

**Reframing Investigative Journalism in Mexico:  
Towards a Transformative Practice**

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## Declaration

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of the university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

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## Abstract

This thesis is about the dangers of following the path of a model for investigative journalism in Mexico based on the 20th Century North American corporate model of the press, anchored in neoliberal ideology in the middle of raising violence. Its entrepreneurial character and market orientation have endangered journalists' labour rights and the right to freedom of information for all.

It is situated in my own experience as a practicing investigative journalist who is deeply dissatisfied with the existing circumstances of journalism in Mexico, but who recognises the necessity of finding a means to reveal human suffering and corruption. The thesis examines the following questions: How is investigative journalism in Mexico constrained by the national media system and multiple political forces? How can we escape neoliberal practices that endanger the purpose of investigative journalism in the public interest? Where and how should investigations be deployed if they are to be truly investigative and truly transformative?

These questions are tackled using a conjunctural analysis that situates the analysis historically and politically in the context of Mexico. The state of investigative journalism is considered as part of this conjuncture and the multiple influences on investigative journalistic practice are discussed. The empirical study is based on two case studies and 41 semi-structured interviews with 39 individuals. The two case studies are: a) a singular group of journalists doing independent investigations in radical collaboration, called *Periodistas de a Pie*; b) an investigative tool called *Plataforma Ayotzinapa*, created by the research agency *Forensic Architecture*.

The thesis advances the use of “a framework for transformative investigations” as a possible way out of the impasse investigative journalism in Mexico finds itself in. This framework has three dimensions: 1) A turn to political action; 2) A communitarian solidarity; and 3) A humanitarian truth production.

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## ***Preface***

As the frontal war on drugs unfolded, I started my career as a journalist based in the supposedly safer Mexico City. I worked for a national radio news programme owned by a corporate group where in-depth investigations were not a core element of our daily activities, but an occasional news product. This meant that investigative work was limited to the amount of spare time we had after we finished working on daily news. Under those conditions, we occasionally published stories about money laundering, corruption in public procurement processes, and other wrongdoing, but this was more as an exception to the rule rather than a systematic programme of investigations. Long-term investigations were rare within Mexican news companies, so our work was seen as an innovation for a radio news programme. In late 2013, the entry of a new competitor in the radio news broadcasting market was announced. The company I was working for, MVS Radio, were seeking to boost our programme's content to be more competitive in terms of audience share and, by extension, to ensure increased profits from the advertising market. Media owners and editors came up with a formula that was created by a special investigations unit. This unit was inspired by the Anglo-American journalism tradition that was very influential in the twentieth century in countries such as Colombia or Argentina (Waisbord, 2000), but not entrenched in Mexican journalism at the time, apart from some fleeting attempts at *El Universal*, *El Financiero*, and *Reforma* newspapers (McPherson, 2012; Serna, 2017).

Nationally praised journalist and chief anchor of our show, Carmen Aristegui, put her main content editor, Daniel Lizárraga, in charge of the new project. Lizárraga, himself an experienced senior journalist, would lead the team, formed of another three younger reporters — Rafael Cabrera, who used to work

for digital news website Animal Político; Sebastián Barragán, former reporter for the national newspaper El Universal; and me, who had been part of the team for the past three years.

This small group of four reporters, solely devoted to long-term investigations with no pressure to publish on a daily basis, unlike everybody else in the newsroom, came like refreshing water into the Mexican national media. It was also a generational change because the rest of MVS's senior reporters were still manufacturing daily news, rushing from one press conference to another, and writing stories out of press releases as every media company does in Mexico. We claimed Aristegui's radio show. Its Special Investigations Unit was completely different because we had more resources and more time to investigate and break a good number of scoops in less time than anybody else. Soon, some of our investigations became major political scandals, drawing the Mexican media agenda's attention and thus, resulting in very good audience rates.

"I have just invested two pesos (Mexican currency) and it has yielded pretty good results", an MVS stakeholder confessed in a private conversation. His spontaneous comment could have sounded crude, but it was true. It was a good business, or at least it was until one of our stories put his corporation at odds with the Federal Government, thus jeopardising past and future investments depending on its relationship with Mexican officials.

In mid-2014, my colleague, Cabrera, proposed a stunning investigation — a mansion used by the Mexican President and his family but registered under the name of a federal contractor. He had obtained that connection's evidence from public registries, so the only thing that was missing was to gather more details about the house and the contractor's identity and his role in local and federal

public biddings. Barragán and I did that. Shortly after, the very same contractor suddenly won one of the most ambitious infrastructure projects offered by the incumbent government — a 3,750 million-dollar high-speed train to be built in collaboration with the Chinese government who would finance it with a generous surplus. Our story could not have found a better hook and momentum.

When the story was about to be published, we called the President's office to seek their comments on it. They said they would come back to us in order to provide a proper reply but this never happened. Instead, the Presidency decided to call MVS proprietors directly. We did not know the exact content of that call, but the MVS board chairman immediately called Carmen Aristegui to request a meeting with her in one of the many fancy restaurants he and his family own in Mexico City. The company's position was clear: If we decided to publish the story of the President's seven million-dollar mansion, our radio news show could no longer be part of their daily schedule of programmes. More than a blatant, violent censorship, their tone was inviting a certain degree of empathy with their position as investors in radio licenses. However, that request had deeper motives. They wanted to avoid a confrontation with the President because they were expecting the Government's approval for the business that would transform their good fortune — they wanted to modify their radio and satellite licenses to additionally provide mobile data services. This would yield millions of dollars from the growing Mexican telecommunications market.

Aristegui, our boss, did not give a conclusive answer to their request. But we considered that the space and resources that we had at MVS so far were exceptional in Mexico, and we wanted to preserve the opportunity to do that kind of journalism for a bit longer. We decided not to air the story on our programme. Instead, we decided upon an alternative solution which was to publish it on

Aristegui's personal website (AristeguiNoticias.com) which, at the time, was starting to become popular and would give us some media exposure. Or at least we thought that to be a solution.

On the 9th November 2014 we published the "Casa Blanca de Peña Nieto" story. It was a Sunday morning. Our hope was to strike a chord in the media agenda to the point where it would force everyone — including us at MVS — to take up the story next Monday morning. We relied heavily on foreign correspondents with whom we had a previous meeting to share the scoop. The strategy was successful and by Sunday evening the scandal had been replicated by international media in Latin America, as well as by a number of media outlets in the English-speaking world. In Mexico, just a few papers such as Proceso and Reforma republished the story, while the biggest newspapers, TV, and radio broadcasters remained silent. The multimedia content we had published on Aristegui Noticias' went viral on the web, with hundreds of thousands of social media interactions talking about the "casa blanca" case. And on Monday morning, the Presidency decided to give an interview to Televisa, the most powerful, politically aligned media in Mexico, and not to us. However, that enabled us to talk about the scandal on our MVS show in a more open way, with its implications and reactions from a variety of political actors, but without broadcasting the investigation *per se* on MVS's station as we had agreed.

President Peña Nieto never fully recovered from such a blow. His legitimacy as the leader of the nation was badly undermined. From that day on, his popularity plummeted continuously as weeks and months passed by (Reforma, 2014; Abundis, 2018), and his team tried to protect him by every means possible from any legal action. But these attempts did not render the level of trust they were expecting. Suddenly, a new chapter of the scandal was published by The

Wall Street Journal's correspondent in Mexico, revealing that the same federal contractor had bought another house for Peña Nieto's treasury secretary (Montes, 2014). We started to believe we might have been influential on the rest of the media and we were no longer alone. We also felt some relief because it had been more than three months since MVS had asked us not to air the story on their radio station, yet we were still on air talking about the scandal's implications. Our part of the deal with MVS was fulfilled, so we thought, since we never aired the story on MVS but we reported the follow-up, preserving our professional integrity and therefore we could keep our radio news programme on air. But time would prove that we were wrong.

In March 2015, MVS found a perfect excuse to dismiss our entire team of 19 journalists under the pretext that we had not requested permission to use the MVS logo for the project Mexicoleaks. MVS's Board of Directors decided to fire two members of the Special Investigations Unit — our main editor Lizárraga, and me, which led to an artificial escalation of a conflict that ended up with the dismissal of Aristegui and all the journalists working for her radio news program. It was an issue, if there ever was one, that could have been sorted out through an internal conversation with those involved — but that never happened. Instead, the company decided to publicize its disagreement with us by advertising it in national newspapers. The incident was widely regarded as a retaliation orchestrated by the Presidency for publishing the “casa blanca” story five months before, and even the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights raised the alarm about the bad precedent this would set for the freedom of the press in Mexico (CIDH, 2015). International media were paying attention again, pointing out the fact that one of the few critical radio news programmes in Mexico had been crushed in such a brutal way (Reuters, 2015; Althaus, 2015). This was

sending a strong warning to other media outlets in case they wanted to follow our steps in embarrassing the President.

As a consequence, President Peña Nieto's reputation had fallen into a downward spiral as he tried to protect himself and his wife, his treasury secretary, and the contractor, from any legal sanction (Reforma, 2014). Some organisations and Mexican intellectuals called for an independent investigation to clarify the case, but the Presidency denied them this course of action. It was true, perhaps, that the Mexican Constitution could not provide any legal framework for the President's impeachment under charges of corruption, but there were plenty of other laws and regulations those involved could have been prosecuted under and judged for (Huerta et al, 2015). Rather, President Peña Nieto ordered an internal enquiry. But the man in charge of that enquiry was his own close collaborator, so no one was surprised when the conclusion was that no breach of the law was found — which, in turn, meant that everyone involved was exonerated at once. The journalists involved suffered a different fate: we were left jobless and with no option to keep doing IJ in Mexico. Even worse, soon after, a series of legal suits thwarted our efforts to practice journalism independently and finally, we discovered that a large part of the team had been targeted with an Israeli, high-tech surveillance software called Pegasus (Citizen Lab, 2017). Intelligence espionage is not new in Mexico, but the scale and the intrusive character it reached with Pegasus software was unprecedented. Surveillance was so blatantly employed in this case that we wondered if it being so evident was part of its purpose, as though the Mexican intelligence apparatus wanted to let us know we were being observed and followed to dissuade us from carrying out more investigations, and thus escalating things to a new level of intimidation in the already dangerous environment for journalists in Mexico.

In the eyes of the Mexican public and our colleagues at home and abroad, we were victims of governmental censorship. We were praised for holding power accountable and revealing wrongdoing at the highest political level. The “casa blanca” case catapulted us into the status of celebrities in journalism circles. We won national and international awards; in those forums we gave conferences about investigative techniques and how we had faced Peña Nieto’s efforts to silence us. We also published a book where we told this same story, and we gained access to collaborations with the very best investigative journalists in the world, including transnational investigations with top ranking organisations such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ). And yet, a deep frustration and dissatisfaction had long played on my mind. How was it possible that President Peña Nieto could have escaped justice whilst we were fired in such an abusive and brutal manner? Was it even possible to really hold power accountable when working for the same rotten media system in Mexico? Ultimately, was it worth doing IJ in Mexico just for the sake of winning awards and recognition?

These were the questions that led me to examine my own profession in this PhD. The impasse made me consider whether or not I had an obligation to prove to myself that revealing corruption cases can lead to justice, or at least have some sort of quantifiable benefits to society. In short, I wanted to demonstrate that IJ can bring change for good. The best way to prove it, I thought, was to undertake a PhD which would allow me to have a better understanding of the political role investigative journalists have in driving change. And, at the same time, it would enable me to bridge a connection between journalism and academia as a means to escape the constraints posed by the Mexican media on long-term investigations. Another reason, I concede, was to give myself some time to reflect

on the dizzying whirlwind my professional life had suddenly become. But proving the effects of IJ, as I later found out, was more difficult to prove than to say, and throughout the journey, this self-reflection would turn into an unexpected internal maelstrom that led to a more critical standpoint on IJ practice.

I believed that a good investigation should bring about change and if not, then the problem must be in the Mexican political and justice systems, not in journalism. My assumptions, I realise now, were based on an idealised, naive, idea of IJ and media power. But that realisation, and the final focus of this research itself, did not come without strenuous soul-searching and sometimes, unpleasant self-criticism about some of the decisions I had made.

In my attempt to measure the impact of a story (Green-Barber, 2014), I was trying to detach myself from it and to be an objective observer, to no avail. I soon encountered a number of scholars struggling with the same problem when producing academic knowledge. I realised that my own experience with the hurdles and constraints of the profession in Mexico, would be informing this project in one way or another, so I decided to embrace my own position as a researcher but also as a practitioner of IJ in Mexico. For that reason I make multiple references to the “casa blanca” case in this thesis, as a way to offer a personal episode that helps me illustrate politics, media, and other complexities of power dynamics in the contemporary history of Mexico.

In that same spirit, I decided to have a dialogue with Periodistas de a Pie (PdP), a group of journalists and friends who are also concerned about the hurdles that journalistic investigations suffer in Mexico, and who have themselves experienced the loss of close collaborators and spaces to publish their stories. In fact, there is hardly a more experienced group of witnesses of the horrors the

frontal war on drugs has left across Mexico, and the implications for the production of these investigations. They have seen, and experienced first-hand, the rotten media system, the abhorrent threats against journalists, and the seemingly endless mourning for other journalists and other Mexicans' deaths during the most violent years in over a century. PdP's story, about a strong dissatisfaction with traditional media but at the same time of an unyielding hope for a better place to practice journalism, is in many respects the story of a generation of Mexican journalists who have to grapple with the irruption of the digital age and the continuities of corrupt political and economic models.

After starting the PhD, I met Matt Kennard, Director of the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ) at the time. The first time we talked was in December 2016 in the Richard Hoggart Building within Goldsmiths University, during the memorial of Gavin MacFadyen, the CIJ's founder who had recently passed away after a life devoted to supporting and teaching investigative journalism all around the world. Soon after, Kennard invited me to have a talk with Eyal Weizman, Director of Forensic Architecture (FA) which is the research agency, also based at Goldsmiths University, that was starting a project on Mexico at that time. The case was the enforced disappearance of 43 students in 2014. The project was called Plataforma Ayotzinapa. I was appointed the Inaugural Gavin MacFadyen Fellow, collaborating with the CIJ and FA on one of the most egregious cases of human rights violations in Mexico. During the seven months of work, and after the presentation of the platform that was meant to visually reconstruct the events of that night, I was certain that my thesis had to draw from the vibrant production of investigations developed in FA's office. The team's commitment and warm solidarity opened up many of the ideological knots that I had carried with me even before starting my PhD. But most importantly,

working in an environment where there was such comprehensive effort applied to the Ayotzinapa case, made me realise the serious impasse IJ faces in the Mexican polity. Not only because of the multiplicity of sources of power and the collusion between authorities and criminals, but also because of certain conventional assumptions about IJ in Mexico that render it helpless when trying to make sense of the events that led to the enforced disappearance of the students, let alone providing an explanation as to why that had happened.

Plataforma Ayotzinapa was the catalyst that led me to think about the transformative power of representation and the need to permit others to use investigative tools. It was also FA's commitment to justice for the victims and their families that convinced me that measuring large impacts of investigations was pointless if these investigations were not anchored in an ethical pursuit of justice, change, and relief of human suffering to begin with. In this sense, PdP matched that same spirit in the way they investigate, share, and radically collaborate to unearth the underlying causes of violence, misery, and conflict. Both extraordinary cases of political commitment, solidarity, and collaboration greatly inspired the dimensions that encompass the framework for investigations that I present here.

I arrived at this critique of IJ, and a proposition to rework its operation boundaries, because of the many frustrations and disenchantments that I suffered myself as an investigative reporter in contemporary Mexico — namely, the clientelist relationship of media organisations that was so brazen in the “casa blanca” case, the apparently uncontrollable violence, and the almost paradoxical task of freeing IJ from the shackles that constrain journalists' participation as political actors in Mexico. However, I am incredibly indebted to the work of PdP, FA, my supervisors Francisco Carballo and Natalie Fenton, and others who have

contributed in one way or another to shaping this thesis, making me see that an investigative practice that reveals injustice and wrongdoing can transcend its own constraints and given assumptions — even the media institutions and the realm of what can be seen. In this sense, writing a PhD on IJ has been almost a self-subversive act. Nonetheless, I believe that this quest has led to something innovative and useful, particularly for journalists in my country who have suffered the effects of neoliberalism and the mounting violence of recent years, but it is by no means limited to them. Still, the original leitmotif — to enable the transformation of society through investigative practice — remains the driving force behind this work.

## ***Introduction***

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, it serves as a warning of the dangers of following a model of investigative journalism (IJ) for Mexico that is based on the very influential corporate model of the North American press of the twentieth century. Assuming a critical point of view, it argues that following that path will, and already has, undermined the potential of IJ in the public interest, privileging profit over democratic ideals, and ultimately making journalists more vulnerable in the Mexican context. And secondly, it advances a proposal to undertake investigations in a way that truly serves the people, transforming reality for the bettering of society. I call it a framework for transformative investigations because rather than a theory, an epistemology, or a journalism model, this framework is an area of operation establishing foundations for political strategy — IJ's political action towards the transformation of society.

There are various reasons why this work is important now. Journalists in Mexico were already finding it difficult to do investigative work, branded in contemporary media as “investigative journalism”. The relationship between journalists and the PRI regime had its own political intricacies. Today, however, with a clientelist media that, at large, is subservient to profit margins and the incumbent government, the possibility to practice critical IJ is limited. As modern history has shown, media owners are more willing to save the business than journalism, at the expense of any democratic aim. Examples of this reach back to the dark years of political repression and ambivalent freedom of speech like the mythical blow to newspaper *Excélsior* in 1976 (Leñero, 1977 ed. 2012) that marked the potentials and shortcomings of the Mexican press, and the control of electronic media during the 1980s and 1990s with the powerful broadcaster Televisa following the mantra of “being the president’s soldier” (Paxman &

Fernández, 2013; González de Bustamante, 2013; Trejo Delarbre, 1988). This led to a stifling publicity scheme whereby both national and regional governments exert control over critical reporting to this day, using official advertising as a way to funnel public money at the whim of the ruling group (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016; Fundar, 2017). Additionally, investigations that uncover wrongdoing are a high-risk activity in the midst of a frontal war on drugs that was triggered in 2007, and that rendered Mexico one of the deadliest places in the world to be a journalist (Artículo 19, 2018; CPJ, 2020). In fact, previous scholarship in journalism studies (Waisbord, 2000; 2008; Lugo-Ocando & Requejo Alemán; Saldaña & Mourão, 2018) has identified similar constraints for the practice of IJ in Latin American newsrooms, spanning from factors found in the individuals to organisational routines and contexts of crime and corruption. However, there is a need for a deeper analysis of these constraints at a national level, having a critical approach to specific political and economic factors.

There are three milestones that are key to understanding the practice of IJ and its difficulties in contemporary Mexico. First, the advent of neoliberal policies sweeping political and economic systems around the globe. From the 1980s, Mexico gradually adopted a series of institutional arrangements to be attuned with its very powerful neighbour, the US, including the media and its regulatory framework (Hughes, 2009; Sosa-Plata, 2014). Competitiveness, individualism, the pursuit of high margins of profit with the least cost, and very marked aversion to political participation in the name of professional literacy, were encouraged in the newsrooms (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012; McPherson, 2012). Under conditions of scarcity and maximisation of profit, journalists wanted to do more investigative work, following the mythical ideals of investigative reporting in the US media. But with reduced budgets and an ideology that precluded participation, the idea was

generally only wishful thinking for most Mexican reporters whose only expectation is that “one day” they will be able to do IJ, as one of my interviewees told me (Interviewee F1, 2019). In fact, the data available shows that there are in excess of 192,000 journalists in Mexico (Observatorio Laboral, 2020), but previous research has been unable to identify how many of that number are solely dedicated to long term investigations (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). This does not mean that there are no investigative reporters in Mexico, as there are high profile figures such as Lydia Cacho, Anabel Hernández, Diego Enrique Osorno, Ignacio Rodríguez Reyna, or Ana Lilia Pérez (El País, 2015; Cacho et al, 2016), as well as other special investigations units in Mexico such as Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, or Quinto Elemento, who are publishing long-term investigations that have shaken Mexico’s contemporary political life (Garcia, 2012; Gorostieta, 2013). The explanation might be that IJ is carried out by just a fraction of journalists when they have the time to do it alongside daily reporting, most times repeating hegemonic narratives — what Waisbord (2000) terms “denuncismo”, and Lichfield (2000), “declarocracia”, better translated as “baseless denouncing” or “the rule of the statements” without further investigation (Merino & Ramírez, 2014; Salmerón, 2002). Nevertheless, this is not only due to a lack of professionalism, as some accounts would want us to believe (Meyer, 1973 ed. 2002; Santoro, 2004; Saldaña, 2013). What lies at the core of the problem is the corporate and hyper commercialised press model that Mexican journalism has been following, particularly at the height of neoliberalism, which has endangered in-depth critical reporting at large. Under this scheme, which measures its success via the production of content and the profit it receives, the inevitable result is the undermining of information quality and the pauperisation

of the newsrooms' labour force, as has already been seen in the US where this model has found its apex (Pickard, 2019; Lozano, 2010).

The transformation of journalism in Mexico will be visited upon in detail during the neoliberal period section later in the thesis, but here I give some context on the effects of neoliberalism to be able to understand how these changes came about in Mexico. In the early 1980s the Mexican economy suffered severe economic collapse which paved the way for the introduction of callous neoliberal measures. By adopting the fallacy of liberalisation of the economy as equal to political liberation or democratisation, neoliberalism was implemented in Mexico as a recipe for the progress of underdeveloped countries (Panfichi, 2002; Ansaldo, 2007; Harvey, 2007; Escalante, 2017). This recipe needed Mexico to open the door to the world market, and this was done in a piecemeal but ruthless fashion. In 1982, President Miguel de la Madrid started the first steps towards a neoliberal paradigm in Mexico, which was reinforced in 1986 with Mexico signing its adherence to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

In the early 1990s, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari followed the footprints of his predecessor, pushing for even stronger neoliberal policies of privatisation and the liberalisation of the economy. The objective, it was said, was to reduce state expenditure and keep inflation within controllable levels. This was the case with telecommunications and the banking system. It also served as a way to pay international debt but without any kind of incentive to bolster the internal market (Huerta, 1995), which prevented the Mexican economy from having more original creative industries. But this would be just the prelude for one of the deepest economic and social changes in the history of Mexico: in 1988, the first talks to sign a free trade agreement between Mexico, the US, and Canada took place in order to materialise the North American Free Trade

Agreement (NAFTA) that finally came into force in 1994. NAFTA shaped the country model to which Mexico aspired. NAFTA has been partly responsible for the stagnation of the Mexican minimum wage, condemning more than half of the population to poverty in less than 20 years of implementation of the neoliberal project (Méndez-Morales, 1998). In other words, when negotiating a free trade agreement with the most powerful economy in the world, Mexico chose to be a certain type of provider in order to have something to offer in a trilateral agreement. Mexico chose to be a manufacturing “competitive” country along with the offer of a wide range of services, namely tourism and the financial sector. But this competitiveness was based on a harmful principle — what Mexico had to offer was a cheap labour force, doomed to remain underqualified and volatile (Calva, 2004). As a result, the minimum wage in Mexico is today one of the lowest on the continent in spite of timid attempts to raise it (García-Pureco, 2018). This turn towards a manufacturing economy left the agriculture sector and local communities in a poor state (Méndez-Morales, 1998). The disadvantages Mexican peasants had *vis a vis* their counterparts in the US were unsurmountable in a free market that caused national producers to lose significant terrain against imports (Huerta, 1995). Imports were introduced with aggressive impetus under the argument that, in doing so, inflation would cede. But the massive entry of foreign goods had terrible economic consequences for Mexican peasants and communities based on primary activities. Unable to compete, Mexicans from rural areas had to emigrate to other states where they could work in manufacturing or flee to the US to send some money to their communities back home in Mexico. In spite of the terrible economic and social effects NAFTA inflicted on Mexican communities, the Federal Government did not make a significant effort to ameliorate them (Calva, 2004; 2019). Furthermore, authors such as Fuentes-

Díaz and Paleta-Pérez (2015) have found a connection between this decomposition of the local social fabric and a rise in criminal activities such as drug and gun trafficking, which to some extent found their articulation and funding in the binational economic dependency on the US, exacerbated by the signing of NAFTA.

This dependency on the US and market-based economy was also reinforced through other means. At the end of Salinas de Gortari's presidency, the US government offered credit facilities, but on the condition that this debt would be paid from oil revenues, a national resource protected by Mexico's Constitution. In this way, the Mexican economy was even more subjected to the North American economy and bound to a neoliberal model (Meyer, 1995). In the same way, huge debts with the International Monetary Fund were conditional upon the implementation of neoliberal policies of reducing public spending and opening Mexico's economy for international investment (Harvey, 2007). The Mexican neoliberal experiment experienced its first evident failure in the 1995 crisis, soon after President Carlos Salinas left office. The devaluation and the heavy austerity that followed are remembered as the last major crises in modern Mexico, when the Mexican peso was so devalued that the new president had to introduce a new currency (Griffith-Jones, 1996). But despite more than 30 years of neoliberalism in Mexico, with no evidence of improving the Mexican economy at large, the model is still enforced today in a second edition of NAFTA signed in 2018 and made operational in 2020 under the name of T-MEC or USMCA (García-Pureco, 2018; Gobierno de México, 2020). The new version seems to include new regulations that rectify abuses in the workplace, but a proper implementation is still an open question. All of these policies not only affected how corporate press organisations operated, but the whole understanding of how

a political and economic system should work (Ortíz Wadgymar, 1998; Romero Sotelo, 2016; Escalante, 2017).

A stress on having trained professional reporters and a corporate-like focus was adopted by Mexican newspapers also at the beginning of the 1990s (Hughes, 2009). To fit the expectations of an economy in transition towards entrepreneurialism, Mexican media offered more robust financial and business information content, with *El Financiero* and *Reforma* as the most salient examples of this transition, modifying the media's traditional character. In this thesis, this point emerges as a crucial element in providing a more critical approach towards IJ and Mexican media, because IJ values and practices make it both a result of, and a critique of, neoliberal institutions. Problems such as corruption in international public biddings, money laundering, transnational crime, and so on, made frequent headlines in national newspapers. Nonetheless, most of the time this potential is subsumed within neoliberal conventions such as a market-driven economy, or competition logics, stifling IJ's possibility to question larger social structures (Sortino, 2001a).

The second milestone is a process of democratisation that is identified as coinciding with the end of the PRI-regime. The PRI party governed with over 70 years of relatively stability but with utterly undemocratic processes to elect candidates, and with a dark history of violence, torture, corruption and censorship (Mendoza, 1988; Schmitter in Tulchin & Romero, 1995; Panfichi, 2002; Krauze, 2013; Rodríguez Mungía, 2016). Some authors identify the beginning of the process to be as early as 1988 (Aristegui, 2010) when the left-wing group inside the party decided to split and form a coalition with other political forces that would take Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as their presidential candidate in the legendary elections of that year, strengthened by a grassroots civil society that was

galvanised in the capital after the destructive earthquake of 1985. The election took place, but the official results awarded victory to the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. An incident in the counting of the votes gave birth to the famous phrase “se cayó el sistema” (“the system was down”), stirring accusations that the election was rigged, and damaging the political stability of the country (Anaya, 2008). However, Cárdenas ended up accepting the results and he formed a new party — the PRD, which would later become the largest exhaust valve for the left in Mexico, winning some governorships and controlling the capital in the years to come, though unable to win the presidency (Becerra et al, 2000).

In 1997 the PRI would lose its majority in Congress, and later on the debacle was consumed in 2000 when Vicente Fox won the presidency for the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), at that time the strongest opposition party in Mexico (Solano-Ramírez, 2006; Casar, 2008). His presidency marked the rearrangement of power relations at the national and regional level (Zavala, 2018), and for the journalism field this also meant a series of new laws, and the Access to Information Law in particular, that enabled the conditions for the practice of investigations, leading to a vast number of information requests that soon became headlines in national newspapers (Ackerman & Sandoval, 2007; Doyle, 2011; Raphael, 2017). But this apparent democratisation wave cannot be viewed with naivety. Changes in power relations did not necessarily lead to a more democratic society. In fact, political participation was reduced (Fundación Konrad Adenauer en México, 2017) and the number of threatened journalists started to rise (Artículo 19, 2017; CPJ, 2020). Democratisation and neoliberalism brought new possibilities for the practice of IJ, raising hopes for a more independent press. But in many cases the arrangement of power also became more violent

and even more repressive, with IJ ending up becoming an exceptional practice, and very often, a deadly one as in the later years.

The 1988 election would lead to two overlapping, but not necessarily linked, processes. On the one hand, since the election was deeply questioned, the Federal Government acquiesced to installing an independent body to oversee federal elections, called Instituto Federal Electoral (IFE) (Ackerman, 2007; Woldenberg, 2012). This would create a somewhat neutral arbiter and, most importantly for this thesis, would regulate the space of political parties in electronic media, which some have seen as a state intervention on the media system that benefited political pluralism (Hallin, 2000; Hughes, 2009; Jebril et al, 2013). On the other hand, the elected president, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, while in charge of these political reforms, pushed for the second wave and most radical neoliberal policies, nationalising state companies that most times became privately owned monopolies, as seen above. These two processes of the 1990s — the decentralisation of the electoral authority and the introduction of more drastic neoliberal policies — overlapped as the end of the PRI government was drawing closer. In fact, Hallin (2000) has seen these two apparently contrasting processes to show the inadequacy of the two main scholarly traditions used to analyse the Mexican media system, i.e. the liberal view that considers the liberalisation of the economy from the hands of the state to be beneficial (Alisky, 1981; Trejo, 1998; Alves, 2005), and the critical political economy that ascribes the maladies of the media to the commodification of information privileging business profits over public interest (Hallin, 1994; Curran & Seaton, 1997 ed 2018; Freedman, 2014). Hallin's disenchantment with both strands comes mainly from the failure, he says, of those two frameworks to properly deal with the complexities of the Mexican political and media systems (with complicit

associations, different degrees of political parallelism, and a media industry that was mostly lenient towards the government but which was never part of the state). Partly based on this argument, Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) have come up with the concept of the “captured media model” for Latin American countries, that is inscribed within the critical political economic tradition but which takes issue with other dynamics that are particularly acute in the Mexican context, or what they call a “post-authoritarian regime”, from clientelism to a purposeful lack of regulation, and whose effects on journalism will be touched upon in more in detail in Chapter 1.

A third milestone for the practice of journalism in Mexico is the rising violence since the declaration of a frontal war on drugs in 2017. As I write, journalists in Mexico who do investigative work are at pains trying to survive because of a new political conjuncture. After the end of the PRI regime and a decade of a frontal war on drugs, Mexico has been left with a different arrangement of power — a more horizontal, multifaceted polity, with different players that resort to different degrees of corrupt associations and both legal and illegal means of legitimacy to operate (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; González-Rodríguez, 2014; Zavala, 2018; Escalante & Canseco, 2019). The escalation of violence has left hundreds of thousands of victims, including journalists, with a deep mistrust of local and Federal Governments, prompted by blatant corruption cases. In 2007, shortly after former President Felipe Calderon took up office in the middle of a legitimacy crisis, one of his first policies was to declare a fight against organised crime in order to bring “law and order to the country”. But his political decision has transcended his mandate. His successor, Enrique Peña Nieto, maintained the same approach, leading to more than 200,000 violent murders in a decade and tens of thousands of disappearances (Espino, 2018; El

Universal, 2019). In 2018, the new Mexican president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, promised to end corruption and the frontal strategy against criminal organisations during his presidential campaign, but as soon as he took office he seemed to have changed his mind and instead created a National Guard with the exact same military approach, and his promises have proven to be just that, no more than promises of change (Pérez-Correa, 2020). Caught in the crossfire, journalists have tried to juggle between reporting the bloodbath and distributing the rest of the news to the country. While at the same time, reporters are standing on a well-known mined territory — an under-regulated concentrated media system, happy to curry favour with local and Federal Governments and advertisers, rather than informing the public (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). No wonder Mexico appears among the top five deadliest countries in the world for journalists in the last few years, and why the promise of the watchdog role of the press seems to have hit a brick wall no matter how professional and objective journalists claim they have become (Oller et al, 2017; IPI, 2017; Freedom House, 2017; Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2017; Alves et al, 2017).

Miroslava Breach's murder on the 23rd of March 2017 is one of the most recent cases of these attacks. She was a well-known journalist working for local media in the northern state of Chihuahua, and with regular interventions in national media outlets. Less than two months later, Javier Valdez, an internationally awarded journalist and one of the most experienced reporters covering criminal organisations for his own independent media, called Río Doce, was shot 13 times in broad daylight in Sinaloa on the 15th of May 2017 (Olsen, 2017).

Most accounts blame criminals, the war on drugs, and even journalists, for being targeted with these threats (Freedom House, 2016; Artículo 19, 2018), but

in this thesis I claim that journalists' lives and their investigative work were in danger even before Calderon's security strategy — the political and economic conditions of Mexico's media system made them vulnerable to begin with. First, journalists were in danger because of the appalling labour conditions they have to contend with in a media model that embraced commercialism, maximising profit over information quality (Del Palacio, 2015a). And secondly, this media model has shaped a certain legal framework with an intentional lack of regulation and protections that has its roots in the tension between freedom of the press and media corporations' responsibility to provide information in the public interest, usually mingled with arguments of free enterprise (Guzmán, 2016). Such a legal framework has been set up to benefit a commercially driven media which prefers cheap, ready-made content over truly informative, investigative stories (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). Those journalists who do not conform to this model do not fit the requirements of mainstream media jobs, so they are forced to work independently, as Valdez and others did (Valdivia-García, 2017; Olsen, 2017). Without large media organisations and other colleagues' support, they become easy targets for retaliation because of the exceptional journalism they produce. That is why I regard a captured clientelist media system in Mexico and attacks on the press to be two sides of the same coin.

Caught between the shortcomings of their practice and the new arrangement of multifaceted (violent) power, journalists who want to do investigations in Mexico face a serious predicament. Under this new political conjuncture, a great deal of journalistic practices and the ideals of their profession are rendered non-operational or, frankly, naïve. On the one hand, their political beings are swept from the media model under which they have to work, and on the other, the country's political and economic conditions have made them

particularly vulnerable and unable to carry out more IJ that serves the public. That is why the expectations from a conventional press in a liberal democracy — either as a watchdog or as the so-called fourth estate working as one of the checks and balances that holds power accountable — are called into question in Mexico.

Today, NGOs like Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad are some of the few places in Mexico where journalists can do long-term investigations without being constrained by daily deadlines and advertising pressures, and with plenty of resources for travel and paperwork. In fact, my former editor at MVS, Daniel Lizárraga, became its investigations director after we found ourselves unemployed following the “casa blanca” scandal publication. But Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción was founded by the son and heir of one of the most prominent Mexican tycoons, with a long history of political involvement against the left in Mexico, and in advancing a hyper commercialised economy, leaving journalists’ autonomy in the long-term as an open question. Other places where investigations can still find an outlet are, frankly, scarce — websites such as Animal Politico or Aristegui Noticias, international media such as Univisión (but based and broadcast only in the US), along with some organisations with experienced journalists but small budgets funded by international philanthropy, such as Quinto Elemento Lab or Periodistas de a Pie (PdP).

The other option left for journalists has been to become a freelancer and to rely on contact networks to pitch stories to alternative media, or to write books and compete with major journalism figures in Mexico’s publishing industry. But at large, the biggest media corporations in Mexico, particularly radio and television broadcasters — Televisa, TV Azteca, Imagen, Radio Formula, Radio Centro, and evidently, MVS — are not willing to invest a considerable amount of resources in an expensive, low profit product as IJ is, which can eventually bring them into

confrontation with political and economic powers in contemporary Mexico (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016).

The picture is even bleaker in local media. A clientelist relationship that renders journalism dependent on official advertising is replicated at the state level but with more dramatic results (Fundar, 2015). Additionally, the war on drugs has made organised crime increasingly violent and diverse in certain areas of Mexico where the rule of law has been replaced by the rule of machinegun's law (Paleta-Perez & Fuentes-Diaz, 2015). In the countryside, journalists can either choose to praise the incumbent governor and be poorly paid — but live and work in peace — or choose to tell the story about his underhand business with criminal organisations and suddenly find themselves exposed to retaliations. And yet, some independent journalists have still decided to expose themselves and investigate, as did *Río Doce*, *Zeta* or *Diario de Juárez* — both based in bordering states and with pitiful stories of collaborators being murdered (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016; Hernández-Ramírez, 2011).

This adverse situation for IJ in Mexico can be summarised by one of my interviewees for this research who said, “That is not Mexican IJ, that is Mexican journalists doing IJ. It is a self-indulgent stance to talk about ‘doing IJ’, that is not true, we pay for workshops expecting that one day you will be able to do IJ and find somewhere to publish, find someone to pay for it” (Interviewee F1, 2019).

Before starting this PhD, although I had experienced first-hand the failed promises of a press holding power accountable, I was unable to articulate a deeper critical view and realise that something at the very core of an idealised concept of IJ is utterly undemocratic. I failed to see that media companies, from which IJ is inevitably emanating, are playing their part in Mexico's political and

justice system failure. I began to realise that any PhD concerned with addressing IJ in Mexico must critique the given assumptions of dominant liberal institutions and the frequent gap between promises and reality of modernisation and democratisation (Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Chibber, 2013). The press is part of this political-economic complex and one of the dominant institutions that necessitated an interrogation; but this also required a critical stance on IJ's practices and ideologies in its own context.

As a result of this conundrum for the practice of IJ in Mexico, the following research questions emerge and underpin this thesis:

1. How is IJ in Mexico constrained by the national media system and multiple political forces?
2. How can we escape the neoliberal practices that endanger the purpose of investigations in the public interest?
3. Where and how should investigations be deployed (that is, a framework) if they are to be truly investigative and truly transformative?

By weaving together the complexity of answers to these questions, I hope journalists or anyone who would like to embark on investigative practice, can be aware of the problems with the IJ model that is being followed so far, and find a different political position from which to operate.

#### *-A Brief Introduction to the Research Design*

The empirical work of this thesis is based on two case studies which I approach using qualitative analysis through semi-structured interviews. The two case studies are; a) a singular group of journalists doing independent investigations in

radical collaboration, called Periodistas de a Pie (PdP); b) and the investigative tool called Plataforma Ayotzinapa, created by FA, and in which I participated as a researcher. These two case studies help me to make sense of the hurdles for doing IJ in Mexico and the innovations that these approaches might have had, as well as causes of concern when carried out in the Mexican context, mainly in print/digital journalism but not limited to them.

PdP is one of the most relevant attempts to challenge given assumptions of the role of the press, particularly with the advent of a frontal war on drugs. Although this group of journalists is not unique, it stands as a prominent case of challenging journalism values in Mexico. PdP is largely composed of female journalists, which is an instance of how the role of women has changed in Mexican journalism, from being relegated from the Mexican public sphere for the most part of the twentieth century (Olvera, 2003; Smith, 2019) to having a more prominent role in the newsrooms covering politics and conflict in the country (García, 2012; De Frutos García, 2016; Coronel-Cabanillas & Gastélum-Escalante, 2016), which has started to bring about research on the association of female journalists and activism in contemporary Mexico (Alonso, 2018). However, I did not dwell on that trait, since a proper examination that focus on the role of gender is needed. Nonetheless, the composition of this group renders it an example of a contemporary creative adaptation of the clash between liberal models of the press and more committed journalistic streams of advocacy reporting. PdP is also an independent but well-established journalism organisation since 2007 (Periodistas de a Pie, 2016). It emerged as a group of reporters who wanted to have a different approach to their publications. “A more social” one, one that seeks “social justice”, as one of the founders told me (interviewee F1, 2019), because the media they were working for were not willing

to give them space for the stories they wanted to report when human rights abuses started to rise across the country. Their training workshops turned out to be popular among journalists in Mexico City, which led them to become an established organisation by 2010. However small and fragile, this effort was in sharp contrast to the mainstream media agenda which mostly focused on reporting the conflict from the authorities' perspective and who clung to a clientelist media model where commercialism is rife. As it will be seen later on in the chapters that follow, PdP's approach is worth noting because it pushed against neoliberal logic through actions of radical collaboration, sharing, and solidarity at a very personal level. By doing so, these reporters protected others and themselves from crass individualism and the increasing violence of the country. This case study will try to point out their characteristics, their shortcomings, and how these features could help to establish the basis of a framework for investigations: one that could be truly transformative. It was by observing this group and their experience of living and doing politics together, that I was led to establish the three dimensions of that framework — *a return to the political, a communitarian solidarity, and a humanitarian truth production.*

The second case study, FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa, is a means to draw from the challenging theoretical underpinnings of "counter-investigations" and to show how assumptions of traditional IJ, to make "power accountable", can feel disjointed in Mexico's contemporary polity. Shortly after I began this project, I joined a team of investigators who would radically change my perspective about journalism's role and the purpose of investigations. I joined Forensic Architecture (FA) in February 2017, an investigation agency based at Goldsmiths University that uses architecture techniques to investigate cases of human rights abuses around the world, e.g. a visual recreation of a clandestine prison in Syria, the

mapping of US bombings in the Lebanon, the involvement of a German secret agent in the killing of a man at the hands of a neo-Nazi group, among others (Forensic Architecture, 2020). The project I was assigned to work on was one the most atrocious cases of power abuse in contemporary Mexico — the enforced disappearance of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa, in the southern state of Guerrero, in September 2014.

This project was presented in September 2017, first to the victim's families, who said it helped them understand what had happened, when and where. The series of videos and the interactive map and models were also circulated in national media where the Mexican public could have access to the spatial representation of one of the most paradigmatic cases of human rights violations in recent history. But the project was also displayed beyond the media realm, for instance the exhibitions in museums such as the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Universitario (MUAC) at UNAM, and the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO) in Guadalajara (Weizman et al, 2017; ITESO, 2018). We knew the authorities had listened to our account as an op-ed, published by a member of the Supreme Court, mentioned that the exhibition at UNAM had the potential to “signify” violence (Cossío-Díaz, 2017), and also noted the creation of a Truth Commission that included Plataforma Ayotzinapa as one of its tools for investigation. In 2020, with a new administration and a new prosecutor, the Mexican authorities in charge are now shifting, claiming that “the historic truth” created by the previous government “is over” (FGR, 2020).

Although FA does not do IJ in essence, two things at FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa changed my own outlook on investigations, and therefore the course of this research. On the one hand it questioned whose account was being depicted, challenging a narrative constructed by a complicit government

apparatus. And secondly, it defined who was able to investigate the story and for what purpose. It was paradigmatic in this account because such a democratisation of the means of investigation was deployed in order to play a transformative role by presenting these conclusions in a variety of forums, including the public sphere, tribunals, advocacy circles, and cultural forums. Drawing from human rights justice processes and the use of digital information publicly available on the web, FA's proposal of investigative aesthetics poses a new possibility for the representation of cases of power abuse in search for justice (Weizman, 2017). This, I would later come to realise, was also a possibility for a journalism willing to play a transformative role in Mexico. FA's work opens up new avenues for journalists to approach reality in an age of digital technological breakthroughs. But its focus differs from the visions of those who idealise Big Data analysis, IA, or virtual reality as the saviours of journalism (Boczkowski, 2005; Meyer, 2001). Instead, FA uses technology to take over the means of investigation from the hands of official investigators, i.e., the state. This is done in a variety of ways, from the collection of social-media imagery in places of conflict, to the analysis of satellite images and other cartography, in order to virtually reconstruct sites of state violence.

However, FA's theoretical developments and its innovative techniques also open up stimulating but puzzling questions for the investigative practice in Mexico, which has been shaped by three overarching processes — neoliberalism, a rugged trail towards democratisation, and the exertion of violence by multiple actors. In that context, perhaps one of the most urgent aspects IJ has to resolve is investigative journalists' political role in relation to the people, the media, and the state. Although some of these debates have already been tackled in the public realm by FA's director, Eyal Weizman, a more specific

theoretical backbone for its implementation in journalism is required; particularly when it comes to the use of the production of images, and its relation with other models of journalism that have advanced alternative ways of reporting reality in the public interest, which is one of the aims of this thesis.

Furthermore, Plataforma Ayotzinapa is also a watershed because the case was the perfect example of the arrangement of power in contemporary Mexico, or the point where all these forces can be observed, almost as Mexico's power Aleph, to use Borgesian language — equivocal, diffuse, multifaceted, simultaneous. In fact, the Ayotzinapa case can demonstrate how the principles of IJ face a conundrum when it comes to making operational the old adage of "holding power accountable". The events of that night, the characters involved, and the subsequent multiple versions of what happened that night are greatly unnerving. By looking at this case, I was able to realise how the traditional approach to investigations would not be able to make sense of the complexities of those events and the later production/erasure of versions. This was the perfect example to show the limitations of IJ embedded in its occupational ideology, and a way to provide the project with more avenues to unleash a real transformative character for investigations in Mexico.

As I have explained above, the framework I present here has drawn a great deal of conceptual footholds from my participation in Plataforma Ayotzinapa. But perhaps the greatest benefit for my approach to investigations was that it can help to liberate the investigative practice from simply deploying its results within media forums, so that the production of truth and evidence can transform society through other means, even judicial and cultural forums. And also, joining FA as a researcher made me aware of the limitations of visual representation and the dangers of the mesmerising effects of this production. That was how the third

dimension of the framework, *a humanitarian truth production*, solidified as both a possibility and a critique of visual reproduction, or, as I would call it, the fetishisation of the image.

Apart from these two case studies, I have also conducted semi-structured interviews with experienced investigative journalists and one national prosecutor in Mexico, Peru, and Argentina, during conferences or seminars on IJ, to try and understand the practice of IJ in the context of Mexico. The experts have privileged access to the people undertaking investigations across the Americas and are aware of their difficulties and constraints, showing that this practice does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in connection with multiple human and institutional nodes. However, these interviews were solely used to add complexity and context to this research, and not as an absolute picture of IJ's political role in Latin America (Stavenhagen, 1986). By the same token, since a complete detachment from my experience as a journalist working on investigative pieces is unreasonable, I embraced my personal involvement and resorted to it in varying degrees throughout this thesis. The ideas that have come about are the result of that experience put into dialogue with the case studies during the interviews with my participants (in total, 41 interviews with 39 individuals), as well as with other journalists and through participation in different forums not cited here but whose input was crucial to think about the possibilities of a truly transformative IJ. This is discussed further in the methodology chapter.

#### *-Overview*

An overview of the development of this framework, as contained in this thesis, is as follows:

In Chapter 1, “The Idea of Investigative Journalism in Mexico: Definitions and Ethics in Journalism Models”, I try to show how some principles associated with IJ took hold in Mexico. It is not by any means an exhaustive historical account, but rather a series of paradigmatic cases that show how the uncovering of wrongdoing in Mexico can be traced back from before it was called IJ and how later on, particularly since the second half of the twentieth century with the advent of the myth of the “Watergate Scandal”, the North American model of IJ and its corporate media permeated the idea of IJ in Mexico and influenced the production of “reportajes” and other political scandals revealed by the press. It also locates IJ and its spirit of holding power to account, among the many models and ideas about the aim of an interventionist or watchdog model of the press (Curran, 2011; Atton & Hamilton, 2008).

Chapter 2, “Political Economy of IJ in Mexico” tackles questions on the origins of the clientelist media in Mexico, practices and organisational conditions in neoliberal Mexico, the triggering of a frontal war on drugs, and the legal framework under which investigations are carried out. These conditions are regarded as political and economic constraints that both shape and issue a threat to the practice of IJ in Mexico, creating a tension between the ideals of a free press and free enterprise in contemporary Mexico.

Chapter 3 delineates the “Methodology” I have followed. It explains the rationale behind the different methods I have mentioned in the lines above in order to respond to the research questions. This methodological proposition is consistent with the kind of investigations framework that this thesis strives to create — an investigative practice that embraces its subjectivity and its particular point of view, as well as encouraging a politically committed generation of knowledge.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the empirical results of my first case study, PdP. Chapter 4 “PdP's Political/Investigative Practices” will bring to the fore, issues such as a clientelist media system and the frontal war on drugs in the voices of PdP members. Their practices of solidarity, collaboration, protection, teaching, and political action are explored as the driving force behind the creation of their organisation and the production of what they considered to be good journalism on account of it seeking “social justice”. Conversely, in Chapter 5 “The prevailing spirit of neoliberal practices of legacy media in PdP”, I show the persistence of neoliberal ideology, made evident in the prevalence of poor labour conditions, unwillingness to take issue with workers’ organisations, and the impact of funders in the investigative agenda, which are still present in PdP’s organisation in spite of their intention to build a place to escape the constraints of the Mexican media model.

Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 analyse my second case study, FA’s Plataforma Ayotzinapa. What Chapter 6, “Plataforma Ayotzinapa: Incipient Counter- Investigations in Mexico”, does is to weigh the benefits that Weizman’s “counter- investigations” theory can bring to the practice of IJ in Mexico. Given the arrangement of power in contemporary Mexico, I argue that the platform brought about innovative political strategies for the dissemination of information towards the transformation of society. Among them were new forms of understanding networked narratives, an investigative practice in empathic solidarity, and multiple sources of legitimacy in the production of truth. And in Chapter 7 I analyse the limitations of the practice that FA has helped to recently popularise in Western mainstream media, called “visual investigations” or “forensic journalism”, by making a critique of its implications in social and journalism theory. Still using Plataforma Ayotzinapa as the case study, I conduct an inquiry into key

concepts of FA's "counter-investigations" theory which are weighed against other interventionist models of journalism. Questions on visual investigations in the digital age, the tendency to investigate solely from the armchair, the fetishisation of the image, and the difficulties in replicating the model for journalistic organisations in Mexico, are regarded as some of its limitations and foreseen concerns for an IJ that seeks to serve the public interest. It is from these two last chapters that the third dimension of *a humanitarian truth production* has found its finest sharpener in the pursuit of the transformation of society.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I expand on the proposition of a "Framework for transformative investigations" and its three dimensions — **1) a turn to political action; 2) a communitarian solidarity; and 3) a humanitarian truth production**. It is based on the shared experiences of PdP, FA, and other interactions with IJ in Mexico that these dimensions are advanced — with clear political strategies, a very personal and radical collaboration, and privileging relational human accounts over visual gimmicks. These dimensions put the focus on the conditions and the way in which investigations are produced so that investigative practitioners would not only be able to investigate in order to transform reality, but they would also recognise and combat the different faces of the shackles that thwart the transformative nature of their practice.

## ***Chapter 1: The Idea of Investigative Journalism in Mexico: Definitions and Ethics in Journalism Models***

### ***-Introduction***

This chapter discusses the background to the idea of investigative journalism (IJ) in Mexico, and the ethical implications of different journalism models and their adaptations throughout Mexico's press tradition. Concepts such as wrongdoing, professional training, and long-term investigations, will be presented in the context of a certain liberal model of the press underpinned by the US (Curran, 2011; Chalaby, 2016), and in contrast with different traditions adopted in Mexico. I will locate IJ and its spirit of holding power to account, amongst the many models and ideas constituting the aim of a committed press — journalism for peace (Hackett, 2006; 2012; Lara Klahr, 2011; 2015), journalism of attachment (Bell, 1998a), civic/public journalism (Rosen, 1995; Glasser, 1999), watchdog journalism (Waisbord, 2000; Hamilton, 2016) and social journalism (Cytrynblum, 2004; 2009 Llobet, 2006), as well as other examples of ethics that have been relevant for Mexican journalists (Villanueva, 2000; 2002; Restrepo, 2004; Bastenier, 2009; Kapuściński, 2006; 2007). I will explore how the origins of IJ, best reflected in the spirit of North American muckrakers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hamilton, 2016), demonstrate the pursuit of social change. However, with the corporatisation of the press came the introduction of objectivity, impartiality, and detached reporting in order to present itself as an industry worthy of profiting from selling information (Schudson, 1995, 2008). That spirit was also present in some early examples of the uncovering of wrongdoing in Mexico, but which adapted the very dominant North American corporate model of the press with previous traditions of denouncing human suffering during

different national struggles. Drawing from this idea, I argue that public scrutiny of wrongdoing in Mexico has also been linked to a moralising political role against human suffering. However, this character conflicts with normative assumptions of a politically detached journalism brought by the influential North American press; as a paradoxical result, it obscured the political role journalists played in Mexico, relegating them to professional workers rooted in ambiguous notions of objectivity and impartiality.

IJ aspects have been thematised into two sections to cover different angles of the subject — “Definitions of Investigative Journalism”, and “IJ and Ethics in Different Journalism Models”. Firstly, given the equivocal definition of IJ, paradigmatic cases of the predominant North American tradition in the early twentieth century, alternated with crucial developments for the practice of IJ in Mexico, will be presented. This is not, by any means a history of investigative journalism in Mexico, but it is meant to show how these two streams have been entangled in key aspects and periods, and how they have become more aligned over time, reaching their climax with the implementation of neoliberal policies in Mexico, exactly when the communicating vessels with the North American press multiplied and widened (La Red de Periodistas de Investigación, 1997; Hughes, 2009). For this reason I devote time to providing a description of the transition towards neoliberalism, democratisation, and up to the point of the war on drugs conflict in the early twenty-first century. Although not necessarily an exhaustive review, this chapter aims to critically evaluate relevant literature that provides a characterisation of how the idea of IJ took shape in Mexico and how it was adapted to the particular context and conditions for the press. However, it does point out that Mexican investigative journalists are in a predicament when trying to engage in IJ and find it hard to conciliate given assumptions of a detached,

objective liberal role of the press (Villanueva, 2002) with traditions of a more politically committed way of reporting (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012).

