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## THE THREE TYPES OF CUBAN JOURNALISM

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*“Only One Way” Photo by Iris Mariño*

# EDITORIAL

## THE THREE TYPES OF CUBAN JOURNALISM

Despite the fact that journalism in Cuba has changed considerably in recent years, opening up space for the independent press and new alternative initiatives, there are still three distinct blocs. There is the state press, characterized by being more propaganda than journalism and supporting strong censorship; the independent media, which is exposed to constant smears to their reputation and repression by the government, as well as its own deficiencies in terms of quality; and the new alternative media, with its more critical spirit and new and interesting perspectives on the Cuban reality, this group is still always respectful towards the government, without daring to exceed certain prohibited limits.

This may seem ideal for the Cuban government as the existence of these three types of journalism (official/propagandistic, independent/dissident/amateurish and alternative/more professional) might create the image of an opening space for critical spirit and pluralism. However, this is not the case. The mere co-existence of these three journalist tendencies does not in itself represent an opening. It rather points to the inability of young educated journalists to exercise their profession in - and identify themselves with the mission of - the official media, or the independent media that, according to them, lack professionalism.

Moreover, it seems that the government is not comfortable with this new generation of alternative journalists, specifically with some who are closer to what are supposed to be the established limits. At the end of October, political police arrested and deprived of liberty some of these alternative journalists, trained at their universities and trained within the state media, for the first time as they tried to cover the amount of damage caused by Hurricane Matthew in Baracoa. By turning the alternative bloc into the persecuted, the government itself is breaking the bloc dynamics that has been so valuable for it, and is no doubt fueling the fire that might provoke the explosion of Cuban journalism, from which perhaps a new free journalism will finally be born.

Agnes Koleman

# THE CRISIS OF STATE JOURNALISM IN CUBA

ALBERT GONZÁLEZ

The official Cuban media has been assisting in bringing about its own death, because it has not achieved to adapt itself to the interests of the Cuban people

## A SYSTEM THAT IS SINKING

In recent months, the role of the official press as a regulatory agency for the Cuban political system has been displaced by the so-called “alternative press” and its young journalists, trained at the university, who have migrated from the state media and are creating new, independent spaces outside of the state sector, such as El Estornudo (The Sneeze), Journalism from the Barrio, El Toque (The Poke) and On Cuba, where their profession is developing with (a little more) freedom.

During the most recent gatherings of the Union of Journalists of Cuba (UPEC), the innumerable problems of the state media sector have been pointed out. More than 40 per cent of these media outlets are run by party officials rather than by journalists. These officials are accustomed to adhering to the party line without reservations, which has caused a rupture between the old guard communist reporters and young graduates.

The political system, in the context of this media battle, has not been monitoring whether the journalism being practiced is true journalism. The professional practice in Cuba is dull and superficial; it is limited to absurd reports and triumphs, neither of which are attractive to the new generations.

Thus, if the official press assisting in bringing about its own death, it is neither because of foreign funding to independent journalism (from the side of the opposition), nor because of a pair of small media

with limited staff and political publishing houses scattered among us. It is because the “alternative” media offer, above all, the idea of a possible reform, the criticisms that should appear each morning in the pages of Cubadebate or Granma, if they really wanted to respond to the interests of the people, as mandated by the Socialist). Media (let us be frank) argue much of what many Cubans already want to hear. Although it is clear that they are still quite silent about the other side of reality on the island (they seem to have a tacit agreement with the government that they will not exceed certain limits), they lay out a critical spirit that the Department of Ideology does not like.

## THE FALL DURING THE 90's

This crisis has been a long time coming. Even if it was true that the official press brought together great intellectuals during the 1980s, journalism got worse in the 1990s reporting without any edge or nuance, without any room for discussion and without any criticism of social value.

During this stage, the devaluation of its main leaders intensified, revealed by the lack of professionalism and in the limited perspective of journalism. The smart filters disappeared and the effective journalists were placed under the supervision of the mediocre ones. To make matters worse, in-depth reporting disappeared as a genre in the media. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century, only 25% of journalists in Cuba possessed a 12th grade education or an average technical level. These are precisely those that began to feel threatened by the young graduates,

who are now increasing within the group of “alternatives.”

