

## The decline of newspapers. The transformation of the journalistic infrastructure in the Mexican context

*Declive de periódicos.*

*La transformación de la*

*infraestructura periodística en el*

*contexto mexicano*

*Declínio dos jornais. A transformação*

*da infraestrutura jornalística*

*no contexto mexicano*

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The nature of the transformation in journalism infrastructure in Mexico during 2015-2024 is described using a multi-year data source covering the national territory at the municipal level. The analysis found evidence of the decline of newspapers, fragmentation of the newspaper market, and a very small advance in the number of newspaper deserts at the state and municipal levels. It is suggested that the infrastructure analysis should be complemented with studies focusing on the attributes of the information reaching communities.

**KEYWORDS:** Newspapers, fragmentation, news deserts, media systems.

*Se describe la naturaleza de la transformación en la infraestructura del periodismo en el contexto de México durante el periodo 2015-2024 a partir de la utilización de una fuente de datos multianual y que abarca el territorio nacional a nivel municipal. El análisis encontró indicios de declive de periódicos, fragmentación del mercado periodístico y avance mínimo de desiertos de periódicos a nivel estatal y municipal. Se sugiere complementar el análisis de infraestructura con estudios centrados en los atributos de la información que llega a comunidades.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Periódicos, fragmentación, desiertos informativos, sistema de medios.

*A natureza da transformação na infraestrutura jornalística no México durante o período de 2015 a 2024 é descrita utilizando uma fonte de dados plurianual que abrangem o território nacional em nível municipal. A análise encontrou evidências de declínio do mercado jornalístico, fragmentação do mercado jornalístico e progresso mínimo na desertificação de jornais nos níveis estadual e municipal. Sugere-se que a análise da infraestrutura seja complementada com estudos focados nos atributos da informação que chega às comunidades.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Jornais, fragmentação, desertos de informação, sistema de mídia.

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## INTRODUCTION

The literature on changes in contemporary journalism has noted processes of restructuring in this field (Chadwick, 2013; Flew & Waisbord, 2015; Hallin et al., 2021; Lindén et al., 2021; Rodelo, 2023). Globalization, the penetration and adoption of various Internet-based technologies, and the disruption of the advertising market—consequently, the obsolescence of the business model of news media organizations—are among the major drivers of the changes observed both in media systems and, specifically, within the journalistic field over the last two decades.

In this context, there are at least two aspects that deserve further discussion: first, determining which processes of change are impacting the journalistic infrastructure and how. The literature offers several perspectives in this regard: for example, there has been talk of a *fragmentation* of journalism—and, alternatively, of media systems, hence, of the phenomenon of audience segmentation—(Lindén et al., 2021; Mancini, 2013; Waisbord, 2006), the establishment of a global media culture (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), the hybridization of media systems (Chadwick, 2017), and, more dramatically, the decline of journalism (Pickard, 2020).

Second, we must identify the patterns of transformation taking shape at the subnational level. Many of these processes have often been addressed from national perspectives, that is, using the national media system as the unit of analysis. In light of this, revealing patterns at the subnational level is crucial, given that media systems in individual countries are neither homogeneous nor static (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp. 71-72; Sánchez Ruiz, 1992). Understanding and embracing this heterogeneity allowed González Macías and Echeverría Victoria (2018) to explain the paradoxical nature of Mexican journalism, in which trends pushing for modernization coexist with trends that influence the permanence of authoritarian practices. In this sense, looking only at the practices of national media will lead to the assumption that they are representative on a national scale.

In addition to the above, people require local information to navigate their daily lives (Friedland et al., 2012; Usher et al., 2023) and to play

an active role in the public life of their communities (Lindén et al., 2021). Local information primarily originates from the work of news media that produce local journalism—a category of media that has faced obstacles in ensuring its financial sustainability. For these reasons, it is important to determine whether there have been changes in journalistic infrastructure, that is, in the general characteristics of the organizations that produce the kinds of journalism that are most conducive to the availability of the local information necessary for decision-making in everyday life. Can we speak of a decline in local newspapers, or indeed, an increase in geographical areas without newspapers (newspaper deserts)? This study aims to contribute to identifying both the nature of the changes impacting journalistic infrastructure, and their extent at the subnational level. To this end, it first develops the main conceptual tools for describing these processes of change. Second, it outlines the main perspectives on these phenomena in Latin America and Mexico.

