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Guatemala Journalists Blast Their Media

by LADB Staff

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Journalists in Guatemala have begun a hesitant drive to open the media to news coverage inconsistent with the economic and social interests of the people who own them. Lacking sufficient outlets for their assertions, and protections for their jobs, a group of reporters turned to email to express their concerns.

They accused the major media print, television, and radio by name of having their reports "changed or ignored by editorial directors, especially those reports related to corruption on the part of present government officials." The reporters said that, while they found doors closed to negative reports on the government of President Oscar Berger, stories highlighting malfeasance in the government of former President Alfonso Portillo were encouraged.

It is widely known and reported that Portillo had taken on the private sector and its influence in public affairs with a vengeance. These concerns were largely supported by a recent report by the UN Development Program (UNDP), *Democracia en America Latina*. The UNDP report noted, "Through the media, business owners concentrate even greater power, either through ownership or by imposing conditions by means of management of the publicity flows. This alliance grants them a major capacity to generate opinion, determine agendas, and influence the public image of officials, political parties, and institutions."

A list of particulars

The email cited thirteen examples of killed reportage, giving names and details. Among them: - A recent change of interior minister was related to an illicit purchase of 80 police cars. - The Ministry of Health has bought medicines from companies in which high-ranking officials have interests. - A government minister owns a farm being sold to Fonatierra (the land fund) at a price in excess of its value. - Officials accused of corruption during the Portillo regime have been given important jobs in the new administration. - A high administration official is accused of no-bid contracting, illegally skirting government procurement rules. - Journalists are being paid to write favorable articles, and favorites have been given public-relations jobs.

The anonymity of the journalists involved in the emails works against their credibility, but, while denying knowing the source, journalists from the named media did confirm to Central America Report, one of the few publications to report the story, several of the allegations in the letter. "Firstly, the work conditions in most national media do not favor freedom of expression within the newsrooms. Labor unions do not exist at two of the three newspapers, and the warning 'don't even mention unions' circulates among journalists.

Furthermore, fixed work schedules do not exist and overtime is unheard of. "Secondly, several journalists consulted, who asked not to be identified, confirmed that news directors carefully

monitor investigative and news agendas, altering or excluding news stories on issues such as corruption on the part of the current government, privileged conditions for the major business families in Guatemala, and any critical stories regarding the Guatemalan media itself. "Thirdly, the sources consulted confirmed most of the cases of corruption mentioned in the message, and they share the conclusion that the absence of these issues in the media is due to the political allegiances of the directors and owners," said the Central America Report story.

Another complaint aired in the weekly Internet publication's follow-up was one seen elsewhere in the region, the sanctity of advertisers (see NotiCen, 2004-08-12). Scandals of overpricing of goods and services rarely see the light of day, nor do tax evasion or customs corruption. These latter are frequent occurrences in Guatemala.

One respondent gave as an example an investigation by the daily *elPeriodico* into accounting irregularities in the farm-worker-advocacy organization *Plataforma Agraria*, while simultaneously ignoring congressional charges of tax evasion by major businesses and newspaper publishers. The paper, *el Periodico*, sets itself slightly apart from the others with the column *El Peladero*, a scandal-mongering column that publishes unsubstantiated rumor in a take-no-prisoners style, where stories involving powerful people sometimes turn up. But even in that column, a review of the past seven months showed almost no mention of the business families or directors of media companies, despite evidence that there were newsworthy incidents concerning them but ignored by the mainstream.

Keeping certain events, facts, and people from public scrutiny has a long tradition in Guatemala. What has been modernized and updated is the means by which it is done. During the most intense periods of the war years (1960-1996), the methods were swift and brutal. Writers were killed, as was Myrna Mack, who wrote about abuse of indigenous in the countryside (see NotiCen, 1999-09-09). Or their loved ones were killed, as was the wife of journalist Byron Barrera, who was shot three times in the same attack.