Secondly, concerning ethics in journalism models, some deliberations authored by Hispanic investigative journalists whose texts have been promoted by journalist associations and are part of the process of journalists' training and professional education during their formative years in Hispanic universities, will be presented (Villanueva, 2000; Restrepo, 2004; Bastenier, 2009; Kapuściński, 2006; 2007). This literature review parts from the understanding that ethics in IJ is not just about actions in the world, but it also encompasses the core of its being and aim. This will be then contextualised within different models of journalism in the public interest in other areas of scholarship under the umbrella of alternative journalism (Atton, 2003; Harcup, 2020). Also, the "ethical gap" in the media, and the neo-Aristotelian solution to it through accountability proposed by Couldry, Phillips and Freedman (2010), will be analysed. This means that an ethical discussion is relevant for the purpose of this thesis, because the implications of a particular practice should not only be assessed as a professional achievement or by its technological capabilities, but in terms of its ultimate effects on society, or teleological implications (its transformative praxis) (Bhaskar, 1993; Agar, 2014).

At the end of this chapter, having explored these two aspects of IJ in Mexico, I will be shaping the perspective this thesis will use as a point of departure to develop a framework for transformative investigations — that if IJ is to be a practice that serves the public interest, it has to return to political action and embrace public service and a humanitarian identity.

## **1.1 Definitions of Investigative Journalism**

There have been various attempts to come up with a general answer to the question of what IJ is, based, for example, on the role it assumes and what it produces in various liberal democracies around the world (Curran, 2011; Protes, 1992; Waisbord, 2000). Other academics have studied the methods IJ employs, including the labour conditions under which it is carried out, implying a differentiation with daily news coverage (Gorriti, 1999; Burgh, 2008; McPherson, 2012). All, but especially the latest, often hinge on notions of temporality — differentiating IJ from traditional reporting, based on the time it takes to investigate an issue and bring it to final publication.

In the case of Mexico, there have been some attempts to characterise IJ in the form of “reportajes”, derived from the French term “*reportages*”. Leñero (1978) and Bonilla (2006) claim that these are investigations that are composed of a series of other journalistic products, like interviews, chronicles, and other research. On the other hand, McPherson (2012) has said that “reportajes” have been long term investigations that are distinctive from daily news reporting with the aim of marking a difference in the marketplace, and thus, linked to add value before other competitors. But this is a limited understanding of the practice, since they do not deal with any kind of revelatory or confrontational trait in these “reportajes”, which has been part and parcel of IJ, as it will be seen in the lines below.

In spite of these attempts, a definition of IJ is often equivocal mainly because the boundaries of IJ and what is simply considered “journalism” are constantly blurred (Stetka & Örnebring; 2013). As shown in subsequent chapters, in Mexico these boundaries are even more difficult to draw since Mexican

reporters combine daily coverage with long-term investigations, if at all<sup>1</sup>. However, for the purpose of clarity in this thesis, I differentiate between IJ and daily reporting for two main characteristics — because of IJ's confrontational revelation of wrongdoing, and due to the requirement of time and other resources needed to investigate.

Following Ettema and Glasser's (1989; 1998) general description of IJ, I will use paradigmatic examples to understand its practice in Mexico. To do so, I will revolve around some of the most significant Anglo-American investigations of the early twentieth century to characterise IJ to support my claim that IJ has been heavily influenced by archetypes based on the North American industrialised press. But in many Latin American countries such as Mexico, this model might find different variations and adaptations according to specific journalistic traditions (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). That is why these North American paradigmatic cases will be alternated with references to crucial examples of Mexican journalism and investigations. These haunting phantasmagorias that overarched and shaped IJ in Mexico, are still useful to trace back characteristics, traits, and aims — even if these are temporal constructions of a practice that is still changing and adapting, having placed a distinctive emphasis at the height of neoliberalism and democratisation in Mexico.

#### *-Morality: Muckrakers and the Mexican Advocates*

A moral language, as explained by Ettema and Glasser (1998), is one of the foremost characteristics of IJ as practiced in North America since the mid-

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

nineteenth century. This language, referring to wrongdoing or good and bad behaviour, resorts to legal frameworks and even goes beyond them to the realm of moral values. This characteristic can be traced to the mid-1800s and the early 1900s in the US, when various publications, especially magazines, revealed fraudulent sales, monopolistic activities, poor labour conditions, and so on. In the US, this was the case of John Mullaly's campaign against the trade of adulterated milk in New York (1853) (Hamilton, 2016), or Ida Tarbell who unveiled Standard Oil's corruption and monopolistic practices in a series of articles published by the McClure's Magazine in 1902 (Starkman, 2014).

It was because of this type of reporting that North American president, Theodore Roosevelt, who was trying to stop journalists from publishing embarrassing stories during his administration, coined the term "muckrakers" (Serrin & Serrin, 2002). Taking the phrase from John Bunyan's "The Pilgrim's Progress" — one of the most influential books in the Evangelical branch of Protestantism — Roosevelt accused reporters of raking only the muck of life and being incapable of seeing the stars. These stories were imbued with moral language about right and wrong, the transgressor, and the uncovering of sinful activities. This is perhaps the birth of a wrongdoing radar in IJ as we know it in contemporary Western media. The term "muckraker" usually denotes an exacerbated investigative style of doing journalism but is equally associated with a "watchdog" press — watchdog, used here as the idea of a guardian or a sentinel in the public interest. However, over the years, "muckraker" and "watchdog" reporting have turned out to be indistinctly used by many scholars and journalists alike (La Red de Periodistas de Investigación, 1997; Waisbord, 2000).

Schudson's (2008) and Curran's (2011) accounts of the history of journalism are perhaps some of the most influential readings in the field for the Western

world. These accounts describe the developments of the Anglo-American press and how it became a profession of the corporate press of the twentieth century, but they also state the political role journalism has played in democratic terms (Broersma, 2017). Curran asserts, “A democracy needs to be properly briefed to be effectively self-governing” (2011, p. 2), in the book “Media and Democracy” where he describes the role of the media in democratic societies — particularly the role of public service broadcaster. The most traditional views rely on an idea that journalism is calling upon an active public to scrutinise the stories and to take action to fix the issues raised by the media, an idea first criticised by Lippman (1922) and more recently by Protesse et al (1992). Such a position has been contested even in democracies with strong liberal institutions because of its propensity to overlook power imbalances in society, and its tremendous dependency on a commercially based model (Chomsky & Herman, 2010; Pickard, 2019). Nonetheless, Curran (2011, p. 81) theorises about a radical option for journalism in democracy, which is more attuned with the more confrontational character of muckrakers.

This shows that the moral language of the early muckrakers is at the core of the idea of a press that ought to hold power accountable. Under this view, investigating the government — and at a later stage also the private sector — journalism would be playing the role of a sort of immaterial institution, forming part of a checks and balances system (Lippmann, 1922). A number of assumptions revolve around this stance; for instance, the concept of the press as “the fourth estate” or “the fourth branch” (Albuquerque, 2005) — first used in England to refer to an extra estate in the realm apart from the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners; and later on in republican systems as a counterbalance to the executive, legislative, and judiciary powers.

*-The Mexican Modern Reporter*

A very important figure to show the birth of the intricate communication vessels of journalism between the US and Mexico is Manuel Caballero. This man lived in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, before and during the years of Porfirismo — the period under the rule of dictatorship Porfirio Díaz which ended in 1910, with the start of the Mexican Revolution (Bonilla, 2006).

Some authors (Gálvez in Bonilla, 2006) ascribe the first “reportaje” to Caballero, who on 19 April 1887 published the story of a duel between two generals. Bonilla (2006) supports this, but she says that there is an earlier piece, from 6 May 1881, called “Ferrocarril para buques”, which has the characteristics of a “reportaje”:

“Caballero presented events in a way that sought to make them more vivid to the reader; he was looking for testimonies, he used interviews, went to the places where events took place, he used textual quotes, telegrams, and statements, so that they could see and hear the actors involved as they were reading”. (p. 109).

Interestingly enough, this text was not trying to proof any kind of wrongdoing. On the contrary, Caballero tried to demonstrate that a contract between a contractor named as Captain Eads and the Mexican government was not disadvantageous for the later (Bonilla, p. 110). Although, there is no clear indication that Caballero used the term “reportaje” in his publications as a reporter, it is true that he introduced the idea of using interviews, the collection of information, and chronological account (“crónica”), to form a journalistic product, inspired by the newspapers in the US.

But Caballero is as important to show the prevalent idea of the press in Mexico as an example of two transitions — from politically motivated journalism<sup>2</sup> to a press industry that privileged information over opinions, and most importantly, departing from political involvement to detached practice. Evidence of this is that he first had a very vocal voice opposing the rule of presidents like Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada, or writing in support of presidential candidates like Porfirio Díaz himself, and even opposing him later on, when Díaz started his multiple re-elections. However, this would come to an end when he extended his journalistic business. He became the owner of *El Noticioso* in 1880, with private publicity, as well as official advertising from local governments in Mexico and even some US cities, like Chicago, as a way to fund his enterprise (Conde-Ortega, 2005; Bache Cortés, 1997). This interplay between information and business would deepen as he set up new publications, like *Guía del Viajero*, the *Álbum Queretano*, and the *Almanaques*. This strong link between information and commercialization would go as far as starting up a publication in Spanish and English in 1882, called *México in Chicago*, with the intention of promoting investments in Mexico.

This transformation from a political figure to media baron during Mexico's Porfirismo, is laid bare when he makes clear what his publication policies are for

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<sup>2</sup> Though it is true that a politically motivated spirit of nineteenth century journalists is not related to investigations, its role in the Mexican press is important to understand that there was a very robust political character in the activity of making their ideas public. During the mid-nineteenth century, a group of journalists and political activists would resort to notions of rights over the land and education for all in the early modern history of Mexico, following the same twofold advocacy activity — publication and political action. This was very clear in the case of people such as Ponciano Arriaga, who edited *El Estandarte de los Chicanates* newspaper, while advancing the idea of a "Procuraduría de los Pobres" (Ombudsman for the poor) in 1847, and then actively participated in the creation of the 1857 Mexican Constitution (Motilla Martínez, 2001). Around the same time, Ignacio Manuel Altamirano created a series of newspapers with a clear agenda against US and French invasions to Mexico (Negrín, 2017). He is usually referred to as a pioneer of the modern Mexican novel, but his writings also appeared in the form of essays published by newspapers. In his texts, a clear pro federalist, nationalistic agenda was displayed — mainly despising monarchists who were pushing forward the crowning of a European king for Mexico.

El Noticioso — renouncing to any kind of political affiliation, and taking the route of news and advertising:

“Our only policy (política) will be not to do any kind of politics. The only policy (política) of the commercial and working classes must be work and commerce, long and varied chronicles of all kinds of events. But never making a comment on them. Devoting to commercial issues — that will be El Noticioso’s only program. (Conde-Ortega, 2005, p. 53-54)”

In many ways, Caballero was a man who navigated between intellectualism and the promises of progress via the industrialization of the country and the construction of means of transport to connect the vast Mexican territory. This way of thought in his time reflected Mexico’s adaptations and own struggles with the idea of a liberal state, and the idea that nation states could be treated as living organisms in evolution, what can be called a positivist stance. These two strands, liberalism and positivism, would impact his way of doing journalism as a reporter and as an owner of media corporations. With this point of view, he saw journalistic corporations as a way to give jobs to the people, and by extension, contributing to the progress of the nation. This explains how he approached journalism as a transnational business anchored in publicity, drawing from the big industrial press in the US, including the influence of Pulitzer and Herst (Dowie & Shudson, 2009).

Caballero would be a character that shew the contradictions of the Mexican liberalism of the late 19th Century, a period where intellectual progress and democratic ideals were linked to national economic progress via commercialism and trade opening. Not very different from how Mexican media would deal with neoliberalism almost a century later.

*-The Revelation of Wrongdoing for Emancipation*

In the literature on IJ, notions of “wrongdoing” or “corruption” are almost taken for granted, which means that it is mostly related to morals and behaviours considered objectionable in countries where this type of investigation is carried out (i.e. consensual as well as legal frameworks that are particular to nations). An analysis on what “wrongdoing” means for the Mexican context and IJ is much needed, but I will not dwell on that. For this thesis it is sufficient to say that the revelation of wrongdoing in Mexico is intertwined with the history of human rights advocacy. It can be traced back to the sixteenth century, with characters such as Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, the colonist who converted to catholic priest, famous for defending natives against the treatment of conquerors and “encomenderos” in Mexico during the “Valladolid Debate” (Dussel, 2011; Bragg, 2020). Based on these events, he would publish “A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies” in 1552, where he exposes the tensions in the New Spain (Mexico’s name under Spanish rule) encomenderos’ “missionary” role, converting natives to Catholicism while exploiting them. One thing is clear in De las Casas — he combined his prolific writing on matters he considered unjust, with his lobbying before the Spanish crown to put an end to it.

However, following the connection between the US and Mexico in the advent of the Mexican Revolution of the early twentieth century, brothers Flores Magón, Ricardo, Jesús, and Enrique, published a series of articles in opposition to Porfirio Diaz’s dictatorship, which made them part of the intellectual backbone for the Mexican Revolution (Escobedo Cetina, 2000). Flores Magón’s texts were influenced by indigenous communitarianism and European anarchism, some of which were published on US soil in support of labour unions. Here is where the character of a muckraking spirit started to emerge. Flores Magón’s brothers

revealed and condemned the labour conditions and structural inequality of their time, but their journalism did not focus solely on bad practices in national or local companies, as was the practice of their North American counterparts. They were more ideologically driven, and their aim was either the defence or the frontal confrontation with the incumbent regime. In this sense their investigations and revelations of wrongdoing were highly political. One of these three brothers, Ricardo, was incarcerated by US authorities and finally died in prison. But as Lomnitz's (2014) account in "The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón" shows, his activities were not a one-man task. With colleagues and friends from both the Mexican and North American sides, they embarked on the production of texts where they revealed wrongdoing and exploitation. This was the case of Ethel Duffy Turner and John Kenneth Turner, whom Lomnitz called "writers and revolutionists", since they were "muckraking journalists" (Lomnitz, 2014, p. ix) and, John in particular, was actively involved in the support of anarchist and socialist groups in the Mexico-US Border. In these interactions is where we start to see the connections between the muckraking spirit and the more politically involved Mexican journalism tradition, but one thing stands out again — the reproduction of stories on human suffering as part of a clear political strategy.

It would be fair to say that IJ in its muckraking version had not yet been developed in Mexico by the early-twentieth century, neither had the US tradition set roots among the Mexican media. However, another way to put it is that some Mexican journalists had an alternative approach to adversarial journalism; although, with a more proselytist rhetoric than one striving to reveal new information for public scrutiny. In a time of social struggle, the manner in which some Mexican journalists championed and fought for moral values led them to

take a more committed, ideological-based stance against injustices and what they considered an oppressive incumbent regime.

*-Technique: Watergate and the Mexican King's Prophets*

After the mid-twentieth century, the Mexican press saw the boom of the industrialised press, with the advent of newspapers such as *El Universal*, *Excélsior*, or *La Prensa*, to the point where these cultural products also became educative devices for Mexicans and their relationship with truth, crime, and justice (Serna, 2017; Piccato, 2010; 2017). In the meantime, one of the most prominent archetypes of IJ was about to emerge — President Nixon's Watergate scandal, published by Woodward and Bernstein in *The Washington Post* in 1972 (Waisbord, 2000). This paradigmatic example of doing journalism in the US and around the world, helped to characterise IJ journalism by the investigation techniques used to hold power to account (Matheson, 2009). The Watergate exposé was a sustained combination of in-depth reporting, whistleblowing, long-term investigation, and campaigning — the result of which was Nixon's resignation. A team model, dedicated solely to investigations, was replicated in many newsrooms across Latin America, for instance at the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* in the late 1970s (Waisbord, 2000).

Though the scheme of “special investigations units” would take more years to be introduced more regularly in Mexican newsrooms (at the height of the implementation of neoliberalism in Mexico), the first Mexican unit the available literature documents is that at *El Universal* (Serna, 2017). Created in 1976, the group of “five or six reporters” was solely dedicated to “reportajes especiales” (special reportages). Serna (2017) tells us that in that group were journalists such

as Fernando Meraz, Antonio Andrade, Miguel López Saucedo, and Luis Gutiérrez Rodríguez, under the orders of Manuel Mejido, an experienced reporter who had just joined *El Universal* as its subdirector. They reported on the developing conflicts in Latin America, such as the Nicaraguan revolution or the surge in drug trafficking in Colombia. These journalists came from the *Excélsior* newspaper, which had just suffered a censorship blow for its critical reporting in that very same year. This point in the history of IJ in Mexico is important because it shows its connections with an already buoyant press industry that gained a foothold since the post-Revolution years and up to the mid-twentieth century. It helps us see that journalism in Mexico was a modern industry attuned to its time. *El Universal* and *Excélsior* newspapers had been in operation for some decades at the time, and though still under the clientelist PRI government, they were well-established national newspapers. The idea that these media were doing primitive journalism before the arrival of the investigation model based on the Watergate paradigm, should be avoided. On the contrary, the first group of reporters doing “reportajes especiales” for *El Universal*, drew from the work of journalists such as Julio Scherer, Carlos Denegri, and Manuel Mejido himself, who had embarked on international coverage missions and executed a frontal watchdog-style reporting at *Excélsior* during the 1950s and 1960s (Serna, 2019). Nevertheless, the introduction of special investigations units and a more North American style in the Mexican newsrooms, meant a rupture with the kind of journalism during Scherer’s *Excélsior*, where analytical pieces were very prominent. According to testimonies from Mexican journalists who lived through that transition, reporting the facts became more important than reflecting on them, which was seen as an important change with implications on the political role journalists had played so far (Gutiérrez in Serna, 2017; Leñero, 1978). This professional transition

emulated the efforts in the US by media entrepreneurs such as William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer (Schudson, 2008; Kaplan, 2002), to create a “learned profession” based on education and training, to use Jukes’ (2017, p. 47) words, and which would lead Pulitzer to create the School of Journalism at Columbia in 1912.

However, by the second half of the twentieth century, Mexican journalism still resorted to individual, public figures with some political weight. Take for instance Manuel Buendía’s (1926-1984) case, which can be seen as the bridge between the analytical tradition, towards a more train-based use of investigative skills to obtain information. Buendía was the author of a column called “Red Privada” in the 1970s and early 1980s, and some of his stories focused on drug trafficking, corruption and the role of the CIA on Mexican soil (Lutz, 1990). He frequently used leaked information from top-ranking public offices, but rarely showed any evidence of his claims as many journalists did in the times of the all-powerful PRI (the party that ruled the country for more than 70 years after the end of the Mexican Revolution in the 1920s). In 1984, armed men shot at Buendía as he was stepping out of his office in Mexico City. Members of the repressive official apparatus, Dirección Federal de Seguridad (Federal Security Headquarters, or DFS), were charged with the murder, but even today the motive and the mastermind behind it remain a mystery. Buendía’s reporting style had some features that resembled Watergate, such as whistleblowing and the political intrigue, but adapted to the realities of a one-party-rule regime that allowed some critical voices to appear as democratic.

In this same tradition of “columnismo”, veteran and well-respected journalists such as Manuel Granados Chapa, used their space in newspapers to publish investigations. Granados Chapa, also formed as a public figure after the

editorial censorship blow to *Excélsior*, revealed the existence of a huge ranch prepared for the then outgoing President José López Portillo, in 1981 (Musacchio, 2010). Both Buendía and Granados Chapa's revelations were not written in a detached, neutral, objective style, but in the form of columns. The style in a Mexican journalism column is closer to a scene where the wise prophet gives written advice to the king. The reprimand would point out an infamous sin that eventually would bring shame on the king in front of his people. In this respect, the Mexican style was still different from the North American model of the late-twentieth century where a reporter is more similar to a professionalised pawn presenting evidence to be evaluated by the public (Lippman, 1922). Still, the incipient use of sources and documents as evidence was starting to emerge in Mexico. However, a wider North American tradition shaping a Mexican adaptation of long-term investigations was starting to emerge, based on the already popularised term of "reportaje" (Leñero & Marín 1999; McPherson, 2012). Years later, these "reportajes" would be further developed by publications such as *Proceso* magazine, during the first implementation wave of neoliberalism in Mexico.

#### *-Ideology-Free: The Assumed Neoliberal Ideology*

The development of *Proceso* magazine is crucial to understanding the contradictions journalists faced during PRI's authoritarian regime and its transition towards neoliberalism and democratisation. This is, perhaps, the Mexican equivalent to the "Watergate myth". *Proceso* was founded by a group of top journalists who used to work for *Excélsior*, the most influential and critical newspaper of its time, until they were expelled in the middle of purported allegations of a union conflict in 1976 (Leñero, 1978). The story behind those

allegations was that *Excélsior*'s existence was only possible through direct and indirect subsidies controlled by the President's office — a perverse relationship to keep up the appearance of a democratic country, as clientelist regimes do; but there was a point when *Excélsior*'s reporting style went too far for too long, leading to the dismissal of its director, Julio Scherer, and his closest collaborators — which was effectively a censorship blow (Scherer, 2007).

This group of journalists then created the weekly magazine, *Proceso*, self-funded and with a faithful entourage of readers. *Proceso*, and chiefly one of its editors, Vicente Leñero, would be responsible for expanding the meaning of Mexican in-depth reporting, often called “reportaje” (McPherson, 2012). Leñero would also do this by making one of the first attempts to come up with a theory for journalism in Mexico, defining “journalism genres” in his “Manual de Periodismo” (or “Journalism Handbook”) (Leñero & Marín 1999). He established a conceptual difference, perhaps for the first time in Mexican journalism, between “nota informativa” (similar to a simple news article), “reportaje” (long-term, in-depth reporting mixed with narrative features), and “columna” (which are op-ed's, that were epitomised in Mexico by journalists such as Buendía or Granados Chapa). These definitions have not remained fixed, they have changed over time under the constant influence of different journalism traditions and national struggles (Lara Klahr, 2015).

However, *Proceso*'s business has hard to keep afloat, so the magazine continued to resort to government advertising (Musacchio, 2010). This tension between critical reporting and official funding explains the many economic crises *Proceso* went through, frequently accompanied by rifts with political powers. This was clear when President José Lopez Portillo (1976-1982) uttered his infamous defiant question in reference to *Proceso*'s demands for more advertising

resources: “¿Te pago para que me pegues?” (Am I funding you, so you can beat me?) (Ortiz-Pinchetti, 2018). This is one of the roots of a pervasive, clientelist media model that persists to this day in Mexico, expanded in Chapter 2, which made it possible for President Peña Nieto to put pressure on MVS Radio to get rid of the entire group of journalists I belonged to in 2015 (Huerta et al, 2015).

The strongest implementation of neoliberal policies in Mexico only took place in the early 1990s, headed by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, who exemplified the rule of the technocrats educated in top-rank universities in the US. In order to enter a free market zone with Canada and the US, which ultimately took the form of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Mexico had to comply with a number of institutions to provide a minimum level of certainty for foreign capital investors willing to invest in a liberalised Mexican economy (Cheema, 2005). Some of these organisations, such as the Federal Commission for Competition (COFECE), were purely economic institutions; and others exercised political and sociological leverage, such as the independent Federal Elections Institute (IFE) or the autonomous Human Rights National Commission (CNDH) (Ackerman, 2007). Less formal institutions, such as the press, would follow suit.

In the early 1990s, as an overarching neoliberal economic model was taking hold around the world and as the second wave of neoliberal policies were introduced in Mexico (Meyer, 1995), the Mexican press had to keep up with the features required to serve a country on its way towards the promise of modernisation and a strong civic aim (Hughes, 2009). It was in this period when journalism as a “learned profession” also had a new impetus, with newspapers such as *Reforma* going national in 1993, or the re-launch of *El Financiero*; both with a strong business-focused agenda (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). According to

Fuentes-Berain (2001), this was an educational process for the newsrooms and a “new paradigm”, introduced by Reforma’s owner, Alejandro Junco, where “the principles of an Anglo-Saxon press were introduced: a distance from political power, balance, economic independence, separation between editorial and commercial sections, and ethical codes that were staunchly defended by the editorial team”. Evidence of this is found in the phrase by a Reforma reporter early in her career, “I was Reforma” (Hughes, 2009, p. 66), to denote the suppression of the self and the adoption of an enterprise ideology. This is also in line with Márquez-Ramírez’s (2012, p. 123) identification of a journalistic transformation of professional roles in those years, “that assumes the gradual adoption and endorsement of American liberal values in Mexican newsrooms”, though this is said more in the sense of instruction and training, but without the authority afforded by a collegiate body or institution.

It was around this time when more “special investigations units” came about in those companies. One of them was that of El Financiero, created by journalist Ignacio Rodríguez Reyna in 1994 (Gorostieta, 2013). The group he recruited for this unit was comprised of reporters who were doing daily coverage during that period, but soon after managed to publish some of the most controversial scandals of the time, uncovering stories on drug trafficking, bribes, and even the dubious business of President Carlos de Gortari’s brother, Raúl Salinas. Two years later, in 1996, Rodríguez Reyna would be called by the experienced journalist, Raymundo Riva Palacio, to form another special investigations unit at Reforma newspaper. Along with Rodríguez Reyna and Riva Palacio, the team would be comprised of other rising stars of elite journalism in Mexico, such as Rossana Fuentes Berain and Ciro Gómez Leyva. These newspapers particularly, but not solely, enthusiastically embraced economic liberalisation, small

government, and other neoliberal watchwords. They also pushed for further training and education for journalists, attuned to the spirit of a liberal model of the press, but highly commercialised (Hughes, 2009). However, Reforma's special investigations unit would be disbanded only a few years later and El Financiero would go through an economic crisis from the early 2000s until it was sold in 2012, and never again did it conspicuously produce in-depth reporting (Martínez, 2012; Gorostieta, 2013).

On the opposite ideological side, Proceso magazine managed to survive its founders' transition from newspaper Excélsior, to become a well-known, left-wing weekly journal with a number of "reportajes" (in-depth reporting) from cover to cover, such as the top-secret NAFTA negotiations (Puig, 1992). However, Proceso was consistently facing economic struggles and boycotts, some of which were engineered from a myriad of political and economic powers, from local governments to the presidency itself (Scherer, 2007). Nevertheless, their solid readership enabled them to survive this turbulent economic transition (Scherer-Ibarra, 2010).

According to Hughes (2009) and Márquez-Ramírez (2012), the transformation in the profession led by newspapers such as Reforma and El Financiero was used as a means to uphold commercially driven media, in contrast with the old model which used to rely on the government's official and non-official subsidies. Hughes argued first that Mexican media values changed because of the arrival of a new business model which led them to more "civic-oriented", independent behaviour. Her argument almost equates liberalisation of the business model with the possibility of implementing "civic" or "public journalism", the model that prioritises service to the public looking for democratic solutions in society (Glasser, 1999). Under her premise, educated journalists in

conjunction with a business model propelled by private advertising, generated a professional, high-quality journalism that would serve the readers instead of the incumbent president. She acknowledged some limits to the transformation of Mexican newsrooms, ascribing part of the failure to the sensationalism of TV barons in the pursuit of profit, and the later evidence that even supposedly freer newspapers supported a presidential candidate that fitted their own interests in the 2000 election. This resistance to a pure, civic-oriented journalism between the market model and an “inertial authoritarian” model, would amount to what she described as “newsrooms in conflict”. In other words, there was the prevailing point of view that “liberalisation” — and by this she meant free enterprise from public funds — was a triggering factor for the reinvigoration of freedom of speech in “post-authoritarian” democracies (Hughes, 2006; Gorriti, 1999).

On the contrary, Márquez-Ramírez (2012) pointed out the feebleness of Hughes’ conclusions, and refuted the idea that more training and education is linked to the positivistic view that a freer media is possible through economic liberalisation. This stance is based on the assumption that independence from an authoritarian government would automatically lead to journalism that has strong civic values, but tends to overlook the many forms in which those same values can be curtailed by other powers (i.e. political and economic groups that control advertising and monopolise the market) (Schiller, 1981; Pickard, 2011; 2019). After three decades of a more liberal and more professional journalism, Hughes herself acknowledged, in a later publication (2016), that Mexican journalism did not become more democratic, and freedom of speech was not automatically enhanced by a commercially driven media model.

However, the whole story of the aftermath is not as simple as a generalised setback due to private media vices. Certainly, a commercially driven media as

we know it today in Mexico, had some roots in the bolstering of neoliberal ideology. Nevertheless, other political and economic factors should be borne in mind if one has to explain the disappointment of the “liberalisation” of the Mexican press. For instance, a clientelist media model and the tearing apart of the social fabric triggered by a frontal war on drugs, which will be addressed in a successive chapter.

### *-Big Data: Technology in Pursuit of the Objective Truth*

A digital age has been presented by scholars and reporters alike as the holy grail of journalism (De Kerckhove, 1999; Deuze, 1999; Boczkowski, 2005, Castells, 2005). Some have gone as far as saying that IJ can use these new technologies to enhance a "scientific method" approach to provide accurate, pertinent information (Dader, 1997; Meyer, 2001). This view stems from North American journalist Philipp Meyer (1973 ed. 2002) and his book on "precision journalism", where he makes a case for a broader use of social science techniques such as statistics, surveys and other social and behavioural methods, to analyse data. Meyer's book became fundamental reading for the implementation of computer-assisted reporting (CAR) — to include newsrooms across Latin America (Crucianelli, 1998). A “Precision journalism” was timely in terms of technological breakthroughs, when the use of databases was increasing along with accessibility to the larger public. To some degree, Meyer was following in the footsteps of social scientists in the implementation of computers to analyse large datasets and apply them to sociology and political science.

Moreover, Meyer's own reporting on riots in Detroit (1969) using surveys and databases to prove that rioters did not have different levels of education,

came to be a paradigmatic case of quantitative research methods for journalists, and established the notion that a “scientific method” could be used in the newsroom (Meyer, 2001). Ever since, courses on journalism in North American universities, and by extension other metropolitan influence centres, have drawn on Meyer’s precision journalism to train journalists and, thus, to create a new technological environment for journalists to report the news (Dader, 1997; Valdivieso, 2003). The use of quantifiable data along with the ideal of objective reporting, introduced the label “data journalism” — a label adopted among the many variants of investigative reporting (Anderson in Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018). An enhanced version of Meyer’s book was published in 2001, under the name “The New Precision Journalism”, which was an attempt to keep up with technological advances, the use of the internet, and the analysis of large numbers of databases, or “Big Data”.

In the mid-1990s, one of the pillars of the adoption of investigative reporting was promoted by a group of North American journalists, members of the Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE) organisation (La Red de Periodistas de Investigación, 1997; IRE, 2020). In 1996, they founded their Mexican chapter, called Investigative Reporters & Editors-Mexico, which would provide training and fellowships to Mexican journalists keen on adopting a watchdog role of the press using investigative techniques to expose wrongdoing, up until the departure of its first director, Lise Olsen (Houston Chronicle, 2020). Some of the reporters who benefited from this training became prominent figures in Mexico’s IJ circles, for example, Alma Delia Fuentes and Lilia Saúl. But the resulting investigative work rarely made its way into the mainstream media, so their investigations appeared in more modest publications such as Proceso. These journalists would be reporting the prelude of what some would regard as a new wave of Mexico’s

political democratisation (Casar, 2008) — starting with the PRI losing the majority in Congress after 70 years of hegemonic control, and the final victory of the conservative PAN in the 2000 presidential election.

IRE's work in Mexico was a sort of collaboration for training with Mexican journalists, and it yielded a number of Mexican reporters who would adopt a more investigations-oriented practice. However, it had the form of a tutelage relationship, where experienced North American journalists taught investigative techniques to be applied in a Mexico context (La Red de Periodistas de Investigación, 1997). This relationship would continue to be bolstered by other North American organisations such as the Knight Center or the International Center For Journalists (ICFJ), which had been responsible for organising courses and training across Mexico and other Latin American countries, more lately with partner organisation, Connectas, based in Bogotá, Colombia (Connectas, 2015).

In Mexico, Lilia Saúl, one of the reporters trained by IRE, started to work for the national newspaper *El Universal* in the early 2000s. There, she was a member of *El Universal*'s investigation team, before creating one of the first data analysis units in Mexico called *El Universal DATA* (Knight Center, 2012b). Saúl was responsible for a multimedia project called “Desaparecidos” in collaboration with Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo*, in 2015. That publication, where they compared cases of enforced disappearances between Mexico and Colombia using large databases, was awarded the Ortega y Gasset prize 2016 for its use of technology and for revealing the scale of the problem in both nations.

However, assuming *El Universal DATA*'s work to be generalised practice at the newspaper, *El Universal*, is misleading. Along with celebrated investigative stories on corruption and crime, *El Universal* has consistently censored stories

that have the capacity to risk its income flow. For example, El Universal did not publish the story of the abuses committed by the federal police in Michoacán in 2015, in the middle of a pacification process of self-defence groups. This story's author, Laura Castellanos, said El Universal did not want to publish it because it would damage the reputation of a top-rank official with the power to hand over publicity contracts to the newspaper (Castellanos, 2015). This is an example of how political power had the capacity to set the agenda of big media outlets in the midst of an armed conflict and still appear as democratic and fair (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016).

Hundreds of thousands of violent killings and a confined space for journalistic investigations led some reporters to take a different tack, far from the promises of technology. These were the years when journalist groups such as Periodistas de a Pie (PdP) decided to listen to victims of violence rather than to reproduce the official discourse of the authorities. This narrative inversion is important because it removes the temptation to quickly associate elements of the population as common criminals, thus resisting the dehumanisation of the conflict (Periodistas de a Pie, 2007). PdP is used as a case study in this thesis and will be addressed in further chapters, but it was important to mention it to show a stark contrast — for PdP, the use of technology and databases was not a silver bullet. Their stance laid bare a structural issue for the press coverage of the war on drugs in Mexico — the problem of a complicit state in the middle of an internal conflict monopolising the means of investigation and creating the memory of that conflict based purely in cold numbers.

Nonetheless, transnational collaborations where technology is a major feature in the process of investigation, such as the collaboration between El Universal (Mexico) and El Tiempo (Colombia), have become more frequent in

recent years. This is in part because the use of technology has made the process much easier, as has happened everywhere with cases such as the Swiss Papers and the Panama Papers (Obermayer & Obermaier, 2017). Furthermore, regionally speaking, collaborations using databases and other technology have been promoted by NGO's such as Connectas, ICFJ, and Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (Peru) (IPYS, 2009; Huertas & Sierra, 2018).

This is the case for collaborative platforms such as 'Lava Jato en América Latina', or the 'Red de Periodismo Estructurado', both of which have investigators from Perú, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, sharing and publishing stories about Odebrecht's scandal. One of the Mexican counterparts in this investigation, "Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad", is a recently created NGO with a vigorous department of IJ, combined with a team of lawyers filing complaints before Mexican tribunals (Knight Center, 2018). Authorities' investigations in Mexico remained stagnant for years, but Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción has consistently probed the case and has advocated for the prosecution of those held responsible. However, something stands out as "the elephant in the room" at Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción — it was founded by Mexican millionaire Claudio X. Gonzalez, son and heir of one of the most powerful Mexican moguls, Claudio X. Gonzalez Laporte, who was part of Televisa's board of directors and has influenced Mexican politics for decades (Méndez-Soto, 2014).

Nevertheless, promises of a precision journalism, a scientific method, or big data as a means of holding power accountable, do not always live up to their own claims. That is not only because statistics do not represent reality in a pristine, unbiased way (Dader, 1997), but because ideas of technological precision are based on the assumption that the representation of reality can be objective and detached from the object of study (Bell, 1998b; Hallin, 2012; RISJ, 2020).

Although the idea of objectivity in journalism was not born with the use of computers, it is useful to analyse it here to show its shortcomings and the prospect of a truly transformative journalism.

Objectivity in the liberal press is usually traced back in North American history to the end of the nineteenth century, with the 1896 election marking the beginning of the so called “Progressive Era”, which started a crusade against partisan rhetoric in newspapers that were aligned to political parties (Kaplan, 2002). As mentioned before, other relevant benchmarks are the aim to make journalism a “learned profession” (Jukes, 2017, p. 47; Schudson, 2008), driven by the pursuit of revenue. In fact, it was Pulitzer who criticised the French model of the press for being too reliant on opinions, and instead he believed that “in America we want facts” (Chalaby, 1996, in Jukes 2017; Muñoz-Torres, 2012). That explains two prominent traits around objectivity in the history of journalism. Firstly, why the muckraking spirit of revealing wrongdoing was amalgamated with objectivity, impartiality, and a zealous detachment from any political affiliation, particularly acute at the rise of a two-party political system; and secondly, it would explain why objectivity gives journalists an aura of professionalism to the duty of informing the public in exchange for profit. A dominant positivist view of acquiring and transmitting knowledge should not be disregarded since some of the most idealised streams of journalism find their basis in several assumptions about a measurable reality, causality, and a scientific method for the social sciences (Bhaskar et al, 2013). In fact, achieving objectivity in the press through technological means finds its origin in the same professional ideological premise and epistemological foundation of what Muhlmann (2007) termed the “cult of the visual” — reporting only what can be seen. This visual fetish became very important for the industrialised press of the twentieth century, in particular since

the introduction of printed images in newspapers to report the news stories as “they happened”.

There is abundant literature on objectivity as a value for a watchdog role of the press, covering Latin America as well as other parts of the world (Kieran, 1998; Mindich, 2000, Anderson & Schudson, 2009; Blaagaard, 2013b). Likewise, IJ manuals written by Latin American journalists talk about it in a tangential way (Gorriti, 1999; Reyes, 2006; Raphael, 2017), but they do not seem to question the existence of a total truth that is “out there” for journalists to report it as “it is”, let alone allow the criticism of the instrumentalisation of objectivity as a way to reinforce hegemonic narratives (Márquez-Ramírez 2012; Fenton, 2004).

According to the existing literature (Márquez-Ramírez 2012; Hanusch et al, 2017; Vos et al, 2018; Mellado, 2018), objectivity in IJ in Mexico has a high status among those reporters who adopt a watchdog role of the press, but it has an ambivalent character. The “Worlds of Journalism” study (Vos et al, 2018) assesses a number of values investigative reporters cherish as inherent to their practice and identity. For instance, levels of identification with objectivity, fact-based reporting, autonomy, and so on. For Mexico (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2016; Márquez-Ramírez 2012), this study provides evidence of a hybrid professional culture. It comes from the liberal model of the press attributed to North American journalists (equated to watchdog journalism aiming to remain editorially detached, fact-based and disseminative in nature) and the adoption of more interventionist types of media roles (agents of change, agenda setters, and facilitators of national welfare). This characterisation corresponds with Gorriti’s (1999) and De Albuquerque’s (2005) view on Latin American watchdog journalism. They see a “creative adaptation” of a North American tradition based

on objectivity and detachment and a more partisan journalism as practised in the traditions of France and Spain.

However, as Márquez-Ramírez (2012) has claimed for the Mexican case, reporters with a strong commitment to objectivity end up replicating the discourse of elites and power centres. This process of reinforcing hegemonic narratives occurs as if phenomena were facts susceptible to being reported as they happened, but without really giving weight to power relations behind the construction of those narratives (Anderson in Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018). This reveals a troublesome effect of a so-called objective reporting as well as an ambiguity between ideology and practice, usually taken for granted by practitioners and the public alike, or to cite Alain Accardo (2000) and his idea of reinforcing “dominant logics” by reporting things as they are — they act *sub specie boni* (by a default view).

This was not, by any means, an exhaustive account of IJ and its adaptation in Mexico. But it has been an attempt to show how a North American tradition, starting from the muckraking journalism of the nineteenth and twentieth century, up to the developments of data journalism, found some ground in Mexican journalism over the years. A particular tipping-point is the implementation of neoliberalism in Mexico which assimilated journalism as part of its own institutional machinery, investing it with a heightened commodified character to be sold on the market. But this was not implemented *prima facie*. In fact, it is an iteration of the myth of North American journalism that has been in a constant flux with national traditions of journalism and political identities, sprouting creative adaptations. No wonder defining IJ is such an elusive enterprise.

In the following section, I locate this adaption of IJ within the ethics of what is considered “good journalism” in the liberal tradition, particularly from literature on contemporary journalism in Mexico and IJ manuals in Latin America. I also review models of journalism that have challenged given assumptions of how journalism is performed in mainstream media, with the purpose of evaluating other scholarship, and identifying opportunities to advance a framework for truly transformative investigations in Mexico.

### ***1.2. IJ's and Ethics in Different Journalism Models***

In dealing with ethics for journalism in general, there is a large list of titles and authors encompassing a myriad of models of journalism, responding to particular contexts and countries, usually taking into account regional, political and economic particularities (Villanueva, 2000; Restrepo, 2004; Bastenier, 2009; Kapuściński, 2006; 2007). Much of this literature deals with what is considered good and bad practice for journalists to deliver their democratic role in society. The existing literature regularly comprises values, codes about their relationship with the audience, power relations with sources and institutions, as well as teaching these ethical frameworks to aspiring journalists in the classroom. However, I have chosen to focus on the literature on alternative or committed models of journalism in general, since it is against this backdrop that the framework for transformative investigations can be located, among other attempts to challenge conceptions of the purpose and aim of journalism in society. I have also chosen to draw on its implications on ethics since I regard ethics to be a process where being, practising, and fulfilling purpose are intertwined (Bhaskar, 2013).

Perhaps the better umbrella term that encompasses a committed approach to challenging mainstream news coverage is alternative journalism (Atton, 2003; Atton & Hamilton, 2008) which describes the use of the media for emancipatory purposes, subculture publications, and even the rise of journalism performed by citizens challenging the monopoly of news manufacturing in the digital age, popularised with the term “citizen journalism”, and theorised multiple times by scholars such as Gillmor (2006), Allan & Thorsen (2009) and Blaagaard (2013a). But let me start from the south. Latin American newsroom experience of a kind of alternative journalism is closer to the influence of social journalism, an idea coined by Argentinian scholar Alicia Cytrynblum (2004), who proposed an approach that withdraws itself from covering the most dominant beats on newspapers (e.g. political campaigns, big scale finances) and instead goes back to the people and their daily lives. This is the kind of reporting that would favour a story on the struggles of women of colour in Mexico, rather than a politician’s statements. This social journalism is interesting because it dislocates what mainstream media usually take to be news, and puts the emphasis on the “problems of society” with the aim of making a difference in people’s lives.

In fact, Cytrynblum’s proposal is heavily influenced by the idea of “civic” or “public journalism”, the model that prioritises service to the public looking for democratic solutions in society and which gained much attention in the early 1990s. The idea of civic/public journalism gained a lot of traction because it moved one step forward towards a more interventionist role of the press, going from informing the public to actually promoting improvement in the quality of public life. This approach, though, does not go beyond the moment of publication and is mainly focused on its adoption in North American newsrooms (Glasser, 1999). The closest attempt to measure the implementation of civic/public

journalism in Mexico is Hughes' (2009) argument that the liberalisation of the media led to a more civic oriented journalism in newspapers such as Reforma or El Financiero at the dawn of the full advance of neoliberalism in Mexico (something her approach does not seem to bear in mind).

In a slightly different way, Marco Lara Klahr (2015), journalist and professor at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico, has elaborated on what he calls "journalism for the transformation of conflicts and prevention of violence". According to this view, reporting the information for the sake of giving the news is not enough, and therefore it adopts a more interventionist role, taking a side and, in its most radical form, actively advocating to bring peace. This approach was particularly important for Mexico in the midst of the escalation of violence that started in 2007 after the declaration of a frontal war against criminal organisations (Raphael, 2019). It is also connected to the work of Bob Hackett (2006; 2012) on "peace journalism" which sees conflict, particularly in the middle of war, as a complex process of different parties and interests, rather than a Manichean dichotomy. It actively seeks peace and it departs from objectivity as the holy grail of reporting in the sense that it regards the media as a battlefield of narratives and even propaganda, thus, peace journalism practitioners should understand their position and seek an end to conflict. These ideas are reminiscent of journalism of attachment (Bell, 1998a), which emerged among the journalists who were covering conflict in the Balkans and were not satisfied with a detached, objective account of human rights violations. The argument, they said, was that they could not detach from the human suffering they were witnessing, so they had to engage or "attach" to those most vulnerable. A heavy criticism on journalism of attachment was that it shamed the population for supporting a conflict or failing to do something about it, calling for authorities to

intervene in foreign affairs but with a very Manichean view (“good guys” versus “bad guys”) (Ruigrok, 2008, p. 69). The Manichean view is problematic, but it is a very original disruption to the kind of reporting that wants conflicts to be perceived as if all parties are in equal circumstances, and as if human suffering is only a collateral damage in the midst of conflict.

A “journalistic deontology” has been developed by another Mexican scholar, Ernesto Villanueva (2000). This view cannot be considered under the umbrella of alternative journalism, but I mention it here because it remains a very influential strand created and discussed in Mexican academic circles. Though more focused on a purist view of journalism ethics, this approach is a set of moral compasses journalists should be complying with, upholding the social duty of being truthful and socially responsible. It draws a great deal of ideas about journalism’s aims and purpose in society from the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) Professional Journalistic Standards and Code of Ethics. Along a similar line, and of special interest for the framework presented here, Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuściński (2006; 2007) has also been preoccupied with a reflection on the practice of reporting, particularly in conflict and in connection with the Global South. His work on “Encounter with the other” (2007), elaborating on the ethics proposed by the French-Lithuanian, Emmanuel Levinas, advanced one of the most humanitarian ideas in journalism, stating that journalism not only reports, but tries to understand the different other, even at the point of sacrifice of the self. This becomes relevant for journalism in general, but it has never been close to permeating debates on IJ and its aim to uncover wrongdoing.

On a different note, notions of social justice (which will be relevant for the case study in Chapters 4 and 5) can be found in a model that implies a more

interventionist, socially committed way of doing journalism, relating also to some of the most radical and, therefore regarded as, partisan understandings of journalism such as “rebel journalism”, claiming that “news is not journalism if what’s being reported is only meant to extract value from communities as opposed to creating value within them” (Ramsammy, 2017). Although the idea of creating political value by actively looking for social change within communities has not yet been further theorised in Mexico, it may fit also into Curran’s (2011) role of the media in a “Radical Democracy”, attacking liberal pluralism for ignoring inequality between different groups in society.

IN the UK, and taking a more general approach to journalism ethics, Couldry, Phillips and Freedman (2010) have provided a diagnosis and a proposal to address current ethical dilemmas for journalism and media power which they link to “accountability” in journalism. Although their references and final prescriptions pertain to the British media system and journalism in general, their analysis proves to be useful in making a link between IJ practice and its ethical implications in different socio-political contexts. Their proposal goes beyond the teaching of individual skills and demands “accuracy” (where truthfulness and trust play a crucial role), “sincerity” (revolving around the individual being consistent about their own beliefs and actions), and “hospitality” (which requires giving space and voice to the strangers or the aliens in our midst) from journalists, in order to fulfil their role in society. All three concepts are plausible and heading in the right direction towards an ethical groundwork for the journalistic practice, but these principles are insufficient if IJ is to assume a more committed, transformational role. Perhaps the idea of “hospitality” is closer to a radical attitude for IJ. Because according to this approach, “hospitality” in journalism should serve as an antidote to both the objectivisation of reality, and contempt for

“the other”. Still, the term “hospitality” gives the idea of a rather passive attitude, or of being tolerant until there is no other alternative than to solve the uncomfortable situation of having to make more room for the unexpected visitor. In fact, Kapuściński’s approach goes even further than this view, but IJ, I would argue, requires a more interventionist, active ethical stance for political action since its transformative capacities have been impeded in the name of the idea of an objective, detached professional activity in Mexico.

When it comes to the specifics of long-term investigation cases in Latin America, the richest resources for knowledge of what investigative reporters hold as ethically right in their daily practice, are news media stylebooks and IJ handbooks published by veteran investigators (Santoro, 2004; Reyes, 2006). These handbooks are mainly focused on teaching investigation techniques and therefore ethical dilemmas only occupy a marginal place in these materials. However, they usually elaborate on their relationship with sources, how to deal with bribery attempts, gifts, invitations, and some advice on certain types of controversial ways of doing journalism, such as undercover reporting (IRE, 2020).

Nevertheless, among this literature it is still hard to find critical points of view about IJ ethics, in particular at the level of its relationship with large economic and political structures. It is uncommon to find scholars in Mexico, let alone journalism trainers, challenging IJ consensually accepted values of its daily practice. Just a few are pinpointing some of its deepest shortcomings in other similar contexts — for instance, the competition logic between journalists working for commercially driven media, their relationship with advocacy groups, or funding (Faundes-Merino, 2000; Sortino, 2001b; Matheson, 2009).

One of the most often cited academic works providing a critical point of view is Waisbord's (2000) analysis of Latin American watchdogs in which he also deals with "denuncismo" (journalists pretending to publish an investigation with no original investigative work at all, and only denouncing what others say is true). Along this line, the problem of objective reporting is presented as a dilemma about the possibilities of reporting the truth. The conclusion Waisbord reaches is that South American reporters have given up telling the truth and thus that there is no truth at all for them, so their role has been limited only to elicit public debates. Conversely, Márquez-Ramírez (2012) gave the explanation of a contradictory phenomenon between assumptions about objectivity and everyday practice, specifically for Mexico. As it has been said before, this ambiguity in Mexican journalism does not only have implications on the existence of a truth out there to be reported, but also on what this reporting is doing, or not, in the public interest.

In clear contrast with Waisbord's (2000) vision that investigative journalists should only animate democratic discussions, the sharpest critical view on IJ in Latin America comes from Argentinian scholar, Sortino (2001a), and Faundes-Merino (2000; 2001), from Chile. For Sortino, the role of contemporary IJ in accountability processes has deepened the problematic approach to corruption stories of embezzlement, bribery, monopolisation, and so on, which are published as if they were merely occasional system errors (Camaj, 2013; Chowdhury, 2004, Mujica et al, 2015), instead of systematic by-products of broader political and economic systems (Faundes-Merino, 2000). In other words, according to this critical view, IJ is disregarding, and sometimes actively perpetuating, power, economic, and political structures, through the type of reporting and values associated with its own practice (Starkman, 2014). Along these lines, Faundes-

Merino (2000) has made a call to treat this accountability compass with care, depending on the context in which the story has unfolded. According to Faundes-Merino (2000), corruption and other moral dilemmas are different in the Western world from those in the Global South, as well as the structures that enable those practices, but he does not expand on giving examples of these differences. Leaning towards this standpoint, Sortino (2001b) has also called for the need for an IJ in Latin American countries that not only reveals wrongdoing or corruption cases, but that could challenge political and economic models. For Sortino, if IJ does not assume an anti-systemic stance, then its ontological characteristics (newsworthiness, originality, revelatory reporting, and so on) prevents investigative journalists from questioning the status quo, making them “watchdogs protecting their master’s property, and there is nothing more dependant than a watchdog”. This upholds one of the most pertinent criticisms of accountability culture in neoliberal times, where governments, but also companies and organisations, are subjected to accountability processes that are changing civil values for market values, as if IJ would be helping to audit a company, checking balances and efficient operation, but refusing to see societal problems as systemic, and therefore, passing unnoticed before the supposedly good nose of the watchdog (Fenton, 2010). In this sense, investigative journalists have assumed the economic model and its role as guardians of, as it were, any atypical incident. What is regarded as wrong in this case is not the system and its intrinsic failures, but the contingency of a particular player breaking the rules of the game.

This body of literature suggests that one of the most urgent needs for IJ in Latin America and elsewhere is a deeper reflection about investigative reporters as political actors. As mentioned above, most of the literature in the field is meant

to address daily reporting in Latin American countries, inferring ideas from newspapers' style guides, but mainly in regard to investigation techniques and epistemology (Ettema & Glasser, 1989; Muñoz-Torres, 2007; Parra-Pujante, 2012). In fact, there have not been many attempts to provide IJ with a proper framework for political action. The need for an enabling framework for IJ in Mexico becomes important in a context where the role of the press is called into question, most notably in the epitome of the liberal state and the multifaceted arrangements of power in Mexico.

### ***-Conclusions***

Two aspects of IJ have been analysed: “Definitions of Investigative Journalism”, and “IJ and Ethics in Different Journalism models”. Although these aspects have been described in a way that is of special interest for IJ as practiced in Mexico, they could be useful to describe the ideologies and processes where the idea of IJ has been linked to the advancement of the liberal role of the press.

