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COLUMN ONE

## For Good Press, Slip 'Em Pesos

**In Mexico, candidates and officials often pay hefty sums for positive news coverage. Much of the cash comes out of public funds.**

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ZACATECAS, Mexico — The local press was ignoring her state congressional campaign here, so Maria Dolores Mendivil started asking people in her party why. The answer shocked her. To get any attention, she'd have to fork over \$1 million.

That's the going rate for a *convenio*, or deal, that candidates in many Mexican states pay to local media during the campaign season to get favorable stories — and avoid unflattering ones.

"I would say to reporters in the cafes, 'You interviewed me — why don't you publish anything?' They told me that the National Action Party candidates were banned, obviously because we hadn't paid," Mendivil said.

She was trounced in the July 4 elections here in the central state of Zacatecas, as were most other candidates on her National Action Party, or PAN, slate.

Mendivil, 39, a political neophyte who immigrated illegally to Texas as a teenager and returned home with dreams of making a difference in her native state, ran head-on into a reality that more seasoned politicians — and sports stars, singers, businesspeople and other aspiring luminaries — were only too aware of: Press coverage in Mexico often carries a price tag.

"I came thinking the press was open and free, something cleaner," Mendivil said. "But in reality it is very dirty."

In many ways, Mexican news media have come a long way since the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI, began loosening its grip on most facets of Mexican life more than

a decade ago. State-owned television and radio stations have been privatized, and newspapers have modernized. Some news outlets that were once government mouthpieces are now more independent, especially those in the northern border states.

Newspapers such as *Zeta* of Tijuana wage fearless campaigns against corruption in high places. *Proceso* magazine and *Reforma* newspaper, which serve nationwide audiences, say they enforce a strict code of ethics. Freedom of expression has improved, analysts agree, since the 2000 election of President Vicente Fox, who ran on a platform of transparency and change.

But candidates and government officials from Chihuahua and Veracruz states, from Oaxaca and Nuevo Leon, say that many old corrupt practices, such as the *convenio*, remain in place. They say they have no choice but to enter into the deals with owners of local media or watch their careers or candidacies suffer from negative news coverage or neglect.

Press experts say they know of no instance in which anyone has been prosecuted for paying *convenios* or receiving them. They add that *convenios* are much more rare — but not unheard of — in big-city media than in those of the outlying states.

On top of the *convenios*, which function rather like long-term contracts with media bosses, there are the *chayotes* — one-time direct payments to reporters. Although much less common than 25 years ago, when reporters received cash-stuffed envelopes at Christmas and President Jose Lopez Portillo gave those covering him Rolex watches, *chayotes* are still very much in vogue in outlying states. The *chayotes*, whose name comes from the Spanish word for a tasty but spiny squash-like vegetable, can take the form of commissions for "publicity packages" that reporters sell to candidates or, in the case of Morelos state, even title to small parcels of land.

What many Mexicans don't realize is that much of the money paid to the media in the under-the-table deals comes out of public funds.

Such payouts, which come on top of legitimate advertising, ultimately hurt the Mexican economy by diverting resources from more productive enterprises. The arrangements also distort the political discourse in a number of ways, most obviously by keeping underfunded or overly scrupulous candidates from running.

"To run, candidates have to link themselves to people with resources. In no way does that contribute to democracy," said Francisco Lopez, the PAN candidate for Zacatecas governor who lost along with Mendivil.

The *convenios* are typically unwritten but quite specific in terms of what the politicians' money entitles them to — so many stories and photos per week in newspapers and a fairly specific number of references on TV and radio programming. Just as important, the deals offer insurance against negative stories.

"The deals guarantee you favorable appearances on the local TV station or in the newspaper, all

with a positive spin, of you visiting an old-folks home, or cutting a ribbon at a school for handicapped children, or denouncing the lack of public security," said a former federal congressman from Nuevo Leon state who asked not to be identified.

Politicians who don't pay up may find themselves mentioned in stories, often fictional, about officials who nap at public meetings, or car wrecks involving politicians' relatives that leave bystanders disabled. Weak Mexican libel laws give politicians and ordinary citizens little legal recourse to demand retraction of or compensation for such stories.

"You may open the paper to see photos of your wife looking fat or with her hair disheveled," the former lawmaker said.

The deals cost millions of dollars, especially during the campaign season that is in full swing in many Mexican states this year. Officials in both the PAN and the PRI say candidates paid huge sums to the media in Nuevo Leon state last year and are paying similar amounts in Veracruz, where voters go to the polls Sept. 5 to elect a governor and state congress.

An estimated \$50 million was spent on bribes to the media in the 2001 gubernatorial race in Tabasco state, according to Mexican press reports.

Although the deals are usually under the table and only rarely become public, most Mexicans are aware of the corruptibility of the Mexican press as an institution. It is why so many are as cynical about the freedoms of speech and press as they are about having equal access to education, legal recourse and economic opportunity.