One obstacle to clarifying both the characteristics of these changes and their geographical configuration is the lack of comprehensive and up-to-date datasets on the media in Mexico capable of supporting a longitudinal and subnational analysis (González Macías et al., 2023). Thus, this analysis aims to contribute to the discussion on the transformation of the infrastructure of the news media system in Mexico, through evidence provided by a multi-year data source covering the entire country: the National Statistical Directory of Economic Units (hereinafter, DENUE), prepared by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2023).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theoretical perspectives are relevant to studying changes in media systems. The first is the historical-structural model for the study of media (Sánchez Ruiz, 1992), which considers societies to be complex systems composed of subsystems that interact with each other in multiple ways. To analyze complex objects (such as societies), a researcher segments the object of study into dimensions, articulations, and “mediating determinations” at different levels or scales, producing abstractions (concepts) and obtaining “hierarchical” syntheses. Structures (relation-

ships between the components of a system) are more or less stable, but not invariant. Finally, historicity in historical-structural analysis results from the collective behavior of individuals through processes such as conflict and class struggle.

The second pertinent theoretical framework arose from the study *Comparing Media Systems* by Hallin and Mancini (2004). In this text, the two authors supported three ideal types of media systems that are suitable for representing the variety of media systems in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. They concede that media systems are not static and that a process of differentiation must have occurred to distinguish themselves from each other. Thus, the characterization of the main features of Western media systems, as well as their trajectory, is analyzed in the light of perspectives on the differentiation and dedifferentiation of social institutions.

Regarding transformation in the field of journalism, a non-exhaustive list of transformation processes described in the literature in recent decades includes fragmentation, media convergence, media globalization, hybridization, the collapse of local journalism, and tensions in the process of journalism's modernization. These processes coexist and converge, being described at different times in response to specific concerns.

For an analysis of the state of local journalism, Napoli et al. (2017) considered three conceptual dimensions of journalism: its infrastructure, output, and performance. Among these, journalism infrastructure refers to the underlying structure of the media system; therefore, it is the very foundation of democracy, as the existence of free and diverse media outlets and the exercise of freedom of expression are necessary requirements for keeping society informed (Pickard, 2020). More specifically, journalistic infrastructure is primarily embodied in the "number, size, and characteristics of media outlets within a community" (Napoli et al., 2017, p. 377), but there are other relevant dimensions of journalistic infrastructure, such as the regulatory framework for the press.

In the following lines, I will concentrate on the perspectives most appropriate for describing the reconfiguration of journalism infrastructure, while I will not develop concepts that focus on the study of change in journalistic output.

### *The fragmentation of journalism*

In a work published two decades ago, Waisbord (2006) described the Latin American news media sector as no longer being a “unified” institution (p. 66). This fragmentation manifests itself in the diversity of actors participating in the media sector, whose entry costs are lower compared to the past, and where the importance of partisan journalism has declined. For Waisbord, the lack of common references for the profession also contributes to this diversity of actors. Specifically, the author refers to the absence of a “unified canon of professional standards” (p. 70). *Fragmentation* seems to be a term preferred by those who focus not on the deficits and crises of journalism from a normative perspective but rather on describing the reconfiguration of the news media market in terms of: 1) greater diversity of actors participating in the public space (no longer exclusively large companies but also micro-enterprises and individual entrepreneurs, and 2) an increase in the number of media outlets. This is due to two forces: lower entry barriers for digital media mounted on platforms and web portals, and audience hypersegmentation (a strategy to compete in a media market where audiences engage in niche consumption). The development of social media platforms has incentivized 1 and 2, as they provide access with few barriers to entry, not only making audience segmentation possible but also stimulating it (Rodelo, 2022).

