

Individualized Work and Unemployment Risk in Northern Mexico Newspapers**Individualización y riesgo de desempleo en los periódicos del norte de México**Víctor Hugo Reyna García¹

RESUMEN

El presente artículo analiza el vínculo entre la individualización de las relaciones laborales y la escenificación del riesgo de desempleo en los periódicos del norte de México. Definidos como pioneros de la modernización del periodismo mexicano, los periódicos de esta región también se han distinguido por sus esquemas de contratación directa. A partir de la teoría laboral de Beck, y trabajo de campo en Baja California, Nuevo León y Sonora, este artículo estudia las experiencias y percepciones de los periodistas sobre sus relaciones laborales y continuidad en el empleo. Los resultados exhiben las consecuencias indeseadas del proyecto modernizador.

Palabras clave: 1. individualización, 2. riesgo de desempleo, 3. periodismo, 4. trabajo, 5. norte de México.

ABSTRACT

Abstract: The present article analyzes the relationship between the individualization of labor relations and the actualization or staging of unemployment risk in different newspapers in northern Mexico. Once defined as pioneers in the modernization of Mexican journalism, newspapers in the region have also distinguished themselves by their use of direct contracting schemes with their employees. Based on Beck's theory of labor and fieldwork conducted in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora, this study describes the experiences and perceptions of journalists who work in these organizations concerning their labor relations and employment continuity. Our results revealed the unintended consequences of the modernizing project.

Keywords: 1. individualization, 2. unemployment risk, 3. journalism, 4. labor, 5. northern Mexico.

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INTRODUCTION

Newspapers based in northern Mexico have been identified as pioneers in the modernization of Mexican journalism² (Hughes, 2009; Lawson, 2002; Schmitz, 2008). The political and corporate culture of the region, as well as its proximity to the United States, might have been the factors that allowed for the emergence of new journalistic cultures and news production models. The rule of objectivity and the watchdog function of journalism were adopted and institutionalized in this region before than in the center and south of the country. As a result of direct counseling, expansion, and imitation, these standards are currently in place in most Mexican news organizations.

Journalism scholars still debate the normative change in Mexican newspapers (González & Echeverría, 2018; Reyna, 2016; Salazar, 2018), but the modernization process has not been limited to the transformation of reporting and editing standards, it has also meant changes in contractual and labor matters. In other words, although academics have focused on the normative dimension of the process, a parallel and just as or even more important transformation has taken place in the labor market, one which defines the characteristics of the jobs and work activities of those who implement and support the normative change: journalists.

Despite their heterogeneous practices, some of the journalistic organizations that led the modernization project in the region share the use of direct contracting schemes. Newspapers such as *El Imparcial*, in Sonora, and *El Norte*, in Nuevo León, or weekly newspapers such as *Zeta*, in Baja California, force individualized labor relationships³ directly between the employee and the employer and restrict the formation of unions. Some of these newspapers go as far as asking their employees to sign confidentiality agreements that forbid them from discussing their work outside the newsrooms.

Four and half decades after the beginning of the transformation of *El Norte* and three and a half decades after the foundation of *Zeta*, the individualization of labor relations is staging unemployment risk for the new generation of journalists and threatening their permanence in this line of work. This phenomenon, which has not yet been examined by journalism scholars in Mexico, is contributing to the increase of job dissatisfaction and

²The modernization of Mexican journalism is understood as a transformation process that started during the 1970s with the purpose of eradicating corruption and incompetence in the country's journalistic organizations. Numerous national and international scholars have studied and are still studying the scope and limitations of this movement.

³Labor relationships are understood as a negotiation space between employees and employers, as the link between capital and labor. The rights and obligations of both parties are defined by these relationships. Three types of work relationships can be identified for practical purposes: collective relationships, between a union and a company; tripartite relationships, also between a union and a company, but mediated by the state, and individual relationships, directly between the employee and the employer.

voluntary turnover in organizations that were once regarded as places where long-term careers could be pursued.

Drawing on Beck's labor theory (2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012) and data obtained from 64 unstructured interviews with journalists and former journalists from newspapers in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora, the present study analyzed the connection between the individualization of labor relations and the staging or actualization of unemployment risk among the region's journalists. The experiences and perceptions of the interviewees revealed a series of unintended consequences derived from the modernization project and challenged the positive characterization that prevails in studies on Mexican journalism.

The article consists of four sections. The first section presents a conceptual framework to study the link between the individualization of labor relations and the staging of unemployment risk in journalism. The second section describes the research design and justifies the use of cohort analysis as an adequate strategy to examine changes and continuities in journalistic work. Finally, the third and fourth sections analyze the individualization of labor relations in newspapers based in the states included in the study and its expression as unemployment risk.