However, I have argued that a definition of IJ is equivocal. Some scholars have attempted to characterise its practice based on its role in democracy, its effects on society, and even the labour conditions investigative journalists have to experience in order to get an investigation published. Based on mythical examples of this practice, it is possible to see how IJ in Mexico is stemming from two different, sometimes conflicting, traditions — on the one hand, a commercially based North American media model where a corporate press is identified with objective, revelatory reporting that is sold in the marketplace; and, on the other, a more committed, politically engaged tradition. But a unique definition is problematic, mainly because the most representative examples of

long-term investigations in Mexico and elsewhere have different characteristics across time and location. But perhaps the clearest difference between IJ and daily reporting is the time and resources allocated to produce these stories.

At the height of neoliberalism in Mexico and the end of the PRI-regime, IJ gained a particular relevance in privately owned media that relied on commercialisation, which assimilated this kind of reporting as part of the institutional framework towards liberalisation and democratisation. The flourishing of a watchdog role of the press with civic roots has made IJ in Mexico a by-product of neoliberal institutions, but with little room to subsist within a commercially driven clientelist media model as exists in Mexico.

In the second section on “IJ and Ethics in Different Journalism Models”, ethics is seen as an inextricable part of IJ’s being, practice, and purpose. The press models that resemble the muckraking spirit of a committed press are found under the umbrella of what a great part of the scholarship identifies to be “alternative journalism”, particularly its heavily situated wing that departs from objectivity as the main aim and adopts a stance when reproducing reality. I have cited examples such as peace journalism (Lara Klhar, 2015; Hackett, 2012), journalism of attachment (Bell, 1998a), civic/public journalism (Rosen, 1995; Glasser, 1999), and social journalism (Cytrynblum, 2004; 2009; Llobet, 2006), and even the advance of ethical journalism in the form of accountability (Couldry et al, 2010) and deontology (Villanueva, 2000; Restrepo, 2004; Bastenier, 2009; Kapuściński, 2006; 2007). However, there is an incipient body of critical literature on the role of IJ in Latin America and the implications of their political action (Waisbord, 2000; Sortino, 2001b; Faundes-Merino, 2000) which opens up many opportunities for this research. The framework for transformative investigations that this thesis elaborates upon, draws from those principles but advances a

committed role for investigative journalists in Mexico which is more interventionist and gives journalists a stronger political character.

From the two sections above one can make the case that IJ in Mexico, its purpose, practice, and aim in society, is connected to ideas largely influenced by the North American press of doing journalism a certain way, and the historical path of a more politically committed, more versatile public character of the native Mexican press. Also, the argument can be made that previous attempts to invest IJ elsewhere with a more interventionist identity, have been far from critical of the practice itself and the economic structures that sustain it. This makes clear that there is room to rework the political role of IJ and the framework under which it operates in contemporary Mexico, so that it can be truly transformative and truly political.

In the next chapter, I explain the contexts and conjuncture within which IJ in Mexico is carried out, drawing from the political and economic conditions that constrain it.

## ***Chapter 2: Political Economy of IJ in Mexico***

### ***-Introduction***

In the previous chapter, I provided a review of the idea of Investigative Journalism (IJ) in Mexico, from crucial events on the revelation of wrongdoing, to the adaptation of the very influential North American media model of a corporate press — particularly after the height of neoliberalism. In this chapter I will try to respond to the questions, how is IJ produced in contemporary Mexico, and what are the political and economic conditions that make it what it is now? Previous scholarship, discussions on how a clientelist media model came to be, how the press is owned by Mexican elites, the influence of neoliberalism on IJ practices, and the legal framework that reinforce those conditions, will inform this review. In other words, I will try to analyse the conditions that hamper a truly transformative IJ in the public interest in Mexico.

The argument I advance in this chapter is that these conditions are underpinning a small, exclusive group of reporters whose existence has enabled clientelist media companies to relegate, in contrast, the vast majority of Mexican journalists to shallow daily reporting that results in cheap, but profitable, media content (Sortino, 2001a; Faundes-Merino, 2000; Fenton, 2004; Márquez-Ramírez, 2012; Anderson in Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018). Such a segregated identity is preventing journalism practice at large from playing a more transformative socio-political role in Mexico (Bhaskar, 2013; Wright, 2011); and those who try to do so are left in a precarious, vulnerable position — sometimes doing daily reporting along with investigative pieces (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2016; Saldaña & Mourão, 2018). The media system created by the Mexican state to create the illusion of a modern, democratic country, and the poor

labour conditions reporters experience under this system, are at the core of all other threats journalists face in contemporary Mexico. These problems were aggravated by the triggering of a frontal war on drugs in 2007 which has made Mexico one of the most dangerous countries within which to be a journalist (CPJ, 2020; Artículo 19, 2020). Or, to put it another way, a politically committed press in Mexico finds it difficult to exist because its vulnerabilities start with, and are aggravated by, a media model that has responded to specific political and economic projects both on a national and global scale. This partially explains why there are only a handful of investigative reporters in Mexico, and why it is common for them to combine daily reporting with occasional long-term investigations, leading to an unresolved tension between these two forms of journalism.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first, on the media model in neoliberal times in Mexico, traces the origins of the Mexican captured media model (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014), founded on the relationship between an authoritarian ruling party and a clientelist media in the mid-twentieth century, and which later had to adapt to neoliberal policies that were heavily enforced in Mexico in the early 1990s (Escalante, 2017). At these stages, how the media and IJ is funded is key to understanding how its transformative role has been affected and its political traction was eroded. Here, the emergence of special investigations units across some Latin American news media organisations is contrasted with the idea of “reportajes” in Mexico (Crucianelli, 1998; Gorriti, 1999; Alves et al, 2017; McPherson, 2012). When it comes to funding, I will dwell on the advent of non-profit journalism in Latin America funded by international foundations, and the scholarship that has tried to assess their sustainability (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán 2014; Wright et al 2019). Next, security conditions for those doing long-term investigations in the country will be

analysed, as attacks on the press have been a rising phenomenon since the beginning of a frontal war on drugs in Mexico, making it even more difficult for journalists to undertake investigative work (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2017; Rely & González de Bustamante, 2014; Barrios & Miller, 2020). These attacks are considered part of the continuum of the political and economic conditions that journalists in Mexico have experienced for decades that include censorship, indirect political pressure, and corrupt practices.

In the second section on the legal frameworks, tensions between ideals of free enterprise, freedom of speech, media ownership, and content regulation, will be brought into the discussion (Sosa-Plata, 2014; Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016; Serna, 2019). It will be seen that the current legal framework — or the intentional lack of it — under which Mexican investigative journalists operate, privileges the operation of a business served by the state, over the existence of a politically engaged journalism holding power to account (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014; Sosa-Plata, 2014).

In this context, in which Mexican journalism has already seen contradictions between a liberal press and the neoliberal notions of free enterprise, IJ has been regarded as the salvation of journalism, and by extension, an ally of the Mexican democratisation process. But if the political and economic conditions reinforce the neoliberal assumptions on freedom in connection to the marketplace, the aim of holding power to account remains solely a pretext to inject some degree of legitimacy into Mexico's media model where journalists doing IJ are few and do it so seldomly. Therefore, this chapter is a critical analysis of the context under which IJ is carried out (or rather hindered) in Mexico and justifies why a framework for investigations that transcend these constraints, is needed.

## **2.1. The Media Model in Neoliberal Times in Mexico**

### *-The “casa blanca” scandal as illustration*

What happened after the “casa blanca” scandal and the subsequent dismissal of our entire team at MVS, was not just a case of applying censorship because the president was annoyed by what was published. There were underlying factors that pertain to a particular political and historical context.

For instance, one needs to explain further why a private company such as MVS was willing to fund critical IJ that led to economic profit for a time, and soon after decided to cancel its most profitable radio program. This national radio news program, with its own investigations unit, was responsible for the publication of a series of stories on corruption and wrongdoing, with relatively good rapport among Mexican audiences. This was so until the day one of those stories put the Mexican President under public scrutiny for receiving a seven million-dollar mansion from a Federal Government contractor. As noted in an earlier section, MVS owners explicitly asked Carmen Aristegui, who anchored the radio program, not to air the story because otherwise, not only would their radio broadcast concessions be at risk, but also the many other companies they owned — restaurants, satellite TV services and, most importantly, the promise of an imminent radio frequency concession they were still in the process of seeking approval for from the Federal Government. Here, the prospect of revenues coming from a company that was completely out of the circuit of the media sector, was jeopardised by the potential risk of incurring the President’s wrath in retaliation. Even if the story was not published on any MVS radio stations, MVS’s final decision to fire an entire team of journalists sent a warning message to the Mexican public — political and economic powers made it very clear that news media companies are funding IJ as long as they are profitable, and as long as it

does not interfere with their other businesses (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016). The problem was, then, that a very small group of people can profit at the expense of public goods (radio spectrums) and then protect their capital to the detriment of the public interest and democratic rights. In other words, my colleagues and I were fired to appease the president's wrath, in exchange for a much-expected profitable telecommunications business that depended on the government's will to issue the necessary permits, in a closed media system for just some competitors.

Mexican media is not evenly distributed across every platform, but a commercially based model is predominant, relying more on advertising than on consumers or subscribers (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). Televisa and TV Azteca used to dominate the national broadcasting and cable/satellite TV market until a third new player, Imagen, entered the national scene in 2016 (IFT, 2016). But this third player happened to be run by Olegario Vazquez Raña, also owner of a new version of Excélsior newspaper. His brother, Mario, also had a long history in the newspaper industry and was one of the most prominent beneficiaries of a clientelist relationship with the political power through his organisation, OEM (RSF & Cencos, 2019). In national radio the concentration is less acute, but family names can be found across media platforms (Huerta-Wong & Gómez-García, 2013). For instance, Grupo Formula is owned by Rogerio Azcárraga, a close relative of Televisa's heir, Emilio Azcárraga. The Vargas family has 52 national radio stations under the brand MVS but it is also in control of one of the two main satellite TV providers in Mexico, Dish.

These media corporations' income stream is mainly from advertising, which could be separated into two large sectors: the private sector, and government publicity ("or publicidad oficial"). Private sector advertising in media was worth

almost 10,922 million dollars in 2016 (Forbes Team, 2016). Although the market is growing as a whole, advertising in TV, Radio and newspapers is plummeting and giving way to more digital advertising (CICOM, 2016). Concerning government's advertising, or "publicidad oficial", the debate is more heated, maybe because the available data is more meticulous and because this is paid for out of public funds. The rise in Federal Government advertising reached 540 million dollars per year during Peña Nieto's presidency (2012-2018), to which must be added the budget local governments spent for the same concept (Fundar, 2017; Martínez-Velázquez, 2018). All this public money is distributed at will, without any kind of regulation and following the old-school clientelist tradition instituted by the PRI. On that basis, NGOs such as Article 19 (Pérez-Flores, 2019) managed to take the debate to Mexico's Supreme Court, which ordered Congress to create a more thorough public advertising regulation. However, the new law passed by Congress confers the power to make decisions about publicity contracts to the Home Secretary attributions, under the President's control. Such a concentration of power to control the media using public funds is the problem at the core of the captured clientelist media model in Mexico which has developed throughout the twentieth century, and whose roots I will try to analyse next.

#### *-The "Invisible Tyranny" and the Captured Media Model*

Among the millions of documents in Mexico's National Archives, Mexican scholar and journalist, Jacinto Rodríguez-Munguía, discovered evidence of the original infraction in the relationship between the Mexican government and the buoyant press of the twentieth century. The document, which can be described as a propaganda manual, emanated from the PRI government press office, and advances the idea of a narrative that requires the media's help in order for the

government to exist. The document itself calls this regime and its narrative “an invisible tyranny”:

“Through the enactment of political propaganda, we can conceive of a world dominated by an ‘invisible tyranny’ that adopts the form of a democratic government. Under this condition, a democracy like Mexico’s can obtain the equivalent popular control levels a dictatorship gets through violence and terror (Rodríguez-Munguía, 2007, para. 4 & 5)”.

This declassified document lays bare the machinery behind the propaganda apparatus that was operational during more than 70 years of PRI party rule, from the end of the Mexican Revolution, up to the beginning of the twenty-first century. This origin explains many episodes of Mexico’s recent press history. It explains, for instance, one of the foundational conflicts of modern politics in Mexico — the killing of students in Tlatelolco in 1968 and the complicity of the mainstream media in covering up the state’s role in the massacre (Taibo II, 2011). It explains why the government’s control over paper supply for printing was used as a way to administer news content during most of the mid-twentieth century (Serna, 2017). The “invisible tyranny” also explains the mythical censorship blow to the *Excélsior* newspaper in 1976 while it shunned the idea of getting rid of the newspaper altogether, and how the most important TV and Radio broadcasters supported the version of labour issues within the newspaper as the main reason behind the blow (Leñero, 1977 ed. 2012). And also, why Televisa’s founder, the most powerful TV broadcaster in Latin America, Emilio Azcárraga Milmo, called himself a “soldier of the PRI and of the president” (Paxman & Fernández, 2013; González de Bustamante, 2013; Trejo Delarbre, 1988).

But most importantly, the “invisible tyranny” explains the origins of the media model Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014) have called “a captured media model”. Based on ‘Comparing Media Systems’ by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez have coined the term “captured media model” to describe the media in Latin America. Hallin and Mancini’s ‘Comparing Media Systems’ is a seminal comparative analysis of the media in different countries. In the original study, eighteen West European and North American democracies were included. They drew a map for media systems with political affiliations, based on variables such as structure of media markets, parallelism between the political parties and the media, journalists’ professional education, and the role of the state. The classification resulted in three models: The North Atlantic, or Liberal, Model; the North/Central Europe, or Democratic Corporatist, Model; and the Mediterranean, or Polarized Pluralist, Model. The latest is of special interest for this thesis because further studies have considered Latin American systems to be very similar to that model in particular, due especially to its polarized environment, low readership, and because of the low level of journalists’ professional literacy (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002). Other important contributions have been made along the same line of analysis (Hallin, 2012; Chakravartty, & Roy, 2013); for instance Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002), added a term to describe how democracies in this region responded to global modernity: clientelism (“a pattern of social organisation in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for deference and various kinds of support” (p. 11)). However, De Albuquerque (2013) has pointed out that even when there are certain similarities between Southern European and Latin American countries, claiming that clientelism has a constant effect on political parallelism is oversimplifying contexts, history, and

social change. Hence, De Albuquerque proposed to add two different variables to assess political parallelism — political competitiveness, and stability in media/politics relationships. These adjustments to this methodology led to Mexican scholars Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez claiming that Latin American media and its relation to the political is often captured by extra journalistic constraints (Captured-Liberal Model), such as the predominance of clientele profiting from a commercial model.

For Mexico, this captured media model adequately describes the clientelist relationship between political or economic powers and the press, capturing its democratic ideal of informing the public that was particularly acute at the height of neoliberalism in Mexico. This means that Mexican governments have promoted a profitable free enterprise approach for some groups, which for the electronic media means licenses and permits, as long as the content is favourable to the purposes of the incumbent government — as happened at MVS with the dismissal of our team following the ‘casa blanca’ scandal.

#### *-Funding: Saving the Business, not the Journalists*

It is relatively easy to find data on funding schemes for Mexican journalism in general, but trying to identify how long-term investigations are funded in Mexico is a different story. Márquez-Ramírez and Hughes (2016) have conducted the most comprehensive demographic study of journalists to date, including journalists’ labour conditions. Unfortunately, their data is not disaggregated enough to show how much an investigative journalist is paid. The closest the study gets is to showing which reporters agree with a “watchdog role of the press” — which is not sufficient to determine specific demographics. This might be the

case because investigative reporters are uncommon in the vast majority of Mexican newsrooms, as the empirical work of this thesis advances in Chapter 4. However, looking at Mexican journalists' labour conditions at large could give us a glimpse into media corporations and their relationship with their employees, including those who undertake long-term investigations. According to their study, there were an estimated 18,400 journalists in Mexico (though Observatorio Laboral [2020] states there are in excess of 192,000). About 80% of them hold a full-time position, 10% are part-time, and just 5.6% work as freelance reporters. The last figure is important because freelancers are usually those who have more time to carry out long-term investigations. As a whole, Mexican journalists' salaries are shockingly small — 70% earn less than 15,000 Mexican pesos (around \$750 dollars) per month, in spite of having heavy workloads.

Waisbord (2000) has argued that the implementation of IJ units in Latin American newspapers has been put into effect as a business strategy to increase sales. This might have been supported by the history of the creation of special investigations units in Mexico in *El Universal*, *Reforma* or *El Financiero*. However, the fact that these units disappeared shortly afterwards calls Waisbord's notion into question. McPherson (2012) has identified that this was the case in some Mexican newsrooms where long-term, in-depth reporting, or "reportajes", was used to mark a difference with what she calls "spot news" — her way of referring to daily or live reporting. But she also acknowledged that this practice is considered too expensive for a business-driven media based on a North American model, resulting in the vanishing of investigative practices in major national newspapers. The same can be said of special investigations units, given the fact they claim to do "reportajes". McPherson's conclusions indicate that investing in IJ is not always profitable, as Waisbord would like us to believe. In

other words, Waisbord's notion of IJ does not fit the Mexican case because there are particular economic factors and constraints that contest the idea that IJ is regarded as a good business in the Mexican media market, chiefly, advertising from the government or private companies.

Proceso in the 1980s and Reforma at the height of Mexican neoliberalism can serve as an example of how investigations were funded both publicly and privately. Proceso achieved this by securing official advertising from the Federal Government. Naturally, that does not mean that this money was only used for investigations (Scherer-Ibarra, 2010), but a good deal of this resources allowed them to continue publishing some of the most critical "reportajes" of its time. However, this model put Proceso at odds with the presidency numerous times, and sometimes close to the point of extinction (Scherer, 2007). They were able to endure for more than 30 years due to their loyal base of subscribers, but they never fully abandoned an advertising business model (Scherer-Ibarra, 2010).

On the other hand, Reforma has always believed in a highly commercialised advertising scheme to fund journalism, even before it became a national newspaper in 1993. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this national edition started with a special investigations team featuring some of the most renowned Mexican journalists (Gorostieta, 2013), but this team disappeared some years later. Today, Reforma offers subscriptions as well as advertising for the government and private companies. This diversification of income seems to be less vulnerable to retaliation from powerful actors than other national and regional newspapers (Salazar Rebolledo, 2016). However, its content combines daily journalism with occasional investigative pieces, which means that their reporters must find time to write daily articles and, in their spare time, plan and undertake in-depth investigations. In fact, long-term investigations have been increasingly scarce in

Reforma as the closure of its magazine called “R”, which had longer texts and more investigated stories than the daily newspaper, attested (Núñez, 2019).

Proceso and Reforma exemplify the funding model that has served to keep a press corporation with investigations afloat via the different faces of advertising in Mexico. However, the many economic difficulties faced by Proceso, and the vanishing of in-depth publications at Reforma, are an indication that the model is not working for all and is short-lived. No one would argue that creating a group of journalists so they could focus on long term investigations to “hold power to account” is bad practice. But it gives rise to concerns when just a tiny proportion of reporters in media organisations are involved in this type of reporting, and the rest are still part of a chain of news production where clickbait content is privileged over relevance, immediacy over in-depth analysis, and business over investigation (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). Thus, IJ units become an exhaust valve for a media environment dominated by commercially driven agendas, the influential role of public relations spin, and the heavy workloads reporters face in the digital age. The result is what Davies (2008) has named “Churnalism”<sup>1</sup> — a travesty of journalism in which press releases and other pre-packaged content makes its way to the front page news (Lewis et al, 2008), which ends up finding legitimacy when it appears wrapped up alongside stories by-lined by “investigative journalists”.

IJ production chain takes many resources and, overall, more time than any other commodity that is produced within the news industry. Under a mercantilist point of view, the output is deemed too expensive a product to make, with

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<sup>1</sup> Churnalism is a term coined by Davies (2008) in his book “Flat Earth News” and further theorised by scholars such as Lewis et al (2008), Davis (2010) and others (Jackson & Moloney, 2015), as a practice where pre-packaged material is uncritically replicated by news outlets.

practically the same market value as any other content produced at a much lower cost (i.e. he-said-she-said journalism or “churnalism”) (Guzman, 2016). This is why media owners in newspapers such as Reforma or El Financiero no longer have an incentive to invest more of their capital in long-term investigations, since shallow reporting has the same value as in-depth reporting in the advertising market. Or even worse — often times, doing investigations counts as a loss. Indeed, the difficulties of in-depth reporting posed by market pressures has been identified by journalists themselves. Very often in IJ handbooks and interviews about their jobs, journalists recommend undertaking long-term investigations alongside their daily reporting, so their editors would not be angry with them for not “filling the pages” (Reyes, 2000; Pickard, 2006; Hamilton, 2016). But this critique has been rarely, if ever, accompanied by a structural solution to the constraints the media pose to investigations in journalism.

Since the market-driven media do not perceive IJ as a valuable asset (not even in the US) Hamilton (2016) suggests expanding funding for non-profit journalism organisations by facilitating tax-deductible donations. Hamilton’s idea also appeals to investigative reporters in Latin America. As Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán (2014) have shown, journalists have created non-profit organisations which are said to be escaping legacy media logics of daily reporting and, thus, enjoying more autonomy. But they have assumed that this kind of journalism is filling a gap in terms of making governments and corporations accountable in their countries, without providing any evidence to demonstrate that specific claim, or any description of the process it entails.

In Mexico, this model has been replicated at least by three organisations: Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, Quinto Elemento Lab, and Periodistas de a Pie (PdP). The first, as previously mentioned, was founded by

the son of a Mexican tycoon with a long history of political intervention in Mexican democracy. As with many other IJ organisations in the world, Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad claim to receive money from organisations such as the MacArthur Foundation, USAID, and the National Endowment for Democracy (MCCI, 2018), which by itself raises many questions about autonomy. However, Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción is not completely transparent about the funds they receive, and the vast majority of its funders remain anonymous. Apart from the fact that the founder has close ties with the largest Mexican media organisation and other tycoons, this opacity is problematic — not only because we cannot know who is funding the investigations they produce, but also because they have a legal team in charge to oppose key projects by the newly elected government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Navarro, 2019), who has found serious opposition (though fragmented) from right-wing groups (Zepeda-Patterson, 2020). Likewise, Quinto Elemento Lab does not provide detailed information about its funding, but their website shows Open Society Foundations and Global Investigative Journalism Network's logos, along with a message saying that they are a non-profit organisation (Quinto Elemento Lab, 2018). The group of journalists I will be using as case study for this thesis, Periodistas de a Pie, has a similar approach to funding as Quinto Elemento — resorting to international aid — and its implications will be further explored with the research results in Chapters 4 to 6.

Apart from Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, some incipient attempts have started to question the viability of this funding model, mainly focusing on its long-term sustainability and questioning the assumption that philanthropy is neutral (Pickard & McChesney, 2011; Requejo-Alemán & Reis, 2014). A clear dominance of Open Society Foundations as the main founder in transition post-

authoritarian democracies such as Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe, has been identified as well (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013). This is unsurprising since Open Society is the largest philanthropic organisation in the world, but it is far from being the only one. The work of Wright, Scott and Bunce (2017; 2019) provides a key critical analysis of this funding model and the impacts on the idea of an independent journalism in the public interest. They have expressed their concerns about how international donors, in a double-edged formula of avoiding influencing journalism but instead asking for some kind of measurable impact, have transformed journalistic projects. This transformation has not solely been at the level of administrative tasks, but has also extended to the idea of what journalism's purpose is and its role in society, perhaps pushing a more interventionist role forward, as Chapters 4 and 5 will attempt to argue.

#### *-Attacks on the Press*

It is not uncommon to find Mexico listed as one of the ten deadliest countries for journalists in the world, and this is when counted among other regions in warlike conflicts such as Syria or Yemen. This is, according to the several organisations for the protection of journalists such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, 2020), Article 19 (2020), or Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) (2017). Article 19 (2020) has stated that more than 133 journalists have been murdered in relation to their work in Mexico since 2000, and the figures worsened since the frontal war on drugs began in 2007 (RSF, 2017; CPJ. 2020). Moreover, according to the same sources, journalists have been the victims of abductions, physical attacks, and disappearances.

But attacks on journalists are not happening in a vacuum. Journalism can be a dangerous profession even in the democracies of the Global North, as many reports recognise (CIDH, 2015; CPJ, 2020). It is common that journalists face what Clark and Grech (2017) have called “unwarranted interference”, which can take many forms of pressure (from physical to economic and legal forms) and which can be exerted by authorities or other figures with the power to interfere in journalistic activities. Nonetheless, some scholarship has found variables that play a role in the dimension of the problem — from the type of regime (Asal et al, 2018), to high-risk activities assumed by the “ideals of a watchdog press” (Reyna-García, 2014 p. 19), gender (Adams, 2018), and even as part of a chain of corruption (Bjørnskov & Freytag, 2016).

In the case of Mexico, research has tried to explore these attacks by establishing their relationship with territoriality (national or regional media) (Márquez-Ramírez, 2015), criminal violence and democratic indexes (Hughes et al, 2017), as well as the support journalists receive from colleagues and civil organisations (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014). This line of research has become more common since the beginning of the 2007 frontal war on drugs. Ever since, the escalating violence (Serrano & Alvarado, 2010; Open Society Justice Initiative, 2016; Raphael, 2019) has eroded journalistic practice as a whole, with criminal organisations and some authorities as the main attackers (Article 19, 2017).

Threats on journalists in Mexico can range from rhetorical threats (comments on social media), to the highest scale of physical violence including torture and killing, as was the case of Regina Martínez, murdered in Veracruz in April 2012. Her case became iconic because after her death many more journalists were killed in Veracruz and serious threats reached even the

journalists who were trying to investigate the motivations behind her murder (Proceso, 2017). It is also a paradigmatic example because it showed how local authorities dealt with these crimes, claiming that the murders had nothing to do with journalists' professional activity and attributing the blame to burglars or personal issues. More recently, in 2017, the assassination of two well-known journalists, Miroslava Breach and Javier Valdez, in the northern states of Chihuahua and Sinaloa, have also put to rest the notion that physical attacks on Mexican journalists were only made on less renowned journalists working for local media (Del Palacio, 2015a; Baltazar, 2010). A less violent type of harassment, but with similar deterrent effects, are political pressures placed on media owners and telecommunications surveillance — experienced by the team I worked for after the publication of the “casa blanca” case.

There are a number of public policies from the state that are aimed at countering attacks on journalists — two of which stand out as considerable, yet ineffective, bureaucratic mechanisms: One is the “Mecanismo de Protección para Personas Defensoras de Derechos Humanos y Periodistas” (standing for Human Rights Activists and Journalists Protection Mechanism), which has been heavily criticised for its ineffectiveness. According to a report by the Inter American Commission on the state of Human Rights in Mexico (2016), in some cases journalists and activists at risk have only been given panic buttons for the police to come in cases of emergency, but these gadgets do not work in certain areas with access difficulties or, even worse, these journalists cannot fully trust the local authorities to come to their rescue. The other is the creation of a specially appointed Federal Prosecutor (FEADLE), focused on crimes committed against journalists, which has, so far, not won a single case (Álvarez, 2017). Authorities can create the impression of following bureaucratic processes and a positive

media perception, but they are failing to provide full justice for journalists and their families (CIDH, 2015). The fact that the number of attacks on the press have not decreased gives clear evidence that these programs simply do not work.

The violence experienced by Mexican journalists, and the attacks they have suffered have been interpolated to explicate similar phenomena in other countries, as is the case in Colombia. In that instance, Barrios and Miller (2020, p. 5) start from the premise that “good journalism can mean the grave or exile”. However, they have used the Colombian case to theorise journalists’ response to censorship and threats, which they call “counterstrategies”. One of the most salient strategies mentioned is the practice of sharing information with the aim of getting it published, which is close to the dimension on *communitarian solidarity* within this thesis, and which is mainly based on the case study of PdP, explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

#### *-Corrupt Practices*

In the line of IJ practices, some literature gives examples of what is considered to be “semi-investigative” journalism, and is thus different from authentic IJ for some researchers. These practices are akin to what some have called the “instrumentalisation” or the “weaponization” of the media (Mancini, 2012; Baron, 2018), serving political and economic elites to the detriment of the public interest. Examples such as “kompromat” material imply the undermining of a public figure’s reputation, inspired by Russian intelligence agencies who used embarrassing stories to eliminate political enemies (Ledeneva, 2006 in Gerli et al, 2018); or what some have called “folder journalism”, meaning that an interested source would send a bunch of documents to popular reporters —

usually an already made “investigation” inside a folder — and all they do is verify its authenticity (Stetka & Örnebring, 2013).

The Mexican version of those “semi-investigative” practices was seen in *El Universal*’s investigations on presidential candidate, Ricardo Anaya. During the 2018 presidential election, intelligence-generated information was leaked to *El Universal* about an ongoing investigation on money laundering where Anaya was allegedly involved (*El Universal*, 2018). However, not a single journalist by-lined the purported investigation. The charges were very weak and the reasons behind the leak were obvious — the ruling party wanted to get rid of one of its competitors by using Mexican institutions under its control, facilitated by a loyal newspaper. In the end, the dirty trick had a counterproductive effect and both candidates, Anaya and PRI’s candidate, lost to left-wing politician, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (Camarena, 2018).

But perhaps a more entrenched corrupt practice in Mexican journalism is the handouts journalists receive from governments and companies alike, known in the journalistic jargon as “chayote” or “embute” (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). In the form of cash, facilities for social housing, or even by including the name of a reporter in the Government’s payroll, these handouts are meant to win journalists’ favour and, therefore, friendly coverage for the hand that feeds. The origins of this practice at the lowest rank of the news-making process is compatible with the long tradition of the “invisible tyranny” and a clientelist media model.

In his highly acclaimed novel “*El vendedor de silencio* “ (The Merchant of Silence), Enrique Serna (2019) tells the story of Carlos Denegri, a superstar of Mexican journalism in the 50s and 60s, who, in his youth, covered the end of the Second World War from London, interviewed some of the most important

personalities of the twentieth century, and who had earned a reputation for being an extraordinary investigator, having access to privileged information from the top of Mexico's ruling elite. However, he had used this power for personal enrichment, serving not only as the mouthpiece of interested groups within the Mexican government, but also by keeping silent about their most embarrassing secrets. In exchange for holding his peace, he would receive payments from local and Federal Government, or would get all-expenses paid trips to cover the incumbent president's international events, among other underhand payoffs. His pen had a price, but his silence was even more costly. His story would be a good one, if it were not because it were true, and because Denegri was not just a rotten apple in Mexican journalism. The professional life of Carlos Denegri epitomises the widespread practice of "chayote" or "embute". This was common practice during the darkest years of the PRI's regime, sustaining the existence of the press by buying journalists off, pretending Mexico was a modern liberal democracy in the concert of nations (Rodríguez-Munguía, 2016).

In recent years, some of the most popular journalists in Mexico have found a new, sophisticated way to receive "chayote" — they have created personal websites where they publish some of their stories and secure advertising contracts with different government ministries and local administrations (Guerrero, 2016). These journalists maintain a modest content on their personal websites, while they still anchor national TV and radio news shows for mainstream media where they have a massive influence on public opinion. This has been denounced by organisations such as Article 19 (2018), and there has been some congressional lobbying to make government's publicity more transparent and fair (Pérez-Flores, 2019), but the current budget for publicity can

still be spent at will by the incumbent president, in spite of all the calls to change the law that sustains the current situation.

## **2.2. Legal Frameworks**

When it comes to “legal frameworks”, Mexican local laws and regulations will be at the fore of the analysis. However, its multiple connections to other legal frameworks — in this case, international treaties as well as similarities with other countries in Latin America and elsewhere — will be drawn here to situate the Mexican case within its context. That would include a further discussion around the “captured media model” and an intentional lack of regulation in Mexico that creates a legal vacuum in favour of a free market economy at the expense of the public interest and the safety of journalists (Lugo-Ocando 2008; Matos, 2011). The legal frameworks that constrain journalism practice at large operate for IJ as well, which is why some of these considerations go back and forth between the two, although I stress certain parts for IJ when necessary.

Journalism operates under specific legal frameworks in democratic societies, encompassed under the term of media regulation. This set of rules and regulations are usually constructed around the idea of journalism and its role as an information provider for “the public interest”, and its right to know and to freedom of speech (Evan Ruth in Article 19, 2000). However, the public interest (i.e. the citizens’ right to know) has been conflated with the right to private property or free enterprise, drawing from the historic private ownership of the media in Western societies in which journalism is sold as an information commodity by media organisations. Most of the regulations for journalism in liberal democracies have tried to find a balance between a number of conflicting

forces, but two in particular: namely, the public's right to know, and the merchants' right to sell this information and profit from it (Feintuck & Varney, 2006).

A whole body of laws and regulations are thus imposed for the journalistic practice in two main realms. The first is concerned with the media industry as a whole, offering a myriad of cultural products including journalism, as well as entertainment, advertising, and so on, in which ownership and the plurality of contents are of particular interest. The second set of laws is concerned with the specifics of the journalistic practice, its particular ethics, protections and limits (in this regard, a separation between the public interest and private life has particularly drawn the attention of both legislators and scholarship) (George, 2016; Nacos, 2016; Bertrand, 2018). In this section, these two regulatory domains will be explored in the context of the Mexican legal framework, which will enable us to talk about the lack of regulation under which IJ operates, and its constraints and implications — sometimes fatal — for the political economy of this practice.

#### *-Telecommunications Reform*

In Mexico, perhaps the latest big change for the media as a cultural enterprise, took place in 2014 with a constitutional reform in the telecommunications sector. At face value, the motivations behind such a reform were twofold. On the one hand, there was the hyper concentrated telephone and internet markets hoarded by one of the wealthiest men in the world, Carlos Slim, who was the most prominent beneficiary of the privatisation of the former state-owned telecommunications provider, Telmex. On the other hand, it was said to be addressing a similar concentration in the media sector, chiefly in the widely

influential TV market controlled by two national broadcasters — Televisa, and TV Azteca (García-Requena, 2013). Both arguments are relevant to this thesis because, it was said, more access to technology and more media outlets would reverse the information control and hegemonic narrative the Mexican government put forward using mainstream media as instrumental mouthpieces. In other words, more media would guarantee a more pluralistic public discussion and, thus, a better-informed society, as has been promised in many liberal democracies around the world with the advent of the internet (Castells, 2005; Curran, Fenton & Freedman, 2016).

A deeper motivation for this reform was its labelling as one of the “structural reforms” introduced by President Enrique Peña Nieto at the beginning of his mandate in 2012, under the argument of having a more modern, progressive economy (Elizondo, 2017). It was also a way in which Peña Nieto displayed his power as the recently elected president in the 2012 elections, while at the same time trying to prove that his reformist impetus was not only cosmetic, as his critics claimed, but a serious resolution (Villamil, 2009). And yet, as I will try to show, media corporations’ interests prevailed in the new legislation to the extent that this telecommunications reform has since been modified to fit their needs, rendering it a superficial, tailored reform.

Along with a series of secondary laws, this reform was one of the most promoted policies by Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, even from his time as a presidential candidate. Some of the most salient characteristics of the spirit of that constitutional reform were the following: more competition in the telecommunications sector (which included mobile phone and broadcasting companies), the strengthening of public service broadcasting, and a broader transparency in public offices (Sosa-Plata, 2014). To achieve this, the Mexican

Constitution was changed, along with two federal laws: the “Ley Federal de Telecomunicaciones y Radiodifusión” (Federal Law in Telecommunications and Broadcasting) and the “Ley Federal de Competencia Económica” (Federal Law in Economic Competition) (IFT, 2018). These changes enabled the creation of a third national TV broadcasting company, which ended with the previously restricted radio-electric space of a media duopoly — Televisa and TV Azteca. Meanwhile, in the mobile phone services sector the opening was considerably bigger in an attempt to break down Carlos Slim’s telecommunications dominion in the Mexican mobile phone market. As a result, a third company called Imagen Television started to broadcast nationally in 2016 and, on the other hand, Slim’s competitors were allowed to use his telecommunications infrastructure to provide mobile phone services across Mexico, which resulted in considerable price reductions for those services. A market logic was the leading force behind the rationale for these reforms, a trait that would prove to be more prominent in further adjustments that would come later on.

With the first version of these new laws, the Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, or IFT (Federal Telecommunications Institute) was created, with the aim of becoming a regulator entity in various capacities and different markets. Amongst the powers it was afforded was the faculty to approve local and national radio TV licenses to be used for commercial and community purposes. Such licenses include a number of radio stations for indigenous communities, though still insufficient according to some Mexican academics (Carballo, 2014; Sosa-Plata, 2016). IFT also had the ability to regulate broadcasted content of private owned media and public service broadcasters, paying special attention to the “derechos de las audiencias” (audiences rights), preventing discrimination, exclusionary content, and fostering a respectful media

environment and the protection of children's media consumption. The strengthening of public service broadcasting was planned to be built upon an already operational infrastructure of audio-visual production which would then become the "Sistema Público de Radiodifusión del Estado Mexicano", with national coverage and a series of content guidelines based on ideas of plurality, informative content (including journalism in various forms) and, ultimately, the public interest. Had any problem arisen from this new legal framework, two specialised courts were set up to deal with these disputes and give certainty to those who would invest in a new media market environment.

Apparently, everything was balanced between the public interest and the free market. However, just two years later, these regulations would change again as a result of media corporations lobbying for more freedom for the industry to make decisions about their content, in detriment to the public interest (Sosa-Plata, 2017; Reyes-Soto, 2017). The counter reform ended up stripping IFT of its capacity to regulate content and to defend "derechos de las audiencias", which allowed media companies to self-regulate this content. This self-regulation in Mexico meant the elaboration of ethical codes written by the media outlets themselves, and the creation of the figure of an "audience ombudsman" who would be in charge of addressing the public's complaints and suggestions. But the self-regulation did not incorporate any kind of overarching collegiate body determining good practices, or impart sanctions at a national level. This setback left the door open for the media to maintain a dangerous but very profitable practice — the selling of "gacetillas" (made up content promoting political propaganda but giving the impression that it was independent, informative material created by journalists) and even the selling of interviews (Espino-Sanchez, 2016). In 2020, and in an unexpected turn of the tide, the judicial power

ruled that private companies were not entitled to self-regulate all of their content, handing control back to the IFT to delineate clear guidelines. However, the content of these guidelines is still a matter of dispute<sup>2</sup> and meanwhile, the lack of a proper legal framework permits media companies to broadcast and sell their products at will, removing the public interest from the debate (Levy, 2017; 2020).

The telecommunication reform and the regulations that followed affect journalism practice in paradoxical ways. On the one hand, a price reduction in mobile phone services had an impact on internet access, and now more than 60% of the population can navigate “to get information”, look for “entertainment”, watch “audio-visual content”, and use “social media” (INEGI, 2018), all of which supposedly would give citizens more access to information in “the public interest”. But, although the penetration of technology was remarkably quick, this access is uneven as just 14% of those able to access services are from rural areas, usually the poorest and the most unsafe communities (also INEGI, 2018). On the other hand, initially the regulator entity was invested with astounding capacity to make a real change in terms of regulating content, including the banning of deceptive propaganda concealed as journalism, offensive material, and other bad practices. However, the eventual relaxation of the law was engineered under a logic where a media business model was preferred over public service options, leaving a regulation vacuum in which almost all practices are permitted under the pretext of a free market<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the IFT has come up with a series of guidelines already that were published by the IFT in December 2016, according to the power given by constitutional reform. Some specialists have pointed out that, even if they had been discarded in the past, they can be used again because the law that made them redundant is no longer operational. Some say this is the only way available if there are to be guidelines that media corporations would accept (Levy, 2017), but the most critical voices (Sosa-Plata, 2017) say that these guidelines are not enough and have been watered down by the industry.

<sup>3</sup> According to Sosa-Plata (2017), the outcome of the telecommunications reform and the subsequent regulations on TV and radio concessions (Ley Federal de Telecomunicaciones y

That is why, even if this telecommunications reform was announced and celebrated as a progressive change in President Peña Nieto's reformist program, in fact a business-minded approach prevailed over its purported democratic aim to this day. The public did gain broader access to technology, some local radio and TV stations, and one extra national TV broadcaster, but the possibility of a real democratisation of the media, including the decisions about its management and content, remains outside of the public's remit.

#### *-Journalistic Content and the Legal Void*

With respect to the legal framework for the practice of journalism specifically, there are at least two levels with some repercussions for Mexican journalists. Firstly, there are the international laws and treaties Mexico has signed up to, protecting human rights in bodies such as the United Nations and the Inter-American Court on Human Rights — both of which foster a liberal role of the press and grant wide publishing protections, particularly with the reform of the Mexican Constitution in 1977, which was an important antecedent of the right to information and free opinion (Ferrer Mac-Gregor, 2013). And secondly, this international legislation has different implications for Mexican national laws, which have been amended to indicate that all human rights mentioned in international treaties Mexico has signed up to, should be guaranteed by the state, including broad protections for the right to freedom of speech (Lopez-Ayllón, 2005). However, legal actions such as libel suits or claims over discriminatory content, can lead to prosecution (Aquino, 2018). On the other hand, internet-

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Radiodifusión), both at the national and the local level, is skewed towards the concentration of the market in already powerful players (e.g. Televisa, Megacable, and América Móvil), reinforcing a preference for a commercially based model over a public service one or community-based outlets.

based content has been left almost without restriction by federal criminal codes, except for “hate speech”, according to a ruling by the Supreme Court (Vela, 2013). At the local level there have been some isolated cases in which the use of social media and blogging spreading “terror” has been regarded as a public offence and punished with imprisonment (Zires-Roldán, 2017); but, at large, these cases have been reversed by the Supreme Court and a lax interpretation of the freedom of speech is the norm in Mexico, following the US in its ardent defence of its First Amendment on freedom of religion, expression, assembly, and the right to petition.

Nonetheless, among this secondary legislation, there are regulations that directly shape the work of IJ in Mexico, how they acquire information, and how they present it. The first of these legal frameworks is a transparency law passed in 2001 which made it mandatory for almost all public offices to surrender information upon request, as well as making it mandatory for every public authority to publicise a number of documents online — a Mexican version of a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). This new law granted a new set of tools for the public, but particularly for researchers and journalists. It gave them access to public information through official channels instead of the practices of old, when leaking confidential documents into a newsroom was the only way a journalist could get government information. This has even led to handbooks for journalists detailing how to do investigations using these information requests (Raphael, 2017). And yet, this apparent transparency is still posing some obstacles for investigative journalists. For example, one of the hindrances concerns the “classification” of information under the argument of national security, which is a seal that has proven hard to break during the years of the frontal war on drugs, even when there is a collegiate body in charge of validating this classification

(Villanueva, 2011; Rea & Ferri, 2019). In this respect, NGOs, journalists, and some lawmakers from the opposition parties have pointed out that this law should also grant protections for whistle-blowers (people who have access to sensitive information and feel the responsibility to make it public, in spite of committing a crime by revealing it in media outlets) (r3d, 2019). As the law stands today, if someone leaks information about wrongdoing from inside the government or from a private company, that person would be prosecuted according to criminal codes and industrial laws aimed at punishing data breach cases with imprisonment and financial penalties. Interestingly, journalists are exempt from being charged with data breach offences as long as they have not stolen the information themselves, which gives them the freedom to publish leaked information. However, the non-existent regulations for the protection of whistle blowers is a void that affects the practices of IJ and their sources (Delgado-Ávila, 2020).

Another important aspect for IJ is “the right of reply” (derecho de réplica) in Mexico (Corzo Sosa, 2018). As recently as 2016, a legal debate arose because of the terms in which that right could be granted by media organisations and the legal instruments available to put it into effect. In other words, there was a need for clarity as to how media outlets should react to petitions from the public to correct published information. The problem this new legislation needed to address was the lack of legal mechanisms to force the media to publish a clarification in the event that published information was imprecise or defamatory (Semanario Judicial de la Federación, 2018). However, a group of news media organisations, notably independent media such as Proceso magazine, filed a complaint arguing that it was against their right to freedom of speech. They claimed that this legal instrument could be used repeatedly to spoil investigations (“reportajes”) and news coverage. In January 2018, the Supreme Court ruled that

it was lawful to ask for a clarification, but only if the information was inaccurate, which remains unclear in terms of what kinds of information would be considered accurate. In the end, the current state of the right of reply is completely delegated to the courts who have the last word according to the specificities of every single case, without a clear standard regulation (Corzo-Sosa, 2018).

This account of relevant legal issues revolving around media organisations and IJ suggests that there have been attempts to provide legal frameworks to protect media freedom in Mexico and to maintain minimum standards of a modern liberal democracy. Nevertheless, the commercial interests of a general corporate media have prevailed over specific regulation, preventing the installation of a more rigorous regulatory system for journalism in the public interest. This lack of regulation, or de-regulation, is not a coincidence but the result of an ideology that equates freedom of the market to an express route to democratic journalism in the public interest. Both levels described above (the international agreements, and the federal and local legislation resulting thereof) are attuned to given assumptions of the role of the press in liberal democracies. But most importantly, these assumptions serve as the bedrock of today's overarching neoliberal paradigm that equates the free market with the deliverance of democratic rights. In other words, the old adage that a free press is a *sine qua non* condition to have a more liberal society, is wielded in neoliberal economies in order to enact a ruthless de-regulation of the market to sustain a commercially based media model.

The current legal media system in Mexico is not just a coincidence, but the result of specific interests in conflict. Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero (2014) have pointed out how the Captured-Liberal Model in Latin American is one in which the lack of regulation is intentional. This, along with a pragmatic exercise of power

and the configuration of alliances between media barons and political elites, would explain why private media developed early and why media power is so concentrated in Latin America (Matos, 2011; Lugo-Ocando 2008). According to this classification, political and economic interests have consequently undermined journalism's independence and performance in Latin America (Pérez-Linan, 2010). But a deregulated media market has consequences for journalists' security too.

In a country like Mexico — where a frontal war on drugs has made the country an increasingly dangerous place to live since 2007 — a lack of regulation is particularly increasing the risks to journalists, especially if they want to undertake investigations challenging the status quo. Academia and international bodies have acknowledged the difficult situation journalists in Mexico face, making it one of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists, as noted above (Freedom House, 2017; Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2017; Alves et al, 2017; Artículo 19, 2019). However, these indexes are disregarding the practices that render journalists to be exploited and defenceless in the first place.

Publishing shallow, undemocratic content is facilitated by a legal system that privileges commercially driven media (O'Neill, 2012). In Mexico, this process of omission/replacement happens particularly with the quality of information on security, where stories are not independently reported but just replicated from official sources without any further investigation (Zavala, 2018). In the best-case scenario, this information is handed over by official authorities; in the worst-case, by authorities colluding with organised crime. But instead of clear guidelines to democratically regulate content, the proposal was, again, self-regulation — in 2011, 715 media outlets signed up to an agreement to stop publishing certain information about the war on drugs, but the agreement was constantly violated

because there was no way to apply sanctions after the complaints of citizens, NGOs or other media (Lozano-Rendón, 2016). In fact, failing to report democratic content during the security crisis was possible simply because the media had other means to keep the business afloat, namely, commercial advertising and political propaganda disguised as journalism (or “gacetillas”), all made possible by a lack of specific regulation.

As it will be seen in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, the discontent with that kind of news coverage in the midst of the armed conflict led many journalists to try independent reporting. Conspicuously, a rising group of freelancers became the peripheral source of information on the war on drugs, challenging the government’s top-down hegemonic narrative (Félix-Anduaga et al, 2015). But without a media organisation or a public service organisation backing them up by law, these were the kinds of journalists who were more vulnerable to retaliation because of their unconventional reporting. On these grounds, a lack of regulation had two effects in Mexico — on the one hand, it spawned media moguls with a dubious political influence, usually employed to increase revenues at the expense of the ideal of a press in the public interest; and on the other, an unrestrained, commercially-driven media left journalists who do not conform to this business logic, operating at their own devices, making them even more vulnerable and scarce.

### ***-Conclusions***

This chapter analyses the various political and economic conditions under which IJ is carried out in Mexico. The historical relationship between political and economic powers and the press in Mexico is key to understanding how the

practice came about and how its political transformative power has been curtailed. First, the original sin of an “invisible tyranny” enabled the PRI to rule Mexico for more than 70 years in a somewhat stable way, always with the help of a clientelist media. The appearance of a modern liberal democracy in the twentieth century was maintained, but the true costs in detriment to democracy were significant and long lasting. Corrupt practices such as “chayote” and other payoffs were entrenched in Mexican journalism and have been sophisticated in contemporary Mexico under the disguise of official “advertising” and other underhand payoffs. This clientelist relationship between sections of the ruling elite and the press brought forth the “captured liberal model” that is so prevalent across Latin American countries, privileging free enterprise and profit at the expense of public funds, and undermining the production of useful information for the people. This trait has been exacerbated since the full enforcement of neoliberal policies in Mexico in the early 1990s. But the effects of these conditions during the years of the frontal war on drugs, triggered in 2007, posed an even greater risk for those journalists who do not conform to that media model, and who were usually those doing critical investigative reporting.

Since private media in Mexico has benefited from public funds funnelled at will by the presidency and local governments, there are scant incentives to invest in long-term investigations that challenge the status quo. Another source is private advertising, but the costly long-term investigations and the cheap, shallow daily reporting have the same market value for advertisers in TV, radio and newspapers, which means that the cheap content is preferred over IJ to fill up the pages. In other words, media owners have no incentives to finance IJ if they can sell advertising at a lower cost by resorting to already made PR content, or “churnalism”. A few media organisations have funded “investigations units” in

Mexico; but their existence seems to legitimise the rest of the operation based on shallow reporting, relegating the practice of IJ to only a handful of reporters. In the midst of this resource shortage, journalists and NGOs in Mexico have found inventive ways to support IJ, from crowdfunding to big philanthropic organisations. However, IJ's independence from supposedly uninterested benefactors is far from being guaranteed, let alone beneficial for the public at large.

When it comes to legal frameworks in Mexico, the current regulation is the result of a conflict of interests and a very prevalent idea of liberalism that links free speech with free enterprise, and which has found its pinnacle in a neoliberal economy. This has produced an arrangement of media power that privileges an intentional lack of media regulation, with two main effects. On the one hand, with the argument of protecting freedom of the press, the current media industry is prone to favour profit margins benefiting from advertising, over the public interest of informative content and more democratic agendas. On the other, this very same legal framework is undermining the quality of information and journalists' labour conditions, making IJ an exceptional and high-risk enterprise.

The picture I have tried to draw in this chapter is the basis upon which to understand the struggles, but also the possible alternatives, of the two case studies that I explore in Chapters 4 to 7. It is upon their experience in this context, that I build a framework for transformative investigations that is politically committed, based on solidarity, and assumes a humanitarian production of truth. In the next chapter on methodology I explain those two case studies in more detail, and I argue why they are useful to constructing such a framework.

## ***Chapter 3: Methodology***

### ***-Introduction***

In undertaking this PhD I do not wish to claim I have invented a completely new roadmap for investigations as if there were no previous experiences of people striving for a different way to investigate, departing from given assumptions of what Investigative Journalism (IJ) is or what certain accounts say it should be. That would be epistemologically and historically incorrect. That is why this thesis proposes a set of methods that have enabled me to build a framework for transformative investigations that address both the current context, and the possibilities that lie ahead. I explore these possibilities by resorting to the study of the conjuncture or the context under which investigations are undertaken. Two case studies are used as points of entry to analyse such a conjuncture: A) the experiences of a specific group of journalists, Periodistas de a Pie (PdP), which helped me to recognise the challenges of such an endeavour as well as advancing the possibilities of a different understanding of what IJ in Mexico could become; B) and I have also included further self-reflexive work that makes a connection between my experiences as a reporter and as someone who experimented with counter-investigations in Mexico, I do so by analysing my journey as a journalist in contemporary Mexico and my work as a researcher with Forensic Architecture (FA) for the project Plataforma Ayotzinapa. In order to contribute to the better understanding of these case studies I have also relied on; C) a series of expert-interviews; and D) other reflexive work based on my position as practitioner and observer of the subject of study.

Each point is expanded upon in the lines that follow, but let me first bring the research questions of this thesis back into this chapter on methodology, since the methods employed respond to the needs these questions give rise to:

1. How is IJ in Mexico constrained by the national media system and multiple political forces?
2. How can we escape the neoliberal practices that endanger the purpose of investigations in the public interest?
3. Where and how should investigations be deployed (that is, a framework) if they are to be truly investigative and truly transformative?

Answering these questions involves an attempt to analyse the state of IJ in a critical way, as well as what it can become, aiming for the construction of an investigative framework with practical implications (Dussel, 2006; Bhaskar, 1993). These questions position this research as a production study rather than one focused on the output or content of IJ itself. This is so because I decided it was more urgent to tackle the conditions under which journalists have to carry out this kind of work, given the violence and constraints they experience in Mexican media, than it was to assess how their production may or may not fit an equivocal model of IJ; or measuring if their work produces any impact on society but which had to be based on volatile variables.

Indeed, this effort intends to be suggestive of a sort of a roadmap, but not one that is drawn from my own imagination, on the contrary, one that is based also on the experience of others who have previously trodden that path and have formulated similar questions and inventive routes and shortcuts for the Mexican political context.

