

## From standardization to deskilling: The unintended consequences of Mexican journalism's modernization

*De la estandarización a la descualificación:  
las consecuencias indeseadas de la  
modernización del periodismo mexicano*

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2019i0.7072>

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This article proposes a new interpretation of the modernization of Mexican journalism. Based on interviews with journalists from three northern Mexican states that have been recognized as pioneers in the modernization of national journalism, it shows how the standardization of news production has generated –as its unintended consequence– a deskilling of journalistic work.

**KEYWORDS:** Deskilling, standardization, modernization, journalism, Mexico.

*Este artículo propone una nueva interpretación sobre la modernización del periodismo mexicano. A partir de entrevistas a periodistas en tres estados del norte de México que han sido identificados como pioneros de la modernización del periodismo nacional, se muestra cómo la estandarización de la producción de noticias ha generado –a manera de consecuencia indeseada– una descualificación del trabajo periodístico.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Descualificación, estandarización, modernización, periodismo, México.

### How to cite:

Reyna García, V. H. (2019). From standardization to deskilling: The unintended consequences of Mexican journalism's modernization. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, e7072. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32870/cys.v2019i0.7072>

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Submitted: 17/12/17. Accepted: 12/02/18. Published: 21/02/19.

## INTRODUCTION

There is an open debate regarding the scope and limitations of Mexican journalism's modernization (Reyna, 2016). On the one hand, Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002) suggest that there was a normative change that eroded the collusion institutionalized during the Partido Revolucionario Institucional's (PRI) hegemony. On the other hand, González (2013) and Márquez (2012) argue that this change produced continuity, since it was interpreted and practiced with ambiguity to reproduce the informative and financial dependence on the State.

In both cases, the transformation is conceptualized and analyzed through the liberal model of journalism<sup>2</sup> in order to study whether the change projected was accomplished or not. Although these studies clarify various aspects obscured by the once dominant deficit perspectives (Arredondo, Fregoso & Trejo, 1991; Trejo, 2001; Villamil, 2005), they do not examine the process in its entirety insofar as they focus on the ways in which Mexican journalism's professional culture has or has not been improved (that is, on the intended consequences of professionalization).

Following Beck (2013), this article presents a new reading of Mexican journalism's modernization. Instead of its scope and limitations from a professional culture perspective, it proposes to analyze the unintended consequences of the process from a labor perspective. This implies, firstly, that the analysis is not aimed at ratifying or refuting the modernization hypothesis and, secondly, that it focuses on the dysfunctions of the transformation of news production rather than on professional norms.

As noted by Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002), the change began during the 1970's in Northern Mexico, in Nuevo León, when Alejandro Junco was named general director of the newspaper *El Norte* and reorganized it according to the liberal model of journalism. During this development—these authors do not acknowledge—both the professional

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<sup>2</sup> Hallin and Mancini (2004) define the liberal model of journalism through three primary characteristics: the press' neutral and objective orientation and its autonomy from the State, a strong professionalism characterized by its self-regulation, and the predominance of the market in news production.

norms and working conditions, relations and organizations were transformed. These actions were intended to reconfigure journalists' professional profile and to eradicate their practices of corruption and incompetence.

In sociological terms, professional and labor norms were standardized in order to “discard unlimited diversity” (Star & Lampland, 2009, p. 8). This way, the infinite conditions to practice journalism were reduced to a controllable number and a well-defined news production model was established, supplying the newspapers with greater efficacy, calculation, prediction, and control (Ritzer, 1996). This allowed its reproduction in Baja California and Sonora through the newspapers owned by Grupo Healy and later, the national expansion of Grupo Reforma, *El Norte*'s publisher.<sup>3</sup>

As such, the intended consequences of standardization were, on the one hand, to prevent journalists from deviating from the norm and, on the other, a mimesis of a production model in organizations associated with Grupo Reforma. Nevertheless, because it entailed a strict division of labor and it implied dissociation between conception and execution (Braverman, 1998), it has also produced unintended consequences: the deskilling of news work<sup>4</sup> and the reduction of journalists hired as reporters to compilers of public officials' statements.

