

## Explaining Press Performance in New Democracies The Organizational Imperative

Sallie Hughes

### Abstract

Once democratic elections are installed in a liberalizing political regime, what determines the quality of media performance in a new democracy? The literature from academia and free press advocacy groups suggests a number of hypotheses, but the political ideologies and journalistic norms of newsroom leaders often are downplayed or even missed. Based on a comparison of Latin American newspapers known for bringing assertive, diverse, and autonomous news coverage to their countries, the central finding of this study is that, once a threshold of political liberalization is passed, the organizational dynamic matters most. Given enough slack in the environment, the political ideologies and journalistic norms of media owners and decision-making editors acting within hierarchical news organizations determine the fate of “democratic” journalism. This finding demonstrates the need for comparative journalism studies to pay more attention to organizational and institutional dynamics as media systems are transformed.

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Scholars have long theorized about the importance of a free press for the quality of democratic governance. More recently, quantitative policy studies have tried to measure the effects of a democratic style of journalism, using statistical measures which assume that a liberal news production environment will yield a positive result.<sup>1</sup> Such an assumption is fragile at best. Although the two may be correlated, media analysts should not conflate the press environment with the actual practice of journalism. In the more than two decades since

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<sup>1</sup> Pippa Norris, “The Role of the Free Press in Promoting Good Governance and Human Development,” paper prepared for UNESCO meeting on World Press Freedom Day: Media, Development, and Poverty Eradication, Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 1-2, 2006; Shyamal K. Chowdhury, “The Effect of Democracy and Press Freedom on Corruption: An Empirical Test,” *Economics Letters* 85, no. 1 (2004): 93-101; and Aymo Brunetti and Beatrice Weder, “A Free Press Is Bad News for Corruption,” *Journal of Public Economics* 87, nos. 7-8 (2003): 1801-1824.

political liberalization transformed governing systems in much of the world, we have seen that electoral democracy does not systematically lead to a form of news production that enables citizen participation, public deliberation, and government accountability.<sup>2</sup> A new generation of deeper studies of media performance is finding that there actually is far more variation in the way that journalism is practiced within new democracies than the traditional assumptions of the liberal media paradigm would suggest.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is anecdotal evidence that some journalistic traits associated with the deepening of democracy have actually declined in the years since Latin America's new democracies passed the procedural benchmark of a founding election.<sup>4</sup> This is particularly apparent in Argentina and Chile.<sup>5</sup> It would seem that an assessment of the press environment alone is insufficient for understanding what explains the creation and survival of prodemocracy journalism.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kaufmann, "Media, Governance and Development: An Empirical Perspective," keynote address delivered at UNESCO meeting on World Press Freedom Day: Media, Development, and Poverty Eradication, Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 1-2, 2006; Daniel Kaufmann, "Media, Governance and Development: An Empirical Perspective," powerpoint presentation delivered at UNESCO meeting on World Press Freedom Day: Media, Development, and Poverty Eradication, Colombo, Sri Lanka, May 1-2, 2006; Sallie Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); W. Lance Bennett, "The Media and Democratic Development: The Social Basis of Political Communication," in *Communicating Democracy: The Media and Political Transitions*, ed. Patrick H. O'Neil (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 195-207; and Katrin Voltmer, ed., *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies* (London: Routledge, 2006). See also Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*; Mauro P. Porto, "Framing Controversies: Television and the 2002 Presidential Election in Brazil," *Political Communication* 24, no. 1 (2007): 19-36; Juliet Gill, "Muzzling the Watchdog: Changing Media Performance in Democratic Argentina" (Ph.D. diss., University of Miami, 2006); Voltmer, *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies*; Ken León Dermota, *And Well Tied Down: Chile's Press Under Democracy* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); and Ronnie Mustamu, "Agenda Setting of Indonesian Mass Media after Political Reformation: Idealism vs. Business of Local Mass Media during Local Election," paper delivered at the Fifth International Conference on Communication and Mass Media, Athens, Greece, May 19-21, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Santori, "Las presiones a la prensa argentina en el gobierno de Kirchner" (Pressures on Argentine journalism during the Kirchner government), *Sala de Prensa* 3 no. 3 (August 2006), [www.saladeprensa.com](http://www.saladeprensa.com) (accessed June 19, 2007); Gerardo Reyes, "Tema: Autocensura" (Issue: Self-censorship), Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, 2006, <http://www.ipys.org/entrevista.php?foro=6&comentarista=2> (accessed July 2, 2007); Juan Jorge Faundes Merino, ¿Ocaso de periodismo de investigación en Chile y América Latina? (The decline of investigative journalism in Chile and Latin America?), *Razon y Palabra*, no. 22 (May-June 2001), [http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/antiores/n22/22\\_jfaundes.html](http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/antiores/n22/22_jfaundes.html) (accessed June 15, 2007); and Juan Jorge Faundes Merino, *Periodismo de investigación en Sudamérica, obstáculos y propuestas* (Investigative journalism in South America, obstacles and proposals) (Capítulo Chileno de Transparencia Internacional - FORJA, Santiago de Chile, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Gill, "Muzzling the Watchdog: Changing Media Performance in Democratic Argentina"; Martín Rodríguez Yebra, "El perro no ladra: Ocaso del periodismo de investigación en Argentina" (The dog doesn't bark: Decline of investigative journalism in Argentina.) unpublished ms, University

This article addresses a theoretical and practical question of some urgency: Once a form of democratic elections is installed, what determines the quality of journalism in a new democracy? Using a most-similar system design, the article analyzes fluctuations in the practice of journalism in four Latin American newspapers identified as founders of forms of journalism thought to have supported democratic deepening in their countries as authoritarian political systems liberalized.<sup>6</sup> The article is based on secondary sources and key informant interviews. It assesses the macro-environment of news production typically the focus of indexes that form the basis for most quantitative studies of the press around the world, but also assesses organizational dynamics inside media outlets and a number of conditions in a domain that institutional theorists call the “organizational field” of a transorganizational institution, such as journalism or the news media.<sup>7</sup> The general purpose of the article is to better understand why prodemocracy journalism endures, strengthens, or declines after a country installs an electoral democracy. Additionally, it assesses the relevance of organizational and institutional theory for advancing comparative journalism studies.