Thus, the methodology in this chapter addresses the research questions from a particular stance. The series of chosen methods respond to an epistemological position that recognises that reality can be grasped while at the same time acknowledges the subjectivity of its construction and the necessity to transform that reality (Alderson, 2015) — this view is largely informed by the epistemological approach of Critical Realism (Bhaskar; 1975, 1993, 2013; Agar, 2014; Wright, 2011) and the methods of Cultural Studies (Hall, 1978; Grossberg, 2010). Additionally, the approach I am taking is one that recognises that the politics of social phenomena are multidimensional and interconnected with various fields and layers of complexity, which has led me to conduct this approach in the tradition of conjunctural analysis (Grossberg, 2010). This means the use of theories, particular political moments, economic dynamics, people's experiences (Grayson & Little, 2017), as well as the intersubjectivity and the particular location of the researcher, need to be taken into account. This also meant recognising that the construction of new knowledge is not restricted to one individual, thus opening the possibility of multiple voices in dialogue (through semi-structured interviews in this case) contributing to a theoretical argument (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Mruck and Mey, 2007).

In this chapter, I explain what this methodological position means in terms of specific research methods and their implications for this thesis, in two sections. The first section, to clear the way for research, I elaborate on Critical Realism as an epistemological lens for this study. I then explain how this informs the kind of conjunctural analysis I have used throughout. In the second section, I justify why the methods I used address each one of the research questions and how these methods were employed; this includes an introduction to the two case studies I have used (Periodistas de a Pie, and Forensic Architecture's Plataforma

Ayotzinapa), as well as an explanation as to how semi-structured interviews are used to both assess and build an investigative framework in dialogue with other journalists. Finally, also in the second section, I explain how I used my previous experience as a journalist to inform this thesis, identifying myself as an active journalist involved in the practice of IJ, and I finish recognising the limitations of this methodology.

### ***3.1 Clearing the Way for Research***

#### *-Critical Realism*

Debates about truthfulness and the possibility of representation have always been at the centre of philosophical discussions, remaining an unsettled but lively subject of deliberation in various fields. The debate is more complex than simply the discussion between those who hold that there is some truth and those who believe it is constructed through human means; however, a contrasting explanation is useful in this case for the sake of a clearer understanding of the repercussions on IJ. It is fair to say that, on one side there is the positivist view holding that reality can be grasped and measured using technological instruments as natural science does with physics or chemistry (Durkheim, 1895; Comte in Bourdeau, 2008). Here, concepts such as reason, objective analysis, and causation are imbued with the idea that the world and the phenomena occurring within it can be known, studied, and explained. Moreover, this stance states that reality does not depend on the interpreter, hence knowledge is out there for humans to discover or apprehend; which implies that the world is as it is, no matter who is perceiving it. Accordingly, some have identified this position with the arrival of the illustrious progress of human civilisation, thanks to the

development of science and innovation (Rouse, 1991). Thus, the connection between objectivity in social sciences such as sociology, to the idea of objective reporting in journalism, is almost automatic — which is a rather conspicuous perspective in authors who think that journalism can benefit from the use of social sciences methods (quantitative methods in particular).

Others, particularly constructivists following a postmodernist influence, argued that the social cannot be measured under those standards and even natural sciences are subsumed within the construction of a subjective being, making the total comprehension of reality an impossible endeavour (Derrida, 1967 ed. 2016; Rorty, 1980). This preoccupation with the imperfection of knowledge, or even different types of knowledge, arises from a stern critique of the empty promise of a civilised modern world according to which, reason should have led to the improvement and progress of the human race. This late stage of modernity, rather, was seen as the construction of a certain idea of improvement and progress that proved to be misleading, or at least unfinished, with the horrors seen in the two wars that took place in the first half of the twentieth century. This critique has been taken into the arena of the disciplines of media and communications on various occasions (Lippman, 1922; Anderson & Schudson, 2009; Habermas, 1989), particularly in order to debunk the claim that journalists can report reality in an unbiased, objective way in spite of individual or corporate power. This critique becomes even more relevant when it comes to the effects of a so-called objective journalism that ends up replicating hegemonic narratives and reinforcing the continuity of hierarchical structures of power (Gramsci, ed. 2010). With the arrival of new global technologies, i.e. internet and mobile communications, the exponential increase in speed and space for data circulation is posing new questions about the relevance of a supposedly objective,

professionalised journalism providing the news (Fenton, 2010); hence, the urgency for a more prominent ethical dimension in journalism in recent years (Couldry et al, 2010).

A proposal to solve the dilemma between both streams in journalism studies has been introduced by Wright (2011). She has explored the possibility of using Critical Realism, a philosophical framework for social sciences coined by Bhaskar (1975), either to enable research on journalism, or to teach journalism as a practice. According to Wright, one of the main reasons why Critical Realism could appeal to journalists "is that it represents a middle path between constructivism and positivism: acknowledging the independent existence of objective reality, but asserting the constructedness of human knowledge about the nature of that reality" (Wright, 2011, p. 159; Simons et al 2017). According to Critical Realists, it would be possible to weave together an epistemological foothold for journalists to process information at the cognisant level. This endeavour would both acknowledge the problems of a so-called objective reporting and, at the same time, assume that it is feasible to comprehend and communicate reality. I would add that it could also be useful for IJ because it provides an ethical preoccupation, whereby an ethical pursuit of knowledge aiming for a transformative role in society is imperative.

Critical Realism derives from the merging of two of Bhaskar's postulates — transcendental realism, and critical naturalism. The first, "transcendental realism", deals with the possibility of applying science to know the natural world, but rejects the assumption that everything can be quantifiable, perceivable, and explicable through empiricism (i.e. positivism). However, in his "transcendental realism", Bhaskar recognises that the construction of knowledge by human intervention is at play (heavily stimulated by Richard Rorty (1980)). On the other

hand, his second postulate on “critical naturalism” revolves around the idea of using methods from the natural sciences to study the human or the social; this view argues that it is possible to acquire knowledge through scientific means, but deems complex factors pertaining to the human activity, such as agency and the structures in which the individual operates, as inseparable from this process, recalling elements of Bourdieu (1977) and Weber (1922 ed. 1978).

Another perspective is that Critical Realism is a reaction to the prevailing influence of postmodern thinking in twentieth century social sciences (Potter, 2005). Among postmodernism’s manifold streams, constructivists particularly argued that language structures play a great part in all stages of human knowledge, making it fully constructed through human interpretation. Therefore, an objective account of the real, or the scientific, explanation of cause and effect can never be fully achieved. As postmodernism posed a philosophical conundrum for the possibility of knowing through empirical mechanisms, Critical Realism came up with a conciliatory framework in which the real exists and can be comprehended, but its complexity, its mediation and representation, are still humanly crafted. This would make human knowledge of the real an incomplete account, but not an unworkable enterprise.

Now, I will try to explain some of the implications of Critical Realism in the field of journalism and how this view is compatible with a theory for transformative investigations in journalism, including the ethical in its dimensions. For its use in the newsrooms, Wright (2011) has already pinpointed some of the implications; for instance, recognising mediated human suffering as real and never reducing it to a social construction. This means that, although the representations of this suffering in the media, and even the reasons why people suffer, could be socially constructed given that the pain and the grief they feel is real. For example, a

European media outlet might publish a TV reportage about a family looking for its disappeared son in Mexico or Colombia, framed in a certain context and using news language geared towards an international audience; however, the family's bereavement and the pain they feel for that loss is real and beyond the mediatisation of those events. Critical Realism, in this respect, would neither neglect the constructedness of suffering in the social, nor the actual pain experienced by the family — it would rather reaffirm the two and would claim that there are underlying causes for this suffering and a way to end or transform it.

In that sense, Critical Realism could open up the possibility for journalism to go beyond given assumptions of the influential North American model of the liberal corporate press (which pretends to be detached from political pursuits in order to sell information in the marketplace), and enable the creation of new avenues to perform a transformative role in society. In other words, Critical Realism, apart from providing some solutions to the heated debates around objectivity, truth, investigations, and so on, enables journalists to play a more active political role. For, according to Bhaskar, researchers (and journalists, in this case) should be striving to bring about political and personal transformation towards freedom, solidarity and justice, something he calls a “transformative praxis” that ultimately springs from a deep preoccupation with the ethical performance of human actions (Alderson, 2015). This “transformative praxis” owes a great deal of substance to the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, with prominent theorists such as Horkheimer or Habermas, who dedicated important parts of their work to the media (particularly Habermas [1989] with his seminal idea of the “public sphere”). In that sense, this idea of “transformative praxis” is reminiscent of Critical Theorists’ struggle for emancipation, and which has inspired other Marxist scholarship traditions, particularly in cultural and media

studies in Britain, to “combine social theory, empirical research and radical politics in theory and in practice”, to use Fenton’s words (2016, p. 4).

Critical Realism permits the researcher to think about greater power, economic and cultural structures, and not solely isolated, dramatic cases (regarding the interaction of individual human agency, industries and organisational structures). According to Bhaskar, phenomena take place in different layers of the real, adding complexity to human actions in perceptible and imperceptible dimensions, including underlying causes and consequences, or not so obvious constraints — what he calls “emergence”. This philosophical approach could enable the inclusion of ethical and moral systems as driving factors in “emergence”, behind certain professional practices taking place in “position-practice systems”<sup>1</sup>. For instance, in the case of the Anglo-Saxon world, the concept of truth could be affected by the reporters’ competence in an attempt to increase the quality of a newspaper in the news market (Schudson, 2008) or even by a fetishisation of objectivity that was propelled by scientific methods of experimentation, or empiricism that evolved with modernity (Rouse, 1991). But an underlying explanation, of the sort that Critical Realism would provide, would be an overarching cultural and moral worldview that prevailed and permeated the Western world, holding sway across the territories of their expanding dominion, including democratic institutions such as journalism: that is a Judeo-Christian worldview. A Critical Realist could argue that the way in which societies with a Judeo-Christian background see human communication with God might affect

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<sup>1</sup> For researchers in media studies, “position-practice systems” will sound familiar to the likes of Couldry’s (2011) proposal on media as practice, in which he puts forward the idea of studying journalism according to the vast, complex ways in which people relate to the different stages of news production. Couldry, as well as McPherson (2014; 2016), draw a great deal from Bourdieu (1977) and his theory of fields, in which the individual is effectively affected by the norms and resources of the groups, or fields, he belongs to, but at the same time the individual shapes and reproduces these groups himself.

the conception of representation of reality. For these systems of belief, God is a total God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and not constrained by time or space. Furthermore, this total God is able to represent perfection in earthly terms and communicate it to humans, either by the incarnation of God Himself in human flesh (Messiah), or the reliable account of its work on Earth (the Gospels). Thus, the possibility of truthful representation of the divine through the word, or the speech, made possible the aspiration of humans to know and convey this knowledge. In other words, if the interactions of the divine with the earthly can be understood and taught throughout generations, it is totally feasible to learn and report the affairs of daily life. In this attempt to explain the concept of “emergence”, the subject of analysis is the concept of truthfulness in emergence in the Anglo-American journalism tradition, and its “position-practice systems” are composed of all the different layers that affect this profession, from the evident factors (institutional, political, and economic) to the less evident ones (ethical and moral values or worldviews).

Critical Realism can also help us to understand the interplay between individuals and social structures. The term “emergence”, under the lens of Critical Realism, enables us to grasp the complexities of (social) phenomena because changes in history are regarded as part of many layers of actors and structures (Bourdieu, 1977; McPherson, 2014; 2016). This means that individuals, as well as social structures, are at play in the different historical stages, in a dynamic whereby one can influence and shape the other, and vice versa. These layers of complexity span from culture, ideologies, practices, economic developments, and even other factors that escape the eye of the knower, so an honest humble recognition of these complexities is essential if one is to investigate the humanities.

This epistemological foothold has several implications for the construction of a methodology. It acknowledges the complex composition of social actors — which is their agency in tension with the social and ideological structures that surround them — enabling us to understand those actors, both as individuals and members of groups or structures. This means that, even if we cannot explore the totality of that interplay between people and structures, there is a way to approach it and understand it, albeit to a limited extent. One of the doors that is left open for us to explore these dynamics, in this case of social and political actors (journalists), is by their own reflection of the “social situation” they confront (Archer, 1995 in Wright 2014). Thus, the possibility of this exploration by means of the actor’s reflexivity led me to take the decision to contact active investigative journalists who have experienced the conditions under which investigations are undertaken, as well as their views on how to overcome the challenges they face in their own practice.

Such an interplay between the individual and social structures is multidimensional. The professional role, or the “position-practice systems” (Bhaskhar 1979) assumed by journalists identifies them as workers as well as members of media organisations, but also as political actors with a certain impact on society and even the promise to shape it. But the opposite is also true, namely, the kind of dynamic exerted by those structures (organisations, groups, cultures, etcetera) end up shaping individual identity too. In other words, position-practice systems operate in a manifold dynamic by which individuals and social structures shape each another. It is under this term provided by Critical Realism that I claim that we can grasp, to some degree, some of these complexities through the reflexivity within those who face that reality, which in this thesis took various forms, with semi-structured interviews as the most recurrent research method.

In a different line of argument, reflexivity is a process that can be applied in order to explore the interplay between the individual and social structures. That is, being both a researcher and an individual affected by the historical development of Mexican politics (Hall in Meeks, 2007), or as a study of “my own people”, in the words of Hayano (1979, p. 99). But, how to extract valuable knowledge from the experience of the self with rigor and honesty about that process itself? In other words, how does one reflect on the very same process of reflection?

The decision to use self-reflexivity was not made consciously from the outset. But, as I was sharpening the questions that are the leitmotif behind this thesis, it became clear that my experience could be conducive to explaining and making sense of the problems IJ is experiencing in Mexico. That process was taking place already as an examination of the past, the shaping of the present, and hopes for the future for a different position from which to undertake investigative work, transforming the real through political action.

This methodological proposition is consistent also with the kind of investigations framework that this thesis intends to bring about — one that is situated and embedded in a particular stance, as well as one that is politically committed. As I mentioned elsewhere, it draws from social research traditions such as critical theory (Habermas, 1989; Avritzer & Costa, 2004; Fenton, 2016), cultural studies (Hall, 1978; Grossberg, 2010), and Critical Realism itself (Bhaskar, 2013; Potter, 2005), where reflexivity in research is accompanied by action. I am also aware of other traditions of situated social research, such as the Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding, 2004) or Action Research (Draper, 2001; Stringer, 2013, p. xv), where the process of inquiry is based “on a practitioner’s

reflections on his or her professional practices”. However, the self-reflexivity used here is methodologically closer to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, in particular the ethnographic tradition of the late 1960s, as made by the active artists that were both participants and observers of the academic work that challenged the limits of their own practice.

Thus, this reflexive work has two features; on the one hand, my identity as a journalist informs this thesis throughout (from the selection of the subject, the approach, the access to interviewees, and the analysis of data); on the other hand, I have also decided to make this self-examination more explicit by analysing the process of undertaking “counter-investigations” in Mexico using the example of Plataforma Ayotzinapa as a case study where I was a participant and an observer. These instruments of the past and the present are therefore part and parcel of my methodological approach.

What Critical Realism cannot do is to deal with more strategic questions in the realm of political action. Bhaskar’s philosophical approach is useful to clear the way for the reconciliation between real knowledge and its constructedness, and perhaps to think of a transformative telos (ultimate purpose) for journalism. But Critical Realism is unable to deal with the crucial questions a transformative journalism must face in the political arena and in specific political systems. Some of these questions are concerned with the role journalistic investigations play in the transformation of society, how these investigations can be undertaken in an era of big technological promises, and where these investigations might be displayed in different settings.

### *-Conjunctural Analysis*

A conjunctural analysis (Grossberg, 2010; Henriques & Morley, 2017) is undertaken here using qualitative methods to collect and analyse data in a multimodal capacity (e.g. mediations, practices, empirical data) (Fiske, 1991). It is so because I perceived that the research questions largely depend on a comprehensive understanding of a particular context where practice conditions and its political implications both constrain and open up new political possibilities (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003; Lincoln, 2005; Marquez, 2014). In other words, the two case studies that I propose for this analysis are used as points of entry to address the conjuncture under which IJ in Mexico is carried out, providing different dimensions to that analysis — political, economic, historical, sociological, and technological (i.e. a multilevel complexity). Before expanding on how I analysed this specific conjuncture, let me explain what I mean by conjunctural analysis, what it is useful for, and what its limitations are.

Cultural Studies, usually linked to scholars such as Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, or David Morley, is perhaps responsible for coining the term as a way to think of and theorise the social (Chen & Morley, 2006). Housed at the CCCS at Birmingham University in the 1960s, these and other scholars engaged in the kind of academic work Richard Hoggart tried to push forward when he founded the centre — the production of knowledge emanating from the daily lives of human beings as culture, with its multidimensional implications, which were always political. This approach followed on a high degree of distrust posed on scholarship conventions at the time, verging on the obsession with metrics, essentialism (or the isolation of subjects of study), and ultimately, the obliteration

of culture, particularly popular culture and its points of contact with the political (Grossberg, 2010).

Hall would follow Hoggart as the CCCS director, a position from which he collaborated with students to write one of the canonical texts of Cultural Studies — “Policing the Crisis” (1978). By analysing the figure of the “mugger” in Britain, Hall et al managed to come up with one of the most thorough explorations of key contemporary struggles, from political alignments, to public consent, the role of media framing, racism, identity, and so on. “Policing the Crisis” was innovative in many ways, but in methodological terms it marked a watershed of a certain way of doing academic work. Rather than being interested in an isolated subject, a social phenomenon or strata, they were looking for the contingency of the dispositions of power in a certain context. In other words, the object of study is not an object, but the multiple forces at play enabling a practice or an event, or the conjunctures, and how they operate.

Another way of phrasing it would be the “relationality”, in the words of Grossberg:

"It starts with an assumption of relationality, which it shares with other projects and formations, but it takes relationality to imply, or more accurately, to be equivalent to, the apparently more radical claim of contextuality: that the identity, significance, and effects of any practice or event (including cultural practices and events) are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it, and make it what it is. (2010, p. 20)"

In this way, “Policing the Crisis” analyses race taking into account different factors at play: economic, political, geopolitical, institutional, sociological, and so on. That is a cultural studies text, one that sees the big picture and extracts the

information related to it. To keep the picture metaphor, conjunctural analysis wouldn't be the study of a photograph, but it would use the metadata and any other means to reveal what made possible the image we are contemplating — not only the aperture, shutter speed, but also the political and economic conditions, such as the cost of the camera, how it was produced, and perhaps most importantly, who owns it.

I am aware of the common criticisms levelled at conjunctural analysis (Grossberg, 2010). The most usual criticism relates to the risk of simply resorting to Marxist theory for the sake of complexity and critical thinking but adding no real value that can help disentangle a socio-political event (Grayson & Little, 2017). Another critique is that the complexity championed by those doing cultural studies end up with a form of reductionism, resorting to a single-issue explanation, problem, or solution (Grossberg, 2019). In other words, they start arguing that intellectual work needs to resort to a myriad of fields, situations, and so on, but in the end the analysis could reduce everything to one or two transversal problems (e.g. economy, class, etcetera).

Overall, conjunctural analysis is about building a complex intellectual critique, explaining how events and practices exist in a particular point in time and space. That is why it is so difficult to carry out a conjunctural analysis. An explanation, even if it attempts to provide complexity and rigour, such a conjuncture will, by definition, change its disposition (Henriques, 2017). There lies also the complication of embarking on conjunctural analysis — no one has ventured to propose a specific way in which it can be done (not even Hall dared to do it), perhaps because there is not only one way of doing it. Every conjuncture is transient, particular, and thus, unable to be interpolated elsewhere.

But using a conjunctural analysis makes sense for the kind of thesis presented here because it touches upon a diversity of socio political and economic strands, some of which were presented in previous chapters (historical developments, professional traditions, political and economic conditions, legal frameworks, and so on). But they are not restricted to specific boundaries, so I deemed that the best way to address such a complex conjunction was to hold these strands together in a way that is seeking a comprehensive understanding of their intersection, while at the same time being conscious of the research limitations. And perhaps more importantly, this kind of analysis allows me to think strategically in order to pursue political goals according to the specific context, something Critical Realism epistemology could not do. In sum, I am arguing that my attempt to come up with an analysis that explains the predicaments of independent investigations in Mexico and think strategically to solve them, is better delivered by doing a conjunctural analysis or by “thinking conjuncturally” (Grayson & Little, 2017 p. 63).

By conducting semi-structured interviews, it is possible to explore what the constraints in national media and attacks on the press are, as well as the experiences of reporters in dealing with cases where the Mexican disposition of power is elusive and polymorphous. Furthermore, using my own experience with Plataforma Ayotzinapa as a second case study, and drawing on my experience of doing IJ in Mexico adds another layer that explores the possibilities and challenges of undertaking counter-investigations in Mexico, testing some of the crucial ideas proposed by that practice. I have tried to make the most of the study of a particular conjuncture for IJ in Mexico to reveal an elaborated set of constraints and situations that explain that context, while refusing to simplify or reduce the debate to just one proposal or a certain way of doing IJ. Instead, I am

building a framework for investigations whereby all possibilities are still open, even outside of journalism.

In sum using conjunctural analysis has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it allows me to make a thorough critique of the current context under which investigations are carried out, with constraints, assumptions, and difficulties. It also has the potential to disentangle the essentialism journalism is imbued in, as if it were an isolated practice. But on the other hand, a framework worked out from a conjunctural analysis must be contingent, ephemeral; working just as long as it overcomes (or not) the constraints preventing it from achieving its political goals. This framework's value lies in responding to a certain conjuncture, but it is precisely there where it starts to die away. Next, I explain what it implies for this project more specifically, and what methods will be used to do so.

### **3.2 Specific Methods**

#### *i) First Case Study: Periodistas de a Pie*

In the early stages of this research I reached the realisation that a certain operational framework for investigations was needed if IJ was to be truly transformative — that is, deeply political. However, I also realised that I was not the first to identify this need, let alone the only one trying to find a way to do things differently in IJ. I deemed it important to talk to journalists who had lived a sort of disenchantment with media organisations, so they could speak clearly about its constraints. But also, with a certain way of doing journalism, stretching the limits of orthodoxy in IJ, exploring more interventionist ways of participation. In order to give rigour and coherence to this research I chose to undertake a case study with

a specific group of journalists — Periodistas de a Pie (PdP). They covered the features of the kind of IJ in the public interest that I was looking for and took a disruptive approach towards the prevalent media model. Apart from those characteristics, PdP was also a group with a rich collective experience of covering grassroots phenomena, which would enable me to explore the intricacies of their professional practice as individuals in interaction with social structures.

By exploring, I mean conducting a case study looking at PdP as an identifiable group of journalists or a collective, and this allowed me to inquire into different aspects of their practice, challenges, and potentials. This includes their objectives, their funding system, the common traits between its members, and the way they approach investigations and collaborate with other journalists and NGOs in Mexico and abroad.

PdP is a particular organisation in Mexico. It has many functions, from training journalists, to campaigning to protect freedom of speech, and doing IJ themselves (Periodistas de a Pie, 2020). It is halfway between an NGO and an independent media organisation because it engages in journalistic work but at the same time advocates for certain issues such as journalist's safety or immigrants' rights, in a very straightforward way. Furthermore, legally, it is registered as an "Asociación Civil", which makes it eligible to receive funding from national and international donors (Interviewee F2, 2019). It all started as a simple group of reporters and friends who wanted to talk about journalism in Mexico and who were looking for the training they were not given by the media organisations they worked for, mainly from national newspapers like Reforma, El Universal or La Jornada. They used to meet in Mexico City's cafes or restaurants for dinner, sometimes to hear each other's complaints about their working conditions or how little their editors cared about the stories they covered on poverty or education,

almost always obscured by the spectacular political headlines of daily news. It is this informal and fluid character that makes it difficult to mark a specific date of its origin, but their first meetings took place between 2005 and 2007 just at the point when the frontal war on drugs was about to be triggered in Mexico. Violence in the country escalated and they felt the need to listen to other journalists' experiences of covering armed conflicts and victims outside the Mexican capital. That led them to have more formal talks with reporters and academics working in Colombia, for instance (Interviewee F2, 2019). Suddenly, that same violence reached the journalists themselves. A real turning point came in 2010 when a reporter some PdP members were acquainted with was murdered, leading to a national manifestation called "Los Queremos Vivos" (we want them alive), according to the interviews I had with them. His death made them realise that, as a journalist group, they had to somehow react. It was in this moment that they decided to adopt a more vocal stance to fight for reporters' security, which was a step forward to advocating publicly in demonstrations and press releases, and even for some of their colleagues' protection.

Most of those who had some connection with PdP worked for different media organisations, mainly national newspapers, and because of the workshops they organised, some reporters from state media outlets joined them as well. That meant that the training they had with PdP, focused on professional skills, was then used to write for the media companies they worked for. But for various reasons, from the increasing precarity of journalists' labour spaces (Espino-Sanchez, 2016) to direct and indirect censorship (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016), some of these journalists were soon left with no platform upon which to publish their stories. So, they set up a webpage that served as a container for the stories that had been censored both in national and local media, and which in the future

would be transformed into a more autonomous media outlet with reporters working specifically for that website, now called “Pie de Página” (“Footnote” in English). On that website, PdP have published investigations on clandestine mass-graves, migration, victim’s testimonies, and more recently, according to what the members of the board of directors told me, they have now included a section to investigate extractive industries such as mining or the oil industry. Some of their most relevant projects are: the book “Entre las cenizas: Historias de vida en tiempos de muerte” (“From the Ashes: Tales of Life in Times of Death” in English) (Periodistas de a Pie, 2012); “Cobertura Especial: Gregorio Jiménez, asesinado por informar” (“Special Coverage: Gregorio Jiménez, murdered because he was informing the public”) (Periodistas de a Pie, 2014), which was a collective investigation on the murder of a local journalist; and most recently “Buscadores” (“Seekers”) (Periodistas de a Pie, 2017), which is a visual memory of people in Mexico who are looking for their disappeared relatives, in many cases digging mass graves themselves because of the authorities’ inaction or collusion with criminal organisations.

Some years ago, PdP stories started to be published both on PdP’s website and on some mainstream media outlets under the agreement that the credits go to PdP. This was only possible because PdP has managed to get enough international funds (e.g. Open Society, Ford Foundation) to hire a somewhat regular group of freelance collaborators.

All the implications of their relationship with legacy media, their experiences of covering rising violence, and the struggles to financially survive from philanthropy in an industry dominated by market logics, make PdP a suitable case to be studied for the questions posed in this research, towards the construction

of a framework for transformative investigations. These characteristics, explored in Chapters 4 and 5, are:

a) Its origin lies in the discontent with the traditional media environment, making them more conducive to a dialogue about the conditions to undertake investigations in legacy media in Mexico.

b) The group, acting as a collective, was a response to the threats and the increasingly vulnerable conditions under which journalists were doing their job, from poor labour conditions, to physical violence.

c) The political role PdP have adopted is an interventionist one, challenging the top-down authorities' narrative of the war on drugs, and focusing on the victims of violence.

That is why when I was thinking about previous attempts to do investigative work differently in Mexico with a transformative aim, PdP stood out as an ideal case to be scrutinised for the purposes of this research. Also, in practical terms the compactness of the group provided some degree of reliability and coherence to study its operation, aims, and challenges in the Mexican context. PdP is not just an excellent case study to be analysed, but also a group of interlocutors with whom I can have a dialogue about the investigative practice in contemporary Mexico.

#### -Semi-structured Interviews with PdP

Based on the assumption that we can know and analyse interactions between individuals and organisations or the structures they belong to, I have deemed the use of semi-structured interviews to be the more appropriate method to do so in order to address the overarching and associated research questions.

Semi-structured interviewing is a research method in which the researcher asks questions to individuals related in some way to the subject that is being analysed (Kvale, 1996). Those questions are planned beforehand but the interviewer is at liberty to slightly digress or deepen on a certain issue, as long as it serves the major goal of addressing the research goals (McNamara, 2009). This type of interview, unlike other qualitative research methods such as participant observation or focus groups, enables the researcher to explore perceptions and conditions in the voice of the interviewees, leaving more leeway for reflection and ideas to emerge. Such a method has many limitations in terms of accurate description, since it can imply misconceptions, vague memories, and over or understatement, (Kvale 1996). However, that does not mean that those appreciations are untrue, or that the reality that they contain cannot be used to describe social and political events (Wengraf 2006 in Wright 2011). Furthermore, this same freedom of digression is ideal if one is to explore interviewees' considerations as a point of departure to elaborate a framework for investigations, thinking together about its feasibility in specific contexts the interviewees know very well and have even transformed already.

In total I conducted 22 interviews with 20 active or former members of PdP. As was clear in the interviews, it is difficult to give an absolute number of how many journalists claim to be PdP members, since the organisation is based on collaboration and solidarity with reporters from many states across Mexico. However, I managed to interview all nine members of PdP's Board of Directors, which is the whole official leadership of the organisation in charge of providing identity and making major decisions about budget, activities, and partnerships. Most of the members of the board are mid-career journalists, aged between 40 and 50 with more than ten years' experience in legacy media, some in national

outlets, and others in regional media. In general, they belong to a lower middle class in Mexico with access to university education in a country where less than 20% of the population has an undergraduate degree (INEGI, 2015). All except for two of PdP's Board of Directors are women and from a mixed ethnic background. Also, I interviewed six former members of the organisation, including some of the key journalists responsible for its foundation but no longer playing a significant role at PdP, although they are still in contact with the organisation and they still occasionally collaborate. Finally, I interviewed five collaborators or former collaborators with regular publications on Pie de Página's (PdP's website). I chose key founders, but one in particular because my interviewees acknowledged that she was responsible for holding some of the first meetings and the idea of forming a network was hers, based on a model she came across when visiting other newsrooms in Latin America. Another founder was also referred to as one of the few men who took part in the process. In like manner, the collaborators I chose were three female journalists and two male collaborators which, to a certain degree, represents the group composition. This means that only five of my 20 interviewees were male journalists, which is resemblant of PdP's gender composition.

All of the interviewees' positions at PdP, their gender, their age range, and the experience they have in national or regional media can be seen in Table 1:

Table 1

PERIODISTAS DE A PIE					
Number	Interviewee Code	Position	Gender	Age Range	Exp. in National or Reg. Media

1	BD1	Board of Directors	Female	40-50	National
2	BD2	Board of Directors	Female	30-35	No
3	BD3	Board of Directors	Male	40-50	National
4	BD4	Board of Directors	Female	40-50	National
5	BD5	Board of Directors	Female	40-50	National
6	BD6	Board of Directors	Female	40-50	National
7	BD7	Board of Directors	Male	30-40	Regional
8	BD8	Board of Directors	Female	40-50	Regional
9	BD9	Board of Directors	Female	40-50	Regional
10	F1	Founder	Female	50-60	National
11	F2	Founder	Female	30-40	No (Academia)

12	F3	Founder	Female	40-50	National
13	F5	Founder	Male	40-50	National
14	F6	Informal founder	Female	40-50	National
15	C1	Regular Collaborator	Female	25-30	No
16	C2	Former Collaborator	Female	30-35	No
17	C3	Regular Collaborator	Female	30-35	No
18	C4	Regular Collaborator	Female	30-35	National
19	C5	Regular Collaborator - Freelancer	Male	30-35	Regional
20	C6	Regular Collaborator	Male	25-30	No

Half of the interviews I held with PdP were face to face, between late 2018 and early 2019, and all were audio recorded. Two took place in PdP headquarters. The duration of these interviews was between one hour and one and a half hours. The other half were conducted via WhatsApp calls. These were

also between one hour and one and a half hours in length. The fact that these interviews were conducted via a digital medium might have caused the responses to be less natural or made the conversation less fluid; however, this might have been mitigated by the fact that there is a certain familiarity with the majority of the interviewees since we have developed a sense of comradeship as co-collaborators on journalistic investigations. One of the interviews was conducted in Hamburg, Germany, during the 2019 Global Investigative Journalism Conference in November of that year, and this interview did not significantly differ from the other face to face sessions.

As previously mentioned, using semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore different aspects of the investigative practice — its conditions, teleological concerns, as well as practical challenges for investigators and the production of evidence on the ground. The general structure I laid out, through a simple guide to understand and listen to my interviewees' reflexivity, was constructed based on the data that was required to address my research questions. That structure offered more of a guideline than a rigid protocol, and I did not necessarily follow the exact order. This freedom was helpful because, in doing so, I felt in a much more comfortable position to raise certain issues depending on the specific characteristics of the interviewee, their role within PdP, and their previous expertise doing investigative work.

1. The beginning of PdP (responding to the question of what the media system constraints in Mexico are).
2. Members and Collaborators and why they joined (addressing investigative practices affected by neoliberalism).
3. PdP's role in Mexican society or vocational goals (on their political role and transformative power).

4. What topics are covered in your investigations and who decides (addressing political economic constraints remaining in the group)?
5. What are the voices that are privileged in the stories published by PdP (on the production of truth)?
6. Processes of validation, verification, treatment of evidence and objectivity (on new challenges posed by technology in cases where the state is involved in wrongdoing, and how this relates to digital testimonies and the production of evidence).
7. What are the expected outcomes after publication (on the political role journalists can adopt beyond the moment of publication)?
8. Funding schemes (addressing the political economic conditions that prevail in the group).

#### -Access

The access I had to these journalists was privileged because of my own status as a journalist. They recognise me as a former peer going through the same difficulties, experiencing the same frustration with media organisations, and even speaking the same language and journalistic jargon (Seale, 1998). I have investigated side by side with some of them and we have worked together on international collaborative projects. At least two of them got their journalism degree from the same school as I did. Though I do not know to what extent I can call them my friends, they have been both professional and morally supportive, so we share personal experiences beyond our professional roles. This familiarity could be both beneficial and detrimental to this research (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). On the one hand, it is beneficial because it gives me a privileged level of

access which makes it much easier to secure an interview and, once we are talking, I can be fairly certain that those interviews are deeper and more insightful than if someone without that familiarity conducted them.

On the other hand, the close relationship between me as a researcher and them as interviewees carry some disadvantages; for instance, during the interviews we might have assumed certain concepts or bypassed the reflection on particular episodes that could have been thoroughly explained and unpacked by an outsider; in my case, in all probability, that could have happened with some valuable information for this research. Additionally, during the interviews, my critical approach to their practice could have been obscured by the sympathy I feel for them both personally and professionally. However, I was conscious about this point and I did all I could to be critical (even self-critical) about their work and professional assumptions. In spite of that, I recognise my own identity and position and I assume responsibility for all the passages where this critical approach was not completely attained.

#### -Anonymity

All of the interviewees' identities were anonymised because of very real risks to their physical safety. Mexico is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a journalist and some reporters who collaborated with PdP have been murdered or have received threats in the past decade. Even if most of these journalists continue to by-line their texts, I did not want to provide another way in which their identities could be linked to their work or how they go about it. Therefore, their names are not disclosed and I refer to them as interviewees identified by a code, e.g. "BD1, F1, C1...." Their real identities are not crucial to

the objectives of this thesis, so anonymising them should not pose a problem for the aims of this research.

#### -Consent form and data processing

Every interviewee signed a consent form, following the October 2018 format version of Informed Consent Forms recommended by Goldsmiths University of London, which in 2017 adopted the UK Research and Integrity Office's current Code of Practice for Research as its institutional code in relation to research ethics and integrity. This is in line with the provisions of The Concordat to Support Research Integrity and in accordance with the UKRI Policy and Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct. Additionally, all the fieldwork for this thesis was approved by the Politics Department Ethics Committee at Goldsmiths in 2019.

This consent form (see Appendix A) informed the participants that the interview was recorded on audio format, that their identities were anonymised, that it involved potential security risks, that they were giving full authorisation to use the information they provided for the purposes of this research, and it specified the conditions under which they agreed to participate in the project.

These interviews were first saved in digital format in an online server that was not available to the general public. The interviews were transcribed in Spanish, analysed using a coding system to find common threads (both by using analytical reading and using the software, NVivo) and then the most relevant concepts and quotes were translated into English. It is worth remarking that this analytical process started even from the moment the interviews were taking place while we were discussing their experiences and the aim of this project, and I have kept a record of that as well keeping written notes, diagram sketches, relevant concepts, and so on. I am confident that in this respect, PdP was also an excellent

choice as subjects for scrutiny and dialogue for the objectives of this research (Pawson and Tilley, 1997; Reason & Bradbury, 2001).

The method of analysis was a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013; Harding, 2015) and Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al, 2017), identifying human experiences and themes that were relevant to the research questions in order to spot valuable findings. This is a way of looking at the collected data (i.e. interviews), which is in the form of transcribed texts, in order to make sense of phenomena where conditions of power and oppression are involved. This analysis method understands that human relations—including power, cohabitation, and the social in general—can be comprehended as discourse or speech (Laclau & Mouffe; 1985 ed. 2001; Foucault, 2012). With human mediation being able to convey these experiences, an analysis of those mediations or discourses is a viable way to understand, analyse, and produce knowledge about the world (Potter, 2005).

In this manner, going about the data set of transcribed interviews allowed me to see human struggles in the particular subject matter, seeing investigative journalism and their practitioners in historical, relational, and contextual terms. Moreover, the Discourse and Thematic analyses occurred during different phases of this research—from the moment the interviews were conducted, the familiarisation with the data, the processing with NVivo, choosing codes and themes, naming them, and even the correction of them before using them on the conjunctural analysis reflected on the final text (Tont et al, 2007). I, the researcher, became the tool for coding, theming, selecting, and contextualising the data that was given by the interviewees, which had some benefits for the research (e.g. interpreting, ordering, and conveying knowledge coherently), but also some limitations (e.g. limited scope, a certain position from where to see

reality, and so on), although some inconsistencies might result from a Thematic Analysis because of those reasons, I have tried to reduce this effect by using a more traditional approach to discourse analysis in different capacities across the whole data set, trying to integrate them in a more coherent narrative. Also, this methodological approach was not designed to look at media content, but rather, at the practice of IJ itself, because, as mentioned earlier, I have considered that dealing with the conditions that affect practitioners and prevent investigations in the public interest is an urgent need, and one of the main objectives of this research.

*ii) Second Case Study: FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa*

As I have previously mentioned, I cannot disavow my own history in Mexican journalism and my commitment to the transformation of both the practice of investigative work and the public life in my country. So rather than denying my involvement in the subject, I embrace it in a way that could be useful and academically relevant. I can do so by analysing a specific project I was part of, called Plataforma Ayotzinapa, which is the visual reconstruction of the enforced disappearance of 43 students in Mexico by the research agency Forensic Architecture (FA), based at Goldsmiths University. I joined the team in the early months of 2017, a few months after I had started my PhD. The decision to join FA would change the course of this research and would also expand my perception of what investigations are about. In the following section I explain why the concept “counter-investigations”, as practiced by FA, can be used as a means to reflect on a different political role for investigative journalists in Mexico and the places from which their investigations can be disseminated.

FA is a research agency, established in 2010 (Forensic Architecture, 2020). It is a group of architects, filmmakers, and journalists, focused on the investigation of cases of human rights violations using techniques of spatial and time representation. Although they have never claimed to be doing journalism, they have publicly questioned events of violence and conflict in multiple sites around the world — from the Middle East, to Europe and Latin America — using visualisation tools. Examples of FA's work can be seen in the visual reconstruction of the Sednaya prison in Syria, based on satellite images and testimonies of survivors, challenging the Syrian president, Bashar Al Assad's, statements denying the existence of the building (Forensic Architecture, 2016); or the investigation into the murder of Halit Yozgat at the hands of a neo-Nazi group in Germany, where FA recreated the actual space of the internet café where the crime took place in order to test whether or not an intelligence agent, who visited that internet café, could have been aware of the incident (Forensic Architecture, 2017). Even if their work operates under the principles of academic research, having to comply with standards of rigour and validity, they also pursue a political impact that has led them to display their investigations, not only in academic circles, but also in the world of art, the media, and even national and international courts (Weizman, 2017).

This versatility has led FA to become involved in the world of IJ, collaborating with grassroots organisations and mainstream media alike. Perhaps the clearest examples of that permutation are the numerous pieces of investigation in collaboration with The New York Times on the Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict. These constant collaborations have resulted in the development of a specific team within the emblematic North American newspaper, "Visual Investigations", and has seen the rise of an investigative

discipline that even bears the same name —“visual investigation” or “forensic journalism” (CIJ, 2019; Philp, 2020). Hence, FA has been named, amongst other projects that investigate the visual using open source data in the web, such as Airwars or Bellingcat (both based in the UK), that seem to have found a way to employ the digital age’s oversaturation of imagery in order to uncover wrongdoing (Ellick, 2019).

Eyal Weizman, FA’s director, has developed a body of theory for that practice which he calls “counter-investigations”: “While forensics is a state tool, counter-forensics, as we practice it, is a civil practice that aims to interrogate the built environment to uncover political violence undertaken by states. The call to ‘take over the means of production’ means for us to take over the means of evidence production (Weizman, 2014, p. 64).” The theory developed by Weizman resorts to publicly available imagery, testimonies, and databases to challenge hegemonic narratives in cases of state violence, turning them into counter narratives aiming to uncover distortions of reality and misrepresentation. The concept of counter-investigations will be further explained in Chapters 6 and 7, but it has three characteristics that are relevant for IJ in Mexico and for this research:

a) Its call to “take over the means of investigation” from the monopoly of the state(s), which concerns the ways in which journalists obtain and validate information and treat it as evidence.

b) Its understanding of “forums” whereby investigations can be deployed beyond the publication of information, which elaborates on the political role of journalists and the strategic use of the media.

c) Its capacity to “counter hegemonic narratives”, which relocates the question of who is able to speak and at what volume.

I have summarised the concept of “counter-investigations” but let me explain how the particular investigation of Plataforma Ayotzinapa can help us to understand it more fully and how I deemed it could be helpful for the construction of a framework for transformative investigations. FA’s Plataforma Ayotzinapa is a visual representation of the events of the 26th of September in 2014 in Iguala, Mexico, when 43 students were detained by local police after which they disappeared, apparently in collusion with organised crime members (Gibler, 2016; Escalante & Canseco, 2019).

The case gained international attention because of the number of enforced disappearances and the cruelty with which the disappeared were treated. But also, because it is a paradigmatic case for the arrangement of powers at play in contemporary Mexico. This case embodies the reason why I claim in Chapters 6 and 7, that the old adage of “holding power accountable” for IJ in Mexico is put into question, requiring an improved conceptual understanding and more appropriate political strategies. Analysing this case in Mexico helps me to understand the specificities of a political landscape that challenges some of the given assumptions of a liberal democratic state. Of course, that is the case because of Mexico’s own historical particularities, but also because of the increasingly elusive arrangement of power in contemporary politics heightened by the swift adoption of neoliberal policies, the triggering of a frontal war on drugs that wreaked havoc on the Mexican population, and the ideals for its democratic institutions (Serrano & Alvarado 2010). The political shift since the year 2000 (when the PRI lost the presidency) and the late stage of neoliberalism that led to its global failure in 2008, have been the context within which interests in conflict

have led to a multifaceted, more horizontal distribution of power in contemporary Mexico (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2004; González-Rodríguez, 2014; Zavala, 2018).

The case of Ayotzinapa laid bare the reality of a country where the state, or parts of it, can be part of a complex social structure that perpetrates wrongdoings and produces a narrative to cover them up. When the authorities in charge of the administration of justice find themselves in such a blatant conflict of interest, all official investigations aimed at bringing justice and truth are tarnished with a shadow of illegitimacy and mistrust (Escalante & Canseco, 2019). The possibility that those holding public position can rectify things, because of the press publicly shaming them, seems far removed from real life politics in Mexico; even more so, when those the press pretends to hold accountable do not have just one face, or one identity (criminal organisations, and other agents exerting legal or illegal violence). Regardless, there are narratives of violence and control that predominate — hegemonic narratives running from top to bottom (Badran & Smets, 2018). Hence, the relationship between journalists and hegemonic narratives needs to be reworked for a context where a violent conflict dislocates the borders between legal and illegal power — redefining the political role of journalists' investigations in society.

The relevance of Plataforma Ayotzinapa is yet to be seen in the long term. However, I claim that there are three characteristics that were key for “counter-investigations” in the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project and which are important for this thesis' outlook:

Firstly, in regard to “taking over the means of investigation” from the monopoly of the state, this platform did not undertake a completely new

investigation on the disappearance of the students but it used some of the publicly available information to create evidence related to certain episodes of that event. For instance, animations showing what CCTV systems could have recorded that night or what was omitted from a soldier's testimony. Furthermore, the platform is also a digital tool aiming to enable more independent investigations, e.g. investigations by Mexican media and some analysts interested in state violence (Díaz, 2017; López-Portillo, 2017).

Secondly, regarding the use of different "forums" where investigations can be deployed beyond the moment of publication: Plataforma Ayotzinapa was conceived of as a multimedia website available to anyone with a computer, but it was also a means to provide a visual account for victims and their families so they could use it to explain their case and advocate for justice. Also, the project has been displayed beyond the media realm, for instance the exhibitions in museums such as the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Universitario (MUAC) at UNAM and the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO), in Guadalajara. It is hard to assess its impact in the process of justice since the case is still in court, but a series of events suggest that the platform is over the eyes of the authorities in charge of law enforcement, e.g. an op-ed published by a member of the Supreme Court talking about the exhibition at UNAM and its potential to "signify" violence (Cossío-Díaz, 2017), or the recent creation of a Truth Commission that will very likely include passages of our investigation (Gobierno de México, 2018).

And thirdly, in regard to its aim to "counter official or hegemonic narratives", Plataforma Ayotzinapa's account of that night ended up being the version of the victims', in contrast with the government's which was usually referred to as "the historic truth" (Presidencia Enrique Peña Nieto, 2014). This visual reconstruction

was looking to dislodge key aspects of that “historic truth” that were not yet proven or were simply untrue, with all their appalling implications in detriment to the search of the students and to delivering justice. What the platform did was to look at the events of that night in a more comprehensive way. The result was that the violence of that night was visualised on a different scale, laying bare its escalation throughout the night and the coordination between different groups using force, both legal and illegal — that is, multiple faces of violence were exerted.

Based on the above, I claim that reflecting on this specific project of “counter-investigations” in Mexico will enable me to respond to the research questions that triggered this thesis, particularly, “where and how should investigations be deployed if they are to be truly investigative and truly transformative?”. This case touches upon key concerns at the core of this thesis: a discontent with given assumptions of journalists’ political role, the production of truth, and the transformative scope of independent investigations.

#### -Semi-structured Interviews with FA

In a similar approach to that taken with PdP, I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine members of the FA team that took part in the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project (there were 18 people in total involved in the project, including myself). All were FA employees for the duration of the project along with the Director of FA, Eyal Weizman. Five were architects doing research and developing spatial models, two were journalists, and one was a web designer. Something that stands out from this group of interviewees is their young age, with most of them being younger than 35 years old and the majority, male. Only one

of the interviewees is Mexican, all others are from a variety of countries (Israel, Greece, Iceland, Spain, Australia, the UK, and Colombia).

Table 2

<b>FORENSIC ARCHITECTURE</b>				
<b>Number</b>	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>
1	Eyal Weizman	FA's Director (Architect Researcher)	Male	40-50
2	DD	FA's Deputy Director (Architect Researcher)	Female	30-35
3	PL	Project Leader (Architect Researcher)	Male	30-35
4	AR1	Architect Researcher	Female	30-35
5	IJ1	Investigative Journalist	Male	30-35
6	IJ2	Investigative Journalist	Male	30-35
7	DND	Design and Development	Male	30-35
8	AR2	Architect Researcher	Male	30-35
9	A1	Animator	Male	30-35

The aim of these interviews was to reflect on the work we had conducted and on the experience of employing a counter-investigations approach to a case in Mexico. I was looking for traces of “counter-investigations” theory in their work, how it was applied to the specific context, and whether there were gaps or contradictions between theory and praxis. This is consistent with Critical Realism’s understanding of “position-practice systems” (Bhaskar 1979) which

takes individuals and their interaction within other social institutions; in this case study, as members of FA as a research agency as well as researchers interacting with academic bodies and Mexico's political institutions. However, their responses do not necessarily accurately represent the virtues and limitations of Plataforma Ayotzinapa. I have tried to mitigate this effect by inducing a critical view where possible, but I have also let their responses flow while I, the interviewer, was the one adopting a critical position, and I analysed the responses looking for gaps and contradictions, but also finding innovative contributions towards the construction of a framework for investigations.

As was the case in the semi-structured interviews with PdP, there was no definitive questionnaire for all participants. Nevertheless, there was a basic structure of subjects, aimed at gleaning insights from the participants' experiences that were related to my research questions, and always resorting to critical reflexivity. I adapted this structure when necessary to get specific information that only one or two people had access to, for instance, on sources of funding, which was something only the director or the deputy director would know.

1. The researcher's role in the project and in FA's general operation (related to political roles).
2. Investigating the visual, questions on gleaning information from digital imagery (addressing the question on the challenges posed by technology and human experience).
3. Political motivations, individually and collectively (related to political roles).
4. Production of narratives (addressing the question on the production of truth).

5. Trust and verification processes (addressing the questions on diffuse arrangements of power, and the conception of evidence and verification).
6. Overlapping with journalism and experience with the media (related to the question on media models constraints).
7. Expected outcomes (related to the question on the deployment of investigations with the aim of transformation of society).

-Consent form, data processing, analysis, anonymity, and access

The procedure was similar to that employed with PdP: semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded, and compliant with ethics requirements including a consent form (see Appendix A) as recommended by Goldsmiths University in its October 2018 version. However, these interviews, unlike those with PdP, were not anonymised. The participants' names already appear in the "Plataforma Ayozinapa's" credits section, but I have also anonymised their identity to standardise the method employed in this research, with the exception of Weizman, since he is the most vocal figure at FA. Apart from two of the interviews that were conducted via WhatsApp video calls, the majority took place face to face in London (at FA's office at Goldsmiths University, or at nearby cafes and restaurants). The video calls might have resulted in a less intimate or less relaxed environment since the interaction was facilitated by technology; however, in both cases the interviewees were Spanish speakers like me, which could have attenuated that effect. In the rest of the interviews, the fact that they were conducted in familiar spaces might have had a positive effect on the depth and length of responses from participants.

The interviews were transcribed in English and Spanish and then translated as needed. They were then processed using the software NVivo, which was used to create categories and classification of information. These interviews were also analysed a combination of Critical Discourse Analysis and Thematic Analysis.

I also had privileged access to these participants since I was part of the group of researchers with whom they had interacted on an almost daily basis for over a period of more than seven months. We shared spaces for work, common professional goals, and even expectations about the outcome. This made interview appointments easier to arrange, and communication about the project and the case was also facilitated by the familiarity I already had with them. As with the case of PdP, this familiarity that results in greater insights also comes with some disadvantage. Among the disadvantages is overplaying or downplaying the considerations of success and failure of the project, as well as the level of importance given to it. I have tried to mitigate this by looking at external sources analysing our work, from newspaper articles referring to the project, to the various expressions we received from the victims when the platform was presented. Nonetheless, rather than denying this closeness to the project and the desire for it to enact change and relief to those who suffered, I reaffirm my position in the analysis and make it clear from the very outset, as mentioned and argued above.

### *iii) Expert Interviews (other semi-structured interviews)*

In line with the semi-structured interviews I conducted with PdP members and FA's team, I have included ten other interviews I held with experienced journalists in Mexico and other Latin American countries, as well as with a Special Prosecutor from Peru whose work has been prompted by journalistic

investigations. I conducted these interviews at an early stage, as I was refining the direction of the research. All of the journalists are well-known investigative reporters working for mainstream media in Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Honduras, and the US, and their insights on the influence of the North American tradition of a corporate press on peripheral countries, is both revealing and thought-provoking.

I conducted these interviews at a point where I thought there was a Latin American school of IJ that was worth analysing and critiquing. Soon after, I realised that it was going to be very difficult to study all the implications of that network of journalists across a continent that, though we share the language and certain cultural characteristics, is vast and immensely diverse. That transnational research, I surmised, would have been impossible, so I decided to focus on the implications of that form of reporting in only one country — Mexico. But going through that part of the process was one of the necessary steps for me to sharpen the research questions as well as my whole argument. I also believe it is important to include the other countries in this analysis because there is valuable information about the kind of journalism that motivated this research that may help us see that those who are doing IJ in Mexico are not doing so in isolation when they are reporting or thinking about professional roles in society. On the contrary, they have a shared ideology and, even though their work has different impacts in different contexts, they collaborate and publish stories expecting similar outcomes and impacts on society in a geopolitical context. Part of the decision to include these interviews responds also to the acknowledgement that these international bonds, collaborations and political struggles exist, adding more contextual complexity to the implication of working on a framework for investigations in Mexico.

Additionally, most of the journalists I interviewed have connections with PdP's work, either as collaborators in investigations or because they led some of the training workshops PdP have organised throughout the years, (e.g. a Colombian journalist working in the US who has given talks at some PdP workshops and whose investigations manuals have been read by investigators across the continent, or an Argentinian reporter who has been involved in the decision to award PdP international recognition because of their particular way of doing journalism). These interviews are methodologically suitable because they were part of the research process and because they add a different dimension to both case studies. These interviews have adjusted the research questions' foci and that is why I am confident that they are helpful in addressing the constraints posed by legacy media, the construction of evidence, and the independent investigations' stance before an equivocal arrangement of power tainted by mistrust, which underlies the research questions.