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<sup>3</sup> During the 1980's, Grupo Healy and Grupo Reforma established a collaborative relationship through which the former's newspapers' production was reorganized under advisement by the latter. Over the course of the first stage, *El Imparcial* replicated the news production model of *El Norte*. Once the replicability of the model was confirmed, both publishing groups began their expansion: Grupo Healy founded *La Crónica* in 1990 and *Frontera* in 1999, in Baja California, while Grupo Reforma did the same with *Reforma*, in 1993, in Mexico City; *Mural*, in 1998, in Jalisco, and the currently defunct *Palabra*, in 1997, in Coahuila. Currently, Grupo Reforma is the most important publishing group in the country.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of deskilling has been defined as “the process of eliminating (or reducing) the required individual (specific) skills as part of a system of operations” (Oxford Reference, 2009). Within journalism, it includes the standardization and simplification of complex tasks in order to improve efficiency, calculation, prediction, and control in newsrooms.

Based on 64 unstructured interviews with journalists and former journalists employed in the leading newspapers published in Baja California, Nuevo León and Sonora, three Northern states considered pioneers of Mexican journalism's modernization (Hughes, 2009; Lawson, 2002; Schmitz, 2008), this article studies the dysfunctions of the standardization process. The actors' experiences and perceptions demonstrate how the idealized change has been expressed in an unintended manner to diminish the skills that are necessary to work as a journalist (deskilling).

The article is organized in three sections. The first section presents a conceptual framework regarding the unintended consequences of modernization, which proposes a new perspective to explore Mexican journalism's transformation. The second section describes the research design, justifying the choice of unstructured interviews and non-probabilistic chain sampling, better known as snowball sampling, as research techniques. The third section analyzes the relationship between standardization and deskilling in journalism.

#### THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF JOURNALISM'S MODERNIZATION

In their research on Mexican journalism, Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002) describe an unprecedented "opening", "change", "democratization", "modernization", "professionalization" and "transformation". Although they frequently refer to the adoption of the liberal model of journalism's standards, they never use the concept of standardization. Generally speaking, the notion of standardization tends to have a negative connotation, and using it to describe a positive phenomenon would be contradictory.

Nevertheless, in a strict sense, the change they describe is standardization. If this concept is defined as "the act of forcing an organization to use specific standards to satisfy particular needs each time they emerge in the organization" (Oxford Reference, 2008), the transformation process initiated at *El Norte* following the promotion of Junco may be best understood in that way, since it consisted of the establishment of several standards intended to produce ample amounts of news in an efficient and predictable manner.

In contrast with Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002), who suggest that the main objective of the transformation was to create critical and independent journalism thereby contributing to Mexico's democratization, the concept of standardization is more realistic than it is idealistic and allows us to inquire into an element never before addressed: the coordination strategy of news organizations. Beyond the ambiguity of notions such as "openness", "change" and "modernization", the organizational coordination strategy is what regulates the adoption or imposition of specific production standards.

According to March and Simon (1958), the distinctive character of standardization relies on three factors: the normalization of semi-manufactured products for their ulterior processing, the interchangeable nature of the parts and time coordination between each sub-process. Instead of an organizational coordination based on planning or feedback, this one is aimed at "reducing the infinite number of things in the world, both potential and real, to a moderate number of well defined variables" (p. 181).

In contemporary sociological theory, Ritzer (1996) goes further and describes a superior phase of standardization: McDonaldization. Suggesting that "the principles ruling the operation of fast food restaurants have been promptly dominating an increasing number of aspects of American society and the rest of the world" (p. 15). These principles are: efficiency (optimal method), calculation (objective measurement), prediction (homogeneous production capacity) and control (strict resource administration).

These conceptualizations provide a better understanding of the ways in which Junco, at *El Norte* in Nuevo León, and José Santiago Healy, at *El Imparcial* in Sonora, reorganized their newspapers and began their expansion. They both implemented a coordination by standardization in order to prevent their employees from practicing their own interpretation of journalism and to limit them to reproduce the organization's model. They also created reporting and editing standards (efficiency), news quotas (calculation and prediction) and a strict division of labor (control).