One deal that did come to light happened on the eve of Oaxaca state's Aug. 1 gubernatorial election, when the local newspaper Noticias published a front-page story accusing its main rival, Tiempo, of taking \$30,000 a month from the PRI-controlled state government to print favorable news of its candidates. Noticias reproduced alleged receipts to support the accusation.

The next day, Tiempo struck back, accusing Noticias of taking even more money — \$100,000 a month — from the state government for positive coverage of the PRI and also printing alleged receipts. Neither newspaper denied accepting the amounts.

Even when there are no elections, Mexican state governments routinely pay enormous sums of public funds to local newspapers, radio and TV stations, sums that are far above the nominal advertising rates. The extra money is referred to as "understood value" to pay for favorable news coverage, usually of the governor.

The government of Veracruz state, for example, this year budgeted \$8 million for publicity, of which about 40% was thought to go toward illicit payments to media owners and individual reporters, said a columnist in the state capital, Xalapa, who spoke on condition that neither he nor his newspaper be identified.

The benefit for Veracruz Gov. Miguel Aleman, who is considering a run for president in 2006, is apparent to readers of the Xalapa papers. One day this month, his picture was on the front page of five of the city's six main newspapers, typical of the press attention he gets daily, locals say.

An official in his government who also asked for anonymity acknowledged the practice, saying *convenios* were decades old and were observed everywhere in Mexico. "It's a black hole," the official said. "Millions of pesos go into this system of paying the media in Mexico."

The subsidies make possible the existence of far more Mexican newspapers than a market would normally support, said Claudio Lomnitz, a history professor at New School University in New York who has studied the Mexican press. That state of affairs undercuts journalistic professionalism and feeds the *convenios'* vicious cycle.

For example, Xalapa, population 400,000, has no fewer than 18 newspapers, whereas only one or two would exist if they were forced to depend on advertising revenue to survive, locals say.

The arrangements also impede Mexico's march toward First World status, said William Orme, a U.N. Development Program official and a former reporter for The Times who wrote a book about Mexico's press.

"One of the big obstacles to economic growth is corruption, and to the extent that the local and national press in Mexico aids and abets corruption, it is a real drag on development," Orme said.

The practice of paying off the press has its roots in a century-long tradition of government control of the media, which was lifted only in the early 1990s, when then-President Carlos Salinas de Gortari permitted the foundation of a second national television network, TV Azteca, to compete with long-established and influential Televisa.

Salinas also privatized state-owned newsprint plants and lifted restrictions on imported newsprint. Previously, the government used its monopoly of newsprint supply to threaten adversarial newspapers with extinction. As the nation's biggest advertiser through most of the last century, it exerted life-or-death power over newspapers merely by parceling out ads to newspapers it favored.

"Salinas realized he needed an independent press to know what was going on," Orme said. "It's a big, complex country, and he saw the danger of the government believing its own lies that the opposition was just a tiny slice of people with no programs or credible personalities."

President Fox and the PAN have said publicly that neither he nor his party condone subornation of the press. He is credited with pushing for a 2002 transparency law that gave the press more access to public information, part of a general move to increase government openness. But

critics say Fox has not done enough to cut the tens of millions of dollars spent on newspaper and television advertising by state-owned monopolies such as Petroleos Mexicanos, the Federal Electric Commission and the Social Security administration. The main purpose of the ads, the critics say, is to buy favorable press coverage.

"The press' relation with the government has moved from one of subordination to collusion," said Jose Carreno, a former spokesman for Salinas and head of Iberoamericana University's Communication, Law and Democracy Program.

Although he sees "growing margins of liberty" for the press under Fox, Carreno says the press is still hampered by the shroud of secrecy surrounding government operations and the way the media do business.

"We still don't know what newspapers' true circulation figures are, what their sources of revenue might be, or when they print news that is really disguised publicity," Carreno said.

Samuel Garcia, former business editor of El Universal and Reforma newspapers of Mexico City, who is about to launch a weekly business magazine in the capital, said the evolution of a truly free Mexican press would take many more years.

"We have not had a civic culture. Democracy is still a new thing in Mexico. Mexicans see the press as a defender of the economic and political elites, not as an institution that seeks the truth," Garcia said.

"For most media in Mexico, a journalistic code of ethics is merely a decorative object."

The roots of the press complicity also lie in the miserable salaries paid to most Mexican journalists, as little as \$200 to \$400 a month in Veracruz state. It is understood that reporters can accept *chayotes* as a means of supplementing their meager incomes, said Joaquin Garces, president of the reporters association of Xalapa. He said half the reporters in Xalapa take *chayotes*.

"The government does not repress the media here. It doesn't have to," said Garces, who is against *chayotes* and refuses to take them. "The press is afraid that if they are critical, the government will take away the *convenios* and the *chayotes*."

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