The study is grounded in an approach to media transformation in which interaction among four institutional domains, including but not limited to the macro-environment of news production, explains journalistic stability and change. The approach was developed ground-up from an in-depth longitudinal study of Mexican news organizations and located within the wider sociology of organizations and institutions.<sup>8</sup> The central finding is that, once a threshold of political liberalization had passed, the organizational dynamic mattered most. Given enough slack in the external environment, the political ideologies and

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of Miami, School of Communication, 2005, 27; León Dermota, *And Well Tied Down: Chile's Press Under Democracy*; and Rosalind Bresnahan, “The Media and Democracy in Chile, *Latin American Perspectives* 30, no. 6 (2003): 39-68.

<sup>6</sup> Rosental Alves, “From Lapdog to Watchdog: The Role of the Press in Latin American Democratization,” in *Making Journalists*, ed. Hugo de Burgh (New York: Routledge, 2005), 181-201; Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*; León Dermota, *And Well Tied Down: Chile's Press Under Democracy*; Silvio Waisbord, “Knocking on Newsroom Doors: The Press and Political Scandals in Argentina,” *Political Communication* 11 (1994): 19-33; and Waisbord, “The Unfinished Project of Media Democratization in Argentina,” in *Communicating Democracy: The Media and Political Transitions*, ed. Patrick H. O’Neil (Boulder, Co: Lynne Rienner, 1998), 41-62.

<sup>7</sup> Timothy Cook, *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*. See also, Richard W. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005); Richard W. Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural and Open Systems*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998); Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1985); id., *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3d ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2004); and Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio, eds., *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

journalistic norms of media owners and decision-making editors acting within hierarchical news organizations determined the fate of democratic journalism.

The study is bounded by certain conditions that are typical in Latin America. All the cases compared were privately owned media companies with vertical decision-making structures. These conditions may limit the broader generalization of the study, but they nevertheless suggests that comparative journalism studies should pay more attention to organizational dynamics and that policy studies should take care not to conflate the environment of news production with actual press behavior.

## Explaining “Democratic” Journalism

Scholars have given several names to journalism that enable or promote participatory citizenship, broad representation, and governmental accountability. Lawson speaks of “opening” the media, Peruzzotti of “independent” journalism, and Waisbord of “watchdog” journalism in the South America of the 1990s and later uses an umbrella “democratic” terminology.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, I argue for a Latin Americanized “civic” or “citizen-focused” definition because of practitioners’ normative concepts and the interaction among independent media, political participation, and civil society during and after political transitions.<sup>10</sup> All of these authors in some way are describing forms of journalism that perform supportive functions in a participatory democracy. Usually, the traits of prodemocracy journalism include a certain autonomy or distance from external centers of power, assertiveness in reporting the news, and diversity in the voices and viewpoints reflected in the news.

Analysts point out that civic or democratic journalism is just one form of news production that arose in post-authoritarian Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Forms that elsewhere I have called adaptive authoritarianism feature strategic selection of news topics, sources, and frames to promote particular interests or causes. Alternatively, more market-driven forms use sensationalism and personalization

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<sup>9</sup> Chappell Lawson, *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002); Enrique Peruzzotti, “La política de accountability social en América Latina” (The politics of accountability in Latin America), *RePRI: Revista Electrónica del EPRI*, Francisco Marroquín University, Institute of Political Studies and International Relations (Guatemala: Guatemala, 2004); Silvio Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); and Silvio Waisbord, “Democratic Journalism and ‘Statelessness.’” *Political Communication* 24, no. 2 (April 2007), 115-129.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*. See also, Enrique Peruzzotti and Catalina Smulovitz, *Enforcing the Rule of Law: Social Accountability in New Democracies* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*; Sallie Hughes and Chappell Lawson, “Propaganda and Crony Capitalism: Partisan Bias in Mexican Television News,” *Latin American Research Review* 39, no. 3 (2004): 81-105; Rick Rockwell and Noreen Janus, *Media Power in Central America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

of political coverage without contextualization.

Of course, the traits of democratic and other forms of journalism can mix; as Hallin, McQuail, and others have noted,<sup>12</sup> neither media systems nor media organizations usually reflect a single journalistic model. However, to the degree the traits from one model or another dominate in the construction of the news, journalism's potential to activate informed participation and popular sovereignty can be strengthened or diluted.

A number of hypotheses for the varying forms of journalism in Latin America and other newly democratic regions can be derived from the academic literature and growing body of advocacy studies of press freedom around the world. An assumption underlying much of this work is that press behavior responds largely to incentives emanating from the environment external to the media organization. Paradigmatic of this approach is Freedom House's widely utilized annual study, *Freedom of the Press*, which uses expert analysis to create quantitative measures of the country-level legal, political, and economic environment in which the press operates.<sup>13</sup> Most of the previously mentioned studies of the effects of the press on democratic performance use this measure of the press environment in their statistical analyses. The Reporters Without Borders ranking, created by a survey of experts and practitioners, is similarly focused on the external environment of news production.<sup>14</sup>

Waisbord's recent work remains within this paradigm, but turns the tables on the assumption of classic liberalism that a free press has much to fear from a strong state.<sup>15</sup> Instead, he focuses on the pressures of "statelessness," or the condition in which states are unable to perform key functions necessary to create an environment in which democratic journalism can thrive. These functions include acting as guarantor of respect for human rights, the formulation and fair use of unobtrusive press laws, and the adoption and implementation of antitrust mechanisms that block the formation of monopolies in the mediated public sphere. Faundes's interviews with leading investigative journalists in six South American countries identified a number of obstacles that journalists perceive for the practice of investigative journalism in the region. As journalists

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2003); Porto, "Framing Controversies: Television and the 2002 Presidential Election in Brazil"; and León Dermota, *And Well Tied Down: Chile's Press Under Democracy*.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel C. Hallin, "Commercialism and Professionalism in the American News Media," in *Mass Media and Society*, 2d ed., ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 218-237, and Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Karin D. Karlekar, *Freedom of the Press 2005: A Global Survey of Media Independence* (New York: Freedom House/ Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), and Karin D. Karlekar, *Freedom of the Press 2006: A Global Survey of Media Independence* (New York: Freedom House/ Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Available at [www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org).