This transformation differs from those that occurred in newspapers such as *La Jornada* or *Proceso*, in Mexico City, or *Zeta*, in Baja

California, insofar as it not only did not emerge from a cooperative undertaking or from an innovation by individual journalists (that is, through coordination via feedback), but instead it happened as a result of a productive reorganization in which an objectivity regime was imposed. This “general model to conceive, define, organize and evaluate journalistic texts, practices and institutions” (Hackett & Zhao, 1998, p. 86) prioritizes distanced observation over ideological critique.

This objectivity regime was taken to the next level at *El Norte* first and at *El Imparcial* later in order to establish a totalitarian system that captured every aspect of news production. Everything, from behavior and sartorial choice to modes of gathering, writing and editing information, was standardized through and governed by the objectivity norm. Even journalists’ lifeworld was colonized when it was decreed that they had to “read newspapers and magazines and to listen to and watch newscasts everyday” (Grupo Reforma, 1999, p. 6) in order to do their jobs.

Through Beck (2013), in addition to the intended consequences, the unintended consequences of this transformation can be examined. In this case, standardization’s dysfunctions are the deskilling of news work and the demotion of reporters to compilers of statements. Márquez (2012) researches this phenomenon from the sociology of professions perspective and discovers ambiguity in the interpretation and practice of objectivity. This article proposes to study this phenomenon from the perspective of the sociology of work in order to highlight the relevance of job design and control.<sup>5</sup>

In this viewpoint, it is not the failure but the success of modernization the one that –as an unintended consequence– demotes journalists hired as reporters to compilers of public officials’ statements. This happens because by standardizing news production and imposing an objectivity regime, the skills required to work as a journalist are degraded in pursuit of efficiency, calculation, prediction and control. When the marching

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<sup>5</sup> The concepts of work design and job control are tightly linked since the former refers to the content, methods, and relationships of a specific task (Rush, 1971) and the latter describes “an individual’s ability to influence on what happens in his or her work environment” (Ganster, 2011).

orders are to fill newspaper spaces with brief notes on public officials, the fact that the employees' want and can do watchdog reporting becomes irrelevant.

### THE UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEW AS A RESEARCH TECHNIQUE

Semi-structured interviews prevail in studies on Mexican journalism's modernization (González, 2013; Hughes, 2009; Márquez, 2012). The reason is that the actors' experiences and perceptions, rather than the analysis of the contents they publish, allow for a better reconstruction of Mexican journalism's contemporary history and help identify patterns of change and continuity. Although some research projects use mixed methods, their arguments are usually based on the evidence recollected through interviews.

In spite of using the same research method, the main difference between foreign and national academics lies in their participant selection: while Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002) interviewed directors and editors, González (2013) and Márquez (2012) extended their sample to include reporters. This explains, at least in part, their divergence, given that leaders tend to portray a favorable image of the organization they work for, while employees in entry-level positions tend to communicate the opposite.

Considering that interviews are an appropriate data-gathering research technique for tracing the transformation process initiated during the 1970's, this article is based on 64 unstructured interviews with journalists and former journalists from the above-mentioned newspapers in Baja California, Nuevo León and Sonora, three Northern states that were pioneers in the Mexican journalism's modernization (Hughes, 2009; Lawson, 2002; Schmitz, 2008). Former journalists were included in order to increase the size of the sample and to observe patterns of change and continuity within news organizations.

Unstructured interviews were chosen over semi-structured interviews insofar as the former offers more flexibility and facilitates an inductive approach which privileges participants' experiences and perceptions over the researcher's hypotheses. Given that research regarding the phenomenon of interest –the relationship between

standardization and deskilling of news work in Mexico— is quite scarce, it was important to approach the interviewees' expressions with an open mind and to avoid preconceived ideas from guiding the fieldwork.

In contradistinction to structured or semi-structured interviews, this research technique lacks a pre-established order of questions—resembling a conversation— and questions are asked in response to answers. This type of interview is recommended when, as it is often with journalists; the target population is hard to access or distrustful of non-journalists as it offers greater freedom to inquire into emergent issues and to adapt to the particularities of specific interviewees during these conversations (Rojas, 2002).

