's oldest and largest newspaper, *El Universal*. I arrived there in 1999, just before the management gathered staff in the gargantuan press room and announced a project of transformation. This was the second time *El Universal*'s sole owner, Juan Francisco Ealy Ortiz, had flirted with such an idea. In the 1980s, he had contemplated a more-limited makeover but nixed



Figure 1.1 Study Participants

the project a day before its launch. This time, societal conditions, his personal break with the political regime, a different kind of competition, and the influence of a reformist editor convinced him that his newspaper had to change profoundly. Thanks to a receptive editor, Roberto Rock, I was not only able to interview journalists before and during the project, but also participate in retraining sessions and do follow-up interviews years later. The opportunity to observe and interview journalists across a decade was incredibly important to refining my arguments about the origin, direction, and reach of media transformation.

The second field site, *Reforma*, is the sister publication of *El Norte*, the newspaper credited with starting the civic trend in Mexico. Based in Monterrey, an industrial city near the border with Texas, *El Norte* sent editors and hired young, inexperienced reporters to staff *Reforma* when it opened in Mexico City in 1993. The new paper's style of journalism, graphic presentation, and autonomous relations with advertisers and government was a turning point in Mexico City journalism. In its premiere issue, *Reforma* led with a story about the launch of opposition party presidential campaigns and, the following year, chronicled a dispute with the PRI-linked union that monopolized newspaper distribution in the capital. Backed by opposition party lead-

ers and intellectuals, the newspaper won the dispute and now is distributed through subscription and self-employed street-corner hawkers. Two of the important traits of the newspaper were its hard-hitting investigative unit in the 1990s and pioneering use of opinion polls, closely and obviously linked to increasing press assertiveness and connection to citizens.

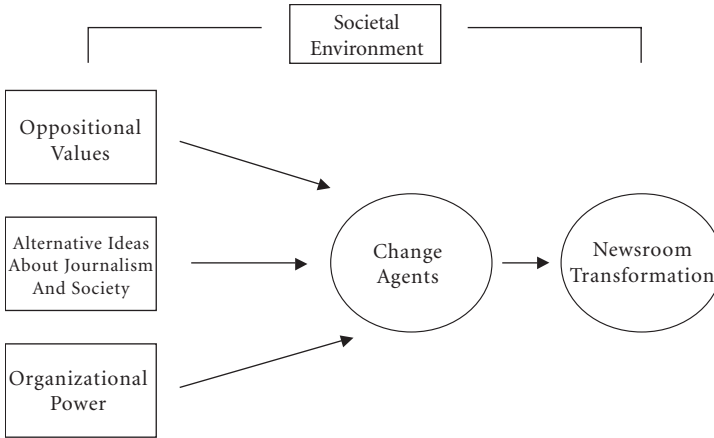
In addition to studying how civic-oriented journalism was established, I wanted to explore the diffusion of the *Reforma* style, which was noticeable in *El Universal's* transition, and gauge how far the transformation of journalism values and behavior reached beyond Mexico City. To do that, I conducted interviews and a survey on journalists' values at fourteen of the country's more independent newspapers. Figure 1.1 shows the location of 126 print journalists who participated in the survey in 1999 and 16 more who participated in follow-up interviews in 2003. One hundred and twenty-six top editors and reporters on politically relevant beats made up the non-random sample. Additionally, in 2002 and 2003 I interviewed journalists and news executives at the two national networks, Televisa and TV Azteca, as well as local commercial and state-owned television stations in four states.

### **An Institutional Model of Media Transformation**

What explanations for journalistic change emerged from the study? As political economists would suggest, democratization and the rise of the free market in Mexico transformed the incentives for news production. These broad societal transformations lessened state controls on the media and changed financial incentives in favor of greater political pluralism in the news. However, these factors alone do not explain why some news organizations changed and others did not, or why newsrooms changed at different times and in different ways.

Mexican journalism until the 1980s was what sociologists would call an overdetermined institution. Incentives, values, and assumptions all acted as the glue holding together regularized patterns of journalistic thought and action that endured across decades and a field of similarly behaving news organizations. I found that alterations in one or more of these forms of institutional binding explained particular moments and directions of newsroom change. Then innovative newsrooms, once buttressed by the right environmental conditions, sparked change across the newsroom field. The diffusion of new journalistic forms was part of a process of institutional transformation that held across a range of organizational experiences.