<sup>15</sup> Waisbord, "Democratic Journalism and 'Statelessness'."

view it, impediments to assertive reporting come from many of the previously identified external pressures, plus owners' responses to business interests.<sup>16</sup>

Lawson and I summed up these studies and our own interviews with informants by proposing five general barriers that block the formation of democratic media systems in Latin America. From the environment, we identified generalized weakness in the rule of law, holdover authoritarian legislation, and limited audience access to diverse sources of information because of media ownership concentration. Within the organizational context, we identify owners' instrumental use of news to further personal and group interests, as well as uneven professional standards among journalists.<sup>17</sup>

There is much to support the idea that media organizations primarily respond to pressures and cues from their external environment, as external controls on Latin American media have remained strong if not stifling since the return to democracy in many of the region's countries. There is also much to support the notion that media owners exert pressure on content in response to both business and particular interests, as many Latin American media companies are family owned and hierarchically structured, and must survive in oligopolistic advertising markets where a government presence nevertheless remains important.

However, the idea that media organizations or media owners respond seamlessly to cues in the external press environment belies both journalistic practice in the region and scores of studies of organizational behavior. There are plenty of examples when media organizations, like other types of organizations, did not change their behavior despite significant alteration of the political and economic cues emanating from the macro-environment. Media organizations can remain almost "frozen" until they lose their cohesiveness, or until they take on new leadership that retools the organizational culture and its artifacts. Similarly, they can change in ways that run contrary to what dominant external cues would suggest.<sup>18</sup>

Studies of organizations and institutions point to another level of inquiry for the question of what creates a type of journalism that facilitates democratic participation and governance: the role of organizational leadership and culture. As Schein has discovered, and from which I extrapolate, organizational culture operates on three levels: (1) as artifacts, or the visible outcomes of organizational culture (in the case of news media organizations, news content

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<sup>16</sup> Faundes, *Periodismo de investigación en Sudamérica, obstáculos y propuestas*.

<sup>17</sup> Sallie Hughes and Chappell Lawson, "The Barriers to Media Opening in Latin America," *Political Communication* 22, no. 1 (2005): 9-25.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*, 131-147; Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, "The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields," in *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, ed. Walter W. Powell and Paul J. DiMaggio (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 65-66; and Schein, *Organizational Culture*, 271-272.

is an artifact of culture as are newsroom decision-making processes); (2) as the stated beliefs, values, strategies, goals, and philosophies of the organization; and (3) as the basic underlying assumptions that are the taken-for-granted beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, and feelings that are usually unquestioned and nonnegotiable. Schein believes that these deep, tacit, usually unquestioned assumptions are what really drive organizational cultures, producing patterns of behavior that yield visible artifacts such as news content.

What determines the shared assumptions? Schein summarizes the sources of organizational culture as the beliefs, values, and assumptions of organizational founders, the learning experiences of group members as the organization evolves, and the new beliefs, values and assumptions brought in by new members and organizational leaders. Leaders “impose” and then “embed” their assumptions in the organizational culture, becoming the most important cultural force within a successful organization. Leaders transmit their values by demonstrating importance through: paying attention, measuring, and controlling on a regular basis; their reactions to critical situations and crises; how they allocate resources; role modeling, teaching, and coaching; the allocation of rewards and status, as well as sanction; and recruitment, selection, and promotion.<sup>19</sup>

Schein’s finding of the centrality of organizational leadership in setting cultural norms would seem especially appropriate to the hierarchical family firm of Latin America, including media companies. While Costa Rica and Argentina may be exceptions, organizational studies have posited that Latin America’s traditional organizational leader is directive and paternalistic and that decision-making is restricted to fewer groups and imposed top-down in a hierarchy with large power differentials.<sup>20</sup> While resistance in small groups may develop to the dominant culture,<sup>21</sup> the lack of career options for journalists in most countries as well as the pervasiveness of vertical decision-making hierarchies suggest that resistance does not change news output consistently or substantially. As a Mexican reporter and author stated recently, reporters “are trained to comply with editors’ orders.” Otano and Sunkel describe a similar

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<sup>19</sup> Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 25-37, 246, and Edgar H. Schein, “The Role of the Founder in the Creation of Organizational Culture,” working paper, Alfred P. Sloane School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1983.