Similarly, non-probabilistic chain sampling, better known as snowball sampling, has facilitated access to journalist populations and has aided in the identification of the disperse population of former journalists. Through this sampling process, research subjects are chosen based on suggestions made by other members of the population. As its name indicates, like a snowball rolling down a hill, “the size of the sample grows as selected individuals invite their acquaintances to participate” (Ochoa, 2015).

The bulk of the fieldwork for this project drew from three news organizations that established an organizational connectivity in Northern Mexico: *El Norte* in Nuevo León, *El Imparcial* in Sonora and *Frontera* in Baja California, but journalists and former journalists from at least a dozen of other newspapers from those states were also interviewed. Most of the interviewees had worked for more than one newspaper. In some cases, they had worked for *El Norte* and *El Imparcial*, *El Imparcial* and *Frontera*, or *El Norte* and *Frontera*.

The sample was balanced in terms of gender, age and rank: a total of 36 women and 28 men were interviewed, which reflects the increasing feminization of newsrooms. Likewise, journalists corresponding to three generations (*baby boomers*, born between the 1940's and 1950's; *X*, born between the 1960's and 1970's; and *Y*, born between the 1980's and 1990's) were interviewed in order to compare generational perspectives regarding the transformation process. All interviews were transcribed manually and analyzed using QDA Miner Lite.



## FROM STANDARDIZATION TO DESKILLING

One of the aspects of *El Norte*'s and Grupo Reforma's productive reorganization that Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002) emphasize is the consultation offered by the American professor, Mary Gardner. According to the authors, her collaboration –which spanned two decades, from 1975 to 1995– was crucial insofar as it facilitated the implementation of the liberal model of journalism in an organization that intended to eliminate corrupt and incompetent practices. In this sense, her contribution would have been to get Mexican journalism out of its “underdevelopment” and to modernize it in accordance with American journalism's standards.

Ethnocentric highlights the intended consequences of the transformation and ignores its unintended consequences because it focuses on remarking the benefits of the “Americanization” or “detraditionalization” of Mexican journalism. However, such change has generated a series of dysfunctions that, four decades after its inception, have transitioned from a latent to a manifest state to express in form a generational and cultural clash, which is increasing the turnover rates in the newspapers explored by this project.

Based on fieldwork conducted in Baja California, Nuevo León and Sonora, this article identifies two interpretations and responses to the standardization of news production: on one hand, baby boomers and generation X journalists, who were part of the transformation that began in the 1970's, argue that the objectivity regime and its constitutive elements –such as non-partisanship, balance and inverted pyramid– are still relevant and are the best way to practice journalism; on the other hand, journalists from generation Y challenge these ideals and practices.

As such, standardization is dysfunctional both due to the deskilling of news work that it fosters and due to the generational conflict that it generates. The conflict extends beyond the generational clash between college-educated journalists and those who were trained in the newsrooms (González, 2017) and it is being resolved through the resignation of the generation that refuses to adapt to an old-fashioned model of news production. Thus, standardization and deskilling

become spaces of ideological dispute and are turning newspapers into transitional spaces.

#### THE STANDARDIZATION OF NEWS PRODUCTION

At *El Norte*, the standardization process established an objectivity regime that emphasized brevity, clarity and simplicity in news production. Under this model, the news article, written following an inverted pyramid structure, in which information is organized in descending order of importance, was established as the dominant genre. Within this genre, the essence of news (what, who, when, where, and why) must be summarized in the first paragraph, which must not exceed 35 words. The remaining paragraphs may be up to 45 words long (Grupo Reforma, 1999, p. 10).

This way of producing news provides newspapers with efficiency, calculation, prediction and control (Ritzer, 1996). Efficiency is a byproduct of a methodological optimization which dictates how the journalist must do their job, from the recollection to the composition of information. Calculation is based on the number of articles each reporter must produce, the size of each paragraph and article. Despite the diversity of matters and sources, this makes news production homogeneous (predictability) and makes journalists easily replaceable.

From this perspective, the relevance of Gardner's counseling resides not only in the "openness" or "change" that it triggered, but in the newsroom workshop it created in order to attract and shape new talent. Replicated by *El Imparcial*, *La Crónica* and *Frontera* with the aid of the same professor, this workshop standardized news production and established the objectivity regime as the new norm, training the new generations both on the technical and ideological fronts so that they would better accept the then new model of news production.

