

Culture of lawfulness in news articles about crime in the Mexican press

Cultura de la legalidad en notas sobre delitos de la prensa mexicana

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Abstract

Based in the premise that media can contribute to the enforcement of a culture of lawfulness, the presence of messages reinforcing a legal culture in the Mexican newspapers is analyzed. After analyzing a sample of articles from six newspapers based in the cities of Culiacan, Sinaloa (*El Debate*, *Noroeste*, *Primera Hora*) and Guadalajara, Jalisco (*Mural*, *El Informador*, *El Occidental*), we found that these newspapers contribute little to the formation of a culture of lawfulness in a country with spikes in its rates of crime and violence.

Keywords

Culture of lawfulness; newspapers; crime; Sinaloa; Jalisco.

Resumen

Partiendo de la premisa de que los medios de comunicación pueden contribuir al fortalecimiento de una cultura de la legalidad, se analiza la presencia de mensajes reforzadores de cultura legal en la prensa escrita mexicana. Mediante un análisis de notas de seis periódicos con sede en las ciudades de Culiacán, Sinaloa (*El Debate*, *Noroeste*, *Primera Hora*), y Guadalajara, Jalisco (*Mural*, *El Informador*, *El Occidental*), concluimos que los diarios analizados contribuyen poco a la formación de la cultura de la legalidad en un país con alzas en sus tasas de delitos.

Palabras clave

Cultura de la legalidad; periódicos; delitos; Sinaloa; Jalisco.

1. Introduction

In Mexico, country in which crime rates have increased in the last years, it seems necessary that people know and obey the laws in place. In order to talk about people's attitudes towards these ordinances, we will use the concept of *culture of lawfulness*.

As a requirement of a state of law, the existence of a culture of lawfulness implies that the citizens know and adopt these laws, but also, in democratic terms, it also implies that they recognize the importance of respecting individual rights and those of others as well as democratic principles (Salazar Ugarte, 2006). This is due to the fact that lawfulness can be upheld (or be imposed) with the respect for rights and legitimacy. Para Salazar-Ugarte (2006), this is the reason that in a culture of democratic lawfulness "the legitimacy of the laws goes hand in hand with compliance with the laws" (30).

In a context where crimes are constantly committed, the communication media are very important sources of citizen information. Therefore, the media can have a large impact on people's attitudes towards laws and community regulations (Godson, 2000). Likewise, the recent change in the Mexican penal justice system passed in 2008 and with an implementation period of 8 years involves the media. For Lara Klahr (2012) this accusatory penal justice system "implemented appropriately will contribute to Mexico having full right to justice, and that journalists and media have access to correct, unbiased information thanks to the principle of publicity, that will materialize increasingly via the public hearings provided by such accusatory model" (17). This implies that the media inform about crimes committed, their punishments, and follow the legal process while always respecting the principles of presumed innocence and respect for victims. Thus, communication media will play a fundamental role in informing people about different types of events and knowledge of

the law. Therefore, it is possible to reinforce—as well as discourage—via communication media, attitudes that are compatible with a culture of lawfulness.

Under the assumption that society is influenced enormously by the news coverage it sees, some researchers have measured the presence of reinforced content of the culture of lawfulness in the media of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon and the Distrito Federal (Mexico City) (Lozano, Martinez & Rodríguez, 2012; Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, 2014; Sanchez, 2013).

For Lozano, Martinez & Rodríguez (2012), "in their role as journalistic information transmitters, [communication media] have a decisive impact on the education, change and reinforcement of perceptions, attitudes and behavior regarding any social, cultural, or political topic,"(3). In regard to this role of the media, different studies have argued that the media disseminates information that does not contribute to society forming an opinion based more on events that are very common (Gomez & Rodelo, 2012; Hernández & Rodelo, 2010).

This is the reason that in the context of violence that currently exists—not only in Mexico, but in Latin America as a whole—, analyzing the messages of a culture of lawfulness in journalistic notes coming from regions with different media systems and the presence of organized crime groups will reveal to what degree the media reinforce or do not reinforce attitudes that favor compliance with the law and respect for rights, in two of the regions with the highest crime and violence rates in Mexico and that until now have not been studied. In this way, we will analyze the contribution of the printed press in the construction of a culture of lawfulness in the entities mentioned. The results show the modest role that Jalisco and Sinaloa newspapers are having in the construction of a culture of lawfulness.

2. Study Context

For Garzon (in Sanchez-Hernandez, 2013) the relation between violence and lawfulness may outlined with four forms of interaction: (a) violent citizens (attributing violence to people in general as an immediate form of conflict resolution in a scenario of scarce lawfulness exercised by the State); (b) strong State (authorities that manage to decrease crime rates and there is little violence); (c) everybody against everybody (incidence of high levels of violence and high levels of illegality); and (d) illegal monopoly (there are high rates of illegal activity, but controlled violence).

In Garzon's opinion, Mexico falls within the third case ("everybody against everybody"). Sanchez Hernández (2013) considers that it is not enough to have a "strong institutional apparatus", but rather it is necessary that whoever infringes the law be indicated also by sectors of society other than the judicial system. Citizens, then, play an important role by observing that the law is upheld. Therefore, it is necessary to ask: Do Mexicans know the law? Do they know what laws have been passed and the punishment that must be carried out after breaking a law?

The outlook is not good. According to Casar (2015), Most Mexicans do not know the law. The Segunda Encuesta Nacional de Cultura Constitucional indicates that 92.8% of Mexicans know little to nothing about what the *carta magna* sets forth (Casar, 2015). Among the causes for this is the little use Mexicans find in knowing the laws, the small value they assign to knowing the legal precepts (if the law does not favor you or seems unfair, it's valid to stop obeying it), and that Mexicans believe that the law is made to favor the politicians and the rich, as well as considering that justice is only partially applied in Mexico (Casar, 2015). Added to this, Mexicans have expressed via public opinion surveys a decrease in trust of institutions. According to a survey performed by Consulta Mitofsky (2015), the institutions Mexicans trust the most are the university (7.3 on a scale of 1 to 10) and communication me-

dia (6.6); while the institution they trust the least is the police (5.3). The mean rate of trust in institutions is barely 6.2.

The previous data is confirmed in the survey conducted by Tello & Garza (2000). Applied to inhabitants of a low to medium socioeconomic area in Mexico City, the survey indicated that security was a "very big" problem. 21.2% of those surveyed said that the law had no use or only served the interests of the authorities (29.2%), while 32.3% said that it served to make politicians and the rich richer (Tello & Garza, 2000). In this way, its proposed, we can get an idea of why "the law doesn't mean much for Mexicans" (6). For Tello & Garza (2000) "if we don't address the topic of lawfulness seriously and diligently, we will not be in conditions as a society to address the problem of security". This data reveals the society's apathy and mistrust institutions that guarantee public safety.

In reference to the media's role in socializing the culture of lawfulness, according to Casar (2015), print media published 502 journalistic notes and 27 newspaper headlines with the word "corruption" in 1996, while in 2014, 29,505 articles and 2,587 headlines contained this word. Casar affirms that this increase does not necessarily imply an increase in corruption. He relates it with a greater freedom of expression since in the last years there has been an increase in access to public information. Since then, the media has dedicated more space to these topics, and its greater exhibition comes into play in the way in which society perceives it.

Media representation of crime has also changed. For Kessler (2011), "security is a daily section in the newspapers; the dissemination of images, the camera at the scene of the incident, the constant updates in the online newspapers go threading a plot with a limitless number of situations, facts and news" (13). Security, he affirms, is a topic that no longer applies just to large cities, but rather has become a nationwide issue (Kessler, 2011).