An example of this perspective is the work of Lindén et al. (2021), who conclude that fragmentation is the best term for describing the changes in Nordic local journalism. They find that it is currently more difficult for traditional media (such as newspapers) to fulfill the role of serving as a local public sphere. In fact, the local public space is increasingly divided into distinct spaces, including independent media outlets, groups, and individual actors on digital platforms. These spaces are also structured around age, social class, and political preferences (Lindén et al., 2021).

The concept of *technological convergence* designates a more specific process of change, related to the adoption of digital technologies: the blurring of boundaries between previously well-defined technologies (and, therefore, media sectors). In the case of journalism, there has been special interest in the merger of areas of the journalistic organization

that had produced information separately for different types of media. Pioneering case studies have shed light onto this type of transformation occurring within media organizations since the 1990s in the United States (Klinenberg, 2005) and since the 2000s in Mexico (Meneses Rocha, 2010). Technological convergence occurred in Mexico concurrently with the downsizing required by media organizations to adapt to a drastic reduction in print media advertising revenue (Rodelo, 2023).

But convergence does not only concern the blurring of boundaries between technologies; it has also influenced the blurring of media consumption by users who no longer remain confined to one medium but move between platforms (Jenkins, 2008). Here we are talking about digital convergence, a phenomenon that designates the possibility of consuming different messages (text, audio, audiovisual) through fixed or portable electronic devices. This phenomenon has cultural consequences, allowing for the appropriation of audiences, while simultaneously providing more opportunities for media conglomerates to become even larger.

*Hybridization*, on the other hand, is a broader and less precise term that attempts to describe the theoretical characteristics of contemporary media systems and seems to attempt to integrate the described processes of fragmentation and convergence, as well as to emphasize complexity, interdependence, and transition. Hallin et al. (2023) used the term to name the trend in journalism studies that consists of emphasizing the heterogeneity of practices, actors, and institutions and the softening of barriers to entry in the journalistic field. Meanwhile, for Chadwick (2013), the hybrid media system is built around the interactions between the logics of old and new media. These interactions include competition between both logics, chaos, nonlinearity, disintegration, and new patterns of integration, and (in news production) openness, fluidity, and asymmetric interdependence (p. 208).

A different approach to addressing changes in journalism is to focus on local media systems. The aforementioned terms (fragmentation, convergence, and hybridization) are usually used to describe general trends in journalism that are frequently analyzed at the national level. Authors, however, have observed that national media systems can be internally heterogeneous. In the Mexican case, for example, there

have been debates about the uneven media development at the sub-national level and about subnational environments where authoritarian conditions and practices coexist with liberal ones (González Macías & Echeverría Victoria, 2018). One research perspective interested in the effects of changes in journalistic infrastructure on the health of democracy is that of news deserts. From this perspective, the effects of newspaper closures on the quality of information reaching communities have been analyzed (Napoli et al., 2017). This perspective also takes into account the functional decline of newspapers, that is, the decline in the number of newspapers with the capacity to monitor public power attributed to watchdog journalism and the persistence of *ghost* newspapers that do not fulfill this function (Abernathy, 2023).

The news deserts perspective has been criticized for failing to consider either the historical background of newspaper consumption in local media systems or the use of digital media as a source of information replacing print newspapers (Usher, 2023). The use of the term “news desert” to refer to the lack of newspapers in a geographical setting can be considered, from this perspective, misleading, as the absence of this type of media does not necessarily imply that the population lacks alternative sources of information. In this sense, I chose to reframe this situation as a newspaper desert in order to address the geographical dimension of the newspaper decline phenomenon. This distinction between newspaper decline and newspaper desert allows us to describe phenomena of a geographical redistribution of newspapers and to identify areas in which newspapers are absent or insufficient.

## CONTEXT OF STUDY

It has often been assumed that newspapers are the most suitable media for promoting understanding of public affairs (Watson & Cavanah, 2015). One among a number of possible foundations for the idea is technodeterminism, which draws from authors like Postman (1985) and the historical-comparative studies of media systems. For example, Hallin and Mancini (2004) point out important sociohistorical antecedents that influence the drastic differences in readership across three types of Western media systems. Among Mexican media commentators, Sán-

chez Ruiz (1994) alluded to a division of labor among media outlets, in which newspapers are more suitable for explaining events and expanding information. In the light of this, there has been, at the end of the 20th century, considerable reflection on the infrastructure of Mexican journalism. The discussion has focused, first, on misleading newspaper circulation figures (Sánchez, 1994; Trejo Delarbre, 1990) and, second, on the scarcity of readers of the print press compared to the primacy of television (Sánchez Ruiz, 1994).