Within this context, in addition to standards, numerous directors, editors and reporters circulated between Baja California, Nuevo León and Sonora in an effort to guarantee the adequate implementation of the model in newly founded or transforming organizations. For instance, Martín Holguín and Javier Villegas, who were promoted to deputy directors of the editorial department of *El Imparcial*, the most important

position after the directors (who are the owners), came from *El Norte*. Likewise, journalists trained at *El Norte* were recruited for *Frontera* and *La Crónica*:

The Healys are a bad copy of the Juncos in every sense. I came fleeing the formality of *El Norte*, I have always hated formality and (joining *Frontera*); I realize that the Healys suffer from the same delusions, the same complex of believing that you must be very formal and wear a tie. They are cut from the same cloth. In fact, their stylebook is almost identical, copied from *El Norte*. That is, everything ... the first paragraph, a headline with a verb, an introductory paragraph containing 30 words or less, two introductory paragraphs and the third one with a quote, in quotation marks and always quotation marks with “he/she added”, “said”, “announced”, etcetera, the data table on the side ... everything is exactly the same. In that sense, (when I left *El Norte* for *Frontera*) it was easy, since I had taken the workshop at *El Norte* (Personal communication, Journalist 1, male, 42 years old, Baja California).

Standardization is closely linked to routinization. In terms of social reproduction, the former is the development of the pattern while the latter is the reproduction of that pattern. Due to the complexity of the news production process, standardization and routinization of news work are necessary. Without this predictability, without these behavioral patterns, journalists would have to decide how to gather and process information about each event and they might not be able to keep up with the production pace.

Journalism has always been governed by routines. Even when it was artisanal, journalists had to habituate and routinize their actions in order to transform their writings into published articles. With industrialization, these tasks were distributed among more people (division of labor), each of whom was specialized in a specific task. The modernization process that began in the 1970's reaffirmed and further standardized reporting and editing routines within Northern Mexican newspapers in an effort to minimize their ambiguity.

In these newspapers, the routine of a journalist hired as a reporter usually includes three steps: first, within the organization, they organize

their daily schedule alongside their superiors; second, outside the organization, they gather the solicited information as well as their editors' last minute requests; finally: inside the organization, they write the news article based on the information they have gathered. As a result of the digital expansion of newspapers, during the second step, journalists are also asked to write and send news from the field.

Some of the journalists interviewed in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora do not perceive their jobs as monotonous. They explained that they like “that no day is like any other; I like the advantage and disadvantage, for lack of a better phrase, that journalism both offers us the opportunity and forces us to reinvent ourselves every day” (Personal communication, Journalist 2, female, 25 years old, Sonora). To them, fieldwork outside of the newsroom is exciting because, to some extent, it is unpredictable; on the other hand, they characterize writing in the newsroom as monotonous and tedious.

In some cases, the enthusiasm for the fieldwork diminishes over time. When it is combined with a lack of growth opportunities and the repetition of tasks, even this facet of news work comes to be considered monotonous. The daily repetition of these tasks makes journalists feel stagnant and start developing turnover intentions. This is more evident in journalistic organizations with little vertical movement, such as *El Norte* and *El Imparcial*:

I already feel stagnant, I feel stuck. Writing an article or conducting an interview no longer thrills me. I feel as though it is the same thing over and over again. I ask the same questions. Yes, it is interesting, but, for example, in terms of entrepreneurs ... I have interviewed lots (of people) and I always ask the same questions, since it is what we are supposed to ask: “How did you come up with the idea?”, “How much was the initial investment?”, “What are your plans?”, and “Which market are you targeting?” It is always the same thing... So I feel stuck in that regard. I feel as though I am no longer enjoying my job, which I dislike because I always ... I promised myself I would not give up journalism ... at least not yet ... But if I feel frustrated by what I do, by the job itself (and because of the limited opportunities for a promotion). I feel as though I do it in automatic (Personal communication, Journalist 3, female, 29 years old, Nuevo León).