Media were dynamited, as was the magazine *La Epoca* in 1988 after publishing just 16 weekly issues that broke new ground in covering taboo topics. Publications were boycotted by advertisers and broken financially, as was the magazine *Cronica*, finally sold in 1996 and stripped of its journalistic integrity. The same fate befell the radio news show *Guatemala Flash*, infinitely important as an organ of the public's right to know in a country of widespread illiteracy.

Narrowing the field

During the same period, no fewer than eight daily publications went under because they lacked the power to finance the high costs of converting to new technology in publishing. This left the field open to only two economically powerful publishers. *Prensa Libre* is the largest, and has a 49-year history. The paper owns *Nuestro Diario*, a sensationalist paper, and *elPeriodico*. The other, *Corporacion de Noticias*, owns *Al Dia*, similar to *Nuestro Diario*, and *Sigloveintiuno*, the second-largest national daily. With the end of the war in 1996 came new international oversight, as the UN mission MINUGUA was installed and with it a new form of media control concentration of ownership by economically powerful interests. The change of modus was facilitated by passage of the *Ley General de Telecomunicaciones*, which mandated an auction system of allocation

of television and radio frequencies, ensuring that only the financially powerful could own the broadcast media.

In April 2000, the Organization of American States (OAS) sent Relator for Freedom of Expression Santiago Canton (see NotiCen, 2000-09-21) to look into the situation at the invitation of President Portillo. As then president of the Asociacion de Periodistas de Guatemala (APG) Byron Barrera reported, the APG told Canton, "As a result of the introduction of new technologies and the absence of a formal communication policy, in the last few years there has been a process of concentration of property in the communication media, in radio, written press, and especially in television. This phenomenon has significantly affected the right to impartial, independent, and integral information, has reduced the space for discussion of national problems, and has affected the independence and stability of journalists."

The APG had a number of recommendations, including changes in the law, changes in the way the government releases information, and protection of the jobs of reporters who stray from the dictates of the owners. That was in 2000. Despite Barrera's later becoming Portillo's press chief, the problem remains, but the means by which the mainstream media control coverage continues to evolve.

Major newspapers like Prensa Libre and Sigloveintiuno publish prodigious numbers of opinion columns. These rely to some degree on self-censorship. Only two columnists have written on this current wave of journalist criticism, despite good evidence that most are thoroughly aware of it. When opinion writers stray, they often serve to ghettoize issues when subjects they write on are entirely ignored in the news sections.

Sociologist Boaventura de Souza Santos has termed this phenomenon the production of nonexistence, meaning that the very fact that an issue turns up in an opinion piece brands it as a non-viable mainstream media topic.

A journalist astray

One columnist who strayed is Mario Roberto Morales, a twelve-year veteran with Siglo. In his column, he discussed the email from the journalists, expressed his agreement with their charges, noted the UNDP report, and went on to criticize the papers for loading coverage with the corrupt practices of the former regime as a smoke screen to obscure similar charges against the present administration. Morales roundly denounced other columnists for ignoring the specific charges in the emails, even though they had received them and they had been verified, albeit informally, by Inforpress.

He said their silence "deepens even more citizens' suspicions of the veracity of the content of the denouncement." Sigloveintiuno responded with an editorial in the very same edition calling the column "a libel that questions the degree of independence and liberty of expression that different written, broadcast, and televised communication media enjoy in our country." The editorial ended with a recommendation that Morales resign from the paper, which he promptly did.

Another columnist, Tania Palencia, a respected political analyst, in her Siglo column, criticized Morales for using anonymous emails as a source and Siglo for failing to promote freedom of expression in the editorial, thereby turning its defense into an offense. In a final irony, Siglo rejected her article until she changed her tone, which she did. Inforpress wrote a follow-up piece in its current edition, warning on the basis of its contacts with reporters that after these events few will dare to criticize the media if they want continued access to them. It concluded that "broad space for opinions provides the legitimacy that sustains the media, while its news pages are manipulated with biases and prescribed agendas."

With no real political parties, that is to say, parties with a genuine, long-term constituency, Guatemala is left instead with a situation that Palencia describes this way: "The real problem is old the political power conferred upon the mass media by their control of language. It is known that they constitute a symbolic political and corporate force capable of sustaining or throwing out governments."

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