I argue that journalistic change is a process that develops through exchange between four domains of institutional action: the environment,



**Figure 1.2** A Model of Civic Newsroom Transformation

the organizational field, the newsroom as an organization, and the social-psychological world of the individual journalist. The newsroom-level model of organizational change is depicted in figure 1.2. At the newsroom level, three variables influence journalists to become successful change agents who transform their organizations: oppositional political values, alternative ideas about journalism and society, and organizational power to set and enforce newsroom policy. Civic-oriented change agents opposed the regime on political, economic, or moral grounds; absorbed outside ideas about journalism as a facilitator of government accountability and citizen participation; and gained control of their newsrooms to direct change. Market-driven change agents held neutral political values. They placed profit generation above regime considerations; were happy with the status quo as long as it defended their interests; and assimilated ideas about journalism as a generator of commercial profit in a competitive environment. Once they gained control of their newsrooms, market-driven change agents implemented new policies and promoted new personnel.

A fourth variable contextualizes the model. The societal environment of news production shaped change agents' values and access to new ideas. For instance, civic-oriented change agents who appeared prior to political liberalization in northern Mexico were driven by political values that opposed the state-led economy and ideas about journalism that had disseminated from the United States. These values and ideas were more common in the northern part of the country than they were in central Mexico, where early journalistic innovators tended to hold leftist political values and be influenced by ideas

about citizenship and journalism that came from Mexican academia and the Spanish political transition.

The societal context also set the political and economic parameters determining whether these ideas and values could manifest themselves as civic journalism. As Chand (2001) found with the emergence of civic organizations, civic innovators could barely hold on in the 1980s. By the 1990s, however, political and economic space had opened enough for institutional entrepreneurs to build on the foundations set a decade earlier. Civic participation flourished in many parts of the country. The experience was similar for the civic press. Repression after massacres of student protesters in Mexico City in 1968 and 1971 included a clampdown on the press. Only a few stand-out publications attempted assertive journalism in the 1970s and they did not survive the decade. It was not until the 1980s, when localized protests against the regime appeared along the northern border, that the first wave of civic-oriented newspapers could consolidate. They created an innovative core from which a second wave of civic journalists formed in the 1990s, when political and economic conditions liberalized even further.

Newsroom transformation occurs within a wider institution, which operates on distinctive planes and encompasses a trans-organizational field of news organizations. Sometimes innovative newsrooms spark change in the wider trans-organizational institution; other times they are responding to transformations that have started in other news organizations. My model of transformation for the wider media institution is derived from the Mexican context, but I believe it has applications elsewhere. The process begins with the creation of innovative civic newsrooms, which, in Mexico, occurred in the hostile environment of a state-led economy and authoritarian political system. In the media field, the authoritarian approach to journalism dominated, but began to face a sustained challenge from the new form. Once the wider environment opened, the civic model diffused to a wider population of newsrooms, driven by new political and financial incentives, mentoring and networks expansion, foreign influences, transformative shocks, and the growing prestige of the new approach.

In contrast to the civic innovators, inertial authoritarian newsrooms remained frozen when environmental conditions began to change because they were led by owners and editors whose mental models of reality, formed in previous eras, filtered information about changing instrumental cues and professional standards. In authoritarian pockets of the country where oligarchies controlled power after the PRI lost the presidency, adaptive authoritarian owners and propagandist governors used the news instrumentally to promote their personal and group interests with whatever faction held political power.



Other newsroom leaders responded to the new financial incentives of economic liberalization and absorbed ideas about how to commercialize news production. They transformed newsroom culture in reaction to the strengthening market. Market-driven newsrooms produced news about opposition political parties to maintain audiences; were assertive when such behavior generated profits; and offered limited protection to major advertisers, including political parties. As in civic transformations, control of decision-making power in the newsroom was essential to the adoption of market-driven journalism or the maintenance of authoritarian practices.

Mexican journalism currently exists within an economy of crisscrossed incentives of the market and cronyism, as well as a shallow democracy of competitive political parties that are, in many ways, disconnected from their constituencies. Mechanisms of representation and accountability, while much stronger than during the PRI regime, remain incomplete. Consolidating and deepening the practices of civic journalism remain as vital today as during the transition from authoritarian rule. But in postauthoritarian Mexico, civic journalism faces a complicated set of pressures: the concentrated structure of media ownership and the domestic advertising market, extra-state violence, holdover authoritarian press laws and practices, state media penetrated by political pressures, private media controlled by owners with varying degrees of commitment to newsroom autonomy, a weak community media sector, and hierarchically managed news organizations. The consolidation of civic journalism as a vibrant alternative to market-driven and holdover authoritarian news production depends upon further structural transformation to address these concerns. However, the survivability of civic journalism also depends upon the ability of civic-oriented journalists to anchor their professional identities in concepts of participatory citizenship and accountable government in the face of enormous social, economic, and political deficits.