Their views on the IJ role in political and judicial terms, as well as their own experiences in experimenting with a liberal journalism model in their own countries, amounts to an expert sample or what others in journalism research have called "elite interviews" (Stetka and Örnebring, 2013) or "expert interviews" (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014). This type of interview gives the researcher first-hand points of view on the subject matter using a cost-and-time-effective method (Halperin & Heath, 2012, p. 275). Although it is true that these experts' points of view have privileged access to the people undertaking investigations across the continent and are aware of their difficulties and constraints, placing too much value on their opinions would be misleading as they entail a series of problems, from being too idealistic about the role of journalism, to a false sense of consensus based on solidarity between them. That is why

these interviews are included in this study only in order to attest to the research process and add dimension and context complexity, but not as an absolute picture of IJ's political role in Latin America.

With these ten interviews the procedure was similar to the one employed with PdP and FA: semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded with their identity anonymised, analysed, and complying with ethics requirements including a consent form, as recommended by Goldsmiths University in its October 2018 version. The majority of these interviews were face to face— three of these interviews took place in cafes and restaurants in Mexico City; four were conducted in Lima, Peru, in their workplaces (newsroom and offices) and a university; one in Argentina during the Conferencia Latinoamericana de Periodismo de Investigación (COLPIN), and another was via video call to Argentina. Most were one hour to one and a half hours in length. As it is shown in Table 3, this group of interviewees differ from PdP members in age range and gender (mostly older and male), and it is very likely that they also differ in social class since they are considered to be experienced and well-established investigative journalists who usually receive more favourable salaries and even some weight in the public spheres of their own countries.

Table 3

<b>EXPERT INTERVIEWS</b>						
<b>Number</b>	<b>Int. Code</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Exp. in National or Reg. Media</b>
1	IJ1	La Republica (Peru)	Special Investigations	Male	50-60	Yes (National

			at La Republica			Media)
2	IJ2	La Republica (Peru)	Special Investigations Unit at La Republica	Female	40-50	Yes (National Media)
3	IJ3	IDL-Reporteros (Peru)	IDL-Reporteros Director	Male	70+	Yes (National Media)
4	IJ4	Convoca (Peru)	Investigative Journalist	Male	30-35	Yes (National Media)
5	IJ5	La Voz (Argentina)	Investigative Journalist at La Voz (Argentina)	Male	40-50	Yes (National Media)
6	IJ6	Univision (Mexico/US)	Univision Special Investigations Unit	Male	60-70	Yes (National Media)
7	IJ7	El Heraldo (Honduras)	Investigative Journalist	Male	40-50	Yes (National Media)

8	IJ8	Mexicanos Contra la Corrupcion y la Impunidad	Investigative Journalist	Male	50-60	Yes (National and Reg. Media)
9	IJ9	Mexicanos Contra la Corrupcion y la Impunidad	Investigative Journalist	Male	50-60	Yes (National Media)
10	E1	Peru's Special Prosecutor	Special Prosecutor	Male	60-70	N/A

#### *iv) Other Reflective Work*

I felt compelled to recognise my position as a journalist and researcher beyond the undertaking of counter-investigations with the Plataforma Ayotzinapa. My experience of covering stories where the state is involved in wrongdoing, and having suffered a direct censorship blow, could be useful if analysed in retrospect through painstaking reflection on the political conjuncture I was positioned in (De Vecchi Gerli, 2018; Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017). This comes close to what scholars such as Harcup (2012; 2020) or Atton (2003) have called “native researching”, which is recognising the validity of the knowledge gained from years of practical experience, in their case, it was experience in the newsrooms that was conducive to the generation of academic knowledge. That is why, in addition to the self-reflexivity on Plataforma Ayotzinapa, I decided to bring back some snapshots from the past that affected my own identity as a Mexican investigative journalist and my current position as a scholar analysing those episodes in a critical way. I resorted to evidence from the past — for example,

multimedia materials, official records, personal notes, newspaper articles — that act as snapshots of that quest (Muncey, 2010). By bringing those experiences to the research, I was able to respond to how the investigative practice is constrained by the Mexican media system, which in my case meant that some investigations were brought to a standstill along with my career as a journalist in Mexico, at least for a while. And those reflections on my own practice as a reporter, investigating and dealing with contemporary politics in Mexico, have made me aware of the difficulties and opportunities that investigators may encounter when trying to engage in political action beyond publication and aiming for the transformation of their reality.

#### *-Limitations of this Methodology*

Although some limitations have been mentioned already, it is worth noting that these methods will only be useful to find a means of transformative IJ in Mexico, looking at the ideological, political, economic, and sociological conditions and constraints of the practice in that particular country. Yet, they are not helpful to analyse the content of investigations themselves or the impact that they might have had. This is so because I part from the evidence of previous scholarship in Mexico showing that there is an urgency to analyse and transform the practice itself, in order to change those conditions (i.e. either ideological assumptions, a captured clientelist media model, or the threats to journalists security that start at the work place), which are preventing the production of investigations in the public interest in the first place. Also, these methods have been employed to produce one possible option to turn IJ into a transformative practice at the national level, mainly but not limited to print and digital platforms; nevertheless,

other methods are required to make an intervention at regional levels or focused on specific media platforms.

### ***-Conclusions***

In sum, the research questions that trigger this thesis made it necessary to choose a certain type of methodological approach, by addressing the analysis of investigative journalistic practice as well as a political proposition in both theoretical and practical terms. That is why a largely qualitative set of research methods has been chosen using the rationale that has been explained in this chapter. These methods, under the epistemological lenses of Critical Realism, respond to a particular understanding of what researching the social is, under epistemological bases that recognise the possibility to analyse the world and people as they go through political and economic struggles. But it also acknowledges that this process implies the subjectivity of the researcher, along with a commitment to transform the reality that has been previously mediated and organised in the form of new knowledge.

The methods employed, along with the collected data, are better held together and analysed through a process that attempts to make sense of a multiplicity of factors (economic, political, historic, and so on) converging in a given time and space, or a particular conjuncture. This conjunctural analysis is not, by any means, an attempt to describe historical processes or political issues in their entirety, but a way to understand the historical moment and to think strategically in order to advance a transformative, committed IJ in Mexico.

This research's fieldwork was based on a series of qualitative research methods with the most prominent being the use of semi-structured interviews (41

in total, with 39 individuals). I have used two case studies — the exceptional work of PdP (22 interviews) and FA’s incipient attempt to do “counter-investigations” in Mexico with the project Plataforma Ayotzinapa (nine interviews). I have also conducted expert-interviews (ten) with other investigative journalists in Mexico and Latin America, to add contextual substance to my findings. And finally, I have relied on other reflective work from my previous experiences as an investigative reporter and as a participant of conferences in the subject of study, to both inform and sharpen the arguments presented in this thesis.

## ***Chapter 4: PdP's Political/Investigative Practices***

### ***-Introduction***

This chapter considers the first case study — Periodistas de a Pie (PdP), aiming to analyse their political and investigative practices as a group, so it can inform a framework for investigations in Mexico. To do so, the question this chapter attempts to respond to is, how did PdP create a space where they were able to carry out investigations escaping the constraints of traditional media in Mexico? Issues such as a clientelist media system and the rising violence in the country are explained in the voices of PdP members. In contrast, their practices of solidarity, collaboration, protection, teaching, and political action are explored as the driving force behind the creation of their organisation and the production of investigations. The argument I will make here is that the formation of a community of solidarity and trust, such as that created by PdP, is key to counter political annihilation in Mexico's political and economic systems (Barrios & Miller, 2020). Or, in other words, the pursuit of a transformative IJ can be learnt from PdP's collaborative experience, not only in the investigative process, but at a personal level in daily life to counter the effects of neoliberal ideology (Harvey, 2007; Escalante, 2016; Wright, 2019).

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section on the experience of journalism in the mainstream media in Mexico, analyses how PdP founders were affected by the continuities of a clientelist regime affecting the media. The section also analyses the organisations they worked for and how this put workers in a vulnerable position, from poor labour conditions to the irresponsible abandonment of individuals reporting in the midst of the escalation of violence. This is not a re-iteration of the first half of this thesis, but an account of how those factors affected the group analysed in this specific case study. Here, I will show

how professional practices and ideological assumptions are part of what the interviewees considered determining living and working conditions for journalists in Mexico (e.g. personal, political, vocational, professional, etc). This includes power dynamics in market-driven media in neoliberal times in Mexico (Hughes, 2009), hyper competition and spectacularity (Hall, 1978), the reinforcement of “official truths” (Chomsky & Herman, 1999; Accardo, 2000), and so on. This is coupled with particularities in Mexican media organisations, such as poor labour conditions (Martínez Mendoza et al, 2009; Coronel Cabanillas et al, 2016; Santana, 2014), the normalisation of handouts (Rodríguez-Munguía, 2007; Serna; 2019), and little room for long-term investigations affecting them at the personal level. All of these constraints were considered by some interviewees as the unbearable context they desperately were looking to escape from by creating a solidarity network which they ended up calling *Periodistas de a Pie*.

The second section deals with the institutionalisation of that particular group of journalists within PdP and the practices they adopted (both political and collaborative activities while doing investigations) to respond to that conjuncture, creating a network of solidarity where they could support each other. This included the organisation of protests, campaigning for the protection of journalists at risk, and undertaking courses and workshops where a method of journalism that was deemed to be “good journalism” was underpinned. A “journalism as social justice” mindset, as one of the PdP members called it, shaped the way in which they conducted investigations, not only by challenging top-down narratives, but also by advancing dynamics of solidarity and sharing which were against the values of what is considered a professionalised press in Mexico, constrained by logics of competition and exclusivity in the information market. These ideals are connected with examples applied in other Latin American countries that

somewhat reflected ideas of a different way of doing journalism, challenging mainstream news coverage, such as alternative journalism (Atton, 2003; Atton & Hamilton, 2008), or journalism for peace (Klhar, 2015), social journalism (Cytrynblum, 2004; 2009; Llobet, 2006), and “public/civic journalism” (Haas, 2007), as explained in Chapter 1.

How the context in which that collaborative dynamic in investigations came about is perhaps one of the most important aspects in this section towards the construction of a framework for IJ in Mexico. They were forced to work in the middle of the militarisation of their own country that was detonating the escalation of violence at many levels of society. However, this same context prompted a series of practices and understandings about journalism that challenged certain assumptions about its role in the public interest, leading them to adopt “counterstrategies” to cope with their violent environment, to use Barrios and Miller’s (2020) words.

The chapter identifies two main turning points for these journalists — first, the discontent with the context in which they lived their lives as journalists in contemporary Mexico at the beginning of 2006; and second, the moment they decided to organise themselves in collaborative solidarity (even at the personal level) to tackle those issues, enabling them to take political action and informing their investigative practices. Thus, PdP’s example brings to the fore three dimensions that I present as part of the framework for transformative investigations in this thesis — *a communitarian solidarity, a return to political action, and a humanitarian truth production.*

### ***-Experiencing Mexico's Political, Economic, and Media Systems***

“You know that there has always been this conception in Mexico of a journalism linked to power; journalism not as a check and balance, but as part of the cohort of power” (Interviewee F1).

As this interviewee told me, for most PdP founders the political landscape in which they have been doing journalism for the last 20 or 30 years is very clear: journalism at large has not been a watchdog, but a lapdog. Stories on handouts, political favours, propaganda, favourable coverage, and the many variations of censorship, are used by them to describe the relationship between political power, which is also economic power, and the Mexican press in general. This is, in essence, the clientelist captured media theorised by Guerrero and Márquez-Ramírez (2014), that was born with the institutionalisation of the Mexican Revolution in the first half of the twentieth century in the form of a state that pretended to be democratic but that was authoritarian at the core. In order to fill the void of a truly democratic order, they captured it via publicity contracts and other monetary help to sustain the media. As explored in Chapter 2, this is also the result of what Rodríguez-Munguía (2007) has called “the invisible tyranny” based on the government’s declassified documents from that period, and which then evolved into the capturing of the media through official advertising both in national and regional media (Salazar-Rebolledo, 2016). In that sense, the press was politically controlled by the government by pushing the buttons of economic subsistence and the expectations of further profit, and that is how journalists in the second half of the 2000s understood the intricate relationship between media and power.

Take for instance the story of this interviewee, who has been working as a journalist in the southern state of Chiapas for more than 20 years. She used to

write for one of the, supposedly, most progressive, socially driven national newspapers, La Jornada — which has praised itself for being the national left-wing newspaper (Musacchio, 2010), regularly putting out stories on labour and social movements, indigenous groups and their struggles — until she felt at odds with the kind of agenda the paper was putting forward:

“In 2009 [...] La Jornada decided to make advertising agreements with many local state governments and that meant going a bit astray of the newspaper’s traditional editorial line. At the time I refused to do it. [...] They wanted me to by-line official press releases and things like that [...], it was a very hard year. I finally left the newspaper, but the government’s harassment continued, [...] some NGOs helped us, among them was PdP” (Interviewee BD9).

The situation this interviewee described is a stark example of the media model captured by historic clientelist relationships, advanced in Chapter 2 — La Jornada was receiving advertising contracts from the Federal Government in order to financially survive as a media outlet.

The impact of the global 2008/2009 economic crisis on the media “business model” around the world was devastating (Rusbridger, 2018), but in Mexico the press saw its sales and circulation of newspapers increase, or at least maintain, but not its profits margins (Rosas, 2016). Although figures cannot be relied upon due to the media in Mexico providing false figures to sell advertising spaces at a higher price (García-Rubio, 2013), this can also be explained by the fact that journalistic corporations managed to survive thanks to different types of obscure government subvention, either with public money from governmental publicity, or concessions and permits in other businesses from restaurants to

telecommunications (RSF, 2017). But this also meant that the hand that fed had more power to influence, suggest, and even drive the agenda at will using advertising contracts. The blackmailing aspect, in which almost identical state press releases were published by the media as journalism, was precisely what the interviewee was reluctant to accept when she stated, “they wanted me to by-line official press releases”. And she decided to leave the seeming left-wing media outlet that had fallen prey to clientelism and, ultimately, churnalism (Davies, 2008; Lewis et al, 2008). This is a recurring account from the most experienced journalists at PdP, describing how they see their years in traditional media with different implications both for the public domain and also for the journalists’ safety. One of these implications relates to censorship, as another interviewee, a member of the board of directors, recalled from his previous experience:

“I could not stand that at Milenio (a national newspaper) because I had never experienced such brazen censorship, I knew about censorship but in Milenio that was (indicating disgust with his face) ... They never wanted to say it openly but it was a story on Elba Esther Gordillo (national politician and leader of the teachers’ union). [...] They would never publish my story on Elba Esther [...]. And I asked about it and my editor told me, ‘look, the teacher has a lot of money invested here and they will never publish something like that’” (Interviewee BD3).

As this example shows, subtle control/pressure on journalistic investigations is extended to other powerful political actors in Mexico’s political landscape, who can mobilise resources and political pressure from left or right-wing parties. In his case, the teacher’s national union leader had so much money and so much

influence on national media that the editors of a national newspaper such as Milenio were afraid to publish an investigation on her.

These are the type of answers interviewees gave when asked what they were escaping from when they decided to create or join PdP. It is unsurprising that they responded by talking about circumstances they found distressing, intolerable or even immoral while working for traditional media. But it is worth noting that they used those examples to mark a difference between the status quo at the time, and the kind of journalism they wanted to practice which they consider to be very different from traditional, “servile” media. That differentiation is a sort of naming of the other, the bad practice and all that they abhor, but it is also a way in which they identify themselves as journalists who are not corrupt, doing “good journalism”, or at least escaping the clientelist cycle. As it will be seen, further interviews reveal new traits. Distinctively, precarious labour conditions were exacerbated by the influence of a neoliberal ideology, introducing training and heavy competition (Fuentes-Berain, 2001; Hughes, 2009), inhibiting guild association by coercion, and the co-opting of real union associations<sup>1</sup>.

### ***-Worse Labour Conditions, Worse IJ***

Structural hurdles for transformative investigations in journalism respond to both the architecture of the media companies and the ideological assumptions shaped by these structures and adopted, consciously or unconsciously, by journalists (Golding and Elliott, 1979). In fact, this “ideology” stems from continuities and constraints in the Mexican press, technological and geopolitical global dynamics,

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<sup>1</sup> This includes a double game in which unions are accused of being co-opted by the state or the companies, preventing unionism altogether, as will be expanded upon in Chapter 5.

and different views on what “good” IJ should be and what role it should be playing in the political landscape. This is also one of the reasons why looking at PdP’s case is so relevant — because from its very foundation, the discontent with traditional media and their practices was also a realisation of the bad labour conditions most journalists endured.

Although the 2008 crisis did not seem to have a huge financial impact on Mexican media, my interviewees claim that labour conditions worsened. Newsrooms in Mexican media have long been precarious labour environments, and most of the interviewees tell stories of how these conditions have been deteriorating for the last 20 years (Martínez Mendoza et al, 2009; Santana, 2014; Coronel Cabanillas et al, 2016; Espino Sánchez, 2016). This perspective is shared by a journalist who took part in the first PdP meetings but later left the group. She has worked for a variety of legacy media, from print platforms to TV and online editions, and is very aware of how news production has suffered a process of pauperisation, affecting information quality and ultimately leaving little room for investigations:

“I myself am in a pauperised newsroom, I work in a newsroom with no tools to pick up a phone... I edit, I report the story, I verify... because my reporters do not even bother to read the documents. The reason why is because I need to produce a daily program, and I don’t have the time to sit down and tell them, ‘look, you should have read this and that’. I simply have no time at all! [...] And I don’t have time because I must submit my stories into a production system that is closer to producing tortillas [...]. So, no one has time. [...] I see X (an investigative reporter) going to the president’s press conferences every morning, when is he carrying out

investigations? Instead of sleeping? Instead of eating? Instead of breathing?” (Interviewee F6).

This description corresponds to the kind of journalism industry more concerned with producing more information but not necessarily better quality information, so they can sell more publicity spaces. Once in this circle, public service is the last thing media corporations care about, as is the case with the journalists working for them. In this situation, time is too costly a commodity to be spent on investigations, so they prefer to use it to sell easily made churnalism pieces. In that respect, “churnalism” (Davies, 2008; Lewis et al, 2008; Jackson & Moloney, 2016) was what the interviewees were observing and tried to escape from. In fact, the lack of opportunities for investigations in Mexican journalism has led some interviewees to think that, by and large, there is no IJ in Mexico. As one interviewee stated:

“We cannot talk about a Mexican journalism (tradition) related to IJ. Tell me who does investigation, or tell me how many important investigations there have been in Mexico? When we are talking about IJ (in Mexico) we are talking about the workshops you can pay for at CIDE<sup>2</sup>, you’re not talking about the practice of IJ. How many are there? The “casa blanca” scandal? Tell me five of them... what Ana Lilia Perez has done? [...] that is not Mexican IJ, that is Mexican journalists doing IJ. [...] We pay for workshops expecting that one day we will be able to do IJ and find somewhere to publish, find someone to pay for it. [...] Where are the journalists who do IJ? All of them are freelancers or working for NGOs

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<sup>2</sup> CIDE is the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (“Center for Research and Teaching in Economics”), which runs a Master’s in Journalism and Public Affairs as well as a Diploma in IJ (CIDE, 2020).

because they are the only ones who can pay for that. [...] It is self-indulgent (saying that there is IJ in Mexico) and we have not discussed it enough in practical terms, and I think, IJ is too idealised and does not exist here” (Interviewee F1).

That perception is an interesting point of view, problematising the matter of who does investigations in Mexico and since when. Interviewee F1 was not saying that IJ is completely non-existent, but rather, that the prevalent conditions within the Mexican media are such that investigations — allocating enough time and other resources to investigate a story — are more the exception than the rule. In other words, if IJ is only carried out by a few, it is not because others do not want to, but because the journalists' labour conditions in traditional media are preventing them from doing so. Some interviewees reiterate how media owners are closer to political and economic power than to the craft of journalism, with phrases such as “it is the case that media owners are against it (IJ), they are not helpful [...]. Here (in Mexico) they play against IJ” (BD1, 2019).

These labour conditions in the media have been an excuse for reporters to have an extra source of income as some historic accounts mentioned in Chapter 1 attest to (Rodríguez Murgúía, 2016; Serna; 2017; Serna, 2019). Among PdP members there is also an awareness of the responsibility journalists have regarding high quality investigations and corrupt practices— those receiving handouts or “chayote”, as it is usually called in Mexican journalism jargon. Dishonest journalists have been characterised as “silence sellers”, as embodied in Serna's (2019) novel “El vendedor de silencio”. In more recent times, as Zepeda-Patterson (2019) recognises, the practice of receiving handouts has been sophisticated in the form of publicity contracts on personal websites and

blogs owned by journalists working for mainstream media. This PdP founder lashes out against such cases:

“What I want is sound journalism, a journalism a democratic country deserves, and that requires a broader understanding to say, ‘yes, journalists are getting killed, but some others are rubbish’, and it would be better to kick them out of the practice for God’s sake!” (Interviewee F1).

This journalist is making a complex point, because even if she is campaigning to defend freedom of speech, she is aware that there are many other problems affecting Mexican journalism and preventing investigations from being published. This is a more complex understanding of the problem of freedom of the press than just denouncing attacks or threats, dealing with a problem that is also rooted in the very profession and involving many active journalists across the country. Part of those practices PdP members considered unacceptable made them look for a different practice, a different approach, outside of media corporations.

That discontent with the status quo was present even in one of the most professionalised national newspapers — Reforma. This media outlet became a national newspaper at the height of the neoliberal modernisation of the country in 1993. As part of its endeavour to have a more professional press, it broke with the practice of receiving handouts and gifts for reporters, deploying resources to provide better salaries for reporters, business coverage, finance, very specialised markets, and so on (Fuentes-Berain, 2001). However, the attempt to form a solid, focused group of investigative journalists did not last long, and by the time the frontal war on drugs was unleashed, Reforma’s daily agenda did less long-term, in-depth reporting. Interestingly, at least three PdP founders used to work for this

newspaper. In spite of the comparatively higher salaries they received there, they said they were unhappy with the restrictions on daily reporting and the commercialised model imposed on them:

“Most of us worked there (at Reforma) and pointing out that condition is necessary, because it has to do with the fact that inside Reforma we had a series of limits, a series of canons forcing you, as you became an expert in your area, to look outside, because you did not fit any longer. [...] We were reporters with no room in the traditional media system anymore, because of this ‘Reforma’s boy’ training, and on top of that, Reforma started to fall short of our expectations when we grew up, and the exodus began [...]. Reforma did not grow up with us, there was an excellent phrase that we always said at that time, ‘Reforma is a good school but it does not have a university’ (Interviewee F5).

The restrictions the interviewee is referring to relate to a news production model based on the idea of daily feeds to be sold in a mechanical, vertical, rigid way. The chain of production was very rigid and therefore there was little room for innovative, disruptive stories and formats in journalism manufacturing.

Apart from those labour conditions, the threatening environment within Mexico’s political media system in the time of rising violence brought about different levels of vulnerability. The declaration of “war” against criminal organisations in 2007 marked the nation’s life at different levels. For Mexican journalists it meant both understanding and reporting a new security strategy, as well as facing the violence resulting from a rising perverse symbiotic relationship between legitimate authorities and increasingly powerful criminal groups across the country (Chabat, 2005; Martínez-Serrano, 2014). For Mexican journalism, this

period is a huge landmark that would change the practice at its core, shaping it to avoid risk (Márquez-Ramírez & Hughes, 2017). Yes, attacks on the press have been on the rise since 2007 (Article, 2017; Freedom House, 2017), but this could hardly have happened at a worse juncture — the frontal war on drugs exacerbated all the problems the Mexican press had already been suffering for years. This state of emergency was also the moment of “realisation” as some interviewees called it, that triggered the mobilisation of alternative initiatives to face and to counter the soaring violence and its discourse. The violent context did affect the way journalists were doing their jobs. According to Marquez (2017) and Hughes (2017), this situation led to journalists’ self-censorship, censorship policies in media organisations, the diminishing of shoe-leather journalism (or street reporting), and the concealment of sensitive information.

It is against this backdrop that we must look at PdP founders, trying to start a journalists’ organisation around 2007. According to one of the founding members, this is an “unfortunate” coincidence with the beginning of the new security strategy pushed forward by President Calderon. But this coincidence helps us to look at PdP’s experience of the conflict, reflecting on what this historical process entails for the practice of IJ.

There was a point at which the group of friends and colleagues who would then form PdP realised that they were seeing the advent of a pivotal moment, and perhaps more importantly, they could take the decision to do something about it. This moment of realisation at PdP did not come immediately. And, most importantly, it did not come from incidents taking place in the capital, as is usually the case with political and cultural movements, but by the connections they had with journalists working in provincial states. For instance, reporters from northern states such as Chihuahua, experienced and described, for PdP members, the

violence triggered by the military strategy. The breaking point came with the murder of a PdP founder's close friend, marking that moment of shocking realisation:

“This was 2008, but I think at the moment this (attacks on journalists) was happening far away from us, until November 2008 when they killed ‘el Choco’, *Diario de Juarez*'s reporter, Jose Armando Rodriguez; that was when we saw it happening close to us. The one who knew him was F3” (Interviewee BD1).

The rising violence and the assassination of “el Choco” galvanised more interest in journalism training and group protection. However, more training on covering violent events, corruption, criminal organisations, victims, and so on, came with an unexpected side effect. It turned out that the new angles, and the more sophisticated reporting they were able to carry out, was difficult to sell to rigid media organisations, and even worse, the activity of “holding power accountable” was responded to with heavy retaliation — from threats to violent attacks.

This is the moment of another realisation — journalists could no longer sustain the premise of a detached reporting because they were embedded in the very plot of an unfolding conflict. That is, they had to assume a situated way of reporting and investigating their stories as personally attached to them, “en medio del desmadre” (“in the middle of the mess”):

“We were in that purely professional reflection when the war fell upon us and we started to tell that the country was getting rotten, and also that we as journalists were in the middle of all that mess (desmadre). It started to quickly decompose between 2005 and 2007, and I notice that that was the

moment when the bubble journalists were in burst. And then we saw the war stratification, which came with a total, absolute drama in 2011” (Interviewee F5).

PdP soon noticed this conflict was wreaking havoc on journalists’ lives at different levels and also in the kind of labour relationship they had with media corporations. Interviewees noticed a rise in freelancing work, which implies the loss of fundamental law protections for employees and leaves journalists exposed to all the old and new risks, but even worse, they had to face them individually, without the protection of a media organisation (Rusbridger, 2018):

“We’re all now moving into freelancing. Some time ago, almost all of us were working for a media outlet and just one or two were freelancers; but now, almost all of us work as freelancers, not just one or two. That was an important change because all of us went on to be unemployed, and we thought, ‘what can we help with?’; with different conditions we would have said, ‘here you have some of my savings’, but suddenly we had none of that” (Interviewee BD1).

This twofold problem of labour conditions in the media and the political rearrangement in Mexico, show how journalists’ vulnerability in Mexico is a coin with two sides. Firstly, the poor labour conditions in media organisations in Mexico, including low salaries, no room for real union association, and high competition, is particularly acute for women reporters and journalists in provincial states (Martínez Mendoza et al, 2009; Coronel Cabanillas et al, 2016); and, secondly, a perverse relationship with political and economic powers (in the form of publicity contracts or non-state powerful actors’ coercion) exacerbated by an overarching violent conflict affecting the whole country. These conditions that

exist within the practice of journalism in Mexico, exposed reporters to a wide range of vulnerabilities. The most devastating of all is the murder of journalists, as the majority of statistics show. But it has also positioned them in less visible crises, economic for sure, but also emotional and psychological. This is what one of the founders reckoned after helping reporters who were experiencing these issues, through PdP, whilst even experiencing that trauma herself.

“I was really bad at the time and I saw that in Juarez [...]. I saw that and I talked a lot with reporters in Juarez, those who were covering... poor photographers... their nightmares, their addictions, in Juarez I became a beer addict, but that was part of the black humour, and then I could understand the nightmares, everything was very hard” (Interviewee F3).

While talking to her about journalists’ vulnerability and how it is reflected in their nightmares, it reminded me of my own vulnerability — I realised I have lost track of how many times I have got shot in my dreams. This is, I suppose, the feeling of empathy that led them to make a collective effort to change journalism, and themselves.

As the next section explains, it was in this state of collaboration, and at the same time coming together to discuss and analyse the practice and the country’s vital pulse, that the first meetings that would lead to the formation of PdP took place in 2007. PdP’s informal meeting space would soon include ways to report and survive the most dangerous years for journalists in Mexico in its history. But this also led to the political coming of age for professional journalists trying to create a space at PdP where they would come together to help and protect each other.

### ***-Against Individuality, a Communitarian Solidarity***

The need for a different kind of journalism and more platforms to publish the stories journalists wanted to investigate was a factor in the conception of PdP as a group. However, these ideas and projects were born amidst human interaction and the plan was for them to continue with collaborative efforts. It was so when they started holding “reading groups” in which they read each other’s investigations and stories, and it remained so when they invited famous journalists to “teach them” how to do better journalism. That was the beginning of PdP in 2007.

At the beginning, this space to come together and share time, experiences, and concerns, soon evolved into a deeper sense of collaboration. Due to the conditions under which reporters had to do their job, this collaboration was not only a way to improve journalists’ education, but almost inadvertently, they also disrupted an industry based on individualism and competition that had left them at their own risk and peril covering an armed conflict (McPherson, 2012; Escalante, 2016; Relly & González de Bustamante). This was explained by an interviewee with vast experience in local media; for her, PdP acted as a refuge for those journalists who were isolated, and therefore more vulnerable to receive threats and suffer attacks:

“Yes, because it is very symbolic that a journalist is always by himself; even if he or she works for a big media organisation, at the end of the day, is always by themselves and the attacks are focused on the individual [...]. So, this thing about feeling part of a group without officially being part of it (goes against individualisation)” (Interviewee BD8).

A spirit of collaboration also had an impact on the journalists' reporting practices and how they acquired information from their sources in concrete practical terms, as this PdP founder recalled an episode in which they were ready to share their phonebook contacts:

“What we said there was, ‘yes, we need more training, but we need to organise ourselves’. In fact, no one else took up the working conditions issue, but we did recognise that we had to be closer together. One of the first things we did, and I felt quite happy about that, was that I said that we had to change our mindset (chip), ‘we must have a shared contact book, it doesn’t matter if it is your source, what does matter is that the information is important, that is good information, it doesn’t matter if (the one you’re sharing your information with) is your competitor; we need to share, because what does matter is that the reader may access good information.’ It was super tough because it was about the source that you had cultivated; [...] and the other thing that we promoted was, ‘if they don’t want to publish your story, it doesn’t matter, pass it on to someone else’” (Interviewee F3).

It is not clear how much resistance journalists had to face when trying to introduce these kinds of practices in the early stages of PdP. Nonetheless, advancing a proposal like that among daily news reporters was not an easy task. Of course, there is the common practice of Mexican journalists sharing audios and information from press conferences to feed into the “sound-bite” dynamic (Hallin, 1992; Márquez-Ramírez, 2012). But the circulation of such a private asset, that is the contact book, was a big change for the adage in professionalised newsrooms in Mexico, “a reporter is only worth his contact book” (Rodríguez, 2009).

The last part of the interviewee's quote is remarkable, "and the other thing that we promoted was, 'if they don't want to publish your story, it doesn't matter, pass it on to someone else.'" Collaboration became a counterstrategy against one of the most appalling effects of the Mexican media model and the exacerbations brought about by the armed conflict — collaboration became a way to overturn censorship. Editors and media owners putting pressure on reporters to ban a story has been a pervasive practice in Mexico, but unlike other countries, this pressure rarely takes the form of a libel suit (Leigh, 2017; 2019). When a reporter has a "scoop" (i.e. a big revelatory story) in his hands and the people being accused know about it, there are many strings those involved can pull to put pressure on the media — from a threatening call boasting about the influences they have, to a discrete insinuation that they are able to turn off the publicity tap (mainly government advertising) (Rodríguez-Munguía, 2007; Huerta et al, 2015). There have been many inventive ideas to avoid pressures of censorship in Mexico but looking for someone else in a better position to publish is definitely one of the most innovative. It is definitely not a PdP invention since we have seen journalists praising collaboration in projects such as the Panama Papers scandal on tax havens, (ICIJ; 2016; Obermaier & Obermayer, 2017) or The Daphne Project on the joint investigation after the murder of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia (OCCRP, 2018). But PdP reflecting and advocating for this level of sharing in such a clear, straightforward way is not only a disruptive practice for the industry, but also a further innovation of political strategy for journalists in Mexico.

This kind of collaboration in the midst of dangerous conditions for journalists was also directed towards reporters working and investigating in the countryside. More than one of the interviewees agreed that there was a big concern for

expanding collaborations with journalists in other parts of the country because of the traditional centrality of national media they abhorred, and because they considered that those journalists were being attacked the most during the conflict. One of the interviewees, working in the south of Mexico, considers that the country's situation led them to similar paths, and the PdP network let them "see each other" (BD9, 2019). One is left wondering to what extent this collaboration served the purpose of publishing investigations, or if it was more a network where journalists at risk could find some sort of protection. In any case, it proved to be effective in connecting people from bordering states at both ends of Mexico, from Chiapas to Chihuahua, and these connections between journalists across the country remain one of the key features of PdP today.

From the interviews I held, and also because I have collaborated with journalists on more than one investigation or project, I know that PdP embarks on a variety of collective efforts within and outside of the organisation, sharing information and technology. One of the interviewees went as far as calling these collaborations "hermanamientos periodísticos" (something between pairing and a twinning venture):

"It is something closer to the mood, it is a lot about the times and the processes that consolidate these 'journalistic pairings' (hermanamientos periodísticos), first of all because you are there in solidarity with whatever is happening to the other, and afterwards in the construction of themes, which is something that has happened to all of us. All of what I have published with PdP has been collaborative work... investigative collaborative work" (Interviewee BD8).

Interestingly, the term “hermanamientos periódicos” gives the idea of a link of kinship of an “hermano” (a brother), in the sense of a particular action that produces a family relationship where there was not one before. This intimacy of the relationship is not an accident in the interviewee’s response since it corresponds with the kind of radical solidarity bonds PdP members would develop later on. In other words, the encountering of journalists with similar agendas, risks, and personal circumstances, led to a personal, closer involvement between those who joined PdP meetings.

Furthermore, according to one of the founders, this closeness occurred from the very beginning, forming bonds of cooperation and solidarity beyond professional interests, even at an intimate level involving the care of each other’s families:

“One of the things that I have defended the most is the network model, and we were very aware of it. From the very beginning, from that first state, we had long discussions lasting hours. We started, say, 7 pm, when we had finished work, and we finished our meetings around 2 or 4 am. But on top of that, most of them had children, so we managed to set up a group in charge of looking after the children, while the rest could discuss in the meetings [...]. We were always aware of those who were moms and that was a very strong bond of solidarity, that gives you another level of bond, to be honest” (Interviewee F1).

That level of bond goes beyond the newsroom or the ultimate objective of getting the story. That solidarity between them no longer had a professional aim, but rather a very personal one at the level of friendship. As this founding member

mentions, PdP became a group of friends concerned about each other's wellbeing to this day, even if her involvement is no longer regular:

“PdP has been an opportunity for growth, the women I admire the most are from there, I have dear friends... I mean, I consider F3 a dear friend to me, BD4 the same, I call them at least once a week (to this day)” (Interviewee F2).

They phone each other regularly and she indicated that journalism is not what they talk about. They care about each other's safety while reporting, but also about their personal wellbeing. This personal involvement at such an intimate level has been evident even in situations of eventual fracture inside PdP. These fractures have been personal fractures more than disagreements on PdP's objectives, but it shows the level of intimacy inside the group up to the level of the creation of a communitarian solidarity.

While developing this idea of intimacy within the group, I could not help but feel that closeness as well. Not only because I had collaborated with them in the past, but because some of the youngest members studied in the same journalism school as I did, we have been to parties and bars together, we know each other's partners and ex-partners, and so on. We have been telling stories together, as well as playing as characters in each other's personal stories. This communitarian solidarity was exactly what made PdP's formation more organic, more impetuous, and made each ready to help the other. A community like that was radically going against logics of individuality and competitiveness imposed by the newspaper's need to mark differences between their competitors, and crucially, it also saved the lives of journalists at risk.

The kind of collaboration that led PdP to become the group it is today became a sort of shelter, both from the media system and from the effects of a violent conflict. Gregarious behaviour seemed a natural response to a state of emergency — protecting, reporting and sharing. This is how PdP evolved from a very informal group of friends interested in learning new ways of doing innovative journalism, to a more cohesive, concrete group, that decided to take on the task of protecting journalists at risk and practicing journalism in communitarian solidarity. This is important because collaboration at the personal level has the power to challenge the media model and some of the most dreadful dangers for the practice of IJ in neoliberal times. In other words, PdP can teach us how a close group of friends in communitarian solidarity can advance political goals in common.

But in order to respond to this juncture, PdP realised that they had to legally formalise their project. They took the decision to incorporate a “red” (network) under the legal constraints of an “asociación civil” (similar to a charity or an NGO), not only to do IJ together, but also to overcome journalists’ adverse conditions by embarking on political action.

### ***-Strategic Political Action***

This section comes from the understanding that “being political” — to use Fenton’s words (2016) on the “alteration of the terrain of power” — was a precondition for the kind of situated reporting PdP was able to carry out. They did not come to investigate *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, their relentless critical approach to counter the hegemonic narrative was informed by a political position on the causes of Mexico’s economic and social conditions and willingness to

change them by political action such as protesting, marching, and lobbying lawmakers. Their previous work as reporters covering the “social beat” and teaching social journalism gave them the necessary framework to report state violence with different conceptual tools, challenging hegemonic narratives. This also afforded them a sensibility to treat victims and perpetrators as people rather than criminal activity statistics. Furthermore, doing this kind of investigation enabled the liberation of that political “being” (Dussel, 2011; Laclau, 1990). Looking for change and getting rid of the straitjacket of detached reporting made them aware of their own political personas and the role they could play in Mexican politics.

I have been talking about this moment of realisation for PdP — el Choco’s assassination in 2008 — but this was only the beginning of a series of political activities going beyond their professional role as journalists that PdP members adopted in order to alter the disposition of power — demonstrations, lobbying members of Congress, political education, and strategic thinking.

As one of the interviewees acknowledged, demonstrations were part of a series of actions, in what he called “incidencia política” (the closest translation is “political leverage”):

“(There was) violence against reporters, and PdP had to assume a leading role in that regard in 2010 [...]. Then PdP started to gain political leverage, not completely aware of what was going on and what the group was getting into; because we used to go the Protection Law’s discussion in the Senate, because we were having meetings with the Interamerican Commission rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, people from the United Nations [...]. There was a moment when we had to have clarity on this and we started

to organise successive demonstrations in Aguascalientes, Jalisco, Colima, Michoacán, and these hubs that have been forming around PdP, because the end of those mobilisations was, and still is, that PdP can move its tentacles, if you want to put it like that” (Interviewee BD8).

A clear and very evident instance of that kind of response was PdP’s involvement in the creation of the “Ley para la Protección de los Periodistas y los Defensores de Derechos Humanos”, a national law aimed at providing journalists with legal and physical protections (e.g. an alert mechanism and the creation of a special prosecutor on cases of attacks on the press and human rights defenders). In the Senate, PdP had the role of a lobbyist, both giving an account of the attacks on their colleagues as well as offering possible solutions to the escalating violence, according to the interviews I held.

What PdP achieved was a new law and the protection mechanism. Whether the law or the mechanism worked (and the evidence of a relentless increase of journalist killings seems to prove it did not), its success or failure is not something I can analyse here, but what I want to show is how PdP members got out of the straitjacket of the assumed ideology of detachment, to try and carry out organisational and political activities which could have been considered by their peers as unorthodox, or going far beyond the remit of their professional roles. This was a very deliberate move to employ “political power” (Interviewee BD1, 2019), to use another interviewee’s words when talking about using mobilisation as leverage to achieve concrete political goals. The combination of manifestation and influencing law-making was, in essence, a political act at odds with the political and economic constraints that were inhibiting journalists’ organisation and were promoting their annihilation as political beings.

It was interesting to see how the interviewees identified protesting and lobbying as parallel political actions, showing how mobilisation alone was regarded as insufficient if there was to be change. Some might say that this involvement in law-making is not new given that something similar happened with a previous initiative to grant protections and more access to public information, with the creation of the “Ley de Acceso a la Información” which, in general terms, paved the way for the public requests for public information. That initiative was planned and put before the Mexican Congress by a group of journalists and academics called “Grupo Oaxaca” (Serna, 2017), led by major figures in Mexican journalism such as Luis Javier Solana, with a long history of advancing a progressive Media legislation while working in top jobs in Mexican government, as well as journalist , Jenaro Villamil, who at the time worked for the leftist newspaper La Jornada before going on to Proceso and who is now in charge of the largest public media company, the Sistema Público de Radiodifusión del Estado Mexicano (SPR). However, other instances similar to “Grupo Oaxaca” are very rare in Mexican politics, and its example does not represent the political involvement the large majority of journalists have in Mexican institutions.

The interviews also showed how these actions are not just an instant reaction, as if it would be a simple reflex of an object hitting the conjuncture of the sorrows of Mexico. But rather, strategic political thinking is conspicuous. It was the reaction to a problem and also the articulation of specific actions with an underpinning rationale. It was not simple mobilisation, what PdP has prompted has been coordinated demonstrations in important cities across Mexico, as in the case of the “Los queremos vivos” march in 2010, with protests in northern cities such as Tijuana, or in southern states such as Chilpancingo in Guerrero. The protests were not spontaneous — PdP members recognise their intentional

efforts to get the optimal date to bring more people together; and although they did not mention it, these protests took place in those cities experiencing the most egregious threats against journalists (Interviewee BD1, 2019). Also, these demonstrations were not just organised for the sake of voicing discontent, but to raise awareness of threats against journalists in the general population. However, some years later, they decided to limit their lobbying actions as is now required under PdP's legal constitution. The decision does not seem to be a total abandonment of involvement in legislation, but a strategic decision to maintain their legitimacy as professional journalists, and a position from where they felt freer to receive international funding. Nevertheless, being incorporated as a legal NGO in Mexico did have a neutralising effect on their politics, as will be explained in Chapter 5.

This political involvement is completely alien to the state of affairs in contemporary newsrooms in Mexico since the neoliberalisation of the newsrooms in the early 1990s meant that reporters would never get involved in politics, either as lobbyists or as activists themselves, which was already advanced in Chapter 2 and will be further explored in Chapter 5. However, this committed stance, going beyond the moment of publication, is *a return to political action*, drawing from the historical traditions of a more interventionist journalism in Mexico.

### ***-A Production for Social Justice***

A political leverage has given way to a new understanding of what IJ can be, and they have achieved this collectively — giving political education and affecting their investigative practice.

First, in the midst of dangerous conditions, educating almost came as a natural move. Workshops were engineered in order to respond to the demands of the media industry, but also as a way to prepare for an increasingly violent environment within which news was to be reported. These short courses on a diverse range of subjects such as victims of violence coverage and database management, amongst others, were an example of organisation by journalists who aimed to transform their working conditions, as well as the nature of the stories they published in the media outlets they worked for. Nonetheless, these workshops soon digressed into something else. According to some of the interviewees, during the training, issues such as labour conditions and political education were brought up and developed into a place where ideas about their profession and their country were discussed, even imagining a different way of doing things created by themselves (Giroux, 1988; Freire, 1968 ed. 2005).

F1, for instance, recognises that their discussions about what journalism is were also a sort of “political formation”. She said this political education was an unconscious result of their workshops but at the same time there was a very intentional effort to consider and do something about the kind of profession and country they were in. Unwittingly or not, this “political formation” touched upon their practice, their guild association, the impact of their work on the world, and informed their actions, from publishing daily news, to advocacy work and in-depth investigations. In fact, the creation of this pedagogical space from which journalism and the world can be discussed has been one of the peak achievements according to some of the interviewees, where their political beings could exist:

“I have always been very politicised (muy grilla) and very political. But I had never found before that intersection between my inclination for politics

and my passion for journalism, that is to say that I had always been forced to keep those two things apart from each other — there was a part of me that read about politics, that opined on politics, I voted with political awareness, and that part of me also had its own political affections; but there was another part of me that was doing journalism, which was always suppressing all those political things from coming up. That’s over now, absolutely” (Interviewee F1).

Secondly, and elaborating on the idea of investigative practice as a political action, PdP members were very aware of the agenda they were upholding in order to extricate themselves from the clientelist relationship with power. Furthermore, according to one interviewee, they wanted to go beyond the idea of journalism as a “public service” and were looking for a journalism for “social justice” instead:

“You know that there has always been this conception in Mexico of a journalism linked to power; journalism, not as part of the checks and balances (in a democracy), but as part of the cohort of power. And somehow, those who have tried to do journalism in a different way like us [...] not so much in the idea of a public service, but rather with an idea of **social justice**” (Interviewee F1).

In a sense, some aspects of journalism for peace (Hackett, 2006; 2012) and of social journalism Cytrynblum (2004) were present in the ideas that the most senior interviewees at PdP put forward when they started to organise themselves as a group. But this required a transformation in two directions — on the one hand, it was concerned with changing the working conditions under which journalists were reporting the stories; and on the other, transforming the reality

they were living in. By changing themselves, they believed they would be in a better position to change the conditions of the people they talked about in their stories. A “social justice” approach, as the interviewee put it, implies a more interventionist, socially committed way of doing journalism, relating also to some of the most radical and, therefore, usually regarded as partisan understandings of journalism, like that of Magón or the novel idea of “rebel journalism” (Ramsammy, 2016).

It is in this way that journalism for “social justice” was strategic purposeful reporting, with the aim to achieve political impact and a change in society. In short, the emergence of a new political subjectivity, in the sense that Laclau (1990) would use it to name that moment of returning to the subject (as human). In PdP’s case, this meant acting politically by re-humanising the discourse in contemporary Mexico’s conjuncture. An awakening of their political subjectivity went back and forth between the journalists and the people they were reporting on. After being restrained by the ideology of a supposedly objective, detached way of investigating devoid of a conscious political character, those who revolved around PdP’s activities developed a more interventionist role. Being aware of their place in spaces of violence, they tried to voice the stories about those who were suffering, actively “reporting human rights abuses because one wants those abuses to stop”, as one of the interviewees would tell me (Interviewee F3, 2019). This awakening came from a previously cold, dehumanised narrative on the victims, deliberately objectivised to separate the rising conflict from its human suffering in Mexico. When violence in the country escalated, PdP inverted the equation of sourcing, but by doing so they also inverted the equation of objectivation of the national struggle against “the criminals” in order to provide it with a face, a place of existence, and its bonds with other humans. That is why

the surge of PdP's political subjectivity was not only their own subjectivity, but also those they were reporting on.

A purposeful, different approach is prevalent in many other PdP members who departed from recording verbatim politician's statements and started to dig deeper, around the communities, with the families, and on the ground. This shift was noticeable not only in terms of content, but also aesthetically. One of the interviewees, a photographer with a long career in reporting violence, gave me some insight as to how an epistemological turn questioning the hegemonic narrative had to aesthetically run in a counterflow against the prevalent conventions of the uses of the image. She, utterly disenchanted with the very graphic aesthetics of national media depicting torn human bodies, resorted to a different kind of semiotic code to represent the humans in the story (Interviewee BD6, 2019).

Another instance is interviewee C5, a journalist from the north of Mexico, who told me about certain incidents in which he would go beyond the supposedly sole journalism's aim of informing the public. In the most conspicuous example, he talked about how he found and shared information on mass graves, some of which was administered by the state as well as others illegally set up by violent groups:

"I went to 14 graveyards, we found awful things there and I registered everything with a photographer, we registered and we took pictures here and there. And I am sure that that material will be useful for other instances, it's going to be useful for the search groups (mass graves). I shared this information with them before I published because it is important that they know [...]. (I went) asking each one of the civil servants

in charge of it, 'hey, where are they and how do you know they are here?'.  
In that respect, they should have been ahead of me (but they didn't), [...] I had to do all that recreation myself" (Interviewee C5).

To follow along the line of meaningful aesthetics, this journalist showed me one of the pictures he was able to take from a mass grave he found in Sinaloa and that he then shared with NGOs looking for missing people. If one is to judge that picture according to given assumptions of what journalism is, its professional ideology says it "should be" in the twentieth century, it is the least newsworthy picture — half of the image shows a brown mound of ground covered with dry turf, the rest depicts a small red chalet with white window frames surrounded by some trees at the back. No blood, no bodies, no spectacle. And yet, it is the discovery of missing people that were buried below that mound of ground, whose identities had been obliterated by the authorities (whether consciously or not) for years. At the time he shared this image with me he was in the process of contacting NGOs and families so they could ask the local government to conduct a DNA test with the hope of identifying their missing relatives. It is this approach to people and human struggle, rather than the professionalism of the business of information, that had informed his decision to transgress the ideological assumptions of his profession.

In this case the image has been re-appropriated as both a meaningful form of communication and as forensic evidence. This re-appropriation is a political intervention in the sea of endless imagery on the internet as well as an act of defiance against the hegemonic discourse on violence in Mexico. This interviewee has transgressed the conventions of journalistic practice because his aim was beyond getting the truth and publish it, as many journalistic manuals suggest is where the role of journalism ends in liberal democracies (Waisbord,

2000; Santoro, 2004; Lee-Hunter & UNESCO, 2012). He has committed the “heresy” of getting involved in the story, even more — he became politically involved because he wants to find the remains, he wants the families to find their missing relatives, and he wants the authorities to modify the registers. He seeks social change, having an impact on the way public issues have been dealt with — even at the expense of the story’s newsworthiness. But in committing this “heresy” within the media realm, he has defied the “cult of the visual” — to use Muhlmann’s (2007) words to describe journalists’ fascination with reporting only what can be seen — and has re-signified an image’s value allocating it to the transformation of human lives. This position, catalysed by a political decision, is key to upholding the *humanitarian truth production* dimension that I propose as part of a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico.

### **-Conclusions**

The way PdP was formed and shaped responds to both ideas of what journalism should be and to specific conditions its members were experiencing at the time. In a way, the conditions described above (political and economic constraints, media models, and conflict) describe the space PdP members found so unbearable to inhabit that they set out to a different destination. Political and economic conditions, as lived in legacy media by those journalists, had a long history of struggles and difficulties in delivering on all the promises the press was supposed to deliver along with the upgrading of skills. But these problems were then exacerbated by an armed conflict which made PdP mobilise and adapt their activities as a collective. Eventually, it ended up changing their own political identity, transitioning them from supposedly impartial reporters providing the

news, to active advocates for the pacification of the country and the end of attacks on journalists.

This idealisation of a different journalism was informed by ideas of collaboration and mutual support, which forged stronger bonds while blurring the lines between the journalist/professional and the person/human. Indeed, these ideas of collaboration and solidarity at the level of personal life and daily living would enable further political action and a different approach in their investigative practice.

There were a number of actions during that process of formation that were, in fact, strategically planned and carried out with clear political objectives. Perhaps one of the most salient actions was that of organising and joining protests against attacks on the press, leading the group to a more interventionist understanding of their role as journalists. This moment of self-recognition is another moment of political reckoning. Even if it is noted that their legal incorporation as an NGO was more or less motivated by the ability to receive international funds, PdP as an organisation has used those funds to act on the Mexican political stage, lobbying, campaigning, and educating other journalists.

In short, PdP's counterstrategies show how a framework for investigative practice in Mexico can go against competitiveness and depersonalisation of journalists in neoliberal times by adopting a radical collaborative ethos for political transformation. This collaboration should not only be at the professional level, but also at the personal level of life experience in community — towards a *communitarian solidarity* that enables *political action* and a *humanitarian truth production*.

Nonetheless, the space PdP created to co-inhabit was not completely free from the neoliberal practices of legacy media. Furthermore, institutionalisation and the enabling powers of an NGO came at a cost. By accepting the limits of the Mexican legislation for NGOs, PdP closed the door for their participation in debates around working conditions and media ownership which are at the core of the hindrances of IJ in Mexico. The persistence of those practices and the struggles to combat them will be the focus of the next chapter.

## ***Chapter 5 The prevailing spirit of neoliberal practices of legacy media in PdP***

### ***-Introduction***

In the last chapter, I explained how Periodistas de a Pie (PdP) reacted to the crass effects of neoliberalism in their workplace with radical practices of collaboration, political action, and a production aimed at social justice. Conversely, this chapter addresses the different ways in which PdP still carries and preserves legacy media practices and ideology in neoliberal times. These pervasive characteristics might respond to strong “occupational ideology” positions (Golding & Elliot, 1979) embedded in the model of a corporate press and its political and economic conditions, as described in the first part of this thesis, but they also respond to the specific legal constitution and the funding model PdP chose when becoming a “Civil Association” (a legal figure in Mexican law that resembles an NGO), serving the purpose of maintaining the organisation’s running, rather than facilitating the pursuit of political goals. These continuities are compared to the concerns other scholars have raised on international foundations funding journalism (Pickard, 2006), which is similar to the relationship between journalists and funders, and that of journalists and media owners in legacy media (Benson, 2016; Wright et al, 2017), and even shaping the objectives of what we call journalism (Wright et al, 2019).