INDIVIDUALIZATION OF WORK AND UNEMPLOYMENT RISK

In Beck's labor theory (2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012), the notions of individualization and unemployment risk are closely linked: the former refers to the institutionalization of individual labor relations and the fragmentation of the worker's collective identity, while unemployment risk refers to the threat of unemployment in an organization or production sector. The connection between the two notions is a cause and effect relationship in which employment, the risk of unemployment, and actual unemployment become individualized as an unwanted consequence of the success of modernization, industrialization, and neoliberalization processes.

In contrast with Bauman (2008), who conceives individualization in the context of his theory of liquid modernity as a fragmentation of society and a temporalization of social experiences, Beck (2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012) defines it as a process that dissolves traditional social forms and bonds, in addition to the certainties of class society, to allow for the emergence of a new type of social cohesion. Therefore, it is a process of social uncoupling and recoupling in which the individual is set free even against their will.

Individualization, the author states, is not synonymous with emancipation or fragmentation and the end of the social dimension, but rather a societal transformation in which the individual is forced to choose their own path in life. Unlike individualism, commonly understood as a series of attitudes and preferences centered on oneself, individualization is a macrosociological process beyond individual preferences that entails

both the emancipation from pre-established behavior patterns and the uncertainty of not knowing whether living one's life is better or worse than letting oneself be guided by tradition.

In the world of labor, individualization is the product of the success of the labor movement rather than a gift from the capitalists: it improved the workers' living standards and dissociated them from the conditions of misery that stirred class consciousness and unleashed class struggle (Beck, 2013, pp. 136-137). For its part, neoliberalism standardized employment contractually, spatially, and temporally and deepened the individualization of employment, unemployment risk, and unemployment (Beck, 2007, pp. 9-15).

The individualization of labor relations reinforces both transformations because it establishes a direct contracting scheme, without mediation by workers' unions, as the new norm, and employees are disconnected from their collective work identities. Individualized labor relations are intertwined with biographical individualization, and they both erode the traditional labor biographies in which education guaranteed a long-term career in a single workplace, and individuals are consequently forced to permanently adapt themselves to the new realities of the labor market.

In this regard, the individualization of work causes what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2012) call risk biographies, in so far as individuals are exposed to a situation of permanent risk in which the façade of prosperity and freedom often hides a background of crisis and imprisonment. The freelancer is a perfect example of this circumstance: people who work on their own, without a temporary or permanent contract to regulate their employment relationships, enjoy greater spatial and temporal freedom than people employed under a more traditional scheme, but their permanence in a line of work is often uncertain.

Beck's critics have questioned his social and labor theories. They argue that the class scheme cannot be done away with and that his statements cannot be generalized (Atkinson, 2007; Curran, 2013; Mythen, 2005). Academics often argue that Beck's concepts are inapplicable to industrially underdeveloped countries such as Mexico because they are based on the reality of an industrially developed country: Germany. However, this logic is rarely used to criticize Durkheim's, Marx's, or Weber's theories, even though they were developed in the nineteenth century... more than one hundred years ago.

Despite such resistance, since the 1990s, many authors since the 1990s have stressed that Beck's concepts of risk, insecurity, and uncertainty can contribute to renovate the field because they provide a precise description of the experiences of de-standardization, flexibilization, and precariousness (Allen & Henry, 1997; Ekinsmyth, 1999; Reimer, 1998). In the same vein, individualization theory has been shown to be adequate to study underdeveloped countries because collective identities are not being reconfigured only in developed countries (Del Castillo, 2012; Flores, 2011; Zabludovsky, 2013).

Labor studies have a long tradition in Mexico, and they have consolidated research lines as diverse as atypical work, unionism, and ergonomics. However, in the 2017 edition of the

Mexican Association of Labor Studies (AMET), only a couple of presentations (Carballar, 2017; Reyna, 2017) addressed the phenomenon described in the present article: the individualization of work and its expression in the new generation of workers. Instead, the notions of exploitation and precariousness are highlighted by both unionism analysts and scholars focusing on youth work. As many Mexican journalism scholars have pointed out, the wage conditions in the news organizations under study are above the national average (De León, 2012; Hernández, 2010; Orozco, 2010). In a country where journalists can make 20 pesos per published article (Díaz, 2014) or 100 pesos per day (Carmona, 2018), the base salaries of reporters in the studied region is relatively high, with salaries between eight and 15 thousand pesos per month. This could prevent them from being classified as low-wage or precarious workers. Therefore, the concepts of exploitation and precariousness are not quite adequate to describe the changing nature of work and employment in these companies.