<sup>20</sup> Eric J. Romero, “Latin American Leadership: El Patron & El Líder Moderno,” *Cross Cultural Management* 11, no. 3 (2004): 25-37; Luis Montaña, “La dimensión cultural de la organización: Elementos para un debate en América Latina” (The cultural dimension of the organization: Elements for a debate in Latin America), in *Tratado latinoamericano de sociología del trabajo* (Treatise of Latin American labor sociology), ed. Enrique de la Garza (Mexico City: Colegio de México, Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Fondo de Cultura Económica), 285-311; and Geert Hofstede, *Culture’s Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Suzana Braga Rodrigues, “The Political Dynamics of Organizational Culture in an Institutionalized Environment,” *Organization Studies* 27, no. 4 (2006): 537-557.

phenomenon in Chile, comparing journalists to bureaucrats who “fulfill tasks someone else has assigned.”<sup>22</sup>

The macro-environment highlighted in the free press literature and the role of leadership and culture identified in organizational studies are two of four interacting domains synthesized in an “institutional model” of media development. The model was developed ground-up by studying Mexico’s transition from an authoritarian media institution to a hybrid system in which civic, market-driven, and authoritarian approaches to journalism coexist. It considered the interaction of the environment, the organization and the organizational leader, but also the transorganizational field of media outlets.<sup>23</sup> An organizational field consists of organizations pursuing similar objectives, which can exhibit higher or lower degrees of structural similarity, or isomorphism.<sup>24</sup> The press field in Mexico went from higher to lower degrees of isomorphism as a transorganizational institution eroded into coexisting populations of media organizations producing differing forms of journalism.

The contrasting approaches to journalism visible in Mexico’s current media field is the result of a transition in which the liberalization of the political and economic environment widened political space, changed economic incentives, and created systemic shocks that delegitimated the old ways of authoritarian journalism in support of the regime. However, some newspapers anticipated societal changes and others modified content in differing ways. Organizational and institutional lenses are necessary to understand these differences and the current hybrid system. Early innovators in the press field were driven by owners or key editors who harbored oppositional political values, learned alternative ideas about journalism from academia or from abroad, and obtained control of their newsrooms to purposefully retool newsroom culture.

Early innovators such as *El Norte* in Monterrey and *La Jornada* in Mexico City survived long enough in Mexico’s political transition to change referents in the newspaper field and influence other publications such as *El Universal*, *Reforma*, and *El Sur* as new ideas, practices, and values diffused. However, not all media organizations reacted similarly. For example *Excelsi3r*, *Novedades*, and *Unomásuno* did not change substantially and eventually closed or became largely irrelevant. Formed in previous eras in which they were highly successful, the organizational leaders of these newspapers filtered information from the environment and newspaper field in ways that blocked substantive change.

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<sup>22</sup> Quote of Mexican journalist and author Marco Lara Klahr, cited in Fidel Samaniego, “Los reporteros estamos formados para cumplir ordenes,” *El Universal*, December 6, 2005, [www.eluniversal.com.mx](http://www.eluniversal.com.mx), and Rafael Otano and Guillermo Sunkel, “Libertad de los periodistas en los medios” (Journalists’ freedom in the media), *Revista comunicaci3n y medios* 14, Universidad de Chile, 2003, <http://www.icei.uchile.cl/comunicacionymedios/14otanoysunkel.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, *Newsrooms in Conflict: Journalism and the Democratization of Mexico*.

<sup>24</sup> DiMaggio and Powell, “The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields.”

The previously reviewed literature from academia and advocacy groups suggests a number of hypotheses about the causes of the variation in journalistic assertiveness, autonomy, and diversity that we see across Latin America after the installation of electoral democracies with differing levels of participation, representation, government accountability, and adherence to the rule of law. I will group them together into three approaches: the Environmental Model, the Organizational Model, and an omnibus Institutional Model. In the Environmental Model, cues from the environment of news production—including legal, political, and economic forces and structures—drive journalistic production. In the Organizational Model, organizational leaders' values and assumptions about journalism and politics drive journalistic production. In the Institutional Model, interaction among conditions in the environment, the organization including its leadership and culture, and the organizational field drive journalistic production.

The hypotheses generated by the Environmental Model locate the causes of press behavior in the legal, political, and economic environments in which media organizations operate. These would include the presence or absence of pressures on content from threats, harassment, and violence; legal restrictions; strategic use of state advertising, broadcast concessions, or other needed inputs; strategic use of private-sector advertising; and degree of media competition and concentration (either very low or very high). The Organizational Model includes organizational leadership and culture, including the expressed values and underlying assumptions about politics and journalism of organizational leaders and the newsroom cultures that they help to create. The Institutional Model posits an interaction between the organization and the environment, additionally considering the role of innovative organizations in the transorganizational field.

## The Cases

The first case analyzed is the newspaper *La Epoca* of Chile. *La Epoca* opened during a thaw in General Augusto Pinochet's personalized form of bureaucratic authoritarianism. Pinochet had bet regime legitimacy on economic performance. When that stagnated in the early 1980s, he slowly increased respect for civil liberties. Eventually, economic stagnation, harsh repression, international pressure, and a taste of free expression led to his peaceful retreat from the presidential palace. *La Epoca* published its first edition on March 11, 1987, and settled in a month later as the third-largest newspaper in the capital, following proregime newspapers *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> León Dermota, *And Well Tied Down: Chile's Press Under Democracy*, 27, 28, 40-42; Shirley Christian, "Opposition Paper Launched in Chile," *New York Times*, March 19, 1987, A7; and Clara Germani, "Chile's New Paper Risks 'Opposition' Label by Printing all the News," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 10, 1987, C15.

The expressed values and news content of *La Epoca* suggested a culture of journalism supporting diversity, autonomy, and where possible, assertiveness. *La Epoca*'s content stood out from larger proregime competitors. While *El Mercurio* placed Pinochet's color photograph and speeches on the front page nearly every day, *La Epoca* covered all of the political parties. One of the newspaper's early scoops was simply to report that Pope John Paul II had called the Pinochet government "dictatorial." *El Mercurio* ignored the story; other proregime newspapers buried it.<sup>26</sup> Later *La Epoca* became known for exposés about corruption and human rights abuses.