Furthermore, the fraud in circulation figures is indicative of the nature of the relationship between newspapers and government in Mexico; a relationship in which newspapers needed to simulate readership to make it easier to justify their advertising rates to public sector advertisers (Sánchez Ruiz, 1994).

Later, Paxman (2024) summarized the evident imbalances and peculiarities of the geographical distribution of newspapers in Mexico as follows: Why are there so many newspapers in Mexico City (compared to other cosmopolitan cities in the world)? The answer he formulates is that it is the legacy of a business model based on media-government interdependence in which the media are conceived as political tools and in which governmental political actors are willing to subsidize them through public spending in order to use media as platforms for informational propaganda directed at peers, adversaries, intellectuals, and other key actors within the political system.

In summary, during the 20th century, the Mexican journalistic sector remained marked by the phenomenon of newspapers with total or partial dependence on public subsidies granted from discretionary advertising spending. As a corollary of the above: 1) newspaper companies tend to be set up in cities where governments reside; thus, the Federal District registered the largest number of newspapers in 2010 (García Rubio, 2013), 2) the financial sustainability of newspapers that depend on public subsidies is threatened by political alternation, either through a change of the party in power or by changes in the governing elites (Salazar Rebolledo, 2022). An example is the case of the newspaper *La Jornada*, the business model of which has been based almost exclusively on the sale of advertising to public entities as a result of clientelist relationships with political groups and actors (Paxman,



2024), 3) new newspapers tend to emerge at the beginning of electoral cycles, when public spending on advertising increases, as a tactic to influence electoral results (Paláu Cardona, 2013; Salazar Rebolledo, 2022).

With the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new technologies brought about a number of changes, including the collapse of print media advertising spending in Mexico (Alianza por el Valor Estratégico de las Marcas [AVE], 2021, 2024) and the entry of new players in the digital public sphere.

#### *The collapse of advertising revenue in print media*

With the creation of innovative advertising technology by tech giants Google and Facebook, the participation of platforms in the advertising market grew enormously, as they were able to deliver ads en masse to hyper-segmented audiences. This phenomenon was also accompanied by a decline in advertising revenue in print media (Bell & Owen, 2017). In Mexico, total (public + private) spending on the press decreased from 4.7 billion pesos in 2017 to 1.4 billion pesos in 2023 (AVE, 2024, 2021). These figures reflect the small share that the press represents within the advertising sector, which totaled revenues of 135 billion pesos in 2023 (AVE, 2024). Another contextual aspect worth mentioning is that public spending on advertising represents a minuscule share compared to private sector spending and that at the national level, the change of federal government in December 2018 was accompanied by a drastic cut in public spending on advertising. This fell from 7.5 billion pesos in 2017 to only 1.9 billion pesos in 2023 (AVE, 2021, 2024).

#### *The rise of content creators on digital social media platforms*

For multiple historical, social, and cultural reasons, domestic broadcast television was for decades the primary source of political information for Mexican citizens. However, the arrival of broadband Internet and the constant increase in access to this technology ushered in a shift in media consumption patterns: the use of social media platforms, as well as on-demand video consumption, primarily through YouTube, began to gain prominence. Crucially, YouTube successfully developed a monetization model in which content creators have access to financial

compensation. This was the main driver of the rise of content creators, including those who created political news and entertainment content. However, these are actors who comment on or reproduce information provided by journalists and traditional news media (Rodelo, 2022).