The present study used Beck's theory of individualization represent the institutionalization of individual labor relations and the fragmentation of collective work identities in the newspapers that led the modernization project in northern Mexico's journalism. Although this process could be understood as a continuum rather than as a localized change, since there is no history of unionism in these organizations, it represents a superior phase insofar as it portrays the collective organization of workers as an obstacle to the proposed normative modernization.

This individualization of labor relations is intended to increase the flexibility of working conditions—it blurs the boundaries between formal and informal employment, and even the employees who feel safe thanks to a full-time indefinite contract become vulnerable. In addition to the precarious working conditions that many employees are forced to face as a result of the individualization of labor relations, it increases unemployment risk and has a negative impact on job satisfaction among journalists and on their intentions to continue in the business of journalism.

It should be highlighted that unemployment risk is not equivalent to unemployment itself but to the pattern of perceptions associated with the possibility of unemployment. The notion of staging, understood as perception and anticipation of the worst possible scenario, articulates this idea because it reflects its nature as a transition from a latent to a manifest state. The latent risk of unemployment exists before being socially perceived, whereas the manifest risk of unemployment presents itself as different types of reactions experienced by the social actors.

For decades, the risk of unemployment remained latent and was characterized as residual in the journalism organizations behind the modernizing movement. Certain people were fired due to undesirable attitudes, but it was always argued that such cases were rare. The twenty-first century has witnessed the emergence of a narrative centered on the demise of

journalism (McChesney & Nichols, 2010; McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Ryfe, 2012), and certain organizations have been forced to close entire sections and lay off personnel.

For example, Grupo Reforma laid off 130 employees in 2016 (Pazos, 2017). The proportion of these 130 workers who were journalists remains undisclosed, as well as if they worked for *El Norte*, *Mural*, or *Reforma*, the three generalist newspapers owned by this publishing group. By the end of 2017, Grupo Healy was also experiencing massive layoffs. The number of workers who lost their jobs and their positions remains undisclosed, as well as if they worked for *El Imparcial*, *Frontera*, or *La Crónica*, the three generalist newspapers owned by Grupo Healy. However, the dismissals included the CEO, who had taken office in 2015, after 16 years in the company.

Extrapolating the logic of his social theory to his labor theory, Beck (2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012) argues that this new form of unemployment risk erodes the protected zones of class society and makes vulnerable to unemployment social groups and individuals that were previously immune to it. Far from being an expression of the disappearance of inequalities, this mechanism reflects the emergence of a threat that is less and less circumscribed to a particular group, area of specialization, profession, or position. The case of the Grupo Healy's CEO, who was laid off despite his seniority, position, and academic background, is an example of the "new normal."

RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study is part of a larger research project, and it is based on data from 64 unstructured interviews with journalists and former journalists from Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora (Mexico). Different studies have identified newspapers from these states as pioneers in the modernization process of Mexican journalism that began in the 1970s (Hughes, 2009; Lawson, 2002; Schmitz, 2008). This makes them an ideal object of study to analyze the current state of the modernizing project and its consequences. Our emphasis is on the individualization of labor relations and the staging of unemployment risk.

Interviewees included journalists who used to work or were working in the following news organizations at the time of the study: *Frontera* and *Zeta* (Baja California); *El Norte* and *Milenio* (Nuevo León), and *El Imparcial* and *Expreso* (Sonora). Journalists from other newspapers in the region (*El Mexicano*, *El Sol de Tijuana*, and *Newsweek Baja* from Baja California; *ABC*, *El Horizonte*, and *Reporte Índigo* from Nuevo León, and *Cambio Sonora*, *El Sol de Hermosillo*, and *Media Zoom* from Sonora) were also interviewed to compare the expression of the phenomena under study. Most interviewees had experience in more than one of these organizations.

The selection of these journalistic organizations was due, in the first place, to their role as pioneers of the modernizing project of Mexican journalism and in the second place, to their relevance in terms of circulation and influence on society. Journalists from low-impact

radio stations, television channels, internet portals, and print publications were excluded from the study because these companies have not been identified as part of the modernization process. On the contrary, these types of organizations have been characterized as reluctant to change.

Interviews were conducted between January 2016 and February 2017. Journalists who were active in newspapers in the region, as well as those who had been fired or had resigned, were interviewed to learn about their experiences and perceptions about their jobs. This procedure was intended to record the expression of the individualization of labor relations and the staging of unemployment risk not only among the journalists who held positions in the newsrooms at the time of the interviews but also among those who had left such positions either voluntarily or involuntarily.