### **Why Media Change Matters**

This book looks to the Mexican experience to answer a question of central importance in democratic societies: How do we build news media that foster a robust form of citizenship? Understanding how media institutions break down and new systems are formed has important practical implications for new democracies attempting to consolidate mechanisms of participation, representation, and accountability.

Scholars and policy analysts have amassed evidence that news media can

play important, affirmative roles during democratization and in deepening electoral democracy. At certain moments in Mexico's transition, for example, Lawson's analysis found that independent publications propelled political change by publishing scandals that delegitimized the PRI regime, and creating a new language for civil society groups that encouraged participation (2002, chaps. 7–9). Television news, when opened to opposition voices late in the transition, promoted better-informed voter decisions. Similarly, Western news coverage of protests against communism in Eastern Europe reaffirmed opposition values and dissolved the atomization of society that sustains authoritarian regimes (Bennett 1998).

The media also support citizen pressure for democratic representation and accountability once something resembling democracy is established. Politicians and policymakers in Latin America monitor news content closely and sometimes react to citizen demands presented through the media. In such circumstances, the press provides a link between public needs and government responses (Hughes 2006). For example, watchdog journalism helped increase accountability in South America's new democracies (Waisbord 2000). Smulovitz and Peruzzotti argue that media exposés are helping to redefine how citizens and politicians interact across the hemisphere: "Citizen action aimed at overseeing political authorities is becoming a fact of life and is redefining the traditional concept of the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives. The emergence of rights-oriented discourse and politics, media exposés of government scandals, and social movements organized around demands for due process are only some of this politics of societal accountability" (2000, 147).

But media effects are contradictory, in part because of the variations in how journalism is practiced across organizations, media types, and societal contexts. While journalism can enable citizenship, it can restrain it as well. Political bias in the news remains relatively common in Latin America today, and sustained political bias can distort participation and subvert accountability, especially when other sources of information are few. For example, biased electoral coverage in Latin America helped keep autocrats in power in authoritarian Mexico and Brazil, while contributing to the election of a neopopulist with authoritarian traits in Peru (Lawson 2002; Boas 2005; Straubhaar, Olsen, and Nunes 1992). Media owners also use their news organizations to take sides politically based on personal, class, or oligarchic interests. In Guatemala, Mexican mogul Ángel González used his television monopoly to back the eventual winner in the 1999 presidential election, Alfonso Portillo, who then made González's in-law and legal advisor the minister of communication. In Uruguay, family-owned groups that

have controlled the country's three private networks since the 1950s gave advertising discounts of up to 95 percent to the long-ruling Colorado and National Parties. Perhaps in return, the government made Montevideo's cable market a closed shop jointly controlled by the three groups. The left-center National Front has been the only major political force to complain, perhaps because it has not been a recipient of media largesse (Zamora 2004; Rockwell and Janus 2003).

Likewise, market-driven journalism, which in Mexico and elsewhere has meant the encroachment of tabloidized techniques and content in mainstream television newscasts, can be problematic for participation. On one hand, use of personal stories and dramatic music helps media users connect with difficult issues, but only if the coverage makes the connection between the featured person or event and the wider social or historic context. On the other hand, concentrated focus on dramatic, tantalizing issues can distort the public agenda. In the Mexican congressional election of 2003, for example, tabloidization essentially pushed electoral politics out of the newscasts. Moreover, studies of political cynicism, mostly conducted in the United States, suggest that media may augment political alienation when they consistently bombard viewers with negative information about government without contextualization. News framing studies suggest episodic coverage of crime or corruption may increase the population's deception regarding individual politicians (Graber 2004; Iyengar 1991; Bennett 2003).

These criticisms of market-driven coverage do not mean that media should omit coverage of crime or corruption. On the contrary, both are important public issues that should receive ample press attention. However, whether context and potential solutions are included is extremely important. This may be especially so in Latin America, where mechanisms of representation and accountability are not institutionalized. Frustration sometimes has nowhere to go but the street. Protests against government corruption led to the removal of four Latin American presidents from office between 1992 and 1999 (Pérez-Liñán 2003). While the accountability inherent in presidential impeachment is obvious, only three of the four presidential removals followed constitutional procedures. Since 1999, angry crowds have forced unpopular presidents from office in Argentina, Ecuador, and Bolivia in constitutionally questionable circumstances.