Given these contextual elements, it is worth asking: what do we know about the Mexican newspaper industry? The literature has offered the following elements: first, the persistence of newspapers that depend on subsidies. This can be confirmed by two observations: on the one hand, there are cases of print newspapers whose very small circulation can only be explained by the existence of cross-subsidies, that is, being financially supported by the profits of other newspapers belonging to the same media conglomerate, as in the case of the Mexican Editorial Organization (García Rubio, 2013). On the other hand, it has been noted that it is not the case that the greater the number of readers, the greater the number of newspapers; that is to say, the demand for newspapers (measured as the number of newspaper readers in the states) and the supply of newspapers do not correlate (Salazar Rebolledo, 2022).

The second element is a gradual decline in the number of printed newspapers in the country, as well as in their circulation figures (García, 2013). However, given the complex relationships between the media and political power in Mexico, it cannot be assumed that every newspaper closure means a loss in terms of its contribution to the diversity of news content: journalistic ventures throughout the country have required a large amount of economic capital and have therefore been financed by actors with strong political-partisan motivations, so the social contribution of these ventures has historically been subordinated to the civic conscience of their funders (Hernández Ramírez, 2010). Watson and Cavanah (2015) also argue that a greater number of newspapers does not necessarily indicate a “more robust local communication infrastructure” (p. 657). This is because the characteristics of the information that people access must be considered.

Third, a gradual increase is detected in the number of digital news outlets publishing on social media platforms or through websites. This is supported by the Mexican media directory created for the Worlds of Journalism survey (hereinafter, the WJS-Mexico directory), which re-

ports 1 128 digital news outlets publishing through social media platform accounts (Facebook or X) and/or websites, representing 45 % of the total Mexican news media, well above the number of outlets in all other categories (radio, television, newspapers, and news agencies) (González Macías et al., 2023). This numerical predominance was consistent across the five regions into which the country was divided.

## METHOD

The previous sections identified perspectives on the transformation of the journalistic infrastructure, as well as essential elements for analyzing recent changes in the Mexican context. Among these, in this study we will focus on four trends that can be analyzed using a data set on newspaper companies: the decline of newspapers, fragmentation, the persistence of subsidies, and newspaper deserts.

A descriptive statistical analysis was conducted on the economic units of the “information in mass media” sector registered in the DENUE (INEGI, 2023) between 2015 and 2024. Among the main characteristics of this database are: 1) it is multi-year; 2) it covers the entire national territory, with the exception of localities with fewer than 2 500 inhabitants; and 3) its unit of analysis is the economic unit, understood as any establishment (as long as it operates in a permanent physical location) and/or company (business operating in several establishments).

Furthermore, this database has the following limitations: 1) the activity is self-reported (it is not verified whether the coded activity predominates in the economic unit); 2) the data collection method could leave out economic units that do not operate in a physical location but virtually or in a household; 3) it provides codes for newspapers and news agencies, but not for economic units that do not have journalism as their main activity, as is the case of economic units dedicated to the production of content for radio and television, as well as in the cases of economic units primarily dedicated to other activities (digital marketing, NGOs, research centers) but that also carry out or finance journalistic activities.

### *Research objective, questions, and hypotheses*

This study aims to describe the reconfiguration processes of journalistic infrastructure (where professional journalism is developed) in Mexico, both at the national and subnational levels, during 2015-2024. The study period includes: 1) the drastic cut in federal public spending on print media advertising that occurred during the 2018-2024 presidency, and 2) the rise of independent political information channels on the YouTube video platform (Rodelo, 2022).

The research objective involved the analysis of trends related to the configuration of journalism infrastructure that manifest themselves through different dimensions. Table 1 clarifies the relationship between the trends and the specific research questions and hypotheses.

## RESULTS

### *Decline in newspapers due to the redistribution of economic activities*

Table 2 shows the redistribution of economic activities in the information in mass media sector during 2015-2024. The activities that have decreased the most are book publishing integrated with printing, news agencies, programming production for cable channels, magazine publishing, newspaper publishing, and post-production services. Specifically, during 2015-2024, the number of economic units dedicated to journalism decreased by 27 % (see Table 2).

The activities that have increased the most are publishing of other materials integrated with printing, directory publishing, telecommunication operators in their various modalities (satellite, wireless, and wired), television programming production, music publishing, software publishing, disc recording, and book publishing, among others (see Table 2).