*La Epoca* was founded by Emilio Filippi, a journalist identified with Christian Democrat publications, who bought the paper with other investors led by politician Juan Hamilton. Hamilton later would become a senator and cabinet member under Christian Democratic presidents Patricio Aylwin and Eduardo Frei. Despite organizational leaders' partisan leanings, Filippi's expressed values supported independent journalism. He described the newspaper not as an opposition paper, but as guided by "four basic characteristics: professional, independent, pluralist, and democratic. ...We offer access to ideas of all kinds: left, right and center, resisting identification with one of them."<sup>27</sup>

*La Epoca* had an impact on the newspaper field, which was dominated by two proregime newspaper chains that had grown with the dictatorship's financial support. León Dermota calls what occurred in the proregime newspapers "calculated pluralism," and attributes it to competition from *La Epoca* and other critical publications in a liberalizing press environment. After Chileans voted to remove Pinochet from office in 1989, the dominant chain *El Mercurio* began to cover all of the political parties and invited left-of-center politicians to write opinion columns.

The diffusion of the new journalistic form across the newspaper field occurred, as in Mexico, through mimicking and the expansion of networks of journalists formed at *La Epoca*. *El Mercurio*'s editors changed their habits when *La Epoca* published interesting stories they missed or had ignored.<sup>28</sup> Some of *La Epoca*'s journalists, including Fernando Paulsen, who became the editor of *La Tercera*, went to work for mainstream publications.<sup>29</sup> *La Epoca*'s journalists also helped to create at least two other independent or quasi-independent publications, for a period of time, that carried on the tradition of

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<sup>26</sup> Alves, "From Lapdog to Watchdog: The Role of the Press in Latin American Democratization"; Germani, "Chile's New Paper Risks 'Opposition' Label by Printing All the News"; and Sanford J. Ungar, "How Chile Muzzles Its Press: In Santiago, Only the Bravest Fight Repression and Apathy," *Washington Post*, January 3, 1988, A5.

<sup>27</sup> William D. Montalbano, "Young Newspaper Tests Limits of Chile's Dictatorship," *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1987, and Christian, "Opposition Paper Launched in Chile."

<sup>28</sup> Alejandra Matus, telephone interview by author, Miami, Santiago, July 20, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Alves, "From Lapdog to Watchdog: The Role of the Press in Latin American Democratization," 191-194, 200-201.

critical, assertive, and diverse journalism, *La Nación Dominical and Plan B*.

At the same time, analysts have noted that liberalization of the environment and the arrival of an innovator in the newspaper field did not end all of the old behaviors in the Chilean press. For example, *El Mercurio* supported political candidates from pro-Pinochet parties and negatively framed or ignored news about demands from marginalized citizens, such as indigenous peoples' claims to land and political rights.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the proregime newspapers reacted to the new critical, politically focused publications by "depoliticizing" their content after the return to democracy. *El Mercurio*, especially, offered a wide range of coverage beyond politics, including a strong classified advertising section, sports coverage, and lifestyle reports. *La Tercera*, a tabloid, focused on urban issues for Santiago's middle class. Chilean media executives called this change "retasking the product."<sup>31</sup>

And what of *La Epoca*? Did it thrive in the newly liberalized environment? *La Epoca* no longer exists, nor do its direct offspring created in the style of the newspaper by journalists formed there. Analysts of Chilean journalism note that there was *less* assertiveness and diversity in the Chilean press of the early 2000s than at the end of the dictatorship. Otano and Sunkel wrote that the "paradox" of Chilean journalism was that: "a supposedly democratizing process has been depleting the ideological and cultural diversity of the media in comparison with what existed in the last years of the military regime, with the result that not a few journalists who were in the opposition in the 1980s denounce with disillusion that currently certain types of information, criticism or viewpoints cannot be expressed."<sup>32</sup>

How could that happen? Environmental pressures after the return to electoral democracy offer a number of partial explanations. The dictatorship's legacy of concentrated commercial media ownership favored *La Epoca*'s commercial competitors. Conservative private sector advertisers did not want to support publications that rocked the boat politically. Similarly, a closed intellectual environment sought consensus above all else. Finally, new governments failed to support independent journalism with quotas of state advertising or legal reforms that would support investigative journalism. In the newspaper field, the financially stronger *El Mercurio* reacted strategically to take away some of *La Epoca*'s innovative edge and introduced other content innovations more in synch with the depoliticized environment in the years immediately following the dictatorship. However, the underlying values and assumptions of those who controlled the direction of *La Epoca*'s news content cannot be discounted. Observers believe that a reemergence of a

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<sup>30</sup> Antonio Castillo, "The Media in the Chilean Transition to Democracy: Context, Process and Evaluation (1990-2000)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Western Sydney, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> León Dermota, *And Well Tied Down: Chile's Press Under Democracy*, 32-34, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Otano and Sunkel, "Libertad de los periodistas en los medios."

Christian Democrat partisan identity at *La Epoca* overwhelmed wider civic tendencies once electoral democracy returned, identifying the newspaper with the governing party. Filippi eventually accepted a position as ambassador to Portugal under Aylwin. Another *La Epoca* columnist and the founding editor of the critical publication *Análisis*, Juan Pablo Cárdenas, left to work abroad for the foreign ministry of Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei. More broadly, Otano and Sunkel say that a “don’t-rock-the-boat” culture of passivity permeated Chilean journalism after a founding democratic election peacefully ended the brutal military dictatorship, discouraging journalists from broadening news agendas and sources beyond those set by government, which was Christian Democratic from the foundational election in 1990 until 2000. In the end, the form of democratic journalism that *La Epoca* helped to pioneer was limited by its organizational culture, changes the publication itself set in motion within the organizational field, and the wider environment of Chilean society.