The sample included 36 women and 28 men (Table 1). Ten women and 10 men were interviewed in Baja California, and 13 women and nine men were interviewed in both Nuevo León and Sonora. The study included fewer men due to the increasing presence of women in journalistic newsrooms in the region (as reporters, editors, and managers) and because some men were reluctant to grant the interviews. Different studies have shown that women are more prone to quit than men (Hardin & Whiteside, 2009; Reinardy, 2009; Smith, 2015); this trend contributed to the imbalance.

Table 1. Distribution of Interviewed Journalists and Ex-Journalists by Gender

	Baja California	Nuevo León	Sonora	Total
Men	10	9	9	28
Women	10	13	13	36
Total	20	22	22	64

Source: Elaborated by the author.

We interviewed journalists from different generations. The oldest and most experienced interviewees were born between the 1950s and the 1960s and entered the professional field of journalism during 1970s and the 1980s, while younger and less experienced interviewees were born between the 1980s and 1990s and began their journalistic careers between the decades of 2000 and 2010. As a result, the study included interviewees from three different demographic cohorts: baby boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y,⁴ covering more than four decades of professional experience.

⁴Generation Y is here defined as the cohort consisting of people born between 1980 and 1996. *Gallup, Eventbrite, and Dale Carnegie Training* use this definition. Meanwhile, baby boomers are defined as people born between 1946 and 1964, and Generation X as people born between 1965 and 1979. Although the borders between generations are porous rather than solid, this ideal typification allows for the observation of general employment trends.

The cohort analysis allowed for the construction of two ideal types, one including baby boomers and Generation X, and the other including Generation Y, which were used to examine patterns of change and continuity across generations. Thus, we could compare the experiences and perceptions of journalists who were part of the industry both at the beginning and peak of the modernizing project, as well as the experiences of those who were experiencing its crisis. The comparison between these demographic cohorts was necessary to understand why people from one of them, Generation Y, are quitting their jobs in organizations that used to be characterized as suitable for building long-term careers.

As shown in Table 2, the subsample of Generation Y interviewees included 41 journalists and former journalists, while the subsample consisting of Generation X and baby boomers included 23 interviewees. The number of Generation Y interviewees was larger due to the predominance of this sector in the industry, especially as reporters, and because people in this age group presented the highest resignation rate. On the other hand, Generation X and baby boomer journalists who still worked in the newspapers are fewer because they usually hold the less common positions of editors and managers. The hierarchy and organizational attachment of older journalists was an obstacle to interviewing some of them.

Table 2. Distribution of Interviewed Journalists and Ex-Journalist by Generation

	Baja California	Nuevo León	Sonora	Total
Generation Y	13	14	14	41
Generation X and baby boomers	7	8	8	23
Total	20	22	22	64

Source: Elaborated by the author.

The non-probabilistic chain sampling technique, better known as a snowball sampling, was used in order to overcome organizational obstacles and approach the actors. This sampling technique consists in approaching potential interviewees based on suggestions provided by other people. Its name refers to the physical phenomenon of a snowball rolling down a slope and becoming bigger and bigger; similarly, the sample size grows as the selected individuals suggest that their acquaintances be contacted (Ochoa, 2015). The method was useful to identify both active journalists and ex-journalists.

Instead of a structured or semi-structured interview, unstructured interviewing was used as a research technique. As opposed to a structured or semi-structured interview, an unstructured interview introduces the questions in no specific order, which makes it similar to a conversation. Questions are asked based on the answers, and the respondent's expressions are placed before the interviewer's. Similar to the non-probabilistic chain sampling technique, this type of interview is recommended when populations are difficult to access or suspicious of external actors.

Interviews were recorded in audio, transcribed in Microsoft Word, and encoded in QDA Miner Lite. Per the inductive logic of the research design, we used open coding. This coding technique, widespread in grounded theory, allows for the creation of analysis categories derived from the actors' experiences and perceptions instead of grouping the experiences in pre-established categories. As with the annotations made after each day of fieldwork, this type of coding facilitated the identification of analysis categories. The present study focused on the categories of labor relations and employment continuity.

THE INDIVIDUALIZATION OF LABOR RELATIONS

Although the individualization of labor relations in northern Mexico newspapers began independently from the modernization process associated with journalistic norms and production, it was reinforced by such process. Whereas new journalists' unions emerged and existing ones were renewed in the center and south of the country (Trejo, 1990), the journalistic organizations in the north went the opposite way in pursuit of the modernization project. Specifically, individualized labor relations were imposed, and workers' unions were stigmatized. As a result, the absence of unions acquired a certain and unquestionable character in the organizations.