Despite this, newspapers do not modify their working structure. Most of the organizations included in this research project impose a quota on their reporters of five articles per day. Because they have a print edition and a digital one, and because they are both written by the same staff, some reporters can produce up to 10 articles in a single day. Half of these articles are reduced versions for the digital edition and the other half are corrected and enlarged articles for the print version. In return, their wages oscillate between 8 000 and 15 000 Mexican pesos per month.

In order to satisfy these quotas, reporters develop adaptive strategies that range from phone interviews with people they could have interviewed in person to exchanging information with colleagues from other media outlets. These actions are starkly opposed to the objectivity regime and, specifically, to the notion that they must be present at the site of the events in order to report the “facts the way they are”, as well as to the notion of exclusivity implemented through the modernizing project. However, they employ these types of strategies because they are otherwise not able to produce what is demanded from them:

Look at this (WhatsApp group). Announcements, pictures, pictures ... My rival is sending me pictures and locations ... From *La Jornada*, *El Sol de Tijuana*, *Uniradio*, *El Mexicano*, *Telemundo*, they are all sending pictures ... Pictures I am perfectly able to use in the newspaper. Reporters, after all I have told you, are going through the same stuff. There is no boss, no editor (in this group). This makes our lives easier. We all have virtually the same information, we all share it ... everything that’s uploaded here is public. The quotas are huge and I can’t run around like crazy (covering them all). So, for me, this group is a relief because, if I miss a picture, I know I’ll be able to have access to one here. The rivalry that existed before, when we had to protect our pictures so that our rivals would not have access to them, has disappeared (Personal communication, Journalist 4, male, 34 years old, Baja California).

## THE DESKILLING OF NEWS WORK

From the sociology of professions, Márquez (2012) argues that Mexican journalism’s modernization did not generate its intended effect insofar

as norms like as objectivity were ambiguously interpreted and practiced in order to maintain the pro-government slant that they were supposed to eradicate. Instead of interpreting these norms from a nonpartisan and balanced standpoint, she suggests that journalists considered them as a function of reproducing statements without expressing any judgment: “My objectivity is: I went to a press conference, I am only passing on what they said, and that is all” (Journalist cited in Márquez, 2012, p. 103).

From a sociology of labor perspective, the practice of journalism as the reproduction of public officials’ statements can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the lack of job control expressed by most of the journalists interviewed prevents them from being able to define their tasks and methods, so they are forced to produce the type of news determined by the organization that employs them. On the other hand, once it acquires a given character, this way of doing (or not doing) journalism is socially reproduced from one generation to the next until it is questioned and challenged.

Together, these analytical perspectives help narrow the interpretation and execution of objectivity to the design of news work. In other words, this professional norm is reduced to the reproduction of statements without expressing any judgments because this is how it has been designed and not only because this is how some journalists perceive it. This argument finds support through the fieldwork conducted in Northern Mexico, where many reporters insist that their marching orders are to generate news based on public officials’ statements:

The media is interested only in public officials’ statements; that is what they look for, that is what they want ... If you give them something else, well, if they have some space left on Sunday, maybe they will include it ... If it is a story or something similar ... But, really, they are only interested in that: (what they say), the numbers of public officials, and that is it ... For instance, if they were interested in a subject such as marijuana legalization, (they would tell you): “find the Health Secretary and tell him/her that you are interested in his/her opinion on the legalization of marijuana”. If you are able to get something else, somebody (else) to tell you something (else), good ... But if you only had the (public official) statement (they would

tell you): “that is it, write the article using the statement; this is what we care about” (Personal communication, Journalist 5, female, 26 years old, Sonora).

This creates a paradox: informative journalism, governed by the objectivity norm, arises in opposition to the subjectivity of opinion journalism, but in this sociopolitical context it is articulated to collect public officials’ opinions and to present them as objective information, free from the point of view of the reporter. As such, it is an opinion-based journalism mediated by the strategic ritual of objectivity, which protects journalists from accusations of partisanship (Tuchman, 1999).