The second case is Argentina’s *Página/12*, another Latin American newspaper frequently mentioned as an early democratic innovator. *Página/12* reinaugurated investigative journalism in Argentina after the fall of the disgraced military junta that brutally ruled the country from 1976 until 1983. The daily newspaper published or prompted others to expose the slew of press scandals that hit the administration of Carlos Menem in the 1990s.<sup>33</sup>

Scholars of military rule and retreat in Latin America write that the Chilean military relinquished the government from a strong position, retaining “reserve domains” of influence such as protection from human rights prosecutions that only much later were broached. Argentina’s military, on the other hand, was demoralized when it left the government. It never overcame interforce disorganization, never produced sustained economic growth, and was humiliated by its loss of the Falklands/Malvinas War to the British.<sup>34</sup> In this context, leaders of what remained of the country’s tattered political parties negotiated a transition that led to elections in October 1983. The newly elected president, Raúl Alfonsín, took office in December 1983 and the transition to democracy was underway.

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<sup>33</sup> Alves, “From Lapdog to Watchdog: The Role of the Press in Latin American Democratization”; Joel Millman, “Argentina: A Fix on Corruption,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 31, no. 1 (1992): 52-53; Isabel Vincent, “An Argentine: Gadfly: J. Lanata, Editor of *Página 12*,” *World Press Review* (1992): 55; and Waisbord, “Knocking on Newsroom Doors: The Press and Political Scandals in Argentina.”

<sup>34</sup> J. Samuel Valenzuela, “Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process and Facilitating Conditions,” in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O’Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 57-63. Felipe Agüero, “Chile: Unfinished Transition and Increased Political Competition,” in *Constructing Democratic Governance in Latin America*, ed. Jorge Domínguez and Michael Shifter (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 292-320.

For the next fifteen years, Argentine press behavior operated differently from what the Environmental Model of media behavior would suggest. When Alfonsín took office, Argentine press and society experienced liberties and constitutional guarantees for the first time in seven years. His government (1983-1989) aggressively investigated and prosecuted human rights abusers. While the press was more assertive, it was restrained compared to bold government action, avoiding sensitive topics and more-than-timid criticism. Waisbord wrote that the Argentine press “merely observed rather than stimulated revelations on abuses of human rights.”<sup>35</sup>

Press assertiveness surged after Carlos Menem took office (1989-1999), even as the political environment worsened considerably. At one point, 140 instances of physical attacks on the press had been reported, none of which was cleared up. Menem himself called reporters “vandals” and dubbed *Página/12* reporters “delinquents.” He said journalists investigating local corruption would have to put up with physical threats as “an occupational hazard.” The government proposed a press gag law and boycotted advertising at *Página/12* for two weeks, rescinding the proposal and boycott only in the face of unified protest and a well-timed editorial in the *New York Times*.<sup>36</sup>

While the economic environment under Menem shifted in favor of increased assertiveness for the larger mainstream newspapers, which benefited from privatization and deregulation of state media companies, *Página/12* benefited only from its ability to capture private-sector advertisers who wanted to reach elite readers attracted by its must-see coverage. It was not the financially strongest newspaper that reinitiated investigative journalism in post-authoritarian Argentina, but one that was entrepreneurial in the journalistic sense. Waisbord relates:

Only one daily (*Página/12*) was initially interested in breaking stories and covering delicate issues; another (*Clarín*) later decided to take a more confrontational line, partially (according to my interviews) in response to *Página/12*'s rising sales among actual and potential *Clarín* readers. Other newspapers, even when having the same information, did not seem eager to break news about sensitive matters; instead, they adopted a cautious position, speculating that revelations implicating government officials could hurt relations with both the Menem administration and advertisers.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Waisbord, “Knocking on Newsroom Doors: The Press and Political Scandals in Argentina,” 26-27.

<sup>36</sup> Waisbord, “Knocking on Newsroom Doors: The Press and Political Scandals in Argentina,” and Calvin Sims, “Anti-Corruption Reporter Shot in Argentina,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1995, A10.

<sup>37</sup> Waisbord, “Knocking on Newsroom Doors: The Press and Political Scandals in Argentina,” 28.

*Página/12* pushed mainstream newspapers, especially Clarín, beyond timid experimentation and split the newspaper field.

Rather than financial strength or competitive strategy, *Página/12*'s autonomy and assertiveness sprung from the oppositional values of its founders. In turn, these came from ideas inherited from the predictorship tradition of investigative journalism and Europe's left and center-left press. Two young journalists and a progressive businessman with interests in human rights thought that Argentines needed a more critical voice in the press in the mid-1980s. They founded *Página/12* in May 1987. In interviews in 2005, newspaper co-founder Jorge Lanata recalled that a "spirit of investigation and press independence was basic in the founding of the daily."<sup>38</sup>

Lanata received editorial advice from the novelist and journalist Osvaldo Soriano, who had spent the dictatorship in exile in Belgium and France writing fiction and co-editing the magazine, *Sin Censura* (Without Censorship). His newspapers of reference were *El País* of Spain and *Libération* of France. *Página/12* reinaugurated Argentina's tradition of investigative newspaper journalism by hiring some of the famous journalists still alive from the 1970s and commingling them with enthusiastic novices. The star *Página/12* muckraker quickly became Horacio Verbitsky, who emerged from underground journalism once the military returned to its barracks. While Verbitsky has readily identified himself with the political left and foreign reporters in the early 1990s repeatedly called *Página/12* "unabashedly leftist," Lanata rejected leftist leanings. He said in 1992: "We are not a left- or a right-wing newspaper. I say we are a liberal newspaper. The left attacks us for belonging to the new right and the right attacks us for being on the left."<sup>39</sup>

The newspaper in the Menem era was definitely adversarial toward the government, however. The *Financial Times* of London noted, "*Página/12* rarely finds anything praiseworthy in Mr. Menem's government." The newspaper opposed Menem's economic plan, including his neoliberal economic policies and the increasing concentration of presidential power.