Although journalists' unions are not theoretically opposed to the modernization of professional standards, the long history of partisanship in favor of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that has characterized Mexican unions was an obstacle for both processes to converge. The anti-union stance assumed by the organizations that promoted the transformation of Mexican journalism was justified during the 1970s and 1990s because unionism amounted to partisanship, tradition, continuity—everything they sought to end.

This opposing stance became more evident in view of the organizational connections between Grupo Healy and Grupo Reforma. In addition to reporting and publishing standards, the newspapers in these publishing groups shared a model of individual labor relationships where union mediation was absent, creating a form of organizational attachment based on the development of a sense of belonging. Drawing from their origins as family businesses, Grupo Reforma and Grupo Healy introduced the notion of *family* to replace the ideas of class struggle and create consensus among their employees.

This shift meant a radical change in the way journalism was done, and it improved certain working conditions such as compensations; however, at the same time, it underpinned the direct contracting scheme that these organizations had inherited. Of course, they had multiple reasons. On the one hand, it kept the organization in complete control of staff turnover, which allowed it to continue hiring, firing, and threatening employees with the prospect of losing their jobs as it pleased. On the other hand, it neutralized the collective organization of workers under the pretext of continuing modernization.

The theme of union and stigma emerged during the interviews with journalists who experienced the transformation while working in *El Imparcial*, *El Norte*, and *Frontera*. Not only were these interviewees uninterested in being members of a union, but they were also unable to conceive of any alternative to individual labor relations. Even those who had been fired or forced to resign justified the lack of labor mediation: “There are no [unions in the newspapers, but] I don't know if they are needed... because sometimes unions are hard to deal with” (journalist 1 from Sonora, woman, 49).

A journalist who was fired from *El Norte* in the early 1980s due to a heated discussion with Ramón Alberto Garza, editorial director of the newspaper, relayed similar thoughts. She had played different roles associated with journalism and public relations for three decades, and at the time of the interview, she was leading a project with the Nuevo León journalists' association, but she holds on to the idea that unions are an unnecessary evil. For her, as for the pioneers of the modernizing project in which she was formed, the main goal is to professionalize journalists and not to define their working conditions and relationships:

I don't think that a union is the best way to go because of the way in which unions are run in Mexico, not with professionalization in mind... to grow as a society... to [generate] higher income or social benefits. You have the right to benefits just because you are a worker. Why not a journalist? Why do you have to create a union of journalists or reporters? (journalist 2 from Nuevo León, woman, 58).

This logic prevents journalists from becoming aware that the direct hiring scheme is the product of a certain time and space, not a given and inevitable circumstance. It also blinds them to the historical fact that most of the progress in terms of labor conditions derives from union struggles rather than from the kindness of employers. As stated by Beck (2013), certain wage conditions (above the average for journalists in these newspapers) can dissociate individuals from the conditions of misery that would trigger the emergence of class consciousness and mobilize them in the direction of class struggle; therefore, they contribute to the social reproduction of their own unemployment risk.

The absence of unions in organizations individualizes work relationships and work experience (Beck 2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012) (see table 3). Devoid of membership in an association within their organization, the collective identities of workers must be built outside the workplace, with the community of journalists, where they cannot influence organizational decision-making. Few journalists are aware of this, and they use these spaces of informal relationships (Zelizer, 1993) to reproduce the management discourse in which they were trained from generation to generation.

This is how the idea that journalists' unions are an unnecessary evil has come to permeate newspapers such as *Horizonte*, *El Sol de Hermosillo*, *Expreso*, *Media Zoom*, *Milenio*, or *Informe Indigo* (in fact, the entire journalistic industry in these states), in addition to the knowledge transferred by Grupo Healy and Grupo Reforma journalists when

they join other organizations or become teachers. “In journalism, there’s a time to check in, but there’s no time to check out” (journalist 2, Sonora, woman, 52); the social reproduction of these concepts grants them an unquestionable nature and help them to be perpetuated.

Table 3. Individualization of Labor Relations in Northern Mexico Newspapers

Basic Characteristics of Employment In Northern Mexico Newspapers

Predominance of direct hiring schemes (between employee and employer).

Individual definition of working conditions.

Stigmatization of workers’ unions.

Contracts easy to terminate by employer.

One-sided modification of employment and salary conditions.

Inability of workers to influence the definition of employment and salary conditions.

Inability of workers to influence the organization’s editorial stance.

Undefined work schedules (12 hours or longer).

Work is submitted to multiple platforms in exchange for one salary.

Blurred boundaries between formal and informal employment.