TABLE 1  
TRENDS, OPERATIONALIZATION, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Trend	Dimension	Operationalization	Research question/hypothesis
Newspaper decline	Redistribution of economic activities	Journalism-related activities decreased during the period, while other activities in the mass media information sector increased.	Q1. How were activities distributed in the mass media information sector during 2015-2024?
	Low survival rate of newspapers	Journalism-related activities survived during the period to a lesser extent compared to other activities in the sector.	H1. Units in the “newspaper publishing” and “newspaper publishing integrated with printing” categories observed in 2015 will survive until 2024 to a lesser extent compared to other activities in the mass media information sector.
Fragmentation	Market segmentation	Journalism-related activities increased during the observed period. The ratio of economic units per company increased during the period.	Q2. Is there an increase or decrease in the number of economic units in the “newspaper publishing” and “newspaper publishing integrated with printing” categories during 2015-2024? Does the ratio of economic units per company increase or decrease during 2015-2024?

Trend	Dimension	Operationalization	Research question/hypothesis
	Diversity of actors	Small and medium-sized units with journalism-related activities increased during the observation period.	Q3. Is there an increase or decrease in small and medium-sized economic units in the “newspaper publishing” and “newspaper publishing integrated with printing” categories during 2015-2024?
Persistent dependence on subsidies	Spending on advertising during elections	Units with journalism-related activities increased prior to the federal elections.	Q4. Is there an increase in the number of economic units in the “newspaper publishing” and “newspaper publishing integrated with printing” categories prior to the years with federal elections (2015, 2018, 2021, 2024)?
Newspaper deserts	In states	There were states without economic units producing journalism during the period.	Q5. Are there any states without economic units producing journalism during 2015-2024?
	In municipalities	Increase in municipalities without economic units producing journalism during the period.	Q6. Is there an increase in the number of municipalities without economic units producing journalism during 2015-2024?

Source: The author.

TABLE 2  
REDISTRIBUTION OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN THE MASS MEDIA  
INFORMATION SECTOR, 2015-2024

Activity	2015	2024	Incr. (%)
News agencies	198	99	-50
Private sector libraries and archives	233	319	37
Public sector libraries and archives	4440	4482	1
Distribution of films and other audiovisual materials	24	25	4
Directory publishing and mailing lists	6	18	200
Directory publishing and mailing lists integrated with printing	2	13	550
Book publishing	80	128	60
Book publishing integrated with printing	142	71	-50
Other materials publishing	24	38	58
Other materials publishing integrated with printing	22	191	768
<b>Newspaper publishing</b>	<b>209</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>-9</b>
<b>Newspaper publishing integrated with printing</b>	<b>678</b>	<b>460</b>	<b>-32</b>
Magazine and other periodicals publishing	237	151	-36
Magazine and other periodicals publishing integrated with printing...	104	89	-14
Software publishing and software publishing integrated with playback	65	144	122
Publishing and content dissemination exclusively via the Internet...	97	91	-6
Music publishers	14	35	150
Exhibition of films and other audiovisual materials	821	1045	27
Compact disc (CDs) and digital video (DVDs) or cassettes recording	74	150	103
Wired telecommunications service operators	3496	5228	50
Wireless telecommunications service operators	367	1621	342

Activity	2015	2024	Incr. (%)
Satellite telecommunications service operators	84	153	82
Other sound recording services	34	36	6
Other information provision services	11	19	73
Other telecommunications services	4 120	3 904	-5
Electronic information processing, hosting, and other services...	305	301	-1
Film production	72	72	0
Production of channel programming for cable television systems...	144	85	-41
Television program production	56	157	180
Production of video clips, commercials, and other audiovisual materials	207	154	-26
Post-production and other services for the film and television industry...	47	38	-19
Radio program broadcasting	1 142	1 437	26
Television program broadcasting	368	400	9
Sum	17 923	21 344	

Note: Emphasis added by the author. Three activities that underwent a SCIAN code change were omitted (INEGI, n. d.).

Source: INEGI (2024).