Like *La Epoca*, *Página/12*'s assertiveness was not to last. The obvious explanation comes from the collapse of the economy toward the end of the decade, which was followed by the reconstruction of a strong presidency. Two successive presidents resigned amid the economic turmoil and President Nestor Kirchner took office in April 2003 with just 22 percent of the vote. Kirchner, however, surprised everyone by quickly reconsolidating power. He took bold action, peppered with anti-imperialist rhetoric, and within two years became wildly popular. A child of the 1970s, he quickly fired a swath of military officials associated with the 1976-1983 dictatorship and voiced support for stripping dirty war abusers of a blanket amnesty granted by Menem. At the

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<sup>38</sup> Jorge Lanata, e-mail interviews by author, Miami, Buenos Aires, July 27 and August 2, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> John Barham, "Survey of Argentina," *Financial Times*, May 14, 1992.

same time, he pressured the IMF and other international creditors into the biggest debt-reduction deal ever achieved by a developing country. Perhaps most importantly, he produced two straight years of 8 percent economic growth.

In the years after Kirchner took office, Argentina's most famous watchdog newspaper ceased to bark. *Página/12* did not publish one serious press scandal touching a high administration official between Kirchner's election and mid-2005. One of the newspaper's most respected columnists, Julio Nudler, quit over what he claimed was censorship of an article linking Kirchner's powerful cabinet chief minister to government corruption.<sup>40</sup> Was economic pressure the only cause of censorship?

Obviously, the government's economic power and the collapse of the private sector played important roles. The Kirchner government became a very powerful advertiser during the crisis and used advertising to reward supportive publications, specifically, *Página/12*.<sup>41</sup> But *Página/12*'s relationship with the Kirchner government was not only cordial on the business side. Journalists repeat the rumor that Verbitsky became an unofficial advisor to the president, which he denies, because so many of his proposals were quickly put into place. Verbitsky responds that *Página/12*'s editorial support of the president is "coherent.... It questioned a large number of things about the policies of Menem and [interim President Eduardo] Duhalde. When there is a government that does things different from how they used to do things, naturally it suits [the newspaper]."<sup>42</sup>

The government's advertising support of *Página/12* has to be understood in the context of the newspaper leadership's ideological affinity with Kirchner and its previous aversion to Menem. Verbitsky's definition of journalism as political militancy guides the paper, at least in part: "In Argentina, there is no distinction between politics and journalism."<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Lanata long ago left the newspaper.

Finally, Guatemala's innovative daily *Siglo Veintiuno* also pioneered a

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<sup>40</sup> Rodríguez, "El perro no ladra: Ocaso del periodismo de investigación en Argentina."

<sup>41</sup> Dario Gallo, "Amor por encargo: El gobierno usa 80 millones en avisos para presionar a medios y conseguir oficialismo" (Love by order: The government uses 80 million in ads to pressure the media and obtain *Oficialismo*), *Noticias*, March 7, 2004; and Dario Gallo, "Domesticados: Por qué los rebeldes de ayer se volvieron dóceles con el kirchnerismo" (Domesticated: Why yesterday's rebels turned docile with Kirchnerism), *Noticias*, October 16, 2004; Poder Ciudadano, "Planillas oficiales de la Secretaría de Medios. Distribución de la publicidad oficial por medio" (Official tallies of the Media Secretariat. Distribution of official advertising by Medium), n.d. (2004), <http://www.poderciudadano.org/?do=news&id=152&PHPSESSID=b2f5e5f9e2f73ff0ff3ef40f379c02a2> (accessed July 2, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Nicolás Wiñazki, "El perro vuelve a ladrar" (The dog barks once again), *Noticias*, June 18, 2005, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Verbitsky, cited in Gill, "Muzzling the Watchdog: Changing Media Performance in Democratic Argentina," 1.

more democratic form of journalism during an opening in an authoritarian regime, and in the process pushed behavioral change at traditional newspapers. The difference in the Guatemalan case is that, when *Siglo Veintiuno* began to lose its civic identity, for reasons similar to *La Epoca* and *Página/12*, most of its journalists were able to create a new newspaper founded on the same principles. Business owners, nongovernmental organizations, and international organizations dedicated to supporting independent media backed this new venture financially, creating a societal alliance for democratic journalism that the other cases lacked.

Guatemala was in the waning years of a thirty-six-year civil war when a group of business owners formed *Siglo Veintiuno* in 1990. A series of personalistic dictatorships had ruled the country during most of the conflict. Democracy, even the oligarchic kind that involved only the elite sectors, was the exception more than the rule. “The state of the press was dismal” when *Siglo Veintiuno* was founded, said publisher Lionel Torriello Najera in 1997. “We were different in that we were committed to changes that the society desperately needs. We present a position that is unabashedly pro-democratic and pro-free market.”<sup>44</sup>

In its early years, the newspaper published muckraking articles on corruption and human rights violations. Led by José Rubén Zamora, a young editor from a journalistic family with a tradition of social progressivism, *Siglo Veintiuno* covered social issues such as the abuse of street children and opened its opinion pages to guerrilla leaders and trade unionists as well as to bankers and business owners.<sup>45</sup> The assertiveness of *Siglo Veintiuno*’s founding staff stood “in marked contrast” to the historically passive and narrow Guatemalan press, write Rockwell and Janus in their book, *Media Power in Central America*.<sup>46</sup> The country’s political and economic elite responded to the new style, and readership in the economically coveted sector of the population rose. The largest newspaper in the country, *Prensa Libre*, changed its editorial line to respond to the innovative competitor and the rise of a new generation of family owners that led the newspaper.

The test of *Siglo Veintiuno*’s support for democracy came just three years after its founding when President Jorge Serrano suspended the constitution and dissolved Congress and the judiciary in an attempt to take absolute power in the style of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori’s self-coup. Zamora was tipped off at 4:00 a.m. that Serrano had suspended the constitution and had

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<sup>44</sup> Alves, “From Lapdog to Watchdog: The Role of the Press in Latin American Democratization.”

<sup>45</sup> Michael Reid, “Guatemala’s Press Fights Return to the Dark Ages: Jose Zamora and Other Journalists Played a Vital Part in Denying President Serrano His Coup,” *Guardian*, June 23, 1993, 9.