## THE SYMBOLIC POWER OF THE HISTORY

In any case, it seems that the government is not willing to lose control over the space that the alternative media is taking up. This is why articles published in recent months by Cubadebate, Granma and other official media have shown a strategy marked by a definite editorial policy: saving history is the only way to maintain the system.

A simple monitoring of the state press in recent months reveals headlines that mark a return to the Cold War: “The goal is to destroy the Revolution”, “They want us to forget our history”, “Imperialism intends to take away everything we have achieved”, “The idea is to trample our flag”, “They seek to change our history”, “Why try to demarcate the coordinates of our utopia?” They appeal to the popular psychology as a way of turning the population against these new alternative media outlets. The new strategy of the official propaganda in Cuba tries to play upon the strong symbolic power that still permeates the national consciousness. These symbols help to forge the illusion that the system is obvious and self-evident, when in fact it rests on the continued and systematic exercise of the application of force, in a concept of closing ranks against young people who have migrated from the

official state media, as well as in the repression against independent individuals or opposition activists that have become journalists.

With this ideological campaign, the state media are seeking to gain ground to create digital applications for mobile phones, to organize themselves on social networks and to design a sentimental propaganda, capable of reviving the national history. The most recent campaign titled “Cuba is Ours”, designed by Cubadebate is an example. The objective is to rescue the symbols capable of moving the hearts of the people, and in the process, return to the “right path” some of the lost young people who support freedom of information.

## THE TURNING POINT: REPRESSION AGAINST THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

The Department of Ideology of the Communist Party has never been responsible for repressing journalists: it is the Ministry of the Interior that is in charge of drowning the independent media linked to opponents, such as *14ymedio* or *Diario de Cuba*. The Department of Ideology is not interested in this type of opposition reporters. The Department of Ideology is more concerned about the young people, trained in Cuban universities, who are swelling the ranks of the new alternative media outlets. These younger journalists were not repressed with blows and detentions, or at least that was thought until the

events of October: the three-day detention of Maykel González Vivero and the arrest in a hostel of eight other members of *Periodismo de Barrio* while covering the damage caused by Hurricane Matthew in Baracoa. For the first time, the repressive apparatus caught up with the alternative media.

The pretexts were broad. But a section of the Cuban penal code appeared as the immediate solution, because in Cuba, contrary to what is thought, no law regulates the practice of journalism. Thus, the crime of “illicit economic activity” seems to be the new formula for controlling information, under the pretext of not paying taxes to the National Tax Organization.

## THE SANTA CLARA CHARTER

Before the arrests at the end of October, during the summer of 2016, the so-called “Santa Clara Charter” exploded. Published by Javier Simoni, a journalist from *Diario de Cuba*, the charter had been kept secret for almost a month after a close social circle had passed it around.

The document was prepared by the Basic Committee of the Communist Youth Union of the official *Vanguardia* (Vanguard) newspaper of Santa Clara and read in a provincial plenary of UPEC in that city in front of Alfonso Borges, the head of the Department of Ideology. Among other demands, the young people demanded the end of the official

editorship and the political persecution to which they are subjected to by the most critical government supporters. They also showed the current divide between the theory of journalism from the university and professional practices in the media.

The protest of Santa Clara represented an attack against the entire framework of censorship. And this happened within the same state structure and with irrefutable arguments. That’s why it hurt the government so much. That’s why it caused so much controversy. And that’s why Borges went to great lengths to keep the meeting a secret.

The Santa Clara Charter unleashed repression from within the official system. One of the most affected was the former reporter for the Sagua la Grande radio station, Maykel González Vivero. He was fired from his job in August for collaborating with alternative media. Maykel and his boyfriend Carlos Alejandro Rodríguez, one of the drafters of the charter, have been harshly persecuted. Maykel turned to the Cuban legal system and even with irrefutable evidence of his innocence, he was dismissed, in clear violation of the Labor Code of the Republic.