However, this is not a byproduct of failure but of the success of the modernization developed by Junco in Grupo Reforma and reproduced by Healy in Grupo Healy. Specifically, it is derivative of a division of labor that has established that certain journalists must devote themselves to a watchdog journalism that sets an agenda, while the rest must limit themselves to generating daily news based on the recollection of public officials’ statements. The rationale for this division is producing large amounts of news, but without neglecting agenda-setting in order to lead both fronts.

Despite its benefits in terms of efficiency, calculation, prediction and control, this division of news labor is also dysfunctional. Firstly, it limits the professional development of the journalists assigned to daily news production, since they are not offered the opportunity to carry out investigative journalism (in other words, they are deskilled though task delimitation). Secondly, the promotion from daily news reporter to investigative reporter is not always possible. Finally, reporters assigned to investigative tasks must generate high impact stories each week.

In *El Imparcial and Frontera*, where the number of employees is smaller than at *El Norte* and where daily news reporters are usually jealous of investigative reporters, the division of labor among reporters is porous rather than solid and it is often that reporters assigned to a special investigations have to act as wild cards to also cover daily news. Given the fact that their role is questioned and their job continuity is precarious, they feel compelled to accept the additional workload:

No matter what happens, you have to turn in one article per week. These jobs are ... your sources rule (you depend on their availability) ... they involve transparency requests answered in ... For starters, a transparency request is answered in one or two weeks. Then, in that sense, like (that idea that) “you have to do this, you have to do that this week” (is not entirely coherent). At the same time, if other things come up during the day (they tell you): “Do this, help us with that” (Personal communication, Journalist 6, female, 25 years old, Baja California).

The possibility of working as investigative reporters can create job satisfaction and prevent journalists from developing turnover intentions. A now former reporter from *El Norte*, who expressed doubts about her future in journalism due to the limited growth opportunities available for her, stated that the only way she imagined herself working as a reporter in the future was if she could do watchdog journalism, although she knew that “who does investigative journalism is very type casted” (Personal communication, Journalist 3, female, 29 years old, Nuevo León).

However, investigative journalism is not a panacea. Due to the aforementioned ambiguity of functions, during the past decade, several reporters assigned to special investigations at *El Imparcial* and *Frontera* have resigned. Some of them even after they were awarded employee of the year recognitions. In every case, there was discomfort with the newspapers’ editorial orientation and with the increasingly limited number of topics they were able to write about. Some even declared that investigative journalism is turning into a mechanism for political blackmail.

As such, like the jobs performed by daily news reporters, the labor of investigative reporters is also being deskilled. They may have been trained in the best universities and they might have the intention to contribute to social change, but if the news organization that hires them decides that they are not allowed to address certain issues that might compromise their financial and political interests, they have no choice but to accept these directives because they lack decision-making power (labor control).



In Junco's and Healy's modernizing project, the division of news labor has separated conception from execution (Braverman, 1998). Consequently, journalists have been deprived of their ability to define their own work. It is not that they lack agency, but that in an organizational context they are hired to reproduce a news production model that was instituted four decades ago and not to practice their own understanding of journalism. If they attempt to diverge from the pre-established script, they are immediately punished and threatened with being fired.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article proposes a new reading of Mexican journalism's modernization. Instead of focusing on the scope and limitations of change from a professional culture perspective, it analyzes its unintended consequences from a labor perspective. With the reference of Northern Mexico's leading newspapers, which headed the modernization project that began in the 1970's, it focuses on the standardization of news production and its consequences in terms of skills.

The fieldwork carried out in Baja California, Nuevo León and Sonora suggests that standardization produces a deskilling that demotes journalists hired as reporters to gatherers of statements. This article argues that this is not necessarily the result of journalists' ambiguous interpretation and practice, but rather an outcome of the way in which news work was designed and the logic of the prevailing news production model. As such, a key factor that prevents journalists from reaching their professional ideals is that they lack job control.

The limitations of this article correspond to those of the modernization project. Contrary to what Hughes (2009) and Lawson (2002) suggest, and as González (2013) and Márquez (2012) imply, we maintain that Mexican journalism's modernization has not been a nationwide phenomenon, having reached only a limited number of news organizations. As such, through the concept of standardization, we paid attention to the organizational connectivity established between Grupo Reforma and Grupo Healy in an effort to analyze one of the most expansive transformation projects.

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