Furthermore, journalists interviewed for this thesis said they knew that poor labour conditions were one of the key reasons for journalists’ vulnerability in Mexico, but at the same time they decided not to tackle this issue, neither in their public statements nor in getting involved in the labour of the media corporations their peers were struggling with.

In a similar way, even if PdP has been so far able to avoid securing funds from publicity contracts in Mexico, international philanthropy has been, for them, both a lifesaver and a constraint. On the one hand, some PdP members said that they were “hunting” resources in order to be able to investigate the stories they were interested in; but more senior members have acknowledged that funders have, intentionally or not, driven the agenda they have been covering (e.g. immigration). Also, and perhaps more worryingly, they have stated that funders require them to avoid any kind of political participation, or at least that is what some PdP members have assumed, which may be the reason why PdP decided not to become involved in any kind of guild-like activities that looked to be like a journalists’ union.

The problem of political participation has, not only an immediate effect in the way they see their own practice and the kind of activities they get involved in apart from publication, but it is publication itself that might be affected by the severing of PdP members as political beings. This understanding of journalism as an objective, detached activity by legal constraints and funders, poses a hurdle for a more committed type of reporting that might take PdP closer to the kind of journalism they wanted to depart from.

Thus, this chapter first explains how PdP opted for an institutional life, after which there is a section on the struggle of choosing to operate under an NGO model, and then the chapter moves into making a critique of the implications for PdP members — not addressing labour issues, and finally the curtailing of political participation. All of these sections will help me raise some concerns that need to be borne in mind when creating a framework of transformative investigations in Mexico if it is to truly do away with neoliberal ideology.

### ***-PdP's Coming of Age as an NGO***

The story of PdP institutionalisation is somewhat convoluted. It did not start out with the concrete aim of becoming a regular meeting group with a name, although that did happen quite early, in 2007. As the frontal war on drugs was triggered, and as these journalists grew frustrated with the traditional media they worked for, the name “Periodistas de a Pie” provided a means by which to differentiate themselves from others. They did not plan it like that, but their meetings to discuss their texts and their own concerns about Mexican journalism was mainly composed by women, either because they felt left behind of the newsrooms vis a vis their male counterparts, or because the “social beat” (i.e. issues on poverty, education, social movements) they covered was treated as a minor section in the newspaper. But their discontent and the taking of action corresponds with what some have identified as a more conspicuous role of women in Mexican journalism and public life (García, 2012; De Frutos García, 2016; Coronel-Cabanillas & Gastélum-Escalante, 2016).

The characterisation of a journalist “on foot” means much more than just those who walk, which is similar to the American concept of a “shoe-leather journalist” (which in Anglo-American newsrooms means going to places to speak to people, rather than sitting at a desk) (Pavlik, 2000). Of course, that method of relating to people existed, but in Spanish, “de a pie” also means someone who belongs to the common class, not to the elites or to the group of people who try to please them. In journalism, this also means a journalist who is like those they report on, unlike reporters who are close to power, receiving “chayotes”. The name also marked a difference between top-rank editors or columnists who have stopped doing reporting on the ground. Thus, by adopting this name, PdP was stating that they were close to the people and differentiated themselves from

those they considered to be part of a press that is close to power. However, this identification was still a relatively informal nomenclature to label themselves and to be identified among other journalism projects. As more journalists approached, either looking for training or for protection against threats, further legal institutionalisation had to be planned.

It was not until 2010, that PdP was incorporated as an NGO, complying with the requirements of the Mexican legal system for an “Asociación Civil” (a Civil Association which is equivalent to a charity in the UK). PdP members have attempted to provide a number of reasons why they took this step; but there are two main conflicting reasons why they decided to become an “Asociación Civil”. The first reason given as to why they decided to become an NGO is that, according to some interviewees, in doing so they would be entitled to advocate for the protection of journalists and they were doing it as a “political definition”:

“In one meeting, at F2’s place, we decided and we clearly said it, that we were going to go on and deal with the defence of journalists, which was something we had not done before. And very clearly, BD3 said, ‘deciding whether or not dealing with it is a political definition.’ And after that definition we decided to incorporate an ‘Asociación Civil’” (Interviewee BD1).

However, becoming an NGO would also mark them as “activists”, a term that is utterly despised by all kinds of reporters in Mexico, usually associating them with militant, propagandistic press (Marín in Gómez, 2020). Here we can see some of the opposition they faced when the idea of becoming an NGO was put onto the table:

“This was a very present discussion when the idea of incorporating the NGO took form. And it was not something relevant for us at the compact core of the organisation, but it was so for some colleagues who were working for traditional media, they were still there, and they were really afraid of anything that resembled anything close to a union. [...] We had that pressure on us, that they were asking to establish the association limits very clearly, as well as its action limits. And on one occasion there was a protest [...], and someone said [...], ‘no, we shouldn’t go, we cannot mix up militancy and activism with journalism,’” (Interviewee F5).

So, why then would PDP decide to institutionalise itself, running the risk of being labelled as an activist organisation? The second reason accepted by some of the interviewees is that becoming an “Asociación Civil” would allow them to receive donations from national and international aid. Before being legally incorporated as an NGO, PdP was receiving some financial aid via Article 19, which served as an umbrella to receive donations in PdP’s name. Actually, they had been in contact with international funders from the very beginning (F3, 2019), so it is not surprising that at some point they would have to pave the way for receiving those funds by themselves:

“It was precisely to be able to have some funds to do some things, because it was not the same thing any more than when we collected some funds between us, had a coffee on Saturdays at the PdP training, or when F6 taught us how to use databases in a Starbucks [...]. So, we had to understand that one step forward was having the incorporation (as an NGO), which is not only because of the resources (to do investigations), it was having a small office [...], with a desk, a telephone line, someone working part-time” (Interviewee BD1).

Even if she said that it was not only to get resources for its operation, this was the step that has enabled PdP to function throughout the years, by receiving funds from many different sources from Fundación Angélica, to Open Society, Ford Foundation, McArthur Foundation, amongst others. Being an “Asociación Civil” has been a financial enabler but also a constraint in many respects, as it will be seen in the following sections.

### ***-The Struggle to Adopt the NGO Model for Funding***

For this study, the interviews I conducted show some particularities on the interpersonal and professional dynamics between PdP members and other journalists they collaborate with in other states of Mexico — there is constant interaction between journalists collaborating with PdP, while at the same time they work for local governments and multiple NGOs.

There is plenty of theoretical material on the relationship between journalists and NGOs or advocacy groups (Cottle & Nolan, 2007; Fenton, 2010; Comfort & Blankenship, 2018). Specifically, on the subject of how these two worlds shape each other, Wright (2014) has painstakingly explored the state of “humanitarian journalism” in African news outlets, analysing the nuances and negotiations on the reporting of humanitarian help conducted by charity organisations in countries facing violence, corruption scandals, and serious human violations. One of the most striking conclusions, which is relevant to this chapter, is how NGOs became major providers of information, influencing the agenda of media organisations and bypassing verification processes.

At PdP, the analysis gets more complex because PdP has worked with many NGOs to undertake investigations in subjects such as migration, enforced

disappearance, discrimination, and so on, but it has also become an NGO itself, chiefly because of the potential for funding their journalistic projects. This decision could have been in line with international trends in IJ (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014), resolving some of the operative challenges the nascent organisation was facing when collaborating with journalists and organisations around the country, but it also brought its own particular problems in Mexico.

All of these interactions are at play when one tries to explain the complexities in which PdP both works with and operates as an NGO. But why, we can ask, is it that PdP has managed to become an NGO in spite of all the resistance to a more interventionist role for journalism in Mexico in neoliberal times? The answer can in part be found in the role of funders. On the particular question of how journalism across the world has been funded by international foundations, it is worth noting Wright, Scott, and Bunce's (2019) assertions about the limits of what is considered journalism and how NGOs may have been shaping these limits, pushing journalists to adopt a more interventionist, social justice approach. Although they do not consider it to be good or bad, how funding shapes the nature of a journalistic organisation is relevant for the case of PdP and for this research as a whole. More specific attempts in Latin America have been carried out by Waisbord (2011) and McPherson (2014; 2016); it is McPherson (2016, p. 339) who claimed, in the specific case of Mexico, that NGOs provide "a verification subsidy for target audiences, in that these audiences can assume that the media has undertaken an evaluation of the source's credibility on their behalf". However, little has been said about how international funders have shaped the role of Mexican journalism.

PdP's funding model can be divided into three main stages over its twelve years of existence, each with particular advantages and questionable threats,

both to the operation of the organisation as a whole and also for PdP members. The first stage during the early years was based on a sort of cooperative, even before the group's formalisation in 2007 in which they organised meetings and workshops by collecting voluntary funds for minor operational requirements. As PdP activities became more demanding, and in what was the second stage, PdP started to receive donations that increased as they launched their legal incorporation process as an NGO. Doing so made a difference to the amount of resources they received and enabled them to have a more formal role in training, protecting journalists, and funding some investigations — to both positive and negative effect. This was the funding model that became increasingly common across the continent, possibly following the trend started by ProPublica in the USA (Carvajal et al, 2012), and having large international foundations' aid as their main source of income (e.g. Open Society, Ford Foundation, and so on) (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014)). The third stage, a work in progress, relates to “monetising” PdP's news website, Pie de Página.

But let me focus on the second stage, because receiving funds from international foundations such as an NGO is PdP's main source of income, according to the interviews with PdP's Board of Directors. Furthermore, international foundation funding has had an impact on PdP's operation and the final work they get to publish — which is why it is so important to discuss the implications of this decision. It all started with a few donations which they used for daily operations, and once they could accept donations independently, they sought projects they could fund with the help of those international foundations. According to some interviewees, PdP started to look for what is called “becas” (grants) for specific projects. At least three interviewees acknowledged that, for instance, funders specifically supported migration stories or training about

reporting issues related to that theme: “We had specific funding to cover migration” (Interviewee F2, 2019).

Just as that founding member said, a board of directors member confirmed that PdP had to find a way to fit into the funders’ agenda:

“This was very important because Open Society Foundation has many areas, some of them do not have any contact with each other, so this (first funding) was not from the freedom of expression office, it was from the migration area, [...] and they were interested in tackling the issue on migrants. [...] And this became a little newspaper project and the other thing was a micro website with investigations on migration” (Interviewee BD1).

What this interviewee is saying is crucial because it means that what PdP was looking for was funding from international aid and Open Society initially denied it from the budget that their organisation releases to causes that champion freedom of expression (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014; Benson, 2018; Wright et al, 2019). However, because there was a budget available to tackle issues related to migration, PdP accepted this funding under the condition that they could produce a newspaper that migrants could read while crossing Mexico with information they might find useful on their way to the US. Here the question arises about whether PdP and Open Society’s agendas were aligned, or if PdP acquiesced to follow an agenda constructed from an office in London with, most probably, a global approach to migration. This is not necessarily an ethically questionable association, but it does show how funders using these models are still in a position to privilege or limit investigations on certain topics, which is something scholars such as Pickard (2016) and Wright et al (2017) have been

warning about, pointing out how ownership of the media and the funders themselves do matter in terms of the final journalistic products. It also appears to contradict some of the further research in which Wright, Scott and Bunce (2019) have talked about funders' controls to guarantee independence, but it very well may be because those controls are of recent creation that might explain this ambivalence.

Another instance of this occurred with poverty or racial discrimination some years later once PdP started to gain a name in Latin American IJ. A Board of Directors member said, of the situations in which this took place:

“We now have funding from the Kellogg Foundation [...], we also have (funding) from Ford [...]. And they accepted investigations, or in-depth stories. I mean, it is not like an NGO project carrying out workshops or creating educative materials, or promoting non-discrimination [...]; what we do here is all that, but through pieces of journalism, which also must maintain independence, I mean, the outcome is a journalistic investigation that does not necessarily say what a funder wants, which I think is where the dilemma lies most times and why many others don't want to give any money for that. Because if it is about promoting certain things and in the end that does not promote the thing they are paying for, they could end up saying, 'what happened there?' But that is the same problem you've got with official advertising — one cannot be bound to say flattering things just because they are paying” (Interviewee BD2).

This interviewee was very aware of how some of these international funders were headhunting a journalistic endeavour that is able to produce work of good quality and with the potential to reach out to PdP's kind of public. It is also worth

noting that she acknowledged the risk of accepting this funding, but she does not seem to notice that it was the foundations who were dictating the agenda of what to investigate.

In a less critical way, some other interviewees defended the argument that it was not PdP adapting to the funders' agenda, but a matter of common interests. However, the power to influence and decide what topics can or cannot be reported does exist and leaves many questions open, even among PdP founders:

“International funders’ priorities, and this is not a secret to anyone who is familiar with this model, can disrupt the themes your organisation covers, or what has priority and how you give priority (to those themes). But I believe that, and something I very much like seeing at PdP is this consistency on the themes and the search for innovation” (Interviewee F2).

One of the interviewees, who is a member of the Board of Directors, advised me that PdP are thinking about exploring different funding models, from crowdsourcing to advertising. When asked about these plans, she said these talks are at a very early stage, so she would not be able to provide more details. Nevertheless, she said they are aware of the risks this move would imply and they are trying to preserve editorial independence. However, PdP members' perception of funders meddling in their agenda is still ambivalent. Some deny the fact that funders can drive the stories they report, whereas at least three interviewees expressed some concerns about it. Although, as the literature shows, foundations such as Open Society and Ford are at pains to avoid editorial interference to the point where this very same spirit is shaping the level of commitment in journalism, the interviews for this thesis show how PdP did make

their agenda concur with that of the funders. What was first, the agenda or the funder, is still not very clear, but it is, indeed, evidence of how journalistic organisations and their identities can be shaped by international funders.

For instance, six interviewees mentioned the case of Kellogg Foundation as one of the most successful experiences, with stories on inequality and great journalistic quality. However, they were not very critical about the way in which this grant was given to them, where the competition for resources with other organisations such as Animal Político, a fresh journalistic web-based project that has published some of the most relevant investigations in Mexico during President Peña Nieto's presidency, was salient (Roldán et al, 2018). This is a PdP Board of Directors' account of how they entered into competition to secure the money:

“The stories we have on inequality have been because of that, we won the prize of the contest (called) “Discrimination Faces”; (at the time), Kellogg was funding Animal Político for their website on inequality, but they won the second place. (I suppose) that the lady who was working for Kellogg saw who had won first place and she called me, and she said, ‘We want something like this’” (Interviewee BD2).

From this interview excerpt, it is impossible to assume that Animal Político stopped receiving funds from Kellogg after they chose PdP for “Discrimination Faces”. However, we can fairly state that resources are not unlimited for these organisations, and if they have to choose between different projects, they probably have left some out. Which get chosen and which do not seems to depend on the funders, and even if it was not completely arbitrary, it was based on who can provide stories with more potential to win prizes.

Some shifts in how PdP secures funds have been more important than others within a decade of existence. In any case, international funds have enabled PdP to operate and grow throughout most of its institutionalised history, challenging both colleagues' premonitions and scholars' concerns (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014; Benson, 2016). However, this model is not completely free from a dynamic in which the investigations' agenda is driven by those funding it and competition is still present in the "hunt" for funds. Of course, this is not new, and it is not something unique to media/journalism production; but in the case of journalism, international funding had appeared as an alternative to traditional media outlets which were heavily dependent upon, and influenced by, advertisers operating under a market based economy in which information had a double function, to inform and to sell advertising space (Wright et al, 2017). That is why finding a prevalent funder influencing PdP's agenda and competition for funds should be viewed with alarm. This kind of influence has been borne in mind by funders around the world, according to Scott (2019); moreover, it is not clear if all international donors are taking the same precautions to avoid it and, as he has rightly pointed out, there are few channels through which to hold these foundations to account.

A framework for transformative investigations should take into account these risks in contemporary Mexico, but this is also true for other places in the Global South— journalism is being funded by international donors and the fight for resources is no longer just for advertising, but also in the bags of international philanthropy. Rejecting all international funding and all sorts of advertising altogether would be a bad idea given the incipient media independency in Mexico, but the urgent task is to be aware of the active political role journalism can have, and to engineer mechanisms to avoid being constrained by very

powerful sources of income, in order to escape from the old constraints inherited from market-driven media — public service *vis a vis* profitability (Curran et al, 2009; Curran, 2011; Wright, 2014) and clientelism (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; De Albuquerque, 2013; Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). In fact, this also notes the problem Pickard (2019) has identified as key if we ever intend to reinvent journalism — a democratic ownership of journalistic platforms is a precondition for journalism that serves the people, not the business.

### ***-Not Addressing Labour Issues***

PdP was created because they wanted to depart from current practice to a new destination for journalism and their investigations. But was this new place really a haven for IJ, safe from the appalling labour conditions and constraints that they abhorred?

As previously stated, working conditions is one of the first and foremost perils journalists face in Mexico, and by extension for IJ. In a sense, once the personal financial security flank is let down, the danger level of all other threats rises (CIMAC, 2008; Bravo, 2019). This is part of the equation Del Palacio (2015b) has put forward when analysing violence on reporters in Veracruz, one of the most dangerous states in Mexico for journalists, according to which journalists in poor employment conditions are more likely to be controlled, and those who do not conform are more susceptible to attack. Such lack of defence responds to the political-economic conditions in which media organisations operate in Mexico, as it was addressed in Chapter 2 of this thesis. But in Mexico,

labour conditions in media organisations at large are not addressed in a guild-like manner precisely because of the history of unionism in Mexico<sup>1</sup>.

Although a history of unionism in Mexican journalism is not available from previous literature, the interviewees made various references to the past to justify why there was a reluctance to form a union. This fear was explained by one of the most senior interviewees who had formerly been the leader of a newspaper union. His perception on this was that guild associations in the media were not vastly different from Mexican unions at large — co-opted by the government to please media owners and achieving favourable coverage. Among those mentioned were the Sindicato Nacional de Redactores de la Prensa and its leader Rogaciano Méndez, and the Club de Periodistas — two organisations that are closer to the government and the media owners' interests than to journalists

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<sup>1</sup> A well-known example of the union's bad reputation comes from the term "sindicalismo charro", which was a method by which the PRI controlled social movements and kept corporation owners' anger at bay, and has given a bad name to all kinds of workers' associations in Mexico. "Sindicalismo charro" consisted of a co-opted union leadership operating under a clientelist dynamic with both political and economic power, and named after Jesús Díaz de León, the railroad workers' union leader in the 1960s and whose nickname name was "el Charro" (Krauze, 1997 ed. 2013). The sublimation of this dynamic was reached when numerous unions related to specific industries were subsumed within large union federations such as the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) and the Confederación Revolucionaria de Obreros y Campesinos (CROC), and loyal to the party in power, then the PRI. "El Charro" is the archetype of more recent union leaders, including Elba Esther Gordillo (teachers' union), or Carlos Romer Deschapms (Pemex); both with infamous records of accumulation of wealth in exchange for political support to the group in power. Negotiations between those confederations, the government, and company owners usually ended up with a marginal gain for the workers, little costs for companies, and a grotesque union leaders' enrichment, oiling the wheels of the PRI's regime, or what Trejo Delarbre (1990) has described as "corporativismo". Thus, unionism in Mexico was regarded as part of a system letting workers down and as a way for union leaders to gain political and economic power (Casar, 1991). With the introduction of neoliberal economic measures, just a few unions kept a distance from the government and had the support of their grassroot base. Following the dominant economic block, Mexican governments privileged privatisation of national companies and weakened the unions' leverage, perhaps using the real corruption within some of those organisations as an excuse to undermine their legitimacy. The ultimate and most dramatic case at the inception of PdP, was that of the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (SME) led by Martín Esparza which was finally crushed during a PAN's government in 2009 by president Felipe Calderon, under the argument that they had far too many benefits as workers which was leading the Luz y Fuerza Company to go bankrupt. This episode exemplifies the typical view of unions in Mexico that neoliberal governments were trying to advance, labelling them as a group of people benefiting themselves and not the workers, advocating for ludicrous demands that lead businesses down the road to bankruptcy (IMCINE, 2017). The same view was present amongst journalists at the time.

(Fuentes-Berain, 2001). In other words, the overarching sentiment in Mexico towards unions is unfavourable, and this is exacerbated in the media industry by an interest in preserving a certain agenda to protect those in power. This interviewee has a personal story related to the union at La Jornada, which explains why that recent past informed PdP's decision not to form a guild association:

“At some point, in the 70s, the Sindicato Nacional de Redactores de la Prensa surged, but it was quickly captured as well. It exists, it is very well known and [...] it has a contract with AFP, which is curious. There is this guy called Rogaciano (Méndez González), who is cacique, he's been there for 50 years or something (less than 30 years in fact). What I mean is that the fight for labour rights in the press was almost non-existent, because a journalist was not considered a manual worker handling screws, a journalist was almost an intellectual, someone who had to feel well compensated when he saw his by-line in the paper, doing something for the society to be improved. [...] In fact La Jornada was the avant-garde in that respect, at Excélsior there was a cooperative, at Unomasuno there was a very informal union, but when Payán and Carmen Lira go and found La Jornada, from the very beginning there was the idea of having a union representing both manual workers and journalists, in other words, a newspaper where everyone was equal. That was how the union was born at La Jornada, the Sitrajour (Sindicato de Trabajadores de La Jornada), supported by Carlos Payán (founder and director), who said, ‘come on, dudes, organise yourselves,” Interviewee BD3.

Although there is a romanticised view on La Jornada's union, this interviewee's point of view on unionism in Mexico was similar to that of other

interviewees — they believe most of these workers' groups are captured or co-opted by the media owners or by the clientelist organisations subservient to the old PRI system. Evidence of distrust towards unions can be found in the interviewees recalling how a reluctance to union formation was particularly acute among those attending early PdP meetings in the late 2000s: “We made very clear that we didn't want to form a union” (Interviewee F1, 2018). They were sceptical about a journalist union because of its long history of pro-government practices, but at the same time, one of the interviewees mentions how they were also afraid of losing their jobs had the media companies they worked for learned that they were in the process of creating a guildlike group of journalists organisation:

“El Universal sacked all those who tried to unionise, [...] there was an attempt to create a union there and all those who took part in the conversations were immediately fired. X (name of a female reporter), a lot of people, colleagues, only because they had these conversations, they sacked them. We are talking about a great fear in those who worked there (and were part of PdP's first meetings),” Interviewee F5.

There are two conflicting ideas coming out of the collected data when it comes to explaining the reasons why there is a reluctance to form a union. On the one hand, some saw them as useless for the workers, but others feared losing their jobs because media owners regarded them as dangerous for the companies. Perhaps the solution to this apparent contradiction is that unions were captured and tolerated by the state to give the long-desired appearance of a democratic regime, which at some point served the incumbent government and media companies. But any new attempt to form a union that threatened this status quo was fiercely opposed with media owners preventing a real opposition to the

precarity in workplaces, bringing back the historical argument of union inefficiency whenever it was necessary to instil fear among workers, and effectively firing those journalists who dared to form an organisation in spite of this fear. The formula proved very efficient since PdP remained faithful to the promise of never forming a union in spite of the rise of the greatest threat journalists may experience while doing their job — physical violence. But the history of labour struggles in Mexican media, and how it has affected guild formation to this day, does not have a simple explanation.

PdP has strongly criticised the media they used to work for, recognising that a different approach was needed. However, PdP has taken decisions that preserve some of those poor labour conditions — most of which have been conscious, such as the decision not to form any kind of union or guild association; other decisions were initially made unwittingly, such as the influence of funders on their reporting agenda; and, others still were kept quiet, such as the fact that some reporters collaborated with them without getting paid — sometimes out of pure sacrificial labour in the name of a superior goal which is, to a certain extent, what some have called free or precarious labour in creative industries (McRobbie, 2016; Fast et al, 2016).

In taking the decision not to form any kind of union, PdP were very much aware of the reasons underpinning that decision and it seems that they all agree on the point that adopting the label of a union was more prejudicial than helpful because of the bad reputation these organisations had in Mexico. It was “very clear” (BD3, 2019), in the words of one of the interviewees, that they were not going to take that route.

Some agree that they were completely frightened by the possibility of losing their jobs, even at a stage when PdP was already incorporated as an NGO:

“We were afraid of losing our jobs and being blacklisted<sup>2</sup>, so no one else in the media would hire us [...], if you tried to organise something no one would hire you [...], that is a sort of straitjacket preventing journalists’ organisation, preventing them from speaking out their opinion, from thinking [...]. As a political actor, as a social actor, and someone with rights you were completely nullified, you were merely a fucking employee” (Interviewee F1).

In short, the decision not to address problems with labour conditions was explained by two reasons at least — bad union reputation, and the fear of losing their jobs in the traditional media they used to work for. Soon after the formation of PdP, in 2010, the situation for many journalists collaborating in different investigations and attending workshops organised by PdP, was mixed. Some were still working for newspapers, radio stations, and other local media, while at the same time trying to form collaboration bonds within PdP’s network. Thus, a great degree of personal economic uncertainty explains why the fear of losing jobs was so acute.

Much of the work that has been done at PdP was in a volunteer capacity where journalists donated their time, and sometimes even their money, to organise workshops and pay for speakers’ meals and accommodation. “It was about people willing to dedicate (donate) their weekends” (Interviewee F6, 2019), one journalist said when talking about the meetings and activities they did at the

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<sup>2</sup> Although there is no evidence of a blacklist in any official document, there are examples in which public officials were asking media outlets to specifically fire critical journalists, calling them by name (Leñero, 1978 ed. 2012; Torre, 2015; Huerta et al, 2015).

time. As time passed, PdP members started to move into freelancing, which for some meant having more free time to volunteer for the organisation. For one of the founders, the idea of getting paid for the work they were doing never really crossed their mind:

“X (a female colleague) and I never accepted a payment for what we did at PdP, we used to say that it was for free because we wanted to be able to work still (in the media industry)” (Interviewee F3).

In 2010, PdP received the first 5,000-dollar donation from Angelica Foundation (Interviewee BD1, 2019). This meant they were able to rent an office and hire assistants. Even this bore the mark of austerity their funders had left in the organisation under the argument that the journalists were donating their work for a new project and a bigger cause:

“(At the beginning) no one made a living from the organisation because it was somewhat of a condition — not making a living out of PdP. Everyone had another job, the organisation’s money was for the organisation, and we did hire people to do stuff, but it was not for permanent salaries; the idea that everything would have to be spent on salaries was absurd to us” (Interviewee F1).

Such an attitude of self-sacrifice and donation of time and work corresponds to a high ideal of the role of journalism in society which resembles the kind of sacrificial labour some workers are willing to undertake for a so-called superior goal, or for the sake of creativity, as McRobbie’s (2016) critique of affective labour in creative industries alludes to. PdP founders thought that the work they were doing for the organisation was beyond a simple job. Since it was a state of emergency for journalism, and in Mexico more so because of the conflict, the

sentiment was that of duty and commitment for a “bigger cause”. When the founders recall these conditions, they do it in a way that seems to have been liberating for them because it was for a project they believed in and which was theirs personally. However, using this rhetoric has led to big sacrifices on the part of these journalists, and even to the replication of pauperisation of labour, which was itself one of their original criticisms.

Resemblant of what many media organisations usually say about their role in a democratic society (i.e. serving the public), PdP used a similar argument to maintain poor working conditions and to making journalists believe their work to be, necessarily, sacrificial, even at the expense of their personal finances. Note, for instance, how this interviewee, one of the youngest in the organisation who has worked only for PdP throughout her professional life, refers to the work that is done in PdP as something that is usually regarded as “social work”:

“It is usually thought that the work we do does not have a cost at all, but it does; and it should be a well-paid job as any other. Even if it has an important social character and it is **social work** that may change many things, which is important for people’s lives, that doesn’t mean it does not have a cost or that it is not a job” (Interviewee BD2).

This interviewee is explaining how she now has a more critical opinion of how things were done at PdP at the beginning. But that was not always the case. When PdP started the process of institutionalisation, they replicated a model in which the people who worked for them were underpaid, or not paid at all. According to some of PdP’s collaborators interviewed for this research, they started as “becarios” (something similar to an internship for early career journalists) with the particularity that most of the time this period is extended for

months with little or no pay. At least one of these young collaborators mentioned that for some time she and three other journalists were working for free in exchange for gaining experience and free access to training:

“Much of what we were doing, mainly G, BD2, and I were working without getting paid. The advantage was that we could join the workshops for free, and that was cool because we were still studying at university; but then saying, ‘oh, we took a master class with such and such famous journalist’, that did give us a plus. You could take advantage of that. But I also remember that, almost since I joined PdP, they were trying to pay symbolic payments, according to the projects or something that had to be published” (Interviewee C4).

This does not mean that voluntary work is unethical in an organisation like PdP; however, this was not exactly stated that way but rather, it was replicating an old practice in many media organisations recruiting young, underpaid journalists as “becarios”. I know it first-hand because I also started my career as a “becario” working for a major national radio station, almost for free, for several months.

That scheme started to change later on, as the same interviewee acknowledged, and now she is paid for the work she does for PdP, although she does it as a freelancer, and that is the same scheme many, if not all, PdP members are working under. Furthermore, PdP’s Board of Directors do not have a contract granting all the rights Mexican law provides for workers, and the basis under which the workforce is employed is temporary contracts or freelancing. I was left with the impression that many PdP members believe in and practice this sacrificial work rationale to this day, since at least one of the board members

acknowledged that she is still not getting paid for the investigations she conducts. According to her testimony, some collaborators from other states are receiving funds per project, which means that they get funds and resources for a certain investigation covering just a few months of work, and sometimes just weeks, called “grants”, as she explained:

“What happens with the grants is that one ends up giving out some money as well, because they are only enough to cover some expenses. [...] And we must say, ‘what we’re looking for with these investigations [...] is having a decent living’, because it cannot give you more than that. Therefore, much of what we are looking for in our investigations is organisation’s funding, and in my particular case, I teach at a university and that helps me pay some bills for my daily living, [...] but in real terms there was nothing left for my salary.’ But if you see it from a quantitative perspective, investigating has not paid off; I mean, the most important projects, those that really give some satisfaction... we don’t get paid for them, at least that’s not my case” (Interviewee BD9).

However, sacrificial work has been receding over the years because journalists have realised that even if PdP became more institutionalised they were failing to pay their own labour force that was sustaining the operation. Members of the Board of Directors are aware of this situation and have reckoned that a sacrificial approach to sustaining the organisation is not the healthiest situation for anyone, neither for journalists nor for investigations, and ultimately, the public. They are trying to end free labour and evidence of that can be found in the case of one journalist who started at PdP working as a “becario” and is now working part-time with a salary she considers to be “fair” (digno), and “higher” if

it is compared with what traditional media outlets currently pay other journalists in Mexico.

“Q: Do you have a fair salary?”

“A: I think so, yeah. More than if I were working part-time (for another organisation), I make 10,000 pesos a month (£410 approximately) for a part-time job and working remotely. # (another organisation funding IJ) pays me much better, because I wouldn’t be able to live just from that. (But) I told a friend how much I was making at PdP, and she told me, ‘dude, people at Cuarto Oscuro are earning 8,000 pesos (£327 approximately) full-time!’” (Interviewee C4).

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that this is a part-time job and is using the legal scheme of freelancing (Interviewee C4, 2019). Paying people fair salaries is a step forward in the right direction, but the operation is under a tight budget and is still present and has an impact on PdP members to this day.

One may think that accusing PdP of undermining labour conditions would be too harsh an accusation since PdP opened the door for a disruptive, innovative way of doing journalism and protecting journalists’ integrity in a country like Mexico. However, there are still some practices from the media PdP abhorred that prevailed to the detriment of journalism as a workplace (i.e. the profession’s pauperisation; sacrificial work, freelancing and its consequential loss of labour rights, to name a few), which might have been preserved by the funding model they have chosen to operate. This does not mean that they are unaware, or that they undertake all these activities solely for profit or for pro clienteles propaganda purposes, as traditional media did, but rather, it shows the limitations of the way they fund a different kind of journalism, and also a different kind of politics.

### ***-Political Action Curtailed***

From the many repercussions that institutionalisation and choice of funding model have had for PdP, the severing of political commitment and action is perhaps one of the crudest effects that arose as a consequence of the neoliberal practices maintained by PdP. The severing of political participation under the argument for a better journalism education has been a political project in itself, following Harvey's (2007) interpretation of neoliberalism and its role in the reproduction of subjectivities. Its significance for Mexican newsrooms has been discussed in ethical and ontological terms in previous chapters. However, in the case of PdP, their political beings have dwelt amidst contradiction between their ideal objectives of social change, and the actual constraints they have imposed on themselves through the decisions they have made to keep the organisation going. In other words, their self-identification as professional journalists in Mexico is an extension of a neoliberal ideology, and not simply that, but the product of a set of strategies, tactics, and policies that create particular kind of subjects, undermining the avenues for the conception of any alternative kind of people's politics (Laclau, 1990; Read, 2009).

On the one hand, PdP founders' motivation behind creating a group of fellow journalists was that, among the many dissatisfactions with the media model they were part of, there was little room, if any at all, for political participation. As explained in Chapter 2, a political restriction was imposed on reporters in the name of an ideology where objectivity and impartial reporting was preferred in corporate newsrooms (Hughes, 2009; Márquez-Ramírez 2012). However, deep down this argument possibly unearthed other motivations; for instance, that a journalistic enterprise supposedly devoid of political intentions would serve a market driven media economy best, and in the case of Mexico, such a politically-

severed reporting would be malleable enough to fit the requirements of whomever is the incumbent ruler, corresponding to the prevalent clientelist relation to power in Mexico (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014). This was precisely what PdP wanted to change, and the urgency of that shift is felt in the way the previous interviewee spoke of political nullification. In fact, this same motivation is also behind PdP's demonstrations and "political definition" that put them in a position that was closer to activism and advocacy in order to change other journalists' working conditions and also their own. However, this political participation was still in tension with ideas of neutrality and detachment:

"In parallel to this reflection on journalism as a practice, let's say that the obvious next step was political organisation. Which I now think it had the disguise of a civil association (NGO in Mexico), we thought, 'let's create a civil association, so no one gets scared.' We were not aware, or we didn't want to accept, that what we were actually doing was an organisation... **not for political goals**, neither with the aim of creating a guild organisation, which was very important. PdP never assumed a guild representation role" (Interviewee F1).

Claiming that setting an organisation as a "political definition" while not seeking "political goals" is not solely a discursive contradiction. It reflects how PdP has had to juggle with the conflicting route and political decision they took. Because even if one of the motivations behind PdP's existence was to regain their rights to mobilise and self-organise (i.e. doing politics), they have ended up accepting conditions under which their margin for political action is curtailed in order to keep the organisation working. An instance of this can be found in its legal incorporation as an NGO, limiting the kind of activities they were able to

perform as a group, particularly with regard to guild formation and labour rights defence.

When it comes to their capacity to lobby and influence legislation, their limitation is less clear, because the interpretation of its legal statutes has changed through time. One of the Board of Director's accepted that in the past they shaped federal legislation for the protection of journalists to a certain extent, but the same person admitted that PdP's constitution now prevents it from engaging in any kind of political activity, including lobbying and campaigning:

“PdP is not going to lobby lawmakers again because it is not allowed to do so by its very constitution (incorporation documents), but it does accept recommendations, it can say for instance, ‘yes, you can get advice from such and such journalists’, in case they are going to pass a new law. PdP does take part in the discussion, but it would never be able to sit down with the legislators and elaborate a new law on advertising, for instance; that is forbidden by its constitution” (Interviewee BD8).

This is the level of contradiction that does not yet seem to be resolved. What is true is that they have decided, based on self-imposed legal constraints or the most convenient political strategy, not to engage in what is usually considered Mexico's “political work”, which is usually related to party politics. With the result being that their current legal situation precludes any kind of advocacy work apart from the defence of freedom of expression within the realm of the media, avoiding any kind of guild representation.

Just as its legal constitution has apparent constraints on PdP's political activities, in a similar way international funders (Interviewee BD3, 2019) appear to have inflicted on PdP members a certain level of ambiguity as to what they

require from them as a condition for their financial support. Some interviewees stated that international funders do not agree with associating with organisations that do “political work”, including guild formation, or any kind of representative activity related to elections, as this Board of Directors member conceded:

“I did tell my colleagues that, as a union, you have lots of limitations and risks, and furthermore, this is a character that foundations do not fund or support” (Interviewee BD3).

The same was confirmed by another member of the Board of Directors who stated that Ford Foundation had asked PdP not to appear to be opposing or favouring local governments, which apparently could be seen as supporting certain political projects:

“We wanted to talk about resistance movements against megaprojects, and what we had to do was to tackle them in a way that did not look as if there was a position against the plans of this or that (local) government” (Interviewee BD2).

However, these prohibitions are not necessarily based on contractual prohibitions. According to Scott (2018), international funders have pushed journalistic organisations closer towards a more interventionist role in the press and more prominent political involvement (e.g. The Bureau for Investigative Journalists, Verdad Abierta, IDL-Reporteros). Nevertheless, it is true that, even in places such as the UK, NGOs have long been restricted by rules on charities abstaining from taking a political position. Organisations such as Oxfam have been accused of being political for drawing attention to poverty in the UK (Independence Panel, 2015), while the Red Cross has been admonished for “meddling in politics” for speaking out about the NHS crisis (Phillips, 2017).

Interestingly in the UK there is a reluctance to define any journalism as charitable activity because all journalism is seen as political in some way. This might explain why there is the impression among PdP members that some international funders do not support political activity, while others encourage it.

Although a more psychosociological study is likely more adequate to uncover why they have this fear of upsetting funders — in a way that resembles the employer-employee relationship in Mexico's media industry — the truth is that PdP members have the impression that, politically, they cannot act as openly as they have done in the past, or to the extent they would want to, so they limit their activities within their journalistic work now.

It would be hard to say that this effect is experienced by all PdP journalists, but it is possible to point out certain traits and characteristics deriving from the severing of their political being, with ethical and ontological implications. The first point is PdP's contradiction in the way they are currently operating as a political/non-political organisation; because they said that they have assumed an activist position in order to defend journalists and transform the practice, and yet their protection scope is restrained when it comes to protecting journalists against one of the most crucial threats Mexican journalists face in the newsroom — poor labour conditions and lack of political representation.

Political constraints might also be interpolated into the character of the investigative work they publish. This might be so because PdP's constitution and some of their funders require them to avoid any political involvement. In other words, the search for objectivity and impartiality that invests PdP with an aura of a professional journalism organisation worth receiving international funds, inhibits PdP's journalism from having a more prominent political role. This means going

back into one of the myths of a professional corporate press of the twentieth century, whose only concern and aim is “informing the public” as if such action could be neutral or apolitical (Sortino, 2001a). Evidence of this can be seen where the interviewees agreed that their professional role finishes when the investigation they have been working on is finally published (Interviewee C5, 2019), and one interviewee even said she was very sceptical about journalism producing change:

“(I am interested in) understanding others’ grief. That is the way I saw it, I have always been very sceptical about the possibility that journalism could really change things, it is a kind of scepticism of protection against disappointment, because sometimes nothing happens” (Interviewee BD4).

Obviously, this is not to deny that publishing is an important political action *per se* (Hinegardner, 2009), but it should be noted how assumptions about objectivity and detached reporting are bolstered and reinforced by crucial factors such as the organisation’s constitution and those organisations funding its operations; thus, directly or indirectly reinforcing journalists’ political nullification process. Such a situation in which political rights are severed in the name of financial viability, is at the core of one of the effects a neoliberalist mentality has had on workers at large in western (and westernised) democracies; however, this situation is particularly startling for a practice like IJ that is supposed to play a crucial role in democratic life.

### **-Conclusions**

This chapter has shown how, in spite of PdP being a disruptive group of journalists for the political and economic media system in Mexico, there are still

some continuities anchored in neoliberal ideology affecting both their labour conditions and their capacity to effect political change.

The funding model they have chosen so far (heavily relying on international funding aid) has had questionable effects on their reporting agenda. Although procuring autonomy for journalists, some funders have influenced the issues PdP report, which resembles the varied conflicting relationship between media outlets and their advertisers in traditional media (Chomsky & Herman, 2010). This confirms what other scholars have said about international foundations replicating the problems of media ownership (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014; Wright, 2014; Wright et al, 2019; Pickard, 2019), directly or indirectly driving the agenda and having an impact on the news coverage agenda. Moreover, the funding model and the legal conditions within which PdP chose to operate, perhaps coupled with reminiscence of a long history of constrained political activity in traditional media, have engendered an atmosphere that limits the political leverage they had at a very early stage of their formation when they mobilised demonstrations and had a more active role in shaping laws in Congress.

Also, in spite of all the organisation work, PdP did not tackle labour issues in a thorough, profound manner. There is a persistent spirit of self-sacrifice, which provides the motivation for much of the work that is still done at PdP. Furthermore, some of the contracts with their collaborators follows the path of underemployment (e.g. freelance work, casual work). One may think that this was so because of the particular history of unionism in Mexico, but PdP has taken some conscious decisions that have restricted their actions on that front too, particularly when it came to legal incorporation and funding. These decisions have had an impact on PdP's political role, restricting its participation solely to

the publication of their stories and to defend freedom of the press, and as a result, limiting the scope of a more committed type of investigation.

Rather than contradicting the concerns that motivated the creation of PdP, these continuities show the limitations of the creation of an independent group of journalists as PdP is, that decided to “take a political definition” to change their practice and their own political being. Certain PdP members are aware of some of these issues and have been talking about tackling them through various means, for instance by painstakingly selecting funders or finding alternatives in which they can participate politically, or even joining discussions about journalists’ labour rights. It remains to be seen if these mechanisms will effectively palliate negative effects on reporting practices and uphold the original motives behind the creation of PdP — championing committed IJ, and unleashing journalists’ political voice.

A framework for transformative investigations, and all those who explore new ways of doing IJ in Mexico, would find it beneficial to learn from the experiences of PdP, raising awareness of the difficulties entailed in challenging common neoliberal practices that undermine collective efforts based on solidarity and political action.

## ***Chapter 6: Plataforma Ayotzinapa: Incipient Counter-Investigations in Mexico***

### ***-Introduction***

In this chapter I present the second case study towards the construction of a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico. To do so, I will use the project Plataforma Ayotzinapa, created by the research agency Forensic Architecture (FA).

As mentioned in Chapter 3, FA is a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, composed of architects, filmmakers, and journalists, which investigates cases of state violence using spatial representations of time and space. They do not claim to be doing Investigative Journalism (IJ), but they collaborate with investigative journalists and their methods have been influential in mainstream news media outlets in Western countries (e.g. The New York Times or Der Spiegel). “The Mexican project” as we used to call it, played a major role in informing some of the key arguments of my thesis, as I participated as one of the researchers during my time as a PhD student at Goldsmiths University. I came to FA as an investigative journalist who, at the time, happened to be doing a PhD, to work on one of the most relevant cases of human rights violations in contemporary Mexico; it was through my participation at FA that the relevance of this case to my PhD project became clear.

The platform visualises one of the most paradigmatic cases of wrongdoing in contemporary Mexico, a crime that posed serious challenges for the practice of IJ in that country. The case in itself was a watershed for contemporary politics in Mexico and is a metaphor for the multiplicity of both legal and illegal powers at play. This complexity is precisely what I found most difficult to come to terms with

while I was working at FA on the Ayotzinapa case — it is not just the multiplicity of federal state and municipal authorities, numerous criminal organisations, and their conflicting versions of the truth, it is also their overlap and interplay. Ayotzinapa is the perfect conundrum that puts our understanding of power arrangements in Mexico to the test, as well as basic professional assumptions for IJ.

The project was not presented as a journalistic product and yet it used some features of IJ with the aim of investigating, but also to enable more investigations, which is an example of the civil practice that FA's director, Eyal Weizman (2014; 2017), has called "counter-investigations". Plataforma Ayotzinapa stimulates a debate on the practice of IJ in Mexico, as it introduced an incipient attempt to do investigations from a nonconventional political position in Mexico (i.e. by taking over the means of investigation from the monopoly of the state(s); with a new understanding of forums where investigations can be deployed; and its possibility to counter discourses from positions of power). As I explain below, Weizman has adopted the media and a journalistic language to advance the kind of political interventions that FA deem relevant for its mission. In other words, FA does not define itself as journalistic in essence, but in its pursuit of social change, has decided to embark on the production of information that very often employs journalistic forms.

Thus, the question I respond to in this chapter is, what are the contributions and limits of this attempt at "counter-investigations" for the advancement of IJ in Mexico, and why does this matter today?

I have tried to respond by weighing key concepts of FA's counter-investigations as applied to the project Plataforma Ayotzinapa, having privileged

insights of the project from the interviews I held with nine members of the research team, and my own experience of working on the investigation team for at least seven of the nine months it lasted. The results of these interviews have been contrasted with the theory developed by FA's director, Eyal Weizman, and the conjuncture of IJ in Mexico, with particular ideals, assumptions, ethical expectations, as well as political and economic constraints, as explained in Chapters 1 and 2.

In other words, what is being analysed here is a concrete example of “counter-investigations” (Plataforma Ayotzinapa) and how they might contribute to enabling a new framework for investigative practice in Mexico. Questions on visual investigations in the digital age, new forms of validation and labelling of events, networked narratives, and the enabling of popular investigations, are key to exploring the potential contributions of this project for an investigative practice. The central argument of this chapter is that Plataforma Ayotzinapa advanced a radical model of “empathic solidarity” in their investigations towards the people subject to their investigation, which led to innovative ways of countering disinformation by “naming and labelling networked narratives” and disseminating it through different channels outside of the media (forums). Conversely, the limitations of this practice are tackled in the following chapter, so that Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 can be regarded as mirrored chapters that add weight to FA's undertakings and its already influential approach in the practice of IJ. Undoubtedly, FA's practice has greatly inspired key parts of the framework for transformative investigations that I propose in this thesis; from this chapter, the “naming and labelling networked narratives” is of great relevance for the first dimension of the framework that I propose on a *humanitarian truth production*, whilst the “empathic solidarity” supports the second dimension of a

*communitarian solidarity*, thus advancing a collaboration against the impact of individualism and competitiveness on Mexican newsrooms in the digital age.

### ***-Ayotzinapa: The Final Crack in Trust***

In 2014, when the events at Iguala occurred, President Enrique Peña Nieto's government had been in office for only two years, having made the old PRI party's dreams of returning to power come true after 12 years of being relegated to the backstage of Mexican politics. The new PRI government had struck major structural reforms (the overarching Pacto por México) (Elizondo, 2017), and had garnered acclamation from international media outlets for its commitment to opening Mexico's economy even more, including its long-lasting closed energy market (Webber, 2014). Evidence of the political honeymoon Peña Nieto had with mainstream media and their coverage was on the Times' front page in February 2014, with Peña Nieto in a suit and looking confident in the promising future to come under his rule, along with the title "Saving Mexico". But 2014 would soon also become the start of Peña Nieto's government debacle.

The news of a group of rural schoolteachers being attacked by local police elements started to emerge in the early morning of 27 September 2014. This was followed by the grim discovery of the body of one of the students, who had been tortured and whose face had been torn apart. Soon after, the figure of 43 students whose whereabouts were still unknown many hours after the attacks, was going to be iconic for the events of that night and for the history of enforced disappearances in Mexico. It turned out that 2014 was not just the beginning of Peña Nieto's debacle, but the whole federal system would be shaken at its foundations as the references to dire repressive episodes against dissidents

started to return to the Mexican imaginary of state violence (Escalante & Canseco; 2019; Lomnitz, 2019). The narrative from the past, about a vertical authority responsible for the darkest years of the PRI regime, had been over. Instead, the new arrangement of power across Mexican states since the PRI started its debacle in 1997, gave way to a multiplicity of interests, sometimes in conflict and other times in complicity. It was in this splintering power dynamic, with multiple narratives and equivocal authority, that making sense of what happened that night was incredibly difficult. Even the formulation of questions was no easy task, in great part because the distribution of responsibilities was too disperse and because some of these actors held power in the shadows, embarking in illegal activities that were both disrupting and constructing the official narrative of the state, which was called “the historic truth” by the then Federal Prosecutor, Jesús Murillo Karam.

This single case would show the problems of deep mistrust in authorities, the role of organised crime in Mexico’s daily life, and the pervasive violence against human bodies, even present in the processes of justice that were supposed to sit safely in the hands of the state (Gibler, 2016; Del Ángel, 2017; Beristáin, 2017). The case is paradigmatic for many other reasons that are tangential to this research, but it is worth naming the moments where those holding power in government had to deal with their lost legitimacy and the public’s lack of trust. The first event was the attempt of the Federal Government to lay the blame entirely on local authorities, which was particularly mishandled along with the fact that those local authorities belonged to a party with left-wing origins and which were the PRI’s adversaries (Beristáin, 2017). Secondly, almost two months after the events and with the urgency of providing an account of what had happened, the federal prosecutor introduced the idea that all 43 disappeared

students had been burnt in a municipal dump, which would explain why the authorities could not find sufficient evidence to either confirm or deny that the students were dead (GIEI, 2015). This moment was critical also in the way the announcement was made; the Federal Prosecutor clearly wanted the public to move on from this case and his tone could not have been more hostile. This was particularly acute when he pronounced the infamous phrase, “I’ve had enough” (“ya me cansé”), during the press conference (Presidencia Enrique Peña Nieto, 2014). At that moment, the disappearance of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa was an international scandal, triggering the intervention of the Organization of American States (OAS or OEA in Spanish) who appointed a group of special investigators for the purpose of providing recommendations to the Mexican authorities — this group would be called the Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes (GIEI 2015 & 2016), which would be instrumental in revealing the serious problems of collusion, tampering of evidence, and political abuse at the core of Mexico’s law enforcement systems.

The GIEI would point out a vast series of procedural errors, but perhaps the moment of total discredit came when, based on a video recorded by a journalist, the GIEI pointed out the fact that the place where some human remains were found had previously been visited by a top-ranking civil servant and his team, but without registering the visit in the case files (GIEI, 2016). This raised alarms, giving the impression that the evidence of human remains could have been planted by the government itself, and fuelling suspicion of a massive cover-up in order to protect other authorities involved. Whether failing to register the visit was a simple mistake, or whether there was any truth to the cover-up theory, it no longer mattered at that moment — trust in the authorities to investigate and bring justice had been profoundly damaged, like a final crack in a relationship of trust.

These problems in the Ayotzinapa narrative comprised the Mexican iteration of a post-truth era (Anderson in Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018; McIntyre, 2018) and at the same time a paradigm for Mexican journalism and its understanding of power.

Against this backdrop, with the support of local and international NGOs<sup>1</sup>, FA used 3D models and animated recreations to counter an official narrative that was full of gaps, with contradictory testimonies, and spoiled by the stain of torture inflicted on the presumed guilty. Instead, we produced a narrative in which the surviving students and other victims were at the centre of the account. It is difficult to assess the real impact of this investigation on processes of justice and its significance to the lives of the victims and their families; however, we at FA knew first-hand how the platform had been received by victims and the Mexican government. The videos we produced helped the victims' relatives to spatially understand the events of that night (Centro Prodh, 2017). In regard to the courts, a high-ranking judge from the Mexican Supreme Court, José Ramón Cossío-Díaz (2017), wrote an op-ed considering FA's work to be an effective way to create signifiers of state violence, suitable for meaningfully conveying such events. In 2018, the newly elected government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador included the platform we created as one of the tools used to carry out their investigations (Comisión para la Verdad y Acceso a la Justicia en el Caso Ayotzinapa, 2019) and in 2020, the new Federal Prosecutor asserted that "the historic truth" was over and announced a series of new findings that might point in that direction (FGR, 2020). However, those investigations are at a very early stage and it is yet

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<sup>1</sup> As expanded in Chapter 7, the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project received financial resources via a Mexican NGO that legally represented the victims' relatives, called Centro Prodh, and the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF). They were able to do so via a grant from the Oak Foundation.

to be seen if those responsible for the attacks and the subsequent later cover-up will ever be held accountable.

### ***-FA's Counter-Investigations: Key Concepts***

Eyal Weizman, FA Director, has advanced the concept of “counter-investigations, or “counter-forensics”, as a civil practice, using technology and testimonies to uncover political violence and engage in the production of truth: “While forensics is a state tool, counter-forensics, as we practice it, is a civil practice that aims to interrogate the built environment to uncover political violence undertaken by states. The call to ‘take over the means of production’ is a call for us to take over the means of evidence production” (Weizman, 2014, p. 64). The body of theory developed by Weizman challenges the way reality is explained by repressive regimes using imagery, testimonies, and databases available to the public on the internet, and turning them into counter narratives aiming to uncover distortions of reality and misrepresentation by interested parties.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, this concept of counter-investigations pushes forward the limits of journalism in Mexico’s context in three dimensions: a) by its call to take over the means of investigation from the monopoly of the state(s), which concerns the ways in which journalists obtain and validate evidence; b) its understanding of forums whereby investigations can be deployed beyond the publication of information; c) and its capacity to counter official and dominant discourses from positions of power (hegemonic narratives). The problem motivating the proposition of taking over the means of investigation lies in the impossibility of trusting those who monopolise the means of investigation; that is national and local states. In other words, it finds its origin in the journalists’

dilemma of having to choose between scrutinising (with some level of trust) the authorities' investigation, or solving the case and spotting the criminal by themselves. For counter-investigations, the official investigator cannot be trusted because they can also be the criminal, tampering with evidence or causing the disappearance of information and people. That is why taking over the means of investigation necessarily involves a power shift. But it is also an expansion of the digital symbols at our disposal to make sense of the truth. This is so because it presents an alternative understanding of what is considered evidence, how it is obtained, and the way in which it is validated. This enabling faculty to investigate through different means, even breaking the monopoly of the state over evidence production, is a different location from which IJ can operate in collaboration across the politics of technology and power.