Beyond practical urgency, the study of journalistic change is important on a theoretical level. News media are recognized as a necessary part of the institutional makeup of modern democratic systems, but academics have rarely addressed how and why media systems change (Lawson 2002, 2–3). Sociologists who study change in organizations and institutions have

given us a good trail of breadcrumbs to follow, however. Using their lead, I have proposed a multilevel institutional approach. News organizations that share similar values and behavioral norms comprise a trans-organizational institution until a group of newsroom change agents disrupts uniformity. In permissive environments, these “outlaw entrepreneurs,” as sociologist Walter Powell describes them, create innovative organizations that begin to influence “fields” of similarly behaving newsrooms. As the innovation spreads, the media institution breaks down. A struggle for hegemony occurs between the innovative and inertial organizations, as each battles for its own vision of journalism and society (Powell 1991, 198; Cook 1998, 69; Fligstein 1991; Scott 1995, 55–56; Scott 1998, 129–30; Singh, Tucker, and Meinhard 1991).

An institutional view of media transformation contrasts with approaches that look at the political economy of the media, the organizational imperatives of news work, or journalistic professionalism in isolation. Institutionalism tells us that efforts to explain media change should focus on the microlevel formation of professional identities, and shifts in organizational power as they interact with macrostructural conditions in the news environment. Civic journalists need space in the political and economic environment in which to operate, but they also need to maintain civic values and hold sufficient power in their organizations. The creation of assertive, autonomous, and politically diverse news media that foster governmental accountability and democratic deliberation depends on personal conviction and sustained risk-taking by a core of institutional entrepreneurs who gain control of their newsrooms and survive long enough to influence the rest of the media.

The rest of the book presents the story of the breakdown of an authoritarian media institution and creation of a new, hybrid media system. The first section describes the emergence, spread, and limitations of civic journalism. The second section describes the alternatives to civic journalism, including adaptive authoritarianism and market-driven journalism. The last section applies the model to other media transformations in Latin America and explores whether civic newsrooms in Mexico, Guatemala, Chile, and Argentina will survive as more than marginalized organizations.

The prospects for a vibrant, civic-oriented media in Latin America are not heartening given the disadvantageous environment of news production. Generalized weakness in the rule of law, holdover authoritarian laws, concentrated media ownership patterns, sporadic economic crises, and spotty journalistic professionalism chill autonomous, pluralistic, and assertive reporting in much of the region. Far from flourishing, press freedom actually eroded in Latin America as electoral democracy consolidated, power centers reconfigured, and participation levels fell in the late 1990s. According

to Freedom House's survey of press systems in the region, the number of countries with a fully free press fell from ten systems in 1994 to just three in 2004. There were more Latin American media systems rated "not free" as of 2004—Cuba, Colombia, and Venezuela—than at any time since the height of the military rule in the mid-1980s (Sussman and Karlekar 2003; Karlekar 2003, 2004).

Latin America's "democratic vanguard" newspapers, identified by Alves (1997) in the late 1990s, have trajectories that resemble those of Mexico's civic newspapers, but have been overwhelmed by adverse environmental changes and resurgent ideological identities. I analyze three cases in chapter 10 and find that none could sustain their momentum. *Página/12* in Argentina became dependent on advertising from an ideologically compatible government administration during an extreme economic crisis in the early 2000s. It no longer displays the critical investigative edge that made it successful in the 1990s. *La Epoca* in Chile folded for financial reasons, but only after losing its innovative tendencies when a series of Christian Democratic presidents took office after the military regime departed. The journalists of *Siglo Veintiuno* in Guatemala quit en masse when the editor was fired for challenging the armed forces. They reopened as *el Periódico*, but their reconstituted newsroom survives under serious physical and financial pressure.

On a brighter note, the institutional legacies of each of these civic projects survives, at least marginally, within journalists' transformed professional identities. Hence Argentine journalist Martín Rodríguez, who grew up reading the exposés of *Página/12*'s muckraking columnist Horacio Verbitsky, laments the decline of investigative journalism in his country and practices it when he can. A group of critical journalists from *La Epoca* in Chile, including award-winning author Alejandra Matus, bounce from project to project looking for an open space in which to report. They eventually open a smaller-scale newsmagazine called *Plan B*, and when that failed financially, they continued to look for outside funding to revive the project. In many countries, investigative journalists have turned to book publishing rather than relying only on newspaper reporting, where owners' interests, financial pressures, and narrow news agendas interfere with long-term investigative projects.<sup>11</sup> Where journalists retain the professional values and identities of civic journalism, they look for the space in which to practice it, if only in a limited way. Should Latin America's press environments and organizational structures reopen, journalists' civic identities would again reassert themselves more clearly in the news.