### *Newspaper decline due to low survival*

During 2015-2024, 376 of the 887 newspapers observed at the beginning of the period survived (42%). In the same period, 9 346 of the 17 943 economic units observed in the mass media information sector at the beginning of the period survived (52%).

### *Fragmentation as market segmentation*

As specified in the newspaper decline section, during the observed period there was a decline in newspapers, an aspect that contradicts the hypothesis of newspaper market segmentation, which would imply an increase in newspapers. Furthermore, under the assumption that one manifestation of market segmentation is the increase in brands (targeting different niches or media sectors) managed by the same players, the



percentage increase in the ratio of economic units by business name during the 2015-2024 period was calculated. The analysis shows that the ratio of economic units per company did not increase: in 2015, the ratio was 2.4 economic units per company; in 2024, it was 2.2.

### *Fragmentation as a diversity of actors*

There was not an increase in small economic units dedicated to journalism; on the contrary, small economic units (0-30 people) decreased, as well as large economic units (51 people and over) (see Table 3).

However, there are indeed informal actors engaged in journalism that are not registered as economic units dedicated to journalism, as the WJS-Mexico directory identified 1 128 digital news outlets and 386 daily print media outlets (González Macías et al., 2023). It is presumed that the WJS-Mexico directory includes a greater number of news outlets than those present in the DENUE (650 in 2024) because the directory includes informal media outlets operating from households or virtually, which are not detectable by the INEGI economic census methodology. Furthermore, it is possible that the DENUE may not detect the increase in the number of actors producing journalism (and therefore the fragmentation of the journalistic field) because these actors participate in economic units with a primary activity different from journalism.

TABLE 3  
SIZE OF ECONOMIC UNITS PRODUCING JOURNALISM, 2015-2024

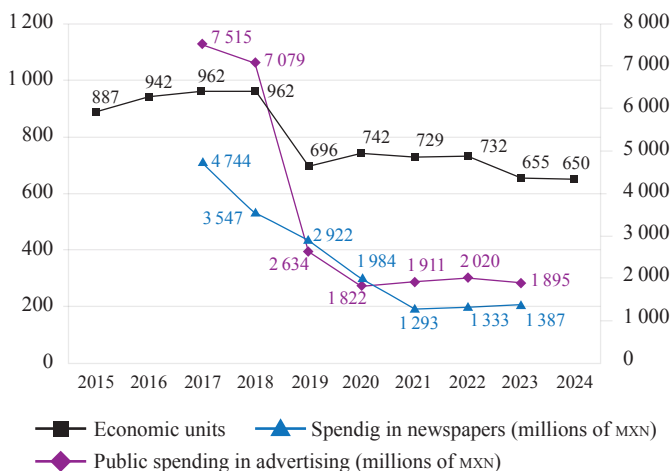
Personnel employed	2015	2024	Incr. (%)
0 to 5	478	294	-38
6 to 10	93	90	-3
11 to 30	135	106	-21
31 to 50	37	41	11
51 to 100	64	58	-9
101 to 250	51	44	-14
251 and more	29	17	-41
Sum	887	650	

Source: INEGI (2024).

### *Persistence of newspaper subsidies*

The longitudinal analysis reveals constant numbers of newspapers in the periods 2015-2018 and 2019-2024, while the main decrease in the analyzed period occurred between 2018 and 2019, when the number of newspapers fell from 962 to 696 (see Figure 1). This seems to suggest that the main explanation for the changes in the number of economic units is the reduction in subsidies from the federal government that occurred in the same years.

FIGURE 1  
NEWS MEDIA OUTLETS AND ADVERTISING SPENDING, 2015-2024



Source: AVE (2021, 2024), INEGI (2024).

### *Newspaper deserts at the state and municipal level*

During 2015-2024, there were no states without economic units producing journalism. In most states (25 out of 32), the number of newspapers decreased; in two states the number remained the same (Aguascalientes and San Luis Potosí), and in five states the number increased: Tlaxcala, Nuevo León, Baja California, Durango, and Mexico City. The degree of newspaper decline at the state level has not been uniform but has been

highest in states in the west (Jalisco, Colima, Guanajuato, Zacatecas, Michoacán, and Nayarit), as well as in Tamaulipas, Quintana Roo, and Chihuahua. The sharpest decline was in Jalisco, a state where 62 newspapers were registered in 2015 and only 29 in 2024.