Likewise, counter-investigations understand their investigative practice both as a problem, but also as an opportunity, for representation to play a transformative role in different forums (Media, Civil Society, Political, Cultural) (Forensic Architecture & ICA, 2018). As it will be explained below, there is a certain contribution to journalism that comes with the concept of counter-investigations, which brings about the idea of a diversity of settings where investigations can be displayed and made operational. In this sense, FA has also claimed the right to create evidence for the purpose of presenting it in different forums, including both the public sphere and the legal realm (the courts). This association of diverse fields is relevant because in doing so, counter-investigations swing between the practice of a forensic expert, the media, and advocates.

It should be made clear that counter-investigations take a stance, a situated way of approaching reality, in order to transform it. So, in that sense, counter-

investigations are more advocacy-like, more “missionary”, as Weizman (2019) would put it, and thus, at odds with the most widespread ideals of professional journalism of detachment and objectivity. The extent to which this purposeful, transformative role is compatible with given assumptions of IJ has not yet been theoretically expanded, at least not for its implications on media theory; but the display of counter-investigations suggest that IJ can become a ductile practice, giving way to the underpinning of creative adaptations of a watchdog role of the press. Furthermore, when challenging hegemonic narratives, counter-investigations show how the investigation of individual cases can be used to expose and combat large complex structures of power abuse. This is related to the often-conflicting voices seeking to win the battle of public opinion, processes of justice, and ultimately, memories of a collective past. And this is perhaps the most prominent trait present in FA’s project, Plataforma Ayotzinapa.

Below, I note some of the most relevant contributions of counter-investigations for the practice of IJ in Mexico, as they were applied to Plataforma Ayotzinapa by the FA team.

### ***-Naming and Labelling Networked Narratives***

Cacophony of information is an interesting description of the chaotic agglomeration of narratives in the Ayotzinapa case. The Oxford Dictionary (Stevenson, 2010, p. 244) describes cacophony as “a mixture of unpleasant sounds”. The phrase was used by one of my interviewees when trying to explain how the information available was just “so much” (Interviewee DD, 2019). The meaning of cacophony works much better in English than in Spanish, because in Spanish cacophony is simply a repetitive sound which is not necessarily

dissonant, whereas in English, cacophonous gives the idea of sound from devious origin, spoiling harmony. The Merriam-Webster's (2020) definition is closest to what the interviewee described: "an incongruous or chaotic mixture: a striking combination". She was referring to all the available versions that made it almost impossible to give a congruous account — with two reports of around 500 pages each made by the GIEI, plus all the books, articles, interviews, and other materials that were at her disposal. Mexican authorities did all they could to ascribe responsibility onto municipal and state authorities which resulted in a plethora of accounts, possible explanations, media interviews, and so on. Between the different versions from all levels of authority, plus local reports, advocacy groups, and international media, the situation did not *seem* to be a lack of information, but rather, an oversaturation of loud voices. And yet, among all these loud versions looking very similar but with differing meaning, there was still missing information — pictures, videos, human remains, and most importantly, the truth was lacking. It was in part because of the purposeful erasure of evidence, and additionally, after we made the platform available, that criminal organisations coordinated a disinformation campaign, attempting to blame the military and state authorities, according to an investigation published by Roberto Zamarripa in the newspaper Reforma (Zamarripa, 2018). This is why Ayotzinapa is the metaphor for the multifaceted power arrangement in contemporary Mexico.

Allcott (2017) and Gentzkow (2017) have said that fake news is "distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth" that make it more difficult "to infer the true state of the world". The Ayotzinapa case was a sort of microcosmos showing how fake narratives are spread in a post-truth era, distorting reality and purposefully taking advantage of a hyperabundance of accounts. That is why in regard to the Ayotzinapa case, one of the researchers described this investigation process as

a “cacophony of information”, because the investigation had to explore as many voices as possible and make sense of it in the midst of dissonant versions. For FA’s team, it was not only a matter of being informed and facing fake information in the phase of consumption of news and articles about the case, but rather, in the phase of the investigation of the case dealing with a cornucopia of sources. In other words, cacophony explains a state in the process of an investigation where there is an overabundance of information, including fake news. How to deal with that cacophonous material is the real challenge for the investigator.

This category of “cacophony”, used to name what FA’s office was confronted with, was not used throughout the project in a deliberate way. But interestingly, the solutions to overcome that cacophony (to organise, label, give a typology to try and understand) was completely deliberate — it turned out that naming processes of events lowered the level of cacophony, organising evidence into different linked categories to reveal a different type of mapping. This is, I claim, one of the biggest innovations Plataforma Ayotzinapa can contribute to the practice of IJ in Mexico, since it enabled a varied understanding of what power was that could be investigated and displayed in a networked way. This is so because, as others have noted (Márquez-Ramírez, 2012; Golding & Elliot, 1979), assumptions on the professional ideology of journalists have made them believe, among other constraints, that their job is to represent reality as it is, which can be referred to previous discussions on objectivity as evidence-based reporting (Schudson, 2001; Chalaby, 1996, in Jukes 2017), but it is not limited to it. There is an important particularity here in the Mexican case, since daily news reporting activity very often gets entangled with those doing investigative reporting, thus, notions of objectivity and impartiality very often get mixed up with investigative pieces. As it was explained in Chapters 4 and 5, this is exactly the tension one of

the interviewees found himself in when he told me that he was willing to help victims and even collaborate with NGOs to make a difference in people's lives; but soon after he also told me that he was very clear with the people he interviewed that his only job "was to publish" and "to transmit what is happening in its entirety" (Interviewee C5, 2019). This might be explained by the fact that he does both daily reporting and investigative pieces for PdP and other media, as many other reporters do in Mexico.

It also involves the "linguistic battle" Zavala (2018) has discussed as one of the most serious problems for Mexican journalists in covering the rising violence during the "war on drugs". Although Zavala's controversial argument can be read as proposing a big alignment of powerful forces to explicate the "war on drugs" discourse, the "linguistic battle" is useful here because, rightly so, he argues that Mexican journalists have fallen into the trap of adopting the language (or the categories) that have been coined from centres of power (i.e. US law enforcement agencies, the Mexican military, and police forces). It is based on the critique of the adoption of a "hegemonic discourse" that Zavala elaborates the provocative idea that "cartels" do not exist. It does not mean that criminal organisations involved in drug trafficking are a fairy tale, but rather, that the category of "cartel", introduced into the journalistic language, is hiding a more complex, more dreadful reality, obscuring the participation of state officials and international agencies in the illegal perpetration of violence against human bodies. This is, in short, the complexity of the disposition of power in contemporary Mexico. It was precisely by creating new categories produced by the investigative team, that FA managed to minimise the level of "cacophony", finding words that were able to reveal complexities. Those categories had to be organised and classified according to the nature of the events in Iguala, Guerrero. The first draft of categories showed

us three overarching actions: Coordination, Escalation, and Collusion, which made sense of and organised the thousands of events we had registered in our databases. But how to name these categories and the overarching actions?

During the first months of 2017, once we had a database big enough to see individual actions and people located in time and space, we had a long meeting to try and make sense of all the raw data. Those present at the meeting were: the project leader (PL), the design developer (DND), a Mexican visiting PhD researcher, journalist John Gibler (author of the book “I Couldn't Even Imagine That They Would Kill Us”, 2016), and me. This is exactly what PL remembers from that meeting:

“For me is more the work that you (Irving) and # (PhD researcher) did, that was to better understand what we were reading, what we were producing, and also, better describe. Literally finding the right words with which to describe what we were producing, because if you don't have the right vocabulary that comes from the right contextual understanding of the place, then you are unable to understand that and to communicate that to an international audience, and for sure a local audience, and that was how to describe the points, how you describe enforced disappearance, also, how you understand the relationship between different actors on-site, that was super important” (Interviewee PL, Project Leader).

Words such as vocabulary, contextual understanding, relation, are all at the core of the categories — which would then become labels — that we used. But the other PhD researcher's (#) work on categorising was particularly important. At the time I felt unable to do what she was doing (classifying, adjusting the meaning of words, challenging legal terms). Now I think I can give a reason why,

as a journalist, I could not do this easily. I was more knowledgeable at the level of description, trying to get a new revelation, more in the narrative territory of journalism that finds itself trapped in the reproduction of hegemonic discourses, in the narrative trap of “show, don’t tell”, for which a lot of insights are gained, but for which little explanation can be given. But it was only in this way, by labelling what had happened and dislocating the vocabulary from the control of the hegemonic narrative, that we were able to counter false narratives by producing truth in its complexity. And for this, she was instrumental. Perhaps the most effective method of labelling to counter false narratives was that of identifying unreliable versions. When the platform was almost mounted on the server and we were able to explore some data-points on the map, we realised that we had the problem that all narratives appeared as having the same weight and value. But of course, this was not true. We had versions obtained by Mexican authorities under torture, as well as contradictory datapoints coming from the same person. We sorted it out, not by eliminating those versions, but by labelling them as “unreliable”, adding a note giving the reason why we thought they did not have the same value as other versions of the events. Another level of this differentiation between simultaneous versions of reality was the distinction by colour. As the victims of violence, we privileged the survivor students’ accounts, giving them a conspicuous red colour on the map.

In this respect, it is worth bringing to the fore the narrative proposal of FA’s director, who says that the Platform was trying to establish networked narratives as “set of relations” in simultaneity.

“The narrative is not a line, the narrative is a network, the narrative is a set of relations, a line only follows a linear story, but this is a story of simultaneity, what happens at the same time, it is not easy to tell it in a

narrative line. You need to develop new narrative forms that are not linear that are simultaneously based, that are more network based, that are more like a mesh and you can navigate through them” (Weizman, FA Director).

The simultaneity of narratives introduced by the Platform allowed for many readings of the events of the case, with the ability to contrast different versions and different locations. For instance, a contrast between the military’s version and that of the victims, or that of the presumed perpetrators and the Mexican authorities (which has been deeply contested). This last interplay led to the very interesting conclusion that both aligned. Why? We concluded that both versions aligned because the presumed perpetrators’ testimonies had been obtained by the Mexican authorities under torture, making the official version seem plausible. Simultaneity, in this case, shed light on a far-fetched version constructed by the state.

The creation of these categories and networked narratives will be controversial to practitioners and theorists because journalists are not supposed to name things or phenomena. That is usually the role of the expert (the academic, the lawyer, the doctor, the political scientist...). Journalists are usually expected to just interview the experts, echoing their statements as they were uttered, giving the false impression that reproducing claims is reporting reality “as it is”. That is why the act of naming is a dislocation at the core of the old adage, “show, don’t tell”; which is used both in literature, including non-fiction and journalism, to enhance the narrative, but which automatically excludes a classification process. In the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, the classification and categorisation of events proved helpful for a better understanding of the case, thereby giving a more coherent account, reducing noise, labelling false narratives, and identifying the voices at the centre of such a chaotic narrative.

Whether investigative journalists, the media industry, and the Mexican public will welcome these created categories, is another research question that I will not be able to respond to here. However, it is worth noting that those who named things in the Plataforma Ayotzinapa case were experts in one way or another but from a position of power that differed from that of the authorities (i.e. PhD researchers and at least one journalist who has covered armed conflicts for years), which might be going in the same direction as the idea of citizen journalism and that more people from the public should be engaging in publishing journalistic content, as it is usually the readers who “know more than we do” (Gillmor, 2006 in Rusbridger, 2018, p. 54). In short, the naming and labelling in networked narratives helped investigate the Ayotzinapa case in an innovative and useful way, producing a truth that understands power complexities and counters cacophony. This is at the core of the third dimension of a framework for transformative investigations that I have called *a humanitarian truth production*, because it engages in a new production of narratives taking a position by naming the world, and for which the defence and liberation of human lives is vital.

### ***-Empathic Solidarity***

Investigation as an attached committed practice is rarely explained in practical terms. The kind of reporting (research) that is needed in order to avoid the dehumanisation of the news requires a sort of identification, of entering into accord with the other. This has been touched upon by people such as Kapuściński (2007), using French-Lithuanian philosopher Levinas to talk about the “encounter with the other”, which requires a level of understanding of the differences with the people that are not you — the other. In a similar way, Muhlmann (2007) has talked about “decentring” the journalist, which means

leaving the position of the journalist giving access to an identifiable public that rallies behind her/him, and instead, assuming the position of the oppressed from where the journalist can speak once they have positioned themselves in a location that is not “naturally” theirs. One of the clearest example Muhlmann has used to talk about a journalist who dislocates himself, is George Orwell who abandoned his privileged position as a member of the upper English class, to live the life of a mineworker in the coal mines in the early twentieth century. Her analysis provides a rationale behind a kind of reporting that is situated, rather than detached and impersonal, that is committed, rather than objective and purely professional.

In this respect, the work of FA assumes a similar position (i.e. a situated, embedded practice), which aims to bring change. But a pertinent question might be, what has been driving this attachment to the story of the 43 students? According to the interviews I had with members of FA involved in the project, to some of them this identification was a form of “empathy”. Of course, this does not mean that all the interviewees mentioned empathy as one of the relevant forces behind the work they were doing, but all of them mentioned a certain type of aim or purpose that related to helping the victims. This “empathy” operates at very different levels among the interviewees, and one cannot be sure whether this sense of empathy or purpose has been inculcated in them because of the contractual relationship they had with FA as workers subordinated to the conclusion of the project, or if it is something that occurred as they related more and more to the case. This last point is a very foggy area, but some insightful traits and how this purposeful approach affected the points of view of the people working on this project, can be drawn from the reasons they gave for having an

empathic approach during the investigation. These are underpinned by the director's explanation of the FA approach:

“(Having) a wild mix of disciplines and different groups working in solidarity around that (the project). [...] The aim is change, is political change, the aim is to... and this is why counter-investigations differ from journalism, is much more directed towards activism, is much more target specific. [...] We also want to support perhaps a certain type of political action, perhaps the kind of politics the Ayotzinapa students were part of, counter-investigations is much more missionary oriented” (Weizman, FA Director).

In this sense, the most revealing words in the director's statement are, first, the “solidarity” around the project which he then amplified, not only to the project itself, but to the victims and the kind of politics the students were involved in. And, secondly, the “missionary” vocation with which he identifies FA's civil practice. This last part appears as the most empathic and perhaps with references to the highest level of empathy in religious language, which leads to self-denial and self-sacrifice. This stance is reminiscent of the kind of sacrificial stance PdP took in doing their work in Mexico, with similar implications that will be addressed in Chapter 7. For now, it is sufficient to underscore the tone and the language employed by FA's director, permeating the visions of solidarity and empathy that researchers had while being involved in the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project, and which they expressed during the interviews.

This was the case with one of the architect-researchers, a Colombian national who came to London to do her master's degree, and had never had any contact with human rights advocates or NGOs before, but whose “Latin

American” background aroused some empathy in her work, even to the level of obsession:

“I (tend) to think that everything that is happening in Latin America, or is related to it, affects me in one way or another because I am Latin American. There is a certain similarity there, it is not exactly the same but there are many similarities in the kind of violence in Mexico and Colombia [...]. When I got invited to work for the project on Mexico I said yes straightaway, because I thought, ‘this is something I feel I relate to’, and when I felt I identified with that, then what happened was that I got hooked by the case and I got obsessed because I was feeling a lot of empathy. [...] I believe there should be a lot of interest in the case so you can develop what I call obsession. In the end you are so into the case that you want to give it your all, [...] (I said to myself) I want these crime scene models to be the most accurate possible” (Interviewee AR1, Architect Researcher).

This level of empathy is interesting because it resorts to a sense of identity and similarity that is not necessarily a radical identification with the other out of responsibility, as Levinas (Rosim-Millán, 2017) explains. It is rather a solidarity based on shared circumstances and historical struggles, perhaps also a level of identification because of language (Spanish), which can be the reason why she mentioned that every time she sees the news in a Latin American country in Spanish, it draws her attention almost immediately, causing her concern. This concern is what made her even more empathetic to the case, according to her words, because the circumstances of people in Mexico resembled the kind of struggles Colombians experience with their government — mistrust, war on drugs, heightened violence. Thus, empathy acted as a driving force that made her perform a sort of sacrifice in solidarity, arousing in her an obsession for a

perfect representation of the case that would serve the victims. She never met the victims before the platform was presented in September 2017, and yet she was thinking of creating something so accurately manufactured that would serve the people affected by the violence of the night of the disappearance. It is then a relational empathy which does not necessarily deny the self completely, but even so, this sentiment kindled a sort of solidarity that made her go beyond the requirements of her professional role, and yet, engulfed a desire for accuracy that was close to an idea of objectivity. This amounts to an “empathic solidarity” that is central to the second dimension of the framework for transformative investigations on a *communitarian solidarity*, because it is based on empathy and solidarity that a life in common can start to emerge, not only at the professional level but also at the personal level.

### ***-Looking for the Cornerstone of Legitimacy in Truth Production***

To be a truth producer, one must have some degree of legitimacy (Alsius et al, 2009; Bilbeny, 2012), trust (Meschoulam, 2018), and authority (Carlson, 2015). FA has said they have tried to disrupt the role of the expert (Weizman & Keenan, 2012) by referring to grassroots information and challenging hegemonic narratives. However, it is fair to say that FA has not departed from a position of power, let alone from the aesthetics of authoritative knowledge (Wright, 2019). From the interviews I conducted, I have traced back the positions adopted by FA to speak about its form of manufactured truth: the type of rhetorical and aesthetical devices they use to present their findings as reliable, and as worthy of being contrasted with hegemonic narratives. They have drawn upon at least three positions of legitimacy transference: academia, complexity (exhaustivity and levels of certainty), and transparency.

The first is the clearest example of the adoption of a traditional position of power (Freire, 1968 ed. 2005; Rouse, 2005). This is the role of the expert at its best, protected by the aura of the university, the centre of knowledge, and experimentation. Firstly, FA is based at Goldsmiths University in London; at least by reputation, being a UK university gives it the status of an internationally recognised institution in one of the most important metropolis in the globe, historically associated with world class education, and therefore, with the production of legitimate knowledge (Seth, 2007). Secondly, FA identifies itself as a research academic agency, with the capacity to comply with international academic standards of rigour (including peer review processes) which makes it eligible to obtain academic grants from some of the biggest academic bodies in the world, such as the European Research Council (Forensic Architecture, 2020) with a budget of around 2 billion pounds a year, and which has supported around 9,500 projects since 2007. FA has used this, and other backing and funding, to undertake their investigations on state violence around the world, supporting their findings with the credentials of international academic standards, which feeds into a valuable reserve of trust (i.e. authority and legitimacy). FA transparently shows these credentials on its website and public presentations, and the team working on the Ayotzinapa project resorted to it as well, as FA's deputy director asserts:

“We were terrified in entering that process and adopting that position of opposing that narrative, because of the stories, in a way, the fact that we were in London made it more possible, the fact that we were a university, and that we have a different kind of distance that recognises academic backing made it more possible. [...] We need to be careful with what we say, we need to back it up in an academic way, rather than in a journalistic

way, or in an advocacy, or an NGO way” (Interviewee DD, Deputy Director).

It is interesting to observe that DD acknowledges that they have to “back up” their claims in “an academic way”, as opposed to a supposedly less rigorous journalistic process; however, FA uses its relationship with journalists and employs a media language in order to strategically communicate the message they want to transmit. Drawing on the credentials of the academic does not disqualify their bottom-up rhetoric completely, it just adds an important nuance to the political statement they have made on narratives of power. They use it strategically as a means to their political ends, pretty much in the same way as *Periodistas de a Pie* employed the strategy of using traditional media to maximise their reach (Chapters 5-6). The interviewee’s response is vital for this thesis because it unlocks a number of possibilities for investigations to flourish in Mexico. If the context is violence and danger for the investigators, then the protections of an institution or body of knowledge like the university can back them. This is particularly relevant for the Mexican media system that has left journalists to their own demise in the midst of an armed conflict. In other words, it turns out this backing is not only one of legitimacy, but of physical protection which might be consistent with the findings of Relly and González de Bustamante (2014) that Mexican journalists are safer in states where there are protection communities outside the media organisations they work for. Nevertheless, this enthusiasm must be tempered since current existing journalistic organisations do not have access to academic backing, and also, the distance between the location of the events (London-Mexico) appears to be an important factor that brings some confidence to the investigators, at least at the level of the feeling of safety:

“You have heard Eyal (Weizman) talk about a horizontal verification and horizontal ground for evidence, and what that means is that verification when in circumstances where mistrust is prevalent, and also personal safety is not secured, distribution verification, horizontal approach to verification, not only builds truth as a community practice rather than as a sort of a monolith, or a sort of an object, which can be either agreed with or disagreed with, but it also secures the voices of those speaking that particular truth” (Interviewee IJ2, Investigative Journalist).

Obviously, this physical distance is impossible to achieve for the majority of Mexican journalists, as the militarisation of the country continues to this day.

The second source of legitimacy is complexity (i.e., exhaustivity and levels of certainty), which had many components in the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa according to the interviews I conducted with the research team. Perhaps the most salient of them is time, which comprises one of the components of the idea of IJ in Mexico addressed in Chapter 1, and which adds onto the construction of an apparent exhaustive investigation in favour of FA’s legitimacy. This interviewee makes a link between the time it takes to do an investigation and the development “of the discipline”, up to the level of a meta academic product, exploring new methodologies:

“Our work is never the shortest way to do the investigation, [...] the shortest way to do the investigation is to read the text and write the report from what you know, a text. If you want to develop new techniques, new methodologies, this is also in excess of the case, it is not just about the case, one part is making sure that for the case you have met your objectives, but on the other part it is figuring out new ways of seeing, new

technologies, new methodologies, that is something that we take on as an office, as our own objective, beyond the case. That is why we have research grants that are general, that are able to support that, the development of the discipline, the development of the methodologies, we are not just service providers” (Interviewee DD, Deputy Director).

Following a similar line of thought, and slightly contravening the FA director’s aim for a “situated” practice, another interviewee also referred to the work they do as “objective in looking”, “assessing margins of error”:

“The first thing is, we do our best, to the best of our knowledge to be objective in looking at the facts, and that gets done through verification, different processes of verifications, corroboration, but also acknowledging and assessing margins of error, and what margins of error can create, all three of those things need to be communicated very clearly, at no point can you make a determination or make a claim without being backed up by substantial evidence [...]. The question is not about politics, the question is about what can be seen, what is recorded, and maybe that is the one place where we have a little bit of separation, a little bit of an objective look at it” (Interviewee PL, Project Leader).

The reference to objective looking will be tackled later on, but it is useful here to elaborate on the argument that FA works on the basis of “margins of error” and “what can be seen”. This idea draws a great deal of substance from Bertrand Russell’s (1914) scientific ideals of accurate knowledge that is open to be challenged. But it also resonates with notions of “levels of certainty”, popularised in scientific disputes over climate change, but which can be traced back to English theologian and statistician Thomas Bayes, whose subjective or Bayesian

probability dictates an approach to certainty based on the accumulation of favourable evidence (Howson and Urbach, 1989; Norton, 1994). This subjective or Bayesian probability approach has been adopted in the legal realm and the sufficiency of proofs, resulting in sentences where phrases such as “beyond reasonable doubt” and the criterion of “preponderance of evidence” are employed to acknowledge a subjective scale of scientific uncertainty (Weiss, 2005). FA’s proximity to the legal forum and its academic nature explain why these “margins of error” or “levels of certainty” are present in its practice and in the wording of their truth products.

Such references to trust by openness to scrutiny lead also to the third and last resource of legitimacy — transparency. As mentioned earlier, openness to scrutiny is not a new way for science to legitimise knowledge. For instance, DD recognised that their findings must be “peer reviewed”:

“We are an academic body and we have to adhere to certain standards, and we are subject to peer review” (Interviewee DD, Deputy Director).

I did not have any notice that Plataforma Ayotzinapa was peer reviewed by an academic body. However, there was a level of transparency and a possibility to be held accountable because all the material (databases and coding) was uploaded online and made open source, as well as the methodology that was employed. So that other investigators (e.g. academics or journalists) could contest our findings.

Furthermore, other organisations involved in in-depth organisations have tapped into the concept of open-source investigation (Bellingcat, Airwars, The Stanford Center for Human Rights and International Justice, to name a few) (GIJN, 2019; Berkeley, 2020, Stanford, 2020). However, the argument DD, PL

and Weizman were making has a relevant characteristic in an age of overwhelming amounts of information. According to this view, and since there is increasingly an insurmountable number of data points online, finding information is easy but it gets incredibly difficult to exhaust all the connections that may grant verification. FA's director has introduced the idea that only machines can help us to cross-reference all of the information that is relevant to solve a case (e.g. Plataforma Ayotzinapa, Machine Learning to identify objects in images) (Forensic Architecture, 2018). To what extent these digital tools can be used for more than one case remains one of the most important challenges, as the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project showed. But as I have pointed at earlier, all of these attempts to look for sources of legitimacy are key for a framework that assumes truth production as part of the transformation of reality.

### ***-Conclusions***

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate how the Ayotzinapa case is the perfect example of how the operation of given assumptions on the role of the press in liberal democracies (i.e. detached, professionally focused, and having a limited understanding of holding power accountable) is rather disjointed from Mexico's contemporary power arrangements, including the media in the digital age. The necessity of a new operational framework for investigating reality can be grasped from the development of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, a tool created by FA to further the investigations on the enforced disappearance of the 43 students, facing a multifaceted disposition of power (i.e. different authorities, legal and illegal, as well as interested versions of the truth).

I have argued that the FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa, along with its theoretical approach to cases of wrongdoing, is fertile ground for the construction of a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico, offering a way to counter neoliberal notions of commodification and individualism, and having a more complex understanding of power arrangements in the digital era. Firstly, by allowing the creation of networked narratives, Plataforma Ayotzinapa revealed the complexity of the case and allowed for a better understanding of the different events that were taking place in simultaneity. This brought up the problem of having to identify the reliability of different narratives and testimonies, because not all of them had the same weight or were false — some were even intentionally misleading, creating a “cacophony of information”. Plataforma Ayotzinapa resolved this by labelling these narratives, classifying them according to their source, and warning when there was a risk of information being unreliable (i.e. “naming and labelling networked narratives”). The task of labelling and classifying events is a dislocation of given assumptions of the role of IJ, going beyond the description of events or holding power accountable — rather than adopting someone else's language and categories, the project embarked on the creative process of naming, assigning meaning value, and classifying events to explain a complex reality to transform human lives. It is therefore a position that takes on the task of *a humanitarian truth production*, which is my third dimension of a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico. Secondly, FA's teamwork was inspired by an “empathic solidarity”, both with the victims of the enforced disappearance of the students, and the struggles for justice in Mexico. This solidarity could have been based on feelings of sympathy and self-identification with the other. However, unleashing feelings of empathy and solidarity triggers a particularly strong commitment to pursue justice that goes beyond professional

assumptions of detachment and the overreliance on journalism training, towards the second dimension of the framework on a *communitarian solidarity*. Thirdly, in Plataforma Ayotzinapa, the way in which FA's investigations achieve validation is by referring to innovative sources of legitimacy; this has meant resorting to the authentication of academic identity, by adding layers of complexity, and transparency — departing from the shortest way of investigating a case, which invariably needs more time, and investing great efforts into developing new methodologies towards a new way of looking at reality.

In the following chapter I analyse in more detail, the limitations of the influence of FA in journalism practice and some of the most important international media outlets, in an attempt to invest their production of accounts with reliability through the visual and “what can be seen”. This is important in order to see some of the latent blind spots of FA's “counter-investigations” practice, which has already been influential in the popularisation of “visual investigations” or “forensic journalism” in mainstream legacy media, which pose puzzling questions that a framework for truly transformative investigations in Mexico needs to be aware of.

## ***Chapter 7: A Humanitarian Truth Production Beyond the Visual***

### ***-Introduction***

In the last chapter, I presented some of the contributions FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa can make for the advancement of transformative investigations in Mexico, particularly within the realm of Investigative Journalism (IJ) in Mexico and its long-lasting ideological assumptions, anchored in the idea of the North American corporate press. In this chapter, I view FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa with particularly critical eyes. I do so by analysing the idea of "visual investigations" or "forensic journalism", a label that has been recently developed among mainstream media in Western countries (e.g. The New York Times and Der Spiegel), based on FA's counter-investigations, resorting to the collection, inquiry, and creation of images to produce claims of truth in regard to accounts of wrongdoing, influencing the way journalistic outlets present their work<sup>1</sup>. I take Plataforma Ayotzinapa as an example of this practice, presenting a critical view of its real contributions to journalism theory and the problems that may arise from the kind of politics that it entails, not only for Mexican journalism, but also for the theoretical edifice behind a visualisation of truth.

At the end of the twentieth century, it was said that computers and the internet would bring about a massive breakthrough for the rise of a more democratic, horizontal journalism (Meyer, 1973 ed. 2002; 2001; Boczkowski, 2005). Nonetheless, seeing technology as a neutral panacea has proven to be,

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<sup>1</sup> FA has been in constant collaboration with The New York Times' Visual Investigations team in the US, and with other media in Europe such as Der Spiegel in Germany. For instance, The New York Times' pieces on the Russian role in the Syrian conflict led them to win the Pulitzer Prize in 2020. FA is not the only one doing this. Other examples are Air Wars and Bellingcat; however, the investigation of the visual has been so influential, and FA's work in particular, that some have advanced the idea of a new "forensic journalism" based on the detailed analysis of imagery and other publicly available data (CIJ, 2019).

at best, a naïve position (Fenton et al, 2009). Several newsrooms around the world and scholars alike have insisted in making the same bet, with emphasis on the mobile digital age — namely, the likes of big data, or data journalism (Meyer, 2001; Borges-Rey, 2017). In Mexico, even the latest left-wing elected president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has ascribed some degree of responsibility for his landslide victory to the internet and “social media” (Warkentin de la Mora, 2018).

But a liberal press and the benefits of the internet have yielded an unexpected outcome in some of the most prominent liberal states. This unexpected outcome explains the claims of a post-truth era or the latest version of yellow journalism in the form of “fake news”, as it has been previously noted in this thesis (Davies, 2016; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). As in some countries of the West, there is evidence of the presence of interested parties spoiling the discussion on Mexico’s public affairs on social media (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017). One prominent example is the Mexican elections of 2018 when an attack on the left-wing and ultimate winner, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, was made known by a whistle-blower who was part of the operation (Clouthier, 2019). So called “operación Berlín”, aimed to engineer tailored information from a headquarters by professional, though not very successful, writers and political analysts. The messages they created would then be shared by a troop of social media accounts with the aim of turning public opinion against the left-wing candidate (Sevilla, 2019).

However, the Ayotzinapa case brings about more complexity on the distribution of power in the battle for narratives of truth. Being the crudest episode of violence exerted by both state and non-state actors in contemporary Mexico, the Ayotzinapa case provides a plethora of interested parties advancing an

explanation to the violence against the students, the government, the opposition, and also criminal organisations (Zamarripa, 2018). The scar the Ayotzinapa case left was even captured as a dramatic fall in Peña Nieto's approval rating<sup>2</sup>. But Ayotzinapa was just a metaphor that shows the deep crack in the public's trust when it comes to reliable information<sup>3</sup>, either emanating from the appointed authorities or from institutions such as the media, leading to very poor political participation beyond elections in the Mexican population at large (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2012; Fundación Konrad Adenauer en México, 2017). A plausible explanation of this mistrust must include the very nature of the news as made by today's media industry (Anderson in Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018) that has ended up perpetuating economic and political dominant discourses, which are anything but democratic (Chomsky & Herman, 2010). News organisations exist under the assumption that they provide information that enables the public to take responsible decisions; but the very influential liberal model of the press relies, as well as in those parts of the Global South where their influence is pervasive, on an approach of a detached, objective journalism. These given assumptions of a detached press permeate both daily news reporters and investigative journalists in Mexico, while in contradiction with more interventionist ideals of a watchdog press — the result being an unresolved tension for Mexican investigative journalists, as argued in Chapters 1 and 2.

It is in this context of a post-truth era that the idea of “forensic journalism” or “visual investigations” has started to emerge, describing a certain way of investigating events through images where truth is being contested. As new

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<sup>2</sup> Even in the most conservative polls such as *Parametría*, President Peña Nieto faced a decline in his approval ratings that ended up being around 15% (Abundis, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Parametría* shows a little trust or no trust rate of between 79% to 83% for tv, radio, and newspapers for 2017, and raised since 2013 (Abundis, 2017).

visual technologies arise in the digital era and become more sophisticated, visual evidence for the real has also been adapting, as Eder and Klonk (2016) have captured in the book they edited “Image Operations”, with an emphasis on visual media and conflict which is closest to the area where FA works. This impetuous iteration for the digital gaze has seen the emergence of a myriad of projects with strong attachment to what is visible, such as *Videre est Credere*, WITNESS, the Digital Forensics Research Lab de Atlantic Council, or repository projects such as “Exposing the Invisible” (Hankey & Tuszinski, in Eder & Klonk, 2016), which has promoted the kind of investigation techniques employed by FA and other civil organisations such as Bellingcat, or Airwars, and which more recently would influence the newly created “Visual Investigations” department at The New York Times — the production of this digital gaze around the visual is what we can call “forensic journalism” or “visual investigations” (Parry, 2017). FA’s role in popularising the term has been key, as a Harvard’s Nieman Lab report has acknowledged, saying in its *Predictions for Journalism in 2019* that “video forensic reporting” was going “mainstream” (Ellick, 2019).

For the purpose of this chapter, I make an inquiry into FA’s role in developing the practice with legacy media partners, which led to the emergence of the terms “forensic journalism” or “visual investigations” — used interchangeably in this thesis. These terms have been seductive for certain media outlets because they promise, not only a new way of investigating, but also because they adopt a new aesthetic language with which information is treated, along with processes of verification and dissemination that can be accepted as valid — though eminently visual.

But why do they seem to be new and different? The visual ingredient is perhaps the most salient and the most spectacular because the real problem with

imagery in the digital era is not a shortage, but an abundance of images on the web, making it very difficult to really see events of relevance to the public. In this new kind of invisibility, a more meticulous look is needed in order to be able to see, which explains the reference to a forensic gaze. In other words, “forensic journalism” or “visual investigations”, uses the visual, not only as a resource for information, but also as a place of inquiry (Weizman in Schouten, 2015). Moreover, this “forensic” practice also claims to take the monumental task of gathering large amounts of data from cyberspace, particularly visual data, employing open sources for investigations (i.e. social media content on publicly available platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and others similar) on a large scale (Colquhoun, 2016). One of the key moments for this kind of investigation came with FA and The New York Times’ work on the accusation that Syria’s government undertook chemical strikes on its own population in 2018 (Browne et al, 2018). By using publicly available videos from people who filmed the incident, the investigation concluded that there was a chemical attack, contradicting the Syrian government. The collection, analysis, and subsequent presentation of a visual counter narrative epitomised the work of “visual investigations” and the “forensic” approach — images were collected and analysed to a highly detailed degree and then presented in a visual aesthetic that was both staggering and seemingly indisputable. Whether it was a chemical attack or not is still in debate and I will not expand that case here, I simply mention it as one of the examples of the practice that was recently in the limelight of Western media (Ellick, 2019; Pulitzer Prize, 2020).

In October 2019, two years after the launch of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, the Centre for Investigative Journalism set up a panel discussion on “The New Forensic Journalism” at Goldsmiths University. The participants were Forensic

Architecture's director, Eyal Weizman, and Chris Woods from Airwars, a not-for-profit project aimed at tracking, assessing, and archiving international military actions and related civilian harm claims in conflict zones. The poster was incisively provocative:

“From open-source digital mapping to forensic architectural methods, the art of investigation in the public interest is rapidly changing, and this innovation is being pioneered at Goldsmiths. But what does a forensic approach to journalism actually mean? Is it about the application of new methods to the work of journalism, or something more distinctively humanitarian, democratic and new?”

Once questions were open to the public, someone asked ‘is this still journalism?’ FA has never stated that they do “forensic journalism” and, during the conference, Weizman always tried to avoid the classification of their work as journalism. However, their influence on the practice by well-established media outlets is hard to ignore and their willingness to collaborate with journalism is evident. My research was interested in what is new about FA's approach to investigations that made it appealing for journalism, and most importantly, what can it contribute to the practice of IJ and what can it contribute to a framework for investigations?

Thus, the aim of this chapter is limited to the exploration of this practice using a particular case in Mexico that is the focus of this thesis and which, I believe, has a level of complexity that might be of interest for scholarship on alternative IJ models for the Global South. I will try to bring to the fore some of the most salient problems with the kind of forensic approach we employed for the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project and which was very close to key features of

traditional IJ. These problems have been selected in a way that responds to the concerns in the political economy and practices of IJ in Mexico, that I have presented in Chapter 2. Thus, these issues are both relevant for the development of a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico, as well as for the practice of “forensic journalism” elsewhere. Indeed, this critique has largely informed the third dimension of the framework that I present in this thesis, *on a humanitarian truth production* — which proposes a departure from the fetishisation of the image and calls for a return to the truthfulness based on the human image (i.e. the very substance of its existence shared with other human beings) (Hoekema, 1994; Rosim-Millán, 2017). I have divided this chapter into three sections: forensic journalism overlapping with other journalism(s) theory, persistence of international funders’ money, and finally, the missionary role and the fetishisation of the image.

Throughout this chapter, the apparent inescapable limitations of such a practice have been brought to the fore for discussion — a project-based dynamic that fosters labour precarity, the eternal return to the visual as a means of validation, and its incorporation into commercial mainstream media, among others — signalling some of the foreseeable concerns for the future of forensic journalism in Mexico and beyond. It remains to be seen if projects of “visual investigations” or “forensic journalism” that follow the model of Plataforma Ayotzinapa can elicit a higher level of public participation and if, paradoxically, its adoption by mainstream media logics does not end up cannibalising its radical model of countering hegemonic narratives from below. But most importantly, it remains to be seen if adaptations of counter-investigations in Mexico can escape the beguiling power of the image in the digital era, and can turn to *a humanitarian truth production* beyond the visual.

### ***-Overlaps with Other Journalism(s) Theory***

As noted in Chapter 6, FA's theoretical approach rests upon three pillars: a) taking over the means of investigation from the monopoly of the state; b) the dissemination of investigations on different forums; c) and its possibility to counter hegemonic narratives (Weizman, 2017; 2018). Next, I will see where these points overlap with other journalism theory under the lenses of the idea of alternative journalism(s) (Atton, 2003; Atton & Hamilton, 2008) and other situated reporting (Bell, 1998b; Hinegardner, 2009), where similar ideas have already been mentioned in that academic area.

In the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, taking over the means of investigation from the monopoly of the state meant the creation of a new platform to elicit more investigations outside the realm of the official version. The aim was to take academics, journalists, and the public on board, and provide them with a tool they could use to investigate themselves. In the area of anthropology and geography, this may seem like a huge leap from the protected area where the forensic practice is undertaken — usually restricted to the authorities and the experts, and far away from the reach of any other agents — and opening access to the general public so they can trespass the cordon-secured area in order to be able to investigate. Such an approach has been explored in Mexico and Colombia by Cruz-Santiago (2016; 2017) and Schwartz (2016) who have analysed the practice of “forensic civism”, or the surge of civilian “searchers” of human remains. However, the idea of putting the means of media representation in the hands of the public is not new in media studies. Theorists such as the Colombian-Spanish thinker, Jesús Martín-Barbero, dating back to 1987, have made the case for the idea of the “popular-masivo” (mass communication by the people), where the production and mediation of popular expressions of daily life can and should

form the basis of a model for a more democratic communication. In a similar way, but more precisely linked to the advent of the internet and the upsurge of mobile communication, theorists such as Gillmor (2006) and Allan & Thorsen (2009) pioneered the concept of citizen journalism in the digital age, calling the definition of what a journalist is into question since the rise of industrial journalism in the early twentieth century, particularly in an era of mass access to multimedia means of production. The fact that anyone could have a tool to register events of the world and they could publish it on the internet scared many who felt the profession was at risk by amateurs (Eco, 2011), and excited others (Castells, 2005; Curran et al, 2016). Among the enthusiasts were media organisations (such as the Guardian or Al Jazeera, at least for a while) as well as NGOs, such as Videre est Credere, which equips “networks of local activists and community leaders with the technology and training to safely capture compelling visual evidence of political violence, human rights violations and systemic abuses”, or WITNESS in the US, with a similar approach (Videre Est Credere, 2020; WITNESS, 2020), to name just a few of many examples.

It is true that Plataforma Ayotzinapa was not putting hardware in the hands of the people in the way that initiatives of citizen journalism have done in the past. However, Martín-Barbero’s principle of the representation of reality by the masses and citizen journalists’ challenging of traditional mainstream media, are in FA’s objective of taking over the means of investigation too. Furthermore, although Plataforma Ayotzinapa is not hardware, it is in part a digital tool, having the characteristics of software, of a navigation tool, attuned to the hype of multimedia environments. All these possibilities are tailored for a particular case so that the people could investigate. In short, the theoretical basis for taking over the means of investigation may appear revolutionary in the realm of anthropology,

forensics, security studies, and human rights, but this is not exactly the case for the scholarship interested in the media. This is even acknowledged by academics studying human rights advocacy themselves, and what they have called “fact-finding” (McPherson, 2018), for example, Koettl (2016, p. 3) who, drawing on his experience as Senior Analyst at Amnesty International, tells us “...journalists largely dominate the field of citizen media verification. Both journalists and human rights researchers are truth-seekers, and it is encouraging to see strong collaboration between the fields of journalism and human rights on this topic, in the form of talks, publications and training materials. In fact, human rights practitioners rely heavily on the very tools and techniques used or developed by journalists”. That is, these ideas of citizen media and the re-appropriation of the space of representation have been circulating debates around the public sphere, long before they did it in the academic circles FA is more familiar with (e.g. visual cultures, contemporary art).

With regard to the use of different forums, there are also certain similarities with other media theorists. Let us reanalyse a director of FA’s approach to the deployment of investigations on different forums, taken from my interview with him:

“What are the forums in which that type of truth production would appear? And you would say, it appears in demonstrations, in gatherings, it appears in the street, it appears in the media, on social media, on twitter, it appears on... journalists could help them and put it on the newspaper, but that’s not for the newspapers... it’s bigger than the newspaper, the newspaper is one of the multiple ways in which that truth production becomes public. [...] It is actually part of multiple dissemination channels” (Weizman, FA Director)

At first, FA's willingness to enter into multidisciplinary circles, from the media to the courts, to the gallery arts and the demonstrations, appears to be circumventing the realm of the media by disseminating their investigations through different "channels". However, it resembles, to a certain extent, the "strategic behaviour towards the media" explored by Saavedra-Utman (2018), which explores how social movements have created their own aesthetics for demonstrations in order to strategically make use of media organisations by tapping into their logics of mediation and consumption. Interestingly, Saavedra-Utman uses the example of the student demonstrations in Chile in 2011, whose objective was not only coverage in the media, but to garner solidarity around their movement and ultimately, to change education laws in the national Congress by lobbying for free education. In that sense, media was only one of the many channels the Chilean movement employed, and the strategic behaviour towards the media was not only about the mediation of protests, but about a political intervention that would transcend throughout different "forums", as it were, in pursuit of social change. It is here where both FA's use of forums and Saavedra-Utman's strategic use of the media overlap. But perhaps more importantly, it assumes the visual investigation and reproduction of events to be a political intervention in itself, departing from the traditional view that cultural products are simply messages to achieve a bigger political end, an argument that in Mexico was first theorised by Hinegardner (2009) and her study of Mexican documentary-makers, of human rights abuses in the town of Atenco.

Lastly, challenging hegemonic narratives is also at the core of the idea of Atton's (2003) alternative journalism, as a way to counter the problem of traditional media in Western democracies that give priority to economic revenues rather than informing the public, resulting in the manufacturing of consent

proposed by Herman and Chomsky since 1988. It also resembles Alain Accardo's (2000) idea of the necessity to resist "dominant logics" in journalism, *sub specie boni*, whereby journalists reinforce an assumed ideology by default, which is the market ideology of journalistic enterprises, explored in Chapter 2. Does this mean that Plataforma Ayotzinapa brought nothing new? Absolutely not. It just needs to be put into the right context. Indeed, one of the real differences FA has come up with, building on previous theorisations, is that FA has managed to pass from the theorisation of hegemonic narratives and the possible solutions, to the creation of a methodology to produce the very ammunition that would counter those narratives. In fact, part of the objectives of this thesis is expanding this methodology and making it malleable so it can serve the purpose of supporting transformative investigations in Mexico.

In the sections that follow, I will analyse some of the shortcomings of Plataforma Ayotzinapa at FA's office, sounding the alarm on some fronts that may hinder a truly transformative investigative practice by replicating the pitfalls of commercialised media entrenched in neoliberal ideology.

### ***-The Problems of a Project-Based Dynamic Funded by Philanthropic Money***

FA works as a research agency embedded in a university with sources from different academic bodies, as any research arrangement operates at a university. Under this model, FA is also permitted to collaborate and accept donations for specific projects from international foundations, as many other journalistic projects have done in recent times (for example, The Bureau for Investigative Journalism in the UK, CONNECTAS in Latin America, or Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad, to name a few). The questions around the use of

international philanthropy money to fund journalism are nothing new (Benson, 2018; Scott, Wright et al, 2017). In this section I explain how FA has been able to use this model and I raise an alert to the complications for media organisations if they are to use this scheme in Mexico.

One further point needs to be made regarding university funding, which seems to be a plausible path for the investigative practice, as FA members seem to suggest that such a condition invests the agency with legitimacy and certain financial independence to investigate. The collaboration between universities and journalists has long been resorted to in the US, for instance in the form of fellowships such as the Nieman Foundation at Harvard (Nieman Foundation, 2020; Grindle, 2011), or the John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships at Stanford University (JSK Stanford, 2020). Closer to the work of FA, Berkeley's Human Rights Center has been doing investigative work since 1977, but it was in 2016 that it established its open source investigation lab (Berkeley, 2020). In the UK, the partnering approach is more focused on training, as is the Centre for Investigative Journalism itself at Goldsmiths University, or the Huffington Post partnering with Birmingham City University (2019). In Latin America, the union between media outlets and universities has also revolved around the training of journalists; this is the case in Perú, with Ojo Público and the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú (Floríndez, 2014; Ojo Público, 2020); and in Argentina, with La Nación newspaper and an alliance with multiple universities to train young reporters (Knight Center, 2017b). In a similar way, in Mexico both fellowship and training programs exist. The Universidad Iberoamericana hosts the Prende (2020) Fellowship program, based on a similar model to that of Harvard or Stanford. The Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) started with a very incipient attempt to fund investigations, acting as a

proxy for international funding money from foundations such as Ford (Corchado, 2015), though the idea was later abandoned and CIDE no longer distribute funds for IJ. Lastly, only in 2020, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) launched a “journalism laboratory” called Corriente Alternativa (2020) that has a “journalistic investigations unit” and a group of 21 fellows, training to undertake IJ. This overview shows that the partnership with academic institutions is not new, and although it might produce a favourable environment for investigations, it can also elicit a number of concerns — from controls that guarantee independence, to the structural problem that university budgets are not bottomless wells and not that widely adopted in Mexico. In short, university backing might have been one of the conditions that made Plataforma Ayotzinapa possible, however, its replication in Mexico is not an easy task and it may pose a conundrum for existing journalistic organisations.

According to FA’s website, Plataforma Ayotzinapa project was funded by the usual operations budget of FA as an academic body, but it also received financial resources via a Mexican NGO that legally represented the victims’ relatives, called Centro Prodh, and the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF), another NGO that has been working with victims of enforced disappearances for almost four decades in Latin America. However, these NGOs survive from international donations themselves, so the origin of that money is elsewhere. As one of the interviewees explains:

“We got a grant, EAAF, I have to check, a grantor that was already funding us, that gave specific funding for this project through EAAF. [...] We have the ERC, the European Research Council, the ERC pays the university, we have overhead in the university, overhead is basically that the grant that they have pays the university a certain percentage, and that pays for

support services, like lawyers, research finance, the rents, etcetera, but it's still a big grant. I think the University pays Eyal's salary, but this is also partly covered by this grant (ERC), it doesn't pay for any staff members, (that) is paid by other funders" (Interviewee DD, Deputy Director).

The grant from EAAF had its origin in the Oak Foundation. The Oak Foundation, a charity based in the UK but with operations around the world, was founded by the billionaire Alan Parker who made much of his wealth from the Hong Kong-based Duty-Free Shoppers, one of the largest luxury goods retailers in the world. (The Times, 2008; Oak Foundation, 2020; Keidan, 2018).

As shown in previous chapters, some have argued that the model where journalistic organisations live off philanthropic money takes high impact IJ out of media organisations, bolstering the creation of "independent" organisations such as ProPublica, The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), to name just some of the most prominent around the world. In Latin America, the closest analysis (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014) has praised the potential of this funding model to gain independence and to hold power accountable, but nothing has been said about the donors. However, the most sensible critique, particularly noted by Wright, Scott, and Bunce (2018), is that this model has been changing the very identity of journalism, imposing bureaucratic loads on journalists and even asking them to measure the "impact" of their stories.

Nonetheless, FA claims to have independence in spite of who its donors are:

“Contractually we make it clear that, [...] our investigation is independent from the funder, so if the funders don’t want us to publish they don’t have a say contractually, the big funders, like the research grants, smaller funders may have a clause in their contracts that say there is an embargo, we are going to publish this date because we agree that politically it is important to do it together, we can say that it needs to be checked before we do that” (Interviewee DD, Deputy Director).

Independence is one of the most valuable assets any producer of information requires in order to be trusted and to survive in case of retaliation or censorship (La Porta, 2004). This might work for a research body based in a university where the diversification of income might help to sustain the base of the research group, protected under the umbrella of the university. But for journalistic organisations, and even more worryingly, for alternative journalism organisations, having this safeguard at hand is far from being the norm.

In Mexico and other parts of the world, this kind of journalism funded by international means is the kind that has made possible the organisation of independent groups of journalists such as *Periodistas de a Pie*, analysed in Chapters 4 and 5. But they are not the only ones applying for grants. The fight for international funding has seen the recent appearance of both NGOs and journalistic organisations such as *Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad*, *Quinto Elemento*, *Animal Político*, and many others (Tuckman, 2019; Huerta, 2019). Most have come up with startling investigations and a true muckraker spirit of social change. Nevertheless, this funding model is also based on competitiveness over resources that are scarce, to fund one-off reporting trips or specific projects that end within a few months or a couple of years (Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014; Bunce, 2016; Interviewee BD9, 2019).

Competitiveness is not only problematic in nature, but its effects on investigative journalists make it potentially harmful too. Since this funding is project-driven, it is short-lived, and tends to allocate resources to whoever is in vogue at any one time, resulting in short term contracts or the casualisation of labour.

The competitive spirit around charity money was partly shown in Chapter 5 with PdP gaining the attention of one funder because they outweighed other journalistic organisations in winning prizes. However, I will now dwell upon the project-driven nature of Plataforma Ayotzinapa and its implications. The project lasted a year, from late 2016 until the presentation of the platform in public in September 2017. Once the presentation and the press conference were over, I recall a conversation between EAAF and FA about the possibility of a second phase of the project. But this, the EAAF team stated, depended upon the possibility of getting another grant from funders. Weizman had said already that Plataforma Ayotzinapa had cost more money than he expected, forcing him to take some extra funds from FA's normal operation. So he agreed to the proposal that if there was going to be a second phase of the investigation, it was only going to happen once another project grant was approved. This example shows how an organisation like FA, based in a university, having access to a multiplicity of fund sources and grants, has the possibility to fill a potential funding gap from its own current budget, and even so, it would have to wait for another grant process before starting a sequel of the same investigation. For journalistic organisations, part of the problem is that they may not have this multiplicity of regular funding options (university stipends, research agency budgets, and so on), which would leave them to their own devices in a race for a sum of philanthropy money that is not unlimited.

On the precarity of labour, and similar to what happened at PdP and their freelancing contracts, working by project meant that a good proportion of those who work in Plataforma Ayotzinapa could only do it for a few months or even weeks. Out of the 18 people involved in the project, at least eight were only hired to work for this project, including myself. Since I was hired, I knew I had a seven-month contract and I would not be able to work for FA after that day. Plataforma Ayotzinapa followed the same scheme as other FA projects — FA operates with a group of fixed researchers and people in charge of administrative work (no more than ten in total at the time for all the operations and simultaneous projects), and would then hire journalists, animators, and developers accordingly, who would only work for a matter of months or even weeks. The ratio of one-to-two for Plataforma Ayotzinapa was not rare, which means almost half of the workforce was on temporary contracts, fostering the casualisation of the workforce. In fact, FA does not require many journalists to operate — three journalists were working on Plataforma Ayotzinapa, two of us specifically as researchers, and the other acting as a communications manager, but only the latter stayed to work for FA after the platform was published.