<sup>46</sup> Rockwell and Janus, *Media Power in Central America*, 100.

dispatched troops to shut down the legislative and judicial branches. Zamora quickly roused his staff and produced a special edition of sixty thousand copies before the military surrounded his offices and printing plant, demanding that censors enter. The troops surrounded *Siglo Veintiuno*'s printing plant and blocked publication.

For four days, *Siglo Veintiuno*'s staff wrote stories and faxed sections of the newspaper to political and civic leaders domestically and abroad in defiance of the censorship. When the newspaper agreed to allow in the censors, Zamora ran blank boxes in place of censored stories and changed the masthead to *Siglo Catorce* (Century 14), because "it was the last century of obscurantism, when the authorities didn't want the population to be informed."<sup>47</sup> After seven days, the military deserted Serrano and he fled the country in the face of a broad civil opposition.

The development of *Siglo Veintiuno* thus far follows the propositions of the institutional model. Owners and an editor with alternative ideas about journalism and society founded an innovative newspaper that practiced autonomous, assertive, and pluralistic journalism. By resonating with society during an opening in an authoritarian regime, the publication became both prestigious and successful financially, pressuring the traditional press into mimicking its style. In this case, the positive impact of the newspaper on the country's democratic transition is clear, helping to crystallize opposition to a return to authoritarianism.

Like the other newsrooms studied, the journalistic model of *Siglo Veintiuno* depended on the acquiescence—if not the leadership—of its owners. Newsroom cultures can buffer changes of many sorts, but cannot forestall them if owners are intent on transforming a publication. *Siglo Veintiuno*'s owners lost their civic impulse when Zamora began to criticize the military too often and a new presidential administration more in tune with their free-market ideology came into power. Analysts of the Guatemalan media say that *Siglo Veintiuno*'s editorial independence began to decline when pro-free market President Alvaro Arzú (1996-2000) was elected in 1996. Zamora said that the spark that ignited the departure of seventy staffers at *Siglo Veintiuno* was his dismissal for publishing investigations that alienated the Guatemalan military, factions of which aligned with organized crime and remained the power behind the new electoral environment.

Zamora rounded up enough small investors and eventually a low-interest international loan to be able to operate his new newspaper, *elPeriódico*, in which all of the former *Siglo Veintiuno* staffers were partners. They quickly faced a government ad boycott, as well as government pressure on the newspaper's private advertisers. Financial difficulty was not the only pressure. Threats and

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<sup>47</sup> Reid, "Guatemala's Press Fights Return to the Dark Ages: Jose Zamora and Other Journalists Played a Vital Part in Denying President Serrano His Coup."

physical repression reached a crescendo during the government of President Alfonso Portillo (2000-2004). After *el Periódico* published an investigative article that named military officers and government officials who allegedly profited from mafia activities, including trafficking in drugs, kidnapping, and extortion, the Portillo government sent tax auditors to the newspaper for forty days. After a related column directly criticized a high-placed general, twelve well-organized assailants invaded Zamora's home and terrorized him and his family for two hours. Zamora sent his family abroad and then, in typical fashion, investigated his assailants and named them in an exposé. Many had connections to the president's staff, military intelligence, and state security offices. Only two were brought to trial, and only one was convicted. During the ordeal, *Prensa Libre* lent editorial support to Zamora, who kept up the heat.

## Analysis

Table 1 compares the cases across a number of variables suggested by the three models as possible causes for journalistic behavior. The precondition for all of these newspapers—all founders of prodemocracy journalism in their countries—was that the external environment was liberal enough for news organizations to behave autonomously and assertively at least to some degree, while representing a diversity of voices and perspectives. None had government censors in the newsroom, as during previous military governments. The press environment today in Latin America's electoral democracies is much more open, a threshold has been passed, and yet severe pressures on news content sometimes still arise and hypothetically can explain the variation in democratic journalism that we see across countries and across time. However, this study finds weak evidence for such a hypothesis.

The comparison of Latin America's founding democratic newspapers shows that variation in the external environment of news production is not enough to explain differences in news media performance. There is no systematic pattern showing that economic pressure, political pressure, violence against journalists, or legal pressure, in any combination, determined the strength of democratic journalism in these four newspapers. However, consistently across each case, whether a newspaper's organizational leaders had an ideological affinity for the political or economic program of the government in office correctly predicted press behavior. Sometimes this occurred even when environmental cues worked against such behavior.

While these measures are admittedly blunt given the secondary nature of the sources, the pattern is consistent in all cases. Therefore, although we cannot rule out the importance of environmental fluctuations after a threshold of liberalization has been passed, researchers should concentrate just as strongly on what is going on inside news organizations. Leadership orientations and their effect on organizational culture matter greatly, especially because of vertical decision-making structures and the shallow roots of journalistic

professionalism in countries that have experienced harsh repression within living memory. To understand what creates journalism that helps to activate participatory citizenship, broaden representation to marginal groups, and hold governments accountable for their actions, it is time to look more closely inside news organizations.

Table 1. Press Environment, Organizational Leadership, and Strength of Democratic Journalism in Four Newspapers

Democratic Journalism: Stronger or Weaker	Economic Pressures	Political Pressures	Violence	Legal Pressures	Leaders' Affinity with President, Government
<i>La Epoca</i>					
Stronger	P	P-D	P-D	P	A
Weaker	P	A	A	L	P
<i>Página/ 12</i>					
Stronger	A	P	P	L	A
Weaker	P	A	A	L	P
<i>Siglo 21</i>					
Stronger	A	P	P	L	A
Weaker	A	A	A	L	P
<i>elPeriódico</i>					
Stronger	P	P	P	L	A

P == present  
P-D == present, decreasing  
A == absent  
L == latent; on books, but not used