Regarding the presence of newspapers in municipalities, in 2015, out of 2 456 municipalities in the country, 266 had at least one newspaper (89% of municipalities were without newspapers). Meanwhile, in 2024, out of 2 469 municipalities, 220 had at least one newspaper, that is, 91% had no newspapers.

Likewise, during 2015-2024, 74 cases of municipalities were detected that went from having at least one newspaper to having no newspapers at all. The most extreme case is that of the municipality of Cárdenas, Tabasco, which went from four newspapers to none. Another interesting case is that of Guadalajara, a municipality with 25 newspapers in 2015 (the most in the country), and only 12 newspapers in 2024.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the nature of the transformation in the journalistic infrastructure in Mexico during 2015-2024. To this end, the analysis makes a methodological contribution by seeking to answer, based on an empirical framework, questions about far-reaching structural transformations in the journalistic field that are difficult to answer due to the lack of consistent data series (González Macías et al., 2023) and a clear operationalization. In this sense, the use of a multi-year data source that covers the entire national territory at the municipal level is novel in the analysis of journalistic infrastructure. The changes in journalistic infrastructure reported in this analysis confirm several concurrent trends in the new communications landscape, namely: the decline of newspapers, the fragmentation expressed in the entry of informal actors into the public space, and the prioritization of channels alternative to newspapers for political communication. They also call for a review of our assumptions about news deserts.

More specifically, the conclusions of the analysis are summarized in the following four key findings: first, this analysis allows us to infer

the decline of newspapers during 2015-2024; they have decreased compared to the mass media information sector (an economic sector that has grown driven by the telecommunications boom), and have survived to a lesser extent than the economic units overall in the sector. Furthermore, the contrast between the number of newspapers captured by DENUÉ and the WJS-Mexico directory suggests that, despite low barriers to entry, it is difficult for journalistic ventures to become formal.

The decline in the number of print and digital newspapers, however, does not necessarily indicate a decline in journalism as an activity, since it can be carried out in organizations that are not strictly newspapers (nongovernmental organizations, foundations, television and radio companies, digital startups, university media, etc.), as well as informally. More forcefully, it can also be argued that the decline in newspapers does not necessarily indicate a decline in information about public affairs (Usher et al., 2023).

Secondly, the fragmentation of the newspaper market is not manifested through an increase in formal economic units, nor through an increase in economic units associated with the same company name. However, based on the difference between the DENUÉ and the WJS-Mexico directory (González et al., 2023), the emergence of a large number of actors conducting journalism informally is evident.

Third, the annual frequency of units engaged in journalism suggests that the main explanation for the decline in newspapers is the decrease in subsidies from the federal government that occurred after the 2018 political alternation (AVE, 2021, 2024). Likewise, the absence of increases in economic units dedicated to journalism just before or during election years, a phenomenon attested in the past (Paláu Cardona, 2013; Salazar Rebolledo, 2022), suggests that during the period analyzed, actors participating in the political communication system prioritized other channels for their communication strategies. This could indicate a break from the historical dependence of Mexican newspapers on subsidies granted in authoritarian manners. Finally, from a municipal and strictly numerical perspective, the growth of newspaper deserts has been minimal during the period analyzed because Mexican newspapers have historically emerged and operated from strategic locations—primarily state capitals—where economic and political power converge

(García Rubio, 2013) based on primarily partisan political motivations (Hernández Ramírez, 2010).

This study has the following limitations: first, the analysis focused on infrastructure and, therefore, does not account for journalistic practices or for the attributes of the journalistic output. The analysis of infrastructure needs to be complemented by a study of the attributes of the information reaching communities, preferably with an approach that is not limited to news analysis but also considers other vehicles for information (Watson & Cavanah, 2015). Taking into account the attributes of journalistic content will also allow us to account for ghost newspapers, that is, newspapers that do exist but with diminished capacities (Abernathy, 2018).

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## PROFILE

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