Confidentiality agreements forbidding employees to talk about work outside their newsroom.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Besides Grupo Healy and Grupo Reforma, the most extreme case of divergence between modernization and unionization in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora was found in *Zeta*. Founded by journalists Jesús Blancornelas and Héctor “El Gato” Félix, this critical and independent weekly newspaper based in Tijuana emerged in response to a drafting coup orchestrated by the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) against Blancornelas via newspaper *ABC*. The founders of *Zeta* decided not only to prevent the creation of unions in their organization, but that personnel was paid as independent agents, without an employment contract.

The logic of this labor policy is that, without a union, the prospect of a strike is minimized or eliminated, which guarantees continuity to the editorial project expressed by the company’s motto: “*Libre como el viento*” (Free as the wind). However, considering its purportedly progressive editorial line, it is striking that *Zeta* has maintained this neoliberal contracting scheme for three and a half decades. Even small publications such as *InfoBaja* employ their journalists formally under contract. It is therefore paradoxical that a newspaper that has been the target of numerous attacks and threats fails to protect their staff’s job security.

For decades, this contracting scheme has remained unchallenged. Journalists accepted not only the risk of unemployment, but also the risk of death, because being part of the organization—whose agenda is built on the basis of watchdog investigative reporting—was a source of pride and job satisfaction. The situation began to change after the assassination of an editor in 2004 and the death of Blancornelas in 2006. Two other editors

resigned because they feared being killed, and Generation Y journalists were more aware of their labor rights when they began working in the newsrooms.

Lacking a contract and the possibility to create a union, this new generation of journalists is faced with a dilemma: to assimilate the current labor relations and working conditions or to relinquish what they ideologically conceptualize as critical and independent journalism, in line with the watchdog function of journalism. Some of them have taken the second option and even won labor lawsuits against the organization, which refused to honor severance payments. Others prioritize the editorial project and put their dissatisfaction and intentions to quit indefinitely aside:

It's strange; I don't have a contract with *Zeta*... Actually, I'm paid honorary fees; I've never signed a contract to work here. This is another odd practice: all reporters and photographers are paid honorary fees; we are not in the payroll. The explanation is that when Blancornelas owned *ABC*, the newspaper union, which was (I think) with the CTM, an organization affiliated with the PRI, went on strike... which is very similar to what happened at *Excelsior*... The government ordered a strike to remove Blancornelas from management and leave him without a newspaper. So, I understand that when he created his new newspaper, he said: "You know what, I'm not taking the risk of something like that happening again," and thus every employee, reporters and photographers, [were hired] for honorary payments. Actually, being here is a matter of conviction. I'm telling you. I complain, for instance, that in *Frontera* I would probably be dissatisfied with my line of work, but I would have IMSS [health care], I would have INFONAVIT [housing credit], bonuses, everything.... And the regime here is totally... as if it was of... but you are actually an employee with the company (journalist 1 from Baja California, woman, 27).

Therefore, the given and unquestionable nature of individualized labor relations begins to crumble with generational change. Even though a collective organization of workers is not yet viable in response to the contracting scheme since negotiation attempts and resignation events take place at the individual level, a critical current has emerged to challenge *Zeta's* employment policies. Even if this critical current fails to change the state of affairs, voluntary staff turnover is already proving to be an issue for the organization's management.

THE STAGING OR ACTUALIZATION OF UNEMPLOYMENT RISK

The notion of unemployment risk becoming "staged" refers to the perception and threatening anticipation of the possibility of being unemployed. Similar to the Marxist notion of class, it is an empowering and action-oriented type of awareness. The difference is that this realization is also a lack of certainty, which results in anxiety and stress. As a consequence of the individualization of employment and unemployment in contemporary society, the perception and anticipation of unemployment risk become an increasingly individualized experience.

Both deviating from and echoing Marx (1989), Beck (2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012) argues that class identities have been eroded, and the social class *per se* has been replaced with an actual class, yet lacking class consciousness. The cases of journalists employed by newspapers in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora are a window into this phenomenon: they share a set of not entirely favorable labor relations, but they fail to develop a class consciousness to transform such relations. On the contrary, these journalists contribute to the social reproduction of the direct contracting scheme in which they have been socialized.

The interviewed journalists and former journalists are aware that their jobs are at stake. Although not in sociological terms or entirely, they acknowledge that their continuity in their jobs is threatened by organizational and institutional factors. First of all, the culture of fear and the idea that “this newspaper will do with or without you” adds substance to the threat: it is staged. In the second place, the actual dismissal of those who fail to adapt to the organizational discipline ends the hypothetical nature of the danger and makes it real. Additionally, the narrative of the end of journalism makes their professional future even more uncertain.