# MY RESPECT AND SUPPORT FOR THE NEW ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

FRANCIS SÁNCHEZ

**They portray the reality that  
has never appeared, and that  
even cannot appear, in the  
official media**

**T**oday one of the most interesting phenomena in Cuban society is the proliferation of alternative, independent media, including those that neither take orders from the government nor from the opposition. This wealth of articulated voices, which can be seen, rather than heard, especially in electronic formats, is a significant improvement of the efforts and experiments being developed in recent years, such as the use of emails to “publish” news and opinions from you to you, personal blogs, sending of PDF files, or the printing of bulletins and loose-leaf manuscripts.

These new and more organized media outlets, such as *14ymedio*, *OnCuba*, *El Toque (The Poke)*, *Journalism from the Barrio*, *El Estornudo (The Sneeze)*, among others - can exist only thanks to computer servers, sponsors or at least volunteers from abroad, since they do not have support from the government, which has continued to monopolize all such types of infrastructure. They also depend on the open cracks that signify access to the Internet. For an article published on these sites, the author can earn as much or more than someone hired at an official newspaper for several months. These new material conditions, in addition to their own freedoms, make it possible for them to develop a new type of investigative journalism that gets into taboo and problematic areas that would otherwise be hidden.

Unfortunately, the majority of its readers continue to be those people that reside or travel abroad. The cost of the internet service in the country means that hours

spent looking online are reserved primarily for communication between family and friends, that is using networks such as Facebook and IMO for video calls. Although the new media also reach people on the island, and impact an audience that is badly treated by the language of propaganda and in need of discovering and reading about their daily reality without the oversimplified black and white superficiality of politicized discourses. The weekly package is an option that many of them take advantage of to make themselves known with an attractive visual, and a language that hooks you through its casual character.

To me, as someone who has tried for many years to put together a project of an independent cultural magazine (Inverted Tree), I have left the life so that I could dedicate myself to writing and trying to give shape to a space where one could connect socially, to publish and to read, like a symbolic habitat of freedom, it is no less true that as a result I am sometimes enigmatic with a scaffolding with which the determined media can arrive and impose themselves on a marginal or almost illegal margin. However, it would be a waste to devote energies to any such intrigue. Even the fact that one can exist, that they let you, can cause a bout of paranoia in front of the mirror. I do not care where they come from or what materials they are covering so long as these media outlets expand, diversify and complexify the discursive language in Cuba, everything for good. Nor do I care about the structural and deep identity of the people with whom I converse every morning at the door of my house. It is more important

to me what they reflect. They reflect the reality that has never appeared and cannot appear in those partisan rags that, based on their nature, do propaganda work.

It is attractive, it is affordable, but at the same time complicated for the thought police. The neutral zone in which some of these new media have positioned themselves, means that they can avoid defining themselves in definitive political terms. They are neither for nor against, but defend their autonomy based on their professional relevance and the social function of journalism, values that had almost been eradicated in the Cuban context. This includes many journalists that are literally professionals in this sector, they are university graduates with the best tools of the trade. Instead of doing trench journalism or launching denunciations, they narrate life and try to expose truths on their own terms. They have credibility because they are neither a judge nor a jury member, which increases their range. It may be noted, however, that sometimes they also protect themselves by rejecting potential news stories about events associated with the opposition and avoiding issues that might compromise the feeling of the top leaders.

Already on the street, with the diploma hanging at home, they may be pursued by other ghosts, other pressures not unlike the ideological monitoring with which they formed in the state universities under the motto of “university is for

revolutionaries.” They must play a lot with the chain and as little as possible with the monkey. They are human. They strive to relativize and question imposed dogmas, sometimes reverting to the official views from the same premises from which power is entrenched, even if they have to go through a myriad of almost puerile analyzes to arrive at the obvious, like when one is trying to convince a spoiled child. They take risks. They deeply feel that the “other” could be any of us. They have been forced to choose between working in the state media or collaborating with the alternative. But any attack, from any side, increases their credibility and contributes to better delineate their characteristics.