In other words, as in the case of PdP, the funding model used by FA might appear plausible but it does not solve some of the most urgent problems for investigative journalists in Mexico. IJ projects should approach the apparently safe conditions of FA funding for investigations in Mexico with care, because this model is based on a project-based dynamic that most journalistic organisations would not be able to endure in the long run, as those organisations lack the institutional footholds of a research academic agency such as FA. Furthermore, the model does not resolve one of the core problems of IJ in Mexico, which is a vulnerability that starts with poor labour conditions. Therefore, IJ organisations

need to be aware of that if they do not want to run the risk of maintaining or worsening the precarity of journalists' jobs. Plataforma Ayotzinapa does not give us clear solutions for alternative funding models for Mexico. A framework for transformative investigations in Mexico must tackle the seemingly inescapable need to resort to philanthropic money, but finding ways to avoid the commodification of information and agendas, and most importantly, the casualisation of labour.

***-The Fetishisation of the Visual and the Problems of a "Missionary Role"***

In her political history of Journalism, Muhlmann (2007) describes a particular position in which journalists act as witnesses-ambassadors, unifying a view for the readers they are supposed to represent. For this position, the weight ascribed to what can be made visible is central, or in her words:

“The truth is visible / among the major rituals of journalism, which make it possible to present ‘facts’ acceptable to all, that is, not reducible to a single point of view, but objectified, we need to emphasize the use of the sense of sight. From the beginning, ‘unifying’ journalism seems to have relied on the eye, as opposed to the voice, as a means of objectification; to unify, to be collectively received as a group of facts, and not of singular opinions, the newspaper had to provide something to see, and had to cease (at last) to be content, like the newspapers of opinion, with saying [...] A fact is (made) visible to all” (Muhlmann, 2007, p. 13).

Muhlmann tries to make the point that a certain kind of journalism always used telling as a way to try and unify the public; the real innovation was the visual language that was used as a result of the introduction of daguerreotypes and the

later industrialisation of photography which coincided with another industrialisation — that of journalism. Subsequent stages would be the creation of infographics, widely used in newspapers and TV programs, and more recently, the capturing of images by the public in what is usually called citizen journalism with a camera or a mobile phone. By the same token, I regard the advent of “forensic journalism” and “visual investigations” also to be one of the stages of the “cult of seeing”, as Muhlmann calls it. I would argue that it is a return to the fixation for revealing or making visible that was hidden from the sight of the people.

The multiple problems of this cult of the image in the media has been analysed elsewhere, for instance, how the production of series of images exhaust social problems without solving uncertainty (Ellis, 1999), the institutionalisation of witnesses (Peters, 2009), and the trivialisation of the image in detriment to vulnerable others (Chouliaraki, 2010; 2013; 2017). In the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, the puzzle looks very similar but particularly salient on two fronts which, in tandem, may pose real concerns about the work of a “truth producer” — a constant reference to the objective truth and a “missionary role”.

As mentioned before, in spite of the FA director’s theorisation of an embedded and situated practice, the team made many references to a detached and objective way of approaching the case and what can be seen:

“The question is not about politics, the question is about what can be seen, what is recorded, and maybe that is the one place where we have a little bit of separation, a little bit of an objective look at it” (Interviewee PL, Project Leader).

In a more nuanced point of view, the FA deputy director's words acknowledge the pursuit of objectivity and where they can look:

“The question of objectivity, in a way, is interesting here because obviously there is political alignment, we are aware of the fact that we are an academic body and we have to adhere to certain standards, and we are subject to peer review, that we do not make big claims, it also means that we have the voice of the objective, and the question is then, where do we choose to look?” (Interviewee DD, Deputy Director).

What visual investigations are doing now is pushing forward the creation or production of images in the realm of the digital and the virtual (i.e. images that are based on pictures themselves, but also from testimonies, inferences arrived at through maps and other imagery) to come up with a whole new visual representation of reality with a great deal of fictionalised elements, with a large number of assumptions on space and time. It is in a sense a heavy human intervention on the image in order to visualise or reveal what was previously unseen. But the almost endless possibilities of image manufacturing pose the same problem as before — the creation of the image as a way of objectifying. And as Derrida would put it, “the extremely refined instruments of archiving we now have are double-edged: on the one hand, they can give us, more ‘authentically’ and faithfully than ever, the reproduction of the present ‘as it was’ but on the other hand, for this very reason and thanks to this same capability, they offer a more refined means of manipulating, cutting, recomposing, and producing computer-generated images, etc” (Derrida in Muhlmann, 2007, p. 97). We are going back to the age of the “naive empiricism”, as Schudson might refer to it, where we must trust the display of reality on the screens because the one who is telling the story is a trustful “I”, narrating, ordering the facts. We should be

believing, trusting, having faith. But the realisation that trusting is impossible, or rather, that trust is no longer unified, has made trust the most undermined element in the process of knowledge; mistrust is the factor behind the exacerbated sensation of a lack of truth or the birth of the era of post-truth.

In spite of the nuanced view of FA's deputy director, the fact is that if the clarification of an embedded practice does not seem to have permeated the whole research team, much less so will it be with the people using the platform and the videos. This is not to say that FA's approach should have resolved questions of objectivity once and forever, but rather that they were not clearly stated, and they were using their position of academic authority to speak an "objective truth". This would not be too problematic were it not for the fact that the work FA does sometimes looks very similar to journalism and collaborates with journalists in the creation of forensic-like journalism products, but constantly escapes a concrete classification. FA sometimes plays the role of an agency, other times that of an academic research group, and other times still, the role of the artist (FA was nominated for the 2018 Turner Prize, the most prestigious contemporary art award in Britain). This makes the collaborations FA have with traditional journalists hard to locate within democratic theory, unlike the case of the tradition of liberal journalism which has been firmly placed in that field, most famously in the public sphere by Habermas (1989), but also in other cases as part of checks and balances, the fourth estate, and so on (De Albuquerque, 2005; Curran, 2011).

This ambiguous position becomes more problematic when FA's director refers to their practice as similar to their "missionary" work, wielding a double-edged sword that both radicalises the human legitimacy of their practice, while at the same time might legitimises its intervention.

Although an emphasis on a missionary-like work is present in FA's office, it is not a religious reference at all. However, for FA it does raise problems, because this rhetoric can lend itself to the so called discovery of a 'truth' that has been investigated remotely, often by people with little native understanding — a criticism Bellingcat's work has received as well being labelled as "armchair investigations" (Schwartz & Barry; 2018). In the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, the use of the platform was restricted from potential users and the general public until a very late stage in the process, in fact, just a few weeks before it was launched in September 2017. It is true that certain people in Mexico had access and a say in what would be useful for researching the case, but this was just the lawyers at Centro Prodh and no one else outside of FA's research team. This does not necessarily strip Plataforma Ayotzinapa of its potential to challenge hegemonic narratives from the side of the victims, but it certainly gives it a nuance when it comes to considering its radical democratisation of the means of investigation. This is important for the field of media, because many models for alternative journalism (Atton, 2003; Atton & Hamilton, 2008) — citizen journalism (Allan, 2013; 2015; Blaagaard, 2013a), social journalism (Cytrynblum, 2004) — have already warned of the dangers of appropriating the discourse and the means of communication from the hands of the people (Martín-Barbero, 1987). Also, although we regarded the project as mainly sourced from the victims' version, we limited that input to the GIEI's specialist reports, John Gibler's book with the voices of the surviving students, and a discretionary selection of media accounts of what happened that night. Furthermore, although the intention of FA was to conduct direct interviews with the surviving students, the legal representatives of the students (who also happened to be our funders) discarded the idea based on the grounds that it could damage the judicial process — the

result being that neither the multimedia nor the videos or models had the actual voice of the students. All of them had been previously mediated by others.

In other words, the real problem for FA's return to the visual is pondering the image as equal to an indisputable truth somehow created by a cutting-edge research agency located at arms-length from the site where events take place, being even at odds with the most traditional ideals of *shoe-leather reporting* which implies talking to the people on the ground (Downie & Shudson, 2009). In short, the human image was barely present in the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project — the visualisation and 3D models had the pre-eminence. This is not to say that FA's commitment to the point of sacrifice is wrong, or that the aim of political change by signifying violence is only fetish; but rather, that a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico must escape the cult of the visual and the pre-eminence of the digital image, and instead prioritise human experience in the manufacturing of truth.

### **-Conclusions**

Immediately after the presentation of the Plataforma Ayotzinapa in September 2017, and the launch of an exhibition at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), a Supreme Court member, José Ramón Cossío-Díaz (2017), wrote an interesting article for the newspaper El País. He did not give his opinion on the Ayotzinapa case, but rather he gave a review of his visit to the museum where FA was exhibiting its work around the world, including the Mexican case at the very entrance of the hall. However, he did underscore the relevance of FA's practice for processes of justice in order to “signify state violence” and bring about truth.

But this practice of signifying through “forensic journalism” or “visual investigations” is a double-edged sword, with some limitations and points of concern. Firstly, FA’s theoretical body appears as a great innovation for disciplines such as forensics and human rights advocacy. However, some of the debates around democratising the means of investigation, as well as the strategic use of the media, have long been part of academic discussions on journalism theory (e.g. social journalism, civic journalism, citizen journalism). Rather than neglecting the potential of counter-investigations or the idea of “forensic journalism”, it is imperative to employ and exploit some of its real contributions to investigations (such as those mentioned in Chapter 6) if one is to find a way to carry out transformative investigations. Secondly, FA’s economic model anchored in its operation as an academic agency seems a viable option for investigations, allowing the diversification of sources of income — from academic grants to regular university budgets, and support from international foundations — but this diversification of sources of income is in stark contrast with the conditions of the majority of journalistic projects in Mexico, which might be able to resort to these international foundation sources to fund one-off projects, but will not be able to access the solidity and constant resources of academic life in a well-established university. It is a problem because this project-based dynamic might not be applicable to current, existing journalistic organisations who would have to compete for these scarce funds and can end up worsening already precarious labour conditions among professional journalists in Mexico. Thirdly, “forensic journalism” or “visual investigations” face the everlasting challenge of the fetishisation of the image, what Muhlmann would call “the cult of seeing”, whereby the only thing that is regarded as true is that which is visible. This position faces many problems, from the increasing ease at which imagery can be

falsified, to the adoption of a missionary role that intends to inoculate a total visual truth. The only way in which a “forensic journalism” can escape this cult of the image is by radically democratising its processes and the creation of its tools for investigation. Or, in other words, a truly transformative framework for investigations must resort to a *humanitarian truth production* that goes beyond the visual, and instead prioritise the mediation of human life experience by human voices that pursue the wellbeing of the other.

In 2018, the newly elected government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador created a Truth Commission in 2018 and adopted Plataforma Ayotzinapa as one of its “multimedia” investigative tools (Comisión para la Verdad y Acceso a la Justicia en el Caso Ayotzinapa, 2019). This produces optimism about the potential of “counter-investigations in Mexico, as this case study shows how a framework for IJ in Mexico can embrace forensic journalism/visual investigations, both as a method of information sourcing and as a narrative vehicle in the digital age to produce change. However, if it wants to be truly transformative, such a framework must radically open the investigation and publication processes, and bear in mind the political and economic contexts that constraint this transformative capacity.

## ***Conclusion***

### ***-Introduction***

This research project has been both an academic and a professional quest. But it was not always as expected. After working as a full-time investigative reporter in Mexico, I have become focused on questions of power where media is at play, and I have engaged in pedagogical tasks— teaching undergraduate students about power and social theory by looking at our world from the Global South, as well as training journalists for the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIJ). In the last four years, this project has also seen a significant change of course — developing from a desire to prove the impact of Investigative Journalism (IJ) in Mexico, to a critical analysis of the structural ideologies and institutions that underpin it but also hamper its transformative power on society. Also, this project is, in many respects, finding an alternative to a very influential North American corporate model of the press which found its apex in the second half of the twentieth century and its embedded neoliberal ideology, so we could invest the investigative practice with a broader operational framework for transformation in Mexico.

This thesis is about the dangers of following the path of an objectified detached highly impersonal model of IJ, mainly based on that commercialised model of the press that North America has exported to the world. Certainly, that kind of press has brought about some of the most impressive pieces of investigation, drawing on the premise of holding power accountable and acting as part of the check and balance in liberal democracies (De Albuquerque, 2005; Chalaby, 2016); nonetheless, its entrepreneurial character and its tendency to monopolise the market has proven to be endangering a real right to freedom of

information for all as it is laid bare, particularly at the local level in the US where the archetype of muckraking reporting was born (Hamilton, 2016; Pickard, 2019). Here, I have tried to show how the importation of that model into Mexico faces similar questions, though not precisely the same. This is exactly what I could not fully comprehend in 2015 when we were all fired after publishing the story of the Mexican President and his seven million-dollar mansion. The right of MVS to hire and sack journalists at will was in tension with our rights as journalists to publish and for the public to be informed. Indeed, this was the structural problem of doing IJ in Mexico — the ownership of the means of investigation granted by the state, as the freedom of the press to investigate and publish is mixed up with the right to free enterprise. A very cunning way of championing liberalism; or I am compelled to say, a neoliberal ideology that employs liberal democratic ideals for the profit of political clientele.

I am ending this project with a two-fold outlook. On the one hand, with a heavy scepticism of the disposition of media power in Mexico, and the realisation that cultural industries have generally renounced to a truly transformative IJ. Furthermore, where there have been attempts, journalists' political personas are oppressed either by the media system itself (Guerrero & Márquez-Ramírez, 2014) or by the crass physical threats they have to face at work, exacerbated by a frontal war on drugs since 2007 (Del Palacio, 2015b; RSF, 2019). But on the other hand, I am very certain now that truly transformative investigations are needed to give back a meaningful purpose to the investigative practices in journalism. This necessity was made evident in the case of the enforced disappearance of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa in September 2014, which in many ways poses a political conundrum for the old journalism adage of “holding power accountable” — since the Ayotzinapa case is the perfect metaphor for the

complexities of contemporary arrangements of power in Mexico (with multiple levels of authority, some moving between legal and illegal territories). I used this event as a case study in part because it shows how, when trying to resort to some of the framework lines of IJ, it is not that simple to make them operational; substantially because of the ideological constraints of neoliberal ideology in Mexico that inhibit politically committed journalism, and because since 2007 journalists are operating within a less obvious vertical order of power — and confronted with messier, less explicit but ever more enmeshed and multifaceted, power arrangements. This is, in essence, why new operational frameworks for IJ are needed in Mexico.

In the middle of the dissatisfaction with the existing circumstances of journalism in Mexico, but with the urgency to find a way out for revealing human suffering, this thesis has examined the following questions: How is IJ in Mexico constrained by the national media system and multiple political forces? How can we escape the neoliberal practices that endanger the purpose of investigations in the public interest? Where and how should investigations be deployed (that is, a framework) if they are to be truly investigative and truly transformative?

I have tried to respond to these questions through a variety of means. Firstly, in Chapters 1 and 2, by researching the political and economic conditions of journalism in the Mexican media system with a particular stress on investigations (i.e. long term, in-depth investigations which are close to the watchdog or muckraking press tradition, in the Mexican context). Secondly, in Chapters 4 and 5, by looking closely at *Periodistas de a Pie* (PdP), a group of female journalists who have carried out investigative work in spite of those conditions, challenging hegemonic narratives of violence and disrupting professional ideologies, but also struggling to overcome the pervasive neoliberal

ideology that permeates the media model in Mexico, and which has systematically restricted their political action. And thirdly, in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7, by assessing the practice of “counter-investigations” in Mexico as practiced by Forensic Architecture (FA), an academic research agency based at Goldsmiths University during the project Plataforma Ayotzinapa, on the enforced disappearance of 43 Mexican students. Though not identified as IJ *per se*, FA’s practice is also close to the emerging titles of “visual investigations” or “forensic journalism”, of recent appearance on both media outlets and non-profit organisations, and which offers theoretical and practical innovations for the investigation of reality in the public interest.

This thesis’ contribution to knowledge is a small step towards the understanding of the political economy of IJ in Mexico, but it is also the proposal for a very practical framework (one among others) to liberate journalists and those practicing investigative work, for political action. It is under the inspiration of the work of both PdP and FA that I advance the use of a framework for “transformative investigations”. This thesis does so by laying bare the heavy constraints IJ carries with it — not just the obstacles present in Mexico’s media system, but the inner contradictions and ideological assumptions in neoliberal times after a process of democratisation of the country, that may anchor IJ to a sheer account of “facts” around “what can be seen”, which rather than being politically innocuous, is very often used for the most obscure political goals. But most importantly, I hope, it offers one way out of the impasse this practice finds itself in — ascribed with too many expectations from its achievements and its impact on society, while at the same time needing an operational framework that enables the transformation of reality in the middle of a particular arrangement of power. Therefore, the framework for transformative investigations that is

presented here has three dimensions: **1) A turn to political action; 2) A communitarian solidarity; and 3) A humanitarian truth production.**

This framework should be viewed against the backdrop of other attempts to construct other journalisms, as I have referred to throughout the thesis: alternative journalism (Atton & Hamilton, 2008), citizen journalism (Allan, 2013), social journalism (Cytrynblum, 2004), and journalism of attachment (Bell, 1998a), amongst others. Although this framework addresses investigative work in Mexico in particular, it should not be considered restricted to Mexican media organisations, as the strategic use of the media is just one of the forums that can be employed.

In this conclusion, I take the analyses of previous chapters as a basis to ground the three dimensions, or as it were, the three pillars in the sand of this framework for transformative investigations. Each one responds to the contextual realities experienced by those doing IJ in Mexico and provides a political position, rather than a technological solution, for the undertaking of investigations in the public interest. In the final section, I acknowledge the limitations of this project and point to the possible avenues for future research.

### **1) *A Return to Political Action***

As I have tried to argue in Chapters 1 and 2, the idea of IJ in Mexico has been heavily influenced by the notion of the watchdog role of the press in liberal democracies, which promises that journalism will hold power accountable in the public interest through revealing that which the powerful do not want to see published (Waisbord, 2000). This model has been inspired by Anglo-Saxon traditions, particularly that of the North American muckrakers of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth century (Hamilton, 2016). Once the muckrakers' spirit was absorbed by large media corporations in the US based on commercialisation, the model was exported by the very influential North American media in the twentieth century (Schudson, 1995; Chalaby, 2016), which is what we usually call IJ today (i.e. in-depth investigations revealing wrongdoing that affects society) (Burgh, 2008). There are a number of problems with the macro promises of this model, but perhaps the most salient relates to the fact that media corporations do not do IJ as their primary product because it is expensive and labour intensive. Furthermore, it has served the purpose of legitimising other shallow reporting produced by legacy media as newsworthy information, which is then introduced into the market logic and does not always respond to the public interest. As I mentioned in the first part of this thesis, Mexican journalism tried to copy industrial patterns and market logics, but also ideological assumptions ascribed to a certain type of professional identity.

However, this model was not just transplanted into a different location; it faced particular contingencies. The highly professional identity that came with it was adapted to Mexico's sociological, political, and economic dynamics. It contradicted, most importantly, the more prominent political role journalists in Mexico had played during most of the twentieth century, which was the result of historical processes and key characters in the revelation of wrongdoing (e.g. Bartolomé de las Casas in colonial Mexico, brothers Flores Magón and satellite journalists that were active Mexico and the US during the Mexican Revolution, and certain publications after the 1968 Massacre, such as *Proceso*) (Beuchot, 1994; Lomnitz, 2014; Rodríguez Munguía, 2016).

In the second half of the twentieth century, with the paradigmatic Watergate Scandal involving president Nixon, the press around the world, Mexico included,

embarked on a project that underpinned special investigations units embedded in the environment of the westernised newsrooms that saw journalism as a profession (Waisbord, 2000; Matheson, 2009). This was not, by any means, a widely extended innovation in Mexican media (Interviewee F1, 2019); but it did end up with the expansion of the “reportajes” practice in papers such as *Excélsior* or *El Universal* (Mejido, 2011), and led the latter to the creation of its first special investigation unit in the late 1970s (Serna, 2017). As the planetary wave of neoliberal ideology permeated every single corporation activity in the late twentieth century, the political roles Mexican journalists occupied, gave room to an increasingly trained and technified job. Scholars such as De Albuquerque (2005) and Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero (2014), have added to the equation the burden of clientelism in Latin American countries such as Mexico, with the result of further defining a captured media model that was born out of the one-party rule in the twentieth century, seeking support in exchange for dubious businesses for both media owners and reporters alike (Huerta et al, 2015; Serna, 2019). This deepened the gap between what media organisations produced as journalism, and what communities needed to consume as useful information. But perhaps the pinnacle of this transformation did not arrive until the early 1990s, with newspapers such as *Reforma* pushing towards a journalism model that made journalism a highly skilled professional activity — and which is generally regarded as a watershed moment in the history of journalism in Mexico due to a process of national democratisation — while at the same time attenuating the political commitment Mexican journalists had in the past. This is a crucial moment for Mexican journalism because it was the prelude of what some interviewees of my empirical research identified as a state of “nullification” of their political

personas (Interviewee F1, 2019), in the wake of twenty-first century Mexican journalism.

The conditions for doing investigative work in Mexico are appalling, according to the interviews for this thesis. The strain on journalists' workloads, aggravated in the digital age with the pressure for more production in less time, has meant that they have fewer opportunities to undertake in-depth investigations (Interviewee F6, 2019). Instead, they are asked to do daily coverage ("diarismo"), to copy and paste press releases, and they are asked to avoid critical coverage because that might lead to less publicity contracts with advertisers (commonly local and Federal governments). In this environment, the opportunities for a kind of reporting that is more politically committed, and which generally takes more time to do, is also curtailed by the expectations of a professionalised idea of journalism that sees reporters' work as a manufactured account of reality that is then sold as "objective" journalism. The result is a type of content that serves the purpose of keeping the media business afloat, with just a few reporters being able to carry out IJ while, at large, journalists are abandoning the most committed ideals of a journalism that serves the public interest. But this media model had an economic impact on the labour force of media industries as well. Newsroom workers experienced low salaries, poor working conditions, and a peculiar aversion to guild organisation — both on the part of the media owners who threaten the formation of unions, and from journalists themselves who have seen previous attempts to unionise become rapidly captured by a historical Mexican clientelism. This is the reason why PdP, although a group for collaboration and support between journalists, always circumvented the idea of forming a union and even recoiled from a more direct defence of journalists' labour rights.

The interviews I conducted show that those labour conditions were the beginning of a vulnerability that was exacerbated with the declaration of the militarisation of the country in 2007, which propelled Mexico's reputation as one of the most dangerous places to operate as a journalist in the world. But rather than seeing the conflict as the point of origin, I have argued based on testimonies, that threats to journalists existed before; their precarious pre-existing conditions only made it more difficult for journalists to face the wave of violence of recent years. The nullification of the political and the obstacles to guild formation preventing self-organisation, are consistent with other academic work that has found journalists' organisation as a factor that increases safety (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2014).

PdP's case study offers an example of different ways to counter the nullification of political beings and the resistance to guild formation, or as Barrios and Miller (2020) would call it, those activities are instances of "counterstrategies" to circumvent the problems they face and further democracy. This group of 20 to 30 journalists realised that they had to organise themselves, not only to improve professional skills, but in order to enact change in society through a dislocation of vertical narratives from positions of power, as well as striving for change in their own practice (Interviewee F1, 2019). They prompted demonstrations to raise awareness of the attacks on the press and they even attempted, though timidly, to influence legislation in order to transform their reality. By doing so, they went beyond given assumptions of their profession, forming an NGO that both permitted them to operate in more interventionist ways, while at the same time spared them from assuming the role of a union. These initiatives tackled the problem of a press captured by vested interests and the violence triggered by the frontal war on drugs, but they had their own limitations, from maintaining poor

labour conditions, to the almost unavoidable need to resort to legacy media if they wanted to have some relevance in Mexico's public sphere.

Drawing from the data, I argue that a truly transformative investigative practice in Mexico must make *A Return to the Political*. A political awareness in journalists has to be stirred up, resorting to avenues for political participation beyond the moment of publication, and radically opening the practice to put the means of investigation in the hands of the public. In other words, a reorientation of journalism towards the matters concerning the public — that is the real polis — is key. This reorientation will not only be teleological or practical, but also ontological, changing the very nature of its being. A political awareness can draw a great deal of insight by looking to the past, to the tradition of committed intellectual workers in Mexico, from priests such as De las Casas (Beuchot, 1994), to activists such as Flores Magón (Lomnitz, 2014) and professional journalists such as Scherer and Leñero (1978). That is why I call it a return to the political. But the same can be said today about PdP themselves in the midst of rising violence — collaborating with grassroots organisations to alleviate human suffering and navigating across, and sometimes against, legacy media logics. Some of the most important lessons we can learn from those examples are that the uncovering of human suffering transcends professional identities, meaning that journalism as we know it in the twenty-first century has not always had the monopoly on investigative practices. In fact, investigations that uncover wrongdoing today around the world, and Mexico is not an exemption, are produced outside media circles already (e.g. NGOs, universities, academic circles, and so on) (Koettl, 2016; McPherson, 2018; Lugo-Ocando & Requejo-Alemán, 2014).

In spite of that, and although news media outlets in Mexico in general have departed from their original democratic ideals, they are still anchored in the principle of serving a purpose in society, and employ methods and forums that are key to the transformation of reality in the digital age. If journalists are to play a relevant role in uncovering wrongdoing and human suffering, they shall escape the constraints of media corporations where the ultimate pursuit is profit and political gain. But instead of doing away with the media altogether, they can strategically use the media for political action, with straightforward objectives for change. This cannot be achieved if journalists' political agency is suppressed in the name of professional education or in the name of objectivity, let alone if the means of investigations and the media industries are not in the hands of people committed to those principles. This is, to put it plainly, acknowledging that investigations are not just simple stories to elicit debates in democracy, but political interventions in their own right with clear goals for transformation. If journalists are to make this return to the political, they should be strategic to win and use those positions for the bettering of people's lives.

In the next section, I explain why I consider *A Communitarian Solidarity*, not only at the level of professional guild formation, but at the personal level, to be a clear embodiment of this political vindication.

## **2) *A Communitarian Solidarity***

This dimension draws a great deal from the empirical data on PdP and FA practices of collaboration. We have seen journalists praising collaboration in projects such as the Panama Papers scandal on tax havens, (Obermaier & Obermayer, 2017) or The Daphne Project on the joint investigation following the

murder of Maltese journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia (OCCRP, 2018). But what PdP and FA can teach us is a type of collaboration at the personal and intimate level that profoundly opposes market logics of competition, individuality, and the severing of political action.

From its very conception, PdP countered the acute individuality that has been transposed to media corporations in Mexico, where political obliteration has also been a constraint to peer organisation and collaboration (Interviewee BD3, 2019). In order to survive the degradation of working conditions as the armed conflict exacerbated the vulnerabilities they suffered, the reaction of collective protection and solidarity reached the sphere of personal wellbeing and family. When facing vulnerabilities at all levels, including poor labour conditions and physical threats in the midst of the conflict, PdP responded with collaboration. But this collaboration went further than just the pure professional terrain; these journalists, not only shared information and contacts, but also, as just mentioned, they sought to collaborate at the personal level, getting involved in the day to day activities of what is considered to be personal life. This radical solidarity in PdP included setting up a group of colleagues who would be responsible for looking after their children while the others were working, or even providing shelter for journalists at risk in their own homes (Interviewee F1, 2019; Interviewee BD1, 2019). All of the interviewees emphasised a closeness between the members of the team, beyond professional duties. Affection in personal relations grew under the pressure of insecure jobs, attacks, and other threats. But this affection not only protected the work they were doing as a service to the public, but most importantly it protected people, the journalists. Their investigations survived because people's lives were safeguarded and nourished by others.

This is important because this personal collaboration went against notions of individuality and competition that were intensely buttressed by neoliberal ideology in the Mexican newsrooms of the last decade of the twentieth century as part of their professional training (Hughes, 2009). But even more so because such a radical collaboration went up to the most intimate spaces of human experience, where neoliberalism had penetrated before commodifying people's lives and affections. These actions of collaboration became actions of communitarian solidarity, constructing a space where they could still live together organised as PdP. A framework for investigative work can learn from this group's experience of opposition to the individualistic effects of market ideology, particularly to counter the alienation of the self for the sake of corporate profit and competition between reporters in order to get exclusive information.

Nevertheless, as Chapter 5 shows, the spirit of neoliberal practices (i.e. the commodification of human life and individualistic behaviour) have proven to be very resilient. PdP, in spite of diverting from traditional media and creating a new space led by principles of sharing and collaboration, still replicated poor conditions of sacrificial labour, failed to respond to labour rights in more robust ways, and fell prey to funders' influence — though not necessarily to the same scale and with more autonomy controls than most legacy media in Mexico — on their agenda (Interviewee BD2, 2019; Interviewee F1, 2019).

Among the many obstacles for collaboration in Mexico's neoliberal times, and elsewhere, is an aversion to unionisation. In journalism, this was a recurrent theme during my interviews with PdP (Interviewee BD3, 2019), as it has been evident by other failed attempts to set up a real representative union (e.g. Agenda de Periodistas [Turati, 2017], Tenemos que hablar [Flores, 2019]). The aversion is so acute that PdP abandoned the idea of creating a union altogether and

created an NGO instead, in order to do journalism and to have some political leverage but not without opposition. Thus, PdP's is an example of a radical departure from individualistic practices in investigative reporting, but it also shows the great resistance a deeply entrenched market ideology can pose to the idea of investigations that puts collaboration and solidarity at the centre, going against an otherwise natural guild formation.

In a similar way, FA's Plataforma Ayotzinapa project showed a certain way of achieving solidarity through investigative practice. This solidarity was towards the humans who are subject to their investigations, which one of the interviews identified as based on "empathy" (Interview with AR1, 2019) and a feeling of self-identification in the other akin to what Kapuściński (2007) said about the identification with the other based on the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas (Rosim-Millán, 2017). Plataforma Ayotzinapa sided with the victims, took their voice, and produced a visual narrative to amplify the cry for justice. This was particularly important for a case where the state that was supposed to investigate the crime, was not only recriminalizing the missing students of Ayotzinapa, but the version of the events that state built was based on testimonies tainted by torture and heavy discrepancies, casting doubts of complicity and a cover-up. Certainly the urgency FA felt when taking the case was not in the fact this was the first time a violation of human rights had occurred in Mexico, since this had happened before, but in the political empathy the students and the families aroused in FA members (Interviewee DD, 2019).

FA, as an academic research agency based in a university in London, miles away from the location of the events, took this case and investigated it in collaboration with other organisations interested in bringing justice. This is the approach FA's director, Eyal Weizman, has followed for many, if not all, of their

projects (e.g. bombings in Gaza, the Sednaya prison in Syria, or the murder of immigrants in Germany), identifying abuse of power and cover-ups (Forensic Architecture, 2020). I have argued also, following Hinegardner's (2009) proposal, that siding with distant others by producing a counter narrative, is a political intervention in its own right. The same happens with other aspects of the practice that Weizman has called "counter-investigations", which include the display of that counter narrative, the use of different forums, and the taking over of the means of state investigation. This is at the centre of the framework this thesis has tried to advance for investigative practice. In the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, this empathic solidarity was also a motivation for accuracy and excellence in the representation of the events, as the FA team acknowledged during the interviews.

Nevertheless, though the "empathic solidarity" principle might be a motive for the revealing of human suffering and wrongdoing, it is based on similarity and identification of causes, rather than a denial of the self. In one case in particular, this empathy was based on the identification with the language of the suffering other. In other words, it is an affirmation of the self and thus, not going beyond collaboration by affinity. A framework for transformative investigations can embrace this empathy but needs to stretch it further so that affinity is not the only aspect dictating which stories are being investigated, or what outcome is more convenient for prestige or peer recognition; it must reach human suffering and subjugation of the radical other, pushing the boundaries up to the political enemy's territory and their own struggle. In that sense, a communitarian solidarity for IJ in Mexico can learn from the experience of PdP on guild formation and instead use more inventive ways of circumventing the acute opposition to self-organisation. For example, by creating a place of convergence where they can discuss good practices, having a unified political voice, and even by placing

media organisations and journalists under scrutiny, which could be a collegiate body of journalists. This will not be the panacea against journalists' poor labour conditions and threats, but it can pioneer the way for broader collaboration through guild-like organisations in the future.

But this second dimension of a framework for transformative investigations based on communitarian solidarity, is not only a reorientation within the circle of truth production. The purpose of radical collaboration in IJ should also be a return to solidarity with the public. A true vocation for solidarity with the radical other would relocate investigations from media institutions into the hands of the people. This is inspired by the ideas of citizen journalism (Allan, 2013; Blaagaard, 2013a) and by Weizman's (2017) call to take over the means of investigation. As mentioned in Chapter 7, there is no way journalists can cope with the volume of today's overflowing information (Gitlin, 2003). In the age of surveillance capitalism and the saturation of data, the sole "objective" replication of information does not add real informative value, rendering journalists' work redundant. In fact, the millions of iterations and variations of complex accounts of reality has led to what Runciman (2017) has called "the obscurity of complexity". There is no way that individual journalists, not even a group of journalists in a newsroom, can shed light on these complexities — the press model based on the all-knowing reporter is most times irrelevant, and largely obsolete today. In other words, informing the public is no longer enough. True transformative investigations require the synergy of people investigating, that is why they need to be open to the public in communitarian solidarity. We need common people as well as experts doing investigations, either because of their expertise or because of their potential to disseminate valuable information in the public interest. This would mean, in a way, a shift from the model of the journalist acting as intermediary between the

state (or those holding power) and the people (Albuquerque, 2005), to a practice that makes a connection between the people and the people, as the collaboration of one of the PdP interviewees with groups searching human remains attested to (Interviewee C5, 2019).

### **3) *A Humanitarian Truth Production***

The two case studies I have employed present apparent discrepancies between them: PdP's grassroots reporting *vis-à-vis* FA's armchair investigations, and FA's overarching political action *vis-à-vis* PdP's restraint from political activities. By addressing these tensions, I hope I can make the case for a framework for investigations that employs all technological means of representation at hand, but whose ultimate end is a production of truth that is not just an abstract account — but rather, a humanitarian truth production. By the same token, this framework would put human existence in collectivity at the centre of the construction of that truth, by giving a name to what happens in the world and striving towards the other's deliverance and that of its environment.

Firstly, PdP's type of journalism was one that responded to the general obliteration of common people that abstracted them into a number of fatalities or casualties in a war on drugs; PdP's response was a radical return to the voice of the humans who were suffering — the victims, the perpetrators, their families, and all the human stories that transcended the reduction of lives to figures and graphics (Interviewee BD6, 2019). This effectively countered a top-down narrative that was based on brutality and control against human bodies, thus decentring public discourse (Muhlmann, 2007) and marking the beginning of a political operation that challenged hegemonic narratives. This development is

important because PdP lays the ground for the kind of discursive battles that resist the centralisation and abuse of power (Zavala, 2018), which is still one of the biggest challenges for journalism in today's Mexico media system. This return to the human account with all the problems of faulty memories in testimonies that might be subjected to verification, turned out to be one of the best antidotes against the objectification of human lives (Interviewee BD4, 2019).

In contrast to PdP's approach, testimonies in the voice of the victims were not that salient in Plataforma Ayotzinapa. Although the narrative there is based on the voice of the victims, this voice was taken from other resources. In other words, these voices had been mediated before, either by the independent group of investigators (the Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes, GIEI) or by journalists. Even if it was the legal defence team who asked not to have access to the victims, the fact that the FA team never went to speak with the survivors raises some questions. One must acknowledge that FA has collected direct testimonies in other projects (e.g. the Sednaya Prison in Syria or the killing of a Bedouin in Israel's West Bank) (Forensic Architecture, 2020), but this did not happen in the Mexican case. Even more, the lack of on-the-ground investigation has happened in other projects as well (e.g. neo-Nazis in Germany, Hong Kong protests) (Forensic Architecture, 2020) where the gathering of evidence is delegated to a local NGO or activist group. From the analysis of the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, I have assessed the kind of investigations inspired by FA's practice (i.e. visual investigations based on open source data of time and space) that have been adopted in mainstream media outlets such as The New York Times or Der Spiegel. These visual investigations have arrived in the realm of IJ thanks to the overabundance of imagery on the internet. This practice draws from the millions of pictures, videos, and other multimedia data available on the

web, to investigate cases of wrongdoing. In this excess of data, investigators set out in search of evidence caught on phone cameras or amateur videos uploaded to social media platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. Some of the most relevant instances are two offices with whom FA has been in constant collaboration — Bellingcat in the UK, or The Visual Investigations team at The New York Times. This is not to say that the work FA does based on open-source data is sheer armchair investigation, as some have said of projects such as Bellingcat or The New York Times' Visual Investigations team (Schwartz & Barry, 2018), since FA has gathered information on the ground for their stories before. However, it does indicate, in the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, a latent problem of a distant investigator that solely receives previously mediated evidence, undermining the humanitarian aim of that practice.

How to make sense of the contrasting practices of PdP's grassroots approach and FA's cutting-edge processing and analysis of digital information? I would argue that a framework for transformative investigations in Mexico needs to depart from a fetishisation of the visual spectacularity of the digital age, and instead use the available technological means of representation to advance a humanitarian truth production that makes sense of the world by labelling it and naming it. This means, not just replicating hegemonic discourses verbatim, but actively creating names and labels to understand wrongdoing and injustices in a post-truth era. That means not relying solely on the development of technology as if the processing of large amounts of multimedia data would result in investigations that transform human lives. Even more, that means departing from the production of pleasing pieces of flamboyant visual construction for the sake of its aesthetic enjoyment and the "cult of seeing". Instead, a humanitarian truth production must acknowledge that not all that exists is visually perceptible, which

means that investigating still needs to go through human testimony and classification, resorting to those who experienced violence, trauma, or who participated in the wrongdoing. PdP's approach to "sifting" images in Mexico, as one of the interviewees told me (BD6, 2019), is helpful here to show how investigations can see beyond vertical narratives and the objectification of (dead) human bodies. Hence, human testimony and on-site investigation cannot be replaced by arms-length or proxy reporting. What gets lost is people's realities and contextual key elements that can only begin to be understood through being present and sharing human contact and communication. Furthermore, only then will the cases that are investigated be those that affect and concern people the most, relocating investigations in the public interest. It is this return to the human image — its very essence of existence shared with other human beings — that breeds solidarity and empathy with the other, eliciting the motive for the transformation of reality and the whole reason for the existence of an investigative practice.

Another point of conflict between the two cases was FA's direct and broad political interventions versus PdP's timid political steps (which in the end were limited to journalistic work only). Certainly, FA's activity does not end with the dissemination of their investigations, and I would claim that crossing the boundaries of media forums is key to achieving that humanitarian truth production. In contrast to the Mexican group of journalists, Weizman's concept of counter-investigations adopts a political stance, and then is willing to provoke all the necessary circumstances that facilitate transformation. This goes beyond traditional democratic and media theory that restricts journalism action to the moment of publication and the stimulation of debates in the public sphere (Waisbord, 2000), and even surpasses some of the most adventurous ones that

allow journalists to elicit outrage (Protest, 1992). The body of literature produced by Weizman and the series of projects FA has embarked on, show an interventionist model in the pursuit of social change — from the collaboration with NGOs, to an active participation in courts (in Germany and the International Criminal Court) and even the persuasion of the senses through art aesthetics in museums. All of these practices are constituted in forums with a variety of consequences, transcending traditional media theory on the impact of IJ. In contrast, though initially enthusiastic about a more interventionist role, PdP members have adopted a timid approach to their political goals. In spite of their active calls for protest and for lobbying in defence of Mexican journalists, they have decided to limit their action to the moment of publication, regarding the production of a story as the climax of their very committed practice. Of course, there are numerous things that they are still doing prior to publication (e.g. training journalists, relocating journalists in danger, supporting local media) (Interviewee BD1, 2019). But there are many other activities that they have abandoned that were crucial to the pursuit of political goals (e.g. labour disputes, lobbying, demonstrations). The reasons why they stopped taking more direct actions are more structural and practical than ideological or pertaining to will; they related to the type of media model they were still in contact with and to historical resistances to unionisation (Interviewee F5, 2019).

As mentioned before, one of the consequences of market ideology in neoliberalism was the annihilation of the Mexican journalist as a political actor, with implications for the ultimate aim of journalism but also restricting the areas of action where journalists could play a role. We can learn from the crossroads PdP's found itself in and from FA's emancipatory approach towards the political, to respond to the research question, "where can investigations be deployed to be

truly transformative?”. A framework for investigations in Mexico has to be able to accept that investigations can be presented and deployed in more than one forum (the courts, the cultural, the artistic, and the media). This is something FA does very explicitly and unashamedly. Indeed, by avoiding the label of “journalism” in the pieces they produce, they enjoy many liberties to navigate across various spheres of public life, including, of course, the media world.

If an investigative practice goes beyond the forum of the media, it means that its nature can adapt to different structures to serve its purpose of revealing wrongdoing in order to fight human suffering. This will have two implications for this framework. Firstly, on the production of truth which, in the case of Plataforma Ayotzinapa, meant “naming and labelling” events, resorting to the very human capacity of reproduction of reality (creating, defining, differentiating, identifying). This tackles the problem of the multiplicity of power arrangements in contemporary Mexico and gives a broader operational framework through which to enter the “linguistic battle”, as Zavala (2018) has singled it out, which is one of the most serious challenges for Mexican journalists in covering violence and the increasingly more horizontal dispositions of power. Secondly, this adaptation has implications on the forums, to use the theory developed for FA’s counter-investigations, where this truth production is deployed and which can take the form of whatever location public life operates in. Once it crosses the boundaries of the forums where this practice is traditionally undertaken, the values and humanitarian aim of IJ can transcend media corporations, where its transformative spirit was first buttressed and then fetishized during its industrial phase. The reversal of that reification means abandoning the production of journalism for journalism sake, and eluding the production of images for the sake of pure aesthetic enjoyment and the cult of seeing which is so acute in the digital

age. The true liberation of the investigative practice, as well as the emancipation of investigators themselves, shall be found in the radical other: in the image of the truth inhabiting other human beings.

### ***-Limitations of this Research***

Probably the most salient limitation is how closely involved I was with the people and projects that are the subjects of my case studies. I consider some PdP members to be dear colleagues I have collaborated with in the past and, in some cases, I can call them friends. Also, I was part of the Plataforma Ayotzinapa project, working hand in hand with the FA team almost from its conception, up to its release and the subsequent impacts. This might have granted me privileged access and insights in both cases; however, being that close means that I could have experienced blind spots and biases that might be based on affection and even admiration of some, however rigorous and critical I tried to be in my analyses.

On the limitations of the research methodology, though some have already been mentioned in Chapter 3, there are at least two overarching limitations. Firstly, this research was limited to a particular country — Mexico, a place with its own legal arrangements, political actors, and historical continuums. However, it is acknowledged that the country's reality is connected and influenced by global trends, be it economic, technological, geopolitical, or even ideological. That is why, although this research focuses on the struggles for a transformative practice at a national level, it can be read as an account of how certain ideals of the muckraking tradition of the press were adapted to Mexico's conjuncture, showing the challenges it faces to be truly transformative in neoliberal times. This leads

me on to the second aspect on methodological limitations, which is that this research was invoking a particular role of the press, referred to by different names, sometimes indistinctively— IJ, or watchdog reporting, or muckraking journalism. Nonetheless, although the research has tried to keep within the limits of the more confrontational, in-depth journalism that takes more time and resources to make, this thesis touches upon a varied understanding of the role of the press in liberal democracies. Therefore, it shares some history, key players, and problems and logics of power as discussed in journalism studies at large.

In another level of closeness to the subject, I was a very active journalist before starting this PhD, looking forward to enabling investigative journalists in Mexico and to contribute to the transformation of the country for the better. Even during the process of writing this thesis, I was still enthusiastic and effectively involved in giving editorial advice or thinking along with other journalists in gatherings in Mexico, Latin American, and the UK, about how we could improve as well as undertake investigative work. I have therefore been involved in theory and practice to be able to undertake IJ myself. I do not fully regret that conduct since it has come with benefits on both sides, as the tradition of cultural studies proved with active artists studying in Birmingham in the late 1960's. However, this close and interested approach comes at a cost. The reader of this thesis should be aware that this framework has been created from a particular location. It is situated so that it may enable more investigative work from wherever possible, not less. This might be in conflict with certain points of view that regard the media and journalists as part of the liberal institutions that alienate political participation (Chomsky & Herman, 2010). I am not saying that this does not happen, but I regard some of those institutions to be strategic sites that ought to be used for the transformation of society when the time is right to do so. Of

course, the revealing of wrongdoing can be done from many other locations and ontologies, and I have even acknowledged and promoted the relocation of this investigative work; nonetheless, this thesis is still hopeful of the transformation or even the creation of institutional bodies so they could serve the common good and not particular interests.

Finally, this is not by any means the only framework that can be used for investigations in Mexico. Neither do I assume that it is free of gaps. This analysis and the proposals that I have made can be perfected and adapted. I believe other researchers can take some of the aspects that I have touched upon here but have been left unworked. For instance, I see a great opportunity in studying the more conspicuous role of women in Mexican IJ since the late twentieth century in more detail. The example of PdP attests to this phenomenon, but a proper analysis with a gender perspective is needed. Also, I see potential in the development of a genealogy for the concept of “wrongdoing” for IJ in Mexico, as it is at the centre of its ethos and many nuances can be further explored that relate to the cultural and sociological associations in a particular country, as well as its legal and political implications. Another concept that I have advanced here for the Mexican case, but which can be helpful to understand how disinformation operates in other contexts, is that of “cacophony” that implies multiple iterations of reality that make information hard to communicate and grasp in the digital age, and which is composed of false accounts, purposeful deceit, and other multiple reasons behind the inculcation of conflicting versions of reality.

### **-Conclusions**

In conclusion, this thesis has analysed the political and economic conditions under which IJ is done in Mexico and, based on empirical information, it has tried to develop a framework for a truly transformative investigative practice to escape the pervasive neoliberal ideology that has hampered its more virtuous ideals, and to face the multifaceted disposition of power in contemporary Mexico.

The framework proposed here has three dimensions, each one recognising pre-existing conditions and a way towards political transformation: **1) A return to political action; 2) A communitarian solidarity; and 3) A humanitarian truth production.**

This framework has tried to rework the role of Mexican investigative journalists as political actors, since prevalent ideologies (Golding & Elliot, 1979) entrenched in neoliberal practices (Escalante, 2016; Hughes, 2009) have degraded it in the name of the creation of a “learned profession” for at least 30 years in Mexico. It has also tried to learn from two examples of relocations of the practice (PdP and FA’s Plataforma Ayotzinapa), to argue that IJ can be invested with broader political powers to act and collaborate with other humans in order to change reality. This is not something completely new, as the revelation of wrongdoing for the bettering of society and the liberation of humans has taken place in Mexico even before the idea of industrial journalism took shape in the West; nonetheless, in a digital age where media corporations serve their own interests instead of the public’s, and where the production of images and narratives has reached the point of a sheer cult of the visual, reframing IJ in Mexico is a necessary task if it is to be truly transformative. To conclude, the experiences of PdP and FA’s counter-investigations (both creating places for political action, communitarian solidarity, and human truth production) suggest

that IJ can become a ductile practice in Mexico, adapting and displaying the spirit of the muckraking press with a political strategy that departs from the almost omnipresent commercialised model and the elusive disposition of power — employing truth production for the transformation of humans' reality.

This framework is not by any means the only way in which the production of truth can serve the public interest. But if these three dimensions are put into practice, transformative investigations would be carried out by any group of people, producing truth with specific political goals for the bettering of society, and not for the sake of selling papers, getting more clicks, or more influence for influence's sake. This would mean that investigation would have to be just one part of a larger political strategy, taking advantage of all the democratic instruments at hand to end wrongdoing, not just revealing it. These groups would not only pursue the almost mechanical production of investigations in the industrial mode of news reproduction, working as separate individuals competing for the best scoop or the best visualisation. But rather, they would see this activity as a place where they can achieve political goals with people who share those same objectives and who would be willing to live and take care of each other, beyond the realm of the professional, transcending onto the level of personal relations, building bonds of trust, solidarity, and friendship. This framework should lead, then, to a reproduction of reality that is not based on accumulation, popularity, individuality, spectacularity, praise and recognition, but a truth that is aimed at the relief of human suffering and, in the process, the emancipation of the self.

This framework for transformative investigations in Mexico issues a call to all those who engage in that practice to depart from a number of reifications. Indeed, from the idolatry of mammon (capital), but also from the fetishisation of

the image. Instead, they ought to turn to the image that is shared and alive in other human beings. Seeing the human as more than just a species, but rather, as carriers of life, agency, and responsibility before others and their environment. Only then the representation of reality will be worthy of being produced, since truthfulness does not only inhabit the individual — it finds its finest and freest version in the collective transcendence.

## Appendix A\*



### Informed consent form

**The informed consent form should always be accompanied by a Participant Information Sheet.**

#### Informed Consent for an interview for the project 'Towards a Journalism Theory for Counter-Investigations'

Please tick the appropriate boxes

Yes No

##### 1. → Taking part in the study

I have read and understood the study information dated [21/05/2019], or it has been read to me. I have been able to ask questions about the study and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and I can withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason.

I understand that if I do decide to withdraw, anonymised data can no longer be removed from the study after 31/08/2018.

I understand that taking part in the study involves an audio-recorded interview and written notes, with my identity being anonymised.

If there is a potential risk of participating in the study, then provide an additional statement:

I understand that taking part in the study has potential risks, including but not limited to incidental identification by third parties, as well as all the risks a journalist in Mexico may face as part of its job (from threats to physical attacks).

*\*This informed consent form has a different title and a slightly different description because the project changed and evolved, in part, thanks to the fieldwork that was carried out.*

2. → Use of the information in the study

I understand that information I provide will be used for academic purposes, as well as other materials derived from this intellectual work, from articles and other content published in print and online platforms.

I understand that personal information collected about me that can identify me, such as my name or where I live, will not be shared beyond the study team.

I agree that my information can be quoted in research outputs.

(In case written information is provided by the participant, e.g. diary) I agree to joint copyright of the materials provided for this project [redacted] to Ruben Irving Huerta Zapien.

3. → Future use and reuse of the information by others

I give permission for information that I provide to be deposited in any academic archive so it can be used for future research and learning.

4. → Signatures

Name of participant [IN CAPITALS] → Signature → Date

I have accurately read out the information sheet to the potential participant and, to the best of my ability, ensured that the participant understands to what they are freely consenting.

RUBEN IRVING HUERTA ZAPIEN → Signature → 20/MAY/2019 → Date

5. → Study contact details for further information

Ruben Irving Huerta Zapien  
+447784548718  
r.huerta@gold.ac.uk

## Information sheet (27/12/2018)

Name of the project: 'Towards a Journalism Theory for Counter-Investigations'

University and department: Goldsmiths College, University of London (Politics & IR / Media)

Expected date of publication: Early 2020

Researcher: Ruben Irving Huerta Zapien

**Summary:** This thesis is an attempt to provide journalists with a theory to undertake investigative reporting in a country like Mexico. There are two important reasons why there is the need of such a text. In the first place, journalism was already finding it difficult to play a transformative political role by means of its investigative work, branded in contemporary media as Investigative Journalism (IJ). And secondly, a decade of a savage war on drugs has left Mexico with hundreds of thousands of victims, including journalists, and a deep mistrust in local and federal governments prompted by blatant corruption cases. I hope journalists can find a series of conceptual grips to undertake investigations; from the argument behind a more interventionist journalism, to the meaning of evidence in a digital age and the processing of testimonies with technological tools. At the centre lies the concern of providing a political foothold to undertake investigations across the irregular path of the Mexican polity or, as it were, a roadmap towards counter-investigations in the middle of a crisis of mistrust.

*Esta tesis es un intento por dotar de una teoría de investigaciones para periodistas en México. Hay dos razones principales para escribir una tesis como ésta. La primera, que los periodistas en México se encuentran en un contexto precario para jugar un papel transformador a través de investigaciones periodísticas, o a través del llamado "periodismo de investigación". Y en segundo lugar, una década de guerra contra las drogas ha dejado a México con cientos de miles de víctimas, incluyendo a los propios periodistas, así como una grave desconfianza en los gobiernos locales y el federal, agudizada por graves casos de corrupción. Espero que los periodistas pueden encontrar una serie de asideros conceptuales que sirvan para llevar a cabo investigaciones en este contexto. Esto tiene que ver con un rol más intervencionista de la prensa, así como con el significado de evidencias o pruebas en la era digital, y con el procesamiento de testimonios a través de herramientas tecnológicas. Al centro de la discusión se encuentra la preocupación por dotar de un piso conceptual para investigar en los senderos irregulares de los espacios políticos de México o, por decirlo de alguna manera, una especie de hoja de ruta hacia la creación de contra-investigaciones en medio de una crisis de desconfianza en las instituciones del estado.*

Version: October 2018

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