The culture of fear is not only a mechanism to enforce professional standards but also an instrument to let the employee know that their continuity in their job is fragile and that any attitude problem can be grounds for termination. The journalistic organizations that promoted normative modernization used numerous strategies to intimidate journalists, but one of the most common was found to be changing roles without prior warning to the employees. The argument, embedded in the logic of the modernizing project, is that it prevents them from becoming accustomed to a single role and decreasing their productivity.

In the case of journalists employed as reporters, role rotation represents a rotation of information sources. Any degree of specialization achieved by the reporters in their work with a given source is sacrificed in order to prevent corrupt practices. This is discouraging for journalists because their professional ethics are called into question, and it is perceived as a strategy to force their resignation. If they adapt themselves to organizational discipline, they can be allowed to continue working. But this is not guaranteed either, because deep down, it is all an expression of a power game:

I think that [moving me from the health care source to the public security source] was like the first step to get me out of balance, like I ... maybe by moving me they thought that I would say: “Oh, no...! I don’t want the police section, I’m leaving, I’m quitting!” Because that’s when the changes began. There were many changes back then, and there were three people who were canned in the same period... in three months, one month apart, myself among them. And they had changed the sources of all three of us [before we were fired]. In other words, after we had been... I mean, it is also healthy for us to change, but we thought, at that moment, we... [that it was all meant to get us out

of balance], and we confirmed it afterward, that it was to destabilize us (journalist 3 from Sonora, female, 29 years old).

Role rotation as a prelude to staff rotation has two functions: to remove journalists who refuse to adjust to organizational demands and to intimidate active journalists. During the golden age of the modernizing project, which was also a peak period for printed publications, dismissing an employee or forcing them to resign had the desired effect because the journalists who continued in the newspapers were sure to observe the rules in order to keep their jobs. Moreover, being fired from a newspaper was a risk to be avoided because it meant that one would have to attempt to rejoin the labor market carrying the stigma of having been fired.

This practice has decreased as a result of the global newspaper crisis and the generational change because the new generation of journalists is anticipating the risk of unemployment and leaving their jobs before the companies fire them. In contrast with other age groups, Generation Y people refuse to remain stoically in their jobs when they are directly or indirectly threatened by unemployment. In most cases, they resign because they have the financial support of their families and because they become aware that vertical mobility in some newspapers is not always possible or desirable:

I learned a lot at *El Norte*... as a school, it is very good... but If I wanted to be promoted from reporter to editor... Gee! I think I would have had to wait until my editor resigned, or died or something... something very radical because there is very little internal mobility. There are many reporters who have been in the same position for 10 or 15 years... some of them because they love reporting and don't want to be editors, and others because there is no mobility; being promoted is not an option [...]. [In my case, when I made the decision to resign], I lived with my parents, I didn't pay rent, I didn't pay for services, I didn't have debts. My only mandatory bills were Telcel and the iPad every month. So I felt free, in that sense, to say: "OK, not only am I quitting, I'm leaving [the country] for more than one month, and I'll see what I can do when I come back" [...]. But I don't know how frequent the case is, quitting just like that [without benefits]. I was also in a position where I could do it. I'm telling you, I didn't pay rent, I didn't have debts, I didn't pay for services... not anything... (journalist 2 from Nuevo León, female, 27).

With food, housing, and health care provided by their parents, journalists from this generation can quit unsatisfactory jobs because they work only to cover their personal expenses and not to support a family. Therefore, they are able to respond to the culture of fear and the discourse that tells them that they are inessential to the organization by leaving it. This flexibility to enter and leave the labor market comes at the expense of their possibility to emancipate from their families, but it prevents them from having to keep a job below their expectations.

Baby boomer and Generation X journalists also expressed dissatisfaction with their jobs and turnover intentions, but they allude to their families and financial commitments as

obstacles to translate such intentions into action. An editor working at *El Imparcial* was removed from his section against his will after two and a half decades with the company, but he remained in the newspaper because he provides for his family: “I liked the other thing more, but, well... you have to adapt... I started in journalism when I was 17, and now I am 43... crunch the numbers... 26 years ago. Well, after 26 years, I have started a family, and I need to look after them” (journalist 4 from Sonora, man, 43).

This means that, while the new generation of journalists anticipates the threat of unemployment by resigning before being fired and perceive the end of the employment relationship as an opportunity to live their own lives, older generations wait passively for unemployment to prey on them (Table 4). People from these generations often are editors or managers, so they are in charge of reproducing the discourse of disposability (“this newspaper will do with or without you”) to the new generation. They repeat that the principle is also applicable to themselves, but they regard their seniority (and termination packages) as labor protection conditions.