After the *Journalism from the Barrio* team visited the areas affected by a cyclone and were asked to leave that part of the country - other independent reporters, for taking the same step, had suffered days of jail - and when they published their stories and editorials with regard to that, worthy of commendation, for that reason, I did not hesitate to make a minimum act of solidarity, though totally sincere; I entered onto their webpage and put my name and address with this comment: “My regards, and my support”.



“Castrated” Photo by Iris Mariño

# MAYKEL GONZÁLEZ

by Agnes Koleman



**“There are no first and second class journalists”**

*Maykel, who was fired in September from a state-run radio station due to his collaboration with independent media and in October was arrested for three days for attempting to report on the damage caused by the hurricane Matthew in Baracoa, represents the future that the Cuban journalism needs to pursue.*

**M**aykel is a new kind of journalist on the Cuban scene. This is the case, because after studying in the university and developing his career initially within the state media, he has carried his critical spirit to the point of being expelled from the radio station in which he worked. He considers himself an “independent journalist”, knowing full well the problems that this can bring him in Cuba, and despite it being a term that the new alternative journalists avoid since it has a strong pejorative connotation (associated with the opposition without formal training that produce a journalism of low quality and that is often just as incapable of being critical as the state). In addition, he has declared that he does not want to give up some of the ideas of the revolution, nor its social advances, which puts him outside of the majority of opposition media outlets. In the context of the absolute polarization of journalism, Maykel finds himself in a no man’s land.

Perhaps for that reason, it is so remarkable that he shows such consistency in his approach to free-lance journalism in Cuba. “I’m not going to marry myself to any media,” he says; “I write for anyone who accepts my articles just as I

have done them, without changes or little touches.”

However, there is one media outlet that is closer to his values than others. El Estornudo (The Sneeze), a young digital media platform created by journalists from the University of Havana that seems to be breaking the tendency that the new alternative media outlets do not cross: the limits that the government has set for them. El Estornudo crossed all these lines when it published the audio that Maykel recorded secretly during his arrest. Because in May, Maykel was the first non-opposition journalist to spend three days in jail because of journalism; and yes, he also had the courage to publish the recorded audio from his interrogation.

The only crime that Maykel had committed was to cover Hurricane Matthew in Baracoa without the express authorization of the government. And after his release, he refused to accept the reprimand and rhetorically justify what the government did in order to continue practicing journalism without problems, but he publishes every act of repression or detention of a journalist on Facebook, regardless of which side he/she comes from, and regardless of the ideas that he/she

**“I write for those who accept my articles as they are”**

tion of a journalist on Facebook, regardless of which side he/she comes from, and regardless of the ideas that he/she

advocates. “There are no first and second class journalists, we are all journalists, and we all have the right to do journalism,” says Maykel.

In this sense, he is certain that the spaces that the alternative press enjoys now have not simply fallen from heaven: “It may be that some years ago, independent journalists were amateurs, but they are our precursors,” he admits. “I refuse to reproduce the same strategy of exclusion that the government has been applying to us.”

According to Maykel, media outlets, like On Cuba and Journalism from the Barrio try to prove that alternative journalism can be done without offending the government, but he clarifies: “journalism demands freedom, and this will always anger the government.” This is why a crusade has been taking place in the universities against these new media outlets, which have seen a significant rise among

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**“It is possible that some independent journalists are non-professional but they are our forerunners”**

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**“Either the alternative media evolve into a more rebellious journalism, or they will disappear”**

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university students, who have grown fed up with the rigidity of the state media and eager for new points of view.

Maykel sees the situation of alternative journalists in Cuba like that of circus artists, wobbling, trying to maintain their balance: “either the alternative media goes beyond a more contentious or provocative journalism or it is going to die,” he says. As for himself, Maykel claims to have reached a point of no return. “We must overcome this confrontation between independent journalists and alternative journalists,” he says, and insists that although he knows that today this is very difficult, all journalists should make a common force to build a new kind of journalism in Cuba. To conclude he stated that “the ethical degradation of journalism has to end.”



*Photo by Ivett de las Mercedes*



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