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**Smith, Benjamin T. *The Mexican Press and Civil Society, 1940-1976: Stories from the Newsroom, Stories from the Street*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018, 366 pp., \$37.95, (paperback).** Reviewed by Celeste González de Bustamante, University of Arizona (celesteg@email.arizona.edu)

In *The Mexican Press and Civil Society, 1940-1976*, readers meet Judith Reyes, the daughter of working-class parents, who before she became an iconic activist singer during the student movements of 1968, ran the newspaper *Acción* in the northern state of Chihuahua to “report the stories the mainstream media refused to print” (p. 267). As a female publisher, Reyes was an exception of the time, and that is what Benjamin T. Smith focuses on—those geographical, political, economic, and cultural outliers—as he fulfills his purpose to write against the grain of the general historiography about Mexico’s press. Readers benefit from this decision, as the literature that centers on Mexico City-based and national historical events abounds. This holds true for the body of work on the press and other forms of media. The shift to the periphery represents a crucial approach to studies of the press, and one that a growing number of historians and scholars of the contemporary press have begun to embrace.

The book’s periodization spans the so-called “heyday” of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), the “economic miracle” that contributed to a rising middle-class and newspaper readership, and five presidential administrations. In part one, Smith outlines the book’s theoretical framework and three main arguments. First, local newspapers increased and thrived during this time frame. Second, the federal government developed more sophisticated strategies to control the press over time, though the government’s strategies had their limitations. Despite the growing power of the semi-authoritarian regime that ruled the country for more than seventy years, civil society and journalists formed part of “decentered, if limited public spheres” (p. 8). Smith provides evidence of a Mexico with cracks in the façade of PRI hegemony, especially at the state level.

His work sits in stark contrast to scholarship that overstates and overemphasizes ruling party domination. The country’s *dictablanda* (soft dictatorship) had a lot of soft spots. Third, geography mattered: Where a paper was located influenced its role in local communities. As for the book’s theoretical framework regarding the press and civil society, Smith employs both the Habermasian notion of civil society representing a “public sphere of open debate,” and the Toquevillian concept of civil society being “a set of voluntary associations free of state control” (p. 284).

In part two, Smith examines the rise of the national and Mexico City-based press and the government’s implements of control such as the well-known case of the establishment of the State-Run paper company, PIPSA, which ended up subsidizing newspaper print. Importantly, what the author points out, and what diverges from most accounts, is that newspaper owners actually lobbied then President Lázaro Cárdenas to create PIPSA because of wildly fluctuating prices of newsprint imports. There were some economic benefits to the arrangement, but the downside resulted in a lack of autonomy among capital and other newspaper owners, who became dependent on low priced newsprint, a perk that the government threatened to remove if newspaper coverage became too critical of the State.

In an elegantly written history, the reader learns that national level journalists were rather cliquish, and they only experienced repression in extreme cases. This was because, for the most part, capital journalists were close to government leaders and officials and by and large came from similar economic and cultural classes, so journalists “knew their limits” and more often censored themselves to avoid aggressions.

In part three of the book (chapters 6-8), Smith unveils case studies that emphasize episodes in which the interests and efforts of members of civil society and journalists aligned, and he explains how they worked in concert to support the local citizenry. The cases include regional press baron José García Valseca, Alfredo Ramírez Villavicencio—a Oaxacan taxi driver who moonlights as a journalist and publisher, and Chihuahuan publisher Judith Reyes. Aside from relying on research at various Mexican newspaper archives, Smith utilizes recently accessible documents from Mexican intelligence archives such as the Federal Office of Security (Dirección Federal de Seguridad) and the General Directorate of Political and Social Investigations (Dirección General de Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales). These two offices' archives also include U.S. Information Service reports and extensive local and state newspaper collections.

The most innovative contributions of the book begin in chapter 6 as Smith explains the political and class diversity among local journalists and how they were frequently closer in social status to popular groups in their communities. At the state level, journalists had more flexibility to print information that critiqued government officials, but that freedom came at a price in the form of a range of aggressions, from imprisonment and robbery of publications, to destruction of property (e.g. destroying a printing press), to public defamation and murder. Between 1940 and 1970, at least 20 journalists outside of the capital were murdered (p. 181). We learn that because of this flexibility and the collective class consciousness among members of civil society and journalists in the states, these two sectors aligned and pushed forth mutual goals, including to inform the public about government corruption. At the state and local levels, in Smith's case studies, the press functioned as a "fourth estate" with the help of civil society associations.

Despite the book's undeniable contributions to the literature, this reviewer notes three shortcomings.

First, Smith describes how members of the press amplified the voices of civil society through publication, but those members of civil society remain somewhat indiscernible. We get a glimpse, for example, upon reading about members of the Committee Projustice and the Rights of Citizens (Comité Pro-justicia y los Derechos de Ciudadanos, CPJDC), a female-led organization, but the reader is left wanting to learn more about their motivations and their relationships with journalists. Second, journalists themselves became members of civil society such as in the cases of Villavicencio and Reyes, whose voice beyond the printing press supported the demands of popular groups, but for some reason Smith chose not to address this symbiosis. Finally, Smith asks why these local alternative journalists and civil society developed alliances in some instances and not in others. Yet he seems uninterested in responding to the question, though an explanation is critical to understanding the relationship between these two sectors.

Weaknesses aside, the book makes notable contributions and is extremely useful for advancing knowledge about the distinctions between Mexico City-based/national-level journalists and those working in the country's periphery. The historical legacy of the price of flexibility in the periphery remains important today as the body count of murdered journalists continues to mount. While 20 journalists were killed in a thirty-year period in the twentieth century, in just the first two years of Andrés Manuel López Obrador's presidency, more than 22 journalists have been murdered.<sup>1</sup>

Between 2000-2020, well over 150 journalists have been killed. All but a few of the slain journalists were living outside of the capital and working for local and state publications. Historians and contemporary scholars of journalism and media in Mexico must continue to focus on the relationship between civil society and the press in order to better understand the circumstances that have enabled such pervasive and persistent repression.

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<sup>1</sup> Celeste González de Bustamante and Jeannine E. Relly, *Surviving Mexico: Resistance and Resilience*

*among Journalists in the Twenty-first Century* (Austin, TX: The University of Texas Press, 2021).