Table 4. The Staging of Unemployment Risk in Northern Mexico Newspapers

Generation Y	Generation X and Baby Boomers
Manifest unemployment risk.	Latent unemployment risk.
Do not trust labor protection zones.	Trust labor protection zones.
Question working conditions, especially schedules and salaries.	Question some working conditions, but at the same time they normalize them.
Express dissatisfaction with their jobs and resignation intentions.	Express dissatisfaction with their jobs and intentions to resign.
Anticipate the risk of unemployment by resigning.	Remain in their jobs despite the risk of unemployment.
Resign because they have financial support from their families, and no one depends on their income (individualization within the family).	Do not resign because they have acquired different financial commitments (individualization in the labor market).
Do not deny the possible end of journalism, newspapers, and journalists.	Deny the possible end of journalism, newspapers, and journalists.

Source: Elaborated by the author.

Generation X journalists deny the possible end of newspapers and journalistic work: “Many people say that [newspapers] are going to disappear, I say they never will” (journalist 2 from Baja California, man, 38). Or: “I think that, because of the place where we are, precisely on the Mexican side... I think that strong newspapers, written... that is... physical, are going to be around for quite some time [...]. I do not see a [dark] future because those of us who work in the paper edition are going to work in the digital edition” (journalist 4 from Sonora, man 43).

Despite this optimism, a new series of layoffs at *El Universal*, *Milenio*, and *Reforma* as a consequence of the cut in government advertising proposed by the new federal

government were circulating at the time when this paper was written (Malo, 2018). Although the newspapers in northern Mexico have apparently not yet been affected by the lack of federal income, these news organizations might likely be affected as the budget cuts reach the state level. This circumstance negates the idea that Mexican newspapers are immune to crises and installs risk and uncertainty within these organizations.

Therefore, as well as the risk of unemployment stemming from the direct hiring scheme of the organizations that spearheaded the modernization project in the region, the threat of the end of newspapers and journalistic work has changed from a latent to a manifest state. The migration of readers from print to digital platforms is not limited to developed countries anymore, and the industry can no longer hide this reality under the carpet. Many journalists will lose their jobs due to factors beyond their attitudes and skills. Some will find their way back to journalism, and others will definitely leave.

But regardless of the future of the organizations that spearheaded the modernization project in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora, the individualization of employment, the risk of unemployment, and unemployment itself prevent journalists from organizing collectively to intervene in the reconfiguration of the industry. Journalists experience the threat of losing their jobs individually and are unaccustomed to influencing organizational decision-making; as a result, they see only two options: tolerating the state of affairs or resigning. In this sense, they involuntarily reproduce their unemployment risk.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study analyzed the relationship between the individualization of labor relations and the staging of unemployment risk in newspapers in northern Mexico. The discussion was based on Beck's (2007; 2013; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2012) labor theory, and interviews with journalists from Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora. Identified as pioneers of a project seeking the innovation of Mexican journalism, newspapers in this region have spearheaded a transformation process that increased wage conditions and established a direct contracting scheme as the new norm.

The individualization of labor relations allows news organizations to fire, hire, and threaten employees with termination. This stages the threat of unemployment in the employees and keeps them in a situation of permanent risk. For decades, this risk was deemed residual, and dismissals were often treated as isolated cases of journalists who had attitude problems or competence shortfalls. This culture of fear and a discourse that reduces employees to disposable assets that the organization can easily replace are used as strategies to enforce discipline.

However, generational change and the newspaper crisis have come to transform this situation: Generation Y journalists often address unemployment risk proactively via resignation. This generation leverages the flexibility to change jobs provided by financial support from their parents and quit positions that used to be among the most highly sought

after in the industry during the peak of the modernizing project. In doing so, they free themselves from pre-established behavior patterns and express their dissatisfaction with journalism, although they also face a future marked by labor uncertainty.

Thus, employment, unemployment risk, and unemployment are individualized, as well as voluntary turnover. Clearly, this strategy is not intended to transform the labor relations and conditions in this sector. Resignations are often impulsive, individual acts in which the individualization of labor relations prevents employees from taking actions supported by collective strength and from expressing their demands before enacting their intentions to resign. There is a reservoir of unemployed communication science and journalism professionals; thus, employees are readily replaced with new candidates.

Given the social and political impact of journalism, the increase in staff turnover resulting from the individualization of labor relations and the staging of unemployment risk take on larger dimensions. The process described in the present paper concerns not only the entry and exit of employees in any company but the entry and exit of people who are in charge of supervising the activities of powerful economic and political groups. Therefore, the process has a direct impact on the quality of the information circulating in Baja California, Nuevo León, and Sonora, and as a consequence, on the quality of democracy in the region.

Translator: Miguel Ángel Ríos Flores

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