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Interview With Edwin Yllescas Salinas, Assoc. Editor Of Nicaraguan Weekly, La Cronica

by Deborah Tyroler

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Weekly newspaper La Cronica is judged by many foreign and national readers as Nicaragua's most serious and objective newspaper. Reproduced below is an interview conducted by Nicaline with La Cronica's associate director Edwin Yllescas Salinas. The interview is the first of a series with leading Nicaraguan journalists. [From 01/06/90 report by Nicaline News Network (Managua, Nicaragua)]

Nicaline: When did you begin publishing? Yllescas Salinas: We came out on the stands on November 4, 1988, and before that we spent about a year studying, analysing, observing and discussing what we wanted to do and how we'd do it. As a project we began in May, 1987.

N: The United Nations said in its November report on the Nicaraguan elections that "the lack of (press) objectivity goes to extremes that are difficult to imagine." Can you comment on this observation? YS: The media in Nicaragua is profoundly polarized, to levels that are, in fact, difficult to imagine. I'd say... that La Cronica is an exception. We've tried to give space to all the political parties. We have a section called "Elections 90" which gives coverage to the government, the UNO, the Conservatives, the Liberals, Social Christians, Social Democrats, to everyone. At times our willingness to open up space to all the political parties becomes impossible because people don't communicate with us about things they've planned. But yes, the media is profoundly and absolutely polarized, to incredible levels. Every newspaper here in Nicaragua has its own political party or is part of a political party. La Prensa, obviously, is the official voice of the Union Nacional Opositora. Barricada is the organ of the Frente Sandinista, and if Nuevo Diario has tried in the past to follow a middle path, now it's polarized in favor of the candidates and positions of the government. The newspapers in this country have been polarized and I've been observing this for 35 years into two classes: those that are in favor of the government and those that are against. Today it's even more difficult. In Nicaragua, every day, there exist three distinct realities: Nuevo Diario presents one reality, Barricada presents another reality and La Prensa presents yet another reality. Which means that each morning you can choose which world you want to live in.

N: Is it unethical, as in the case of La Prensa, to receive money from the US government? EYS: Let's look at this in two parts. La Cronica is a project clearly financed by the Dutch government, and by a Dutch non-governmental development agency. We don't feel guilty for working with this money. We receive it in an open and clear fashion. We use channels established by Nicaraguan law for receiving aid. Now, as far as the funds that La Prensa receives, some from the National Endowment for Democracy, some from other US sources, that are not received in a clear and open form, it seems to me that if this is not a censurable thing, at least it's something that should be clearly explained to La Prensa readers. La Prensa should have sufficient honesty to say, "X percent of our finances come from this and that source, and this and this is what we do with it." Not only does La Prensa remain silent about receiving money, it denies it.

N: How much money does La Cronica receive from abroad? EYS: What we've received in the last 14 months, and what we will receive over the next 27 amounts to about \$1.5 million.

N: Is it a conflict of interest for Violeta Barrios de Chamorro to be a Nicaraguan presidential candidate and at the same time editor and publisher of a newspaper, La Prensa? EYS: Yes, I think there is a certain conflict there. She uses her newspaper to applaud and promote herself. It seems to me there's a lack of discretion

there. If I were in a position like that I would not use a newspaper in which I have influence to eulogize or publicize myself. It isn't a socially accepted custom. N: Do you think it is injurious, slanderous or incitatory to refer to the UNO as the GN-UNO, as Barricada and Nuevo Diario do? EYS: Yes it is. The UNO, the Union Nacional Opositora, is made up of 14 parties (sic). Some of the people active in the UNO have been connected in the past with the National Guard, as has been pointed out, and documents supporting this have been presented in the newspapers. But this is not sufficient to conclude that the UNO is connected with Somocismo or the counterrevolution, and the government itself approved the entrance of these people into the country. They were activists before in the counterrevolution and now they're in the UNO, but it was the government that let them back into the country and gave them the liberty to join whatever political party they wanted. Look, the National Guard was eleven years ago. Eternal punishment does not exist. These people were tried, they were sent to jail, they were liberated, rehabilitated; once they're rehabilitated they have the right to chose a political path. If some members of the UNO have had connections with Somocismo this doesn't mean that the UNO is counterrevolutionary and that as a consequence the UNO is the GN-UNO. N: Xavier Chamorro (director of Nuevo Diario) says that the La Prensa has more than shown itself to be a mouthpiece for the US government and the contras. EYS: I think Mr. Chamorro goes a bit too far. Under no circumstances is the UNO the mouthpiece of the counterrevolution, of Somocismo or the US government. The UNO is a coalition of parties. Some UNO members have sympathies with the US government, just like others have sympathies with the Soviet government. It is not legitimate to conclude that the UNO is the spokesman or civic voice for those forces in Nicaragua. I don't think the Nicaraguan government would permit internal political forces to be turned into representatives for foreign interests. N: Are the newspapers of Nicaragua raising or lowering the civic level of the electoral process today? EYS: I fear that the effect of the media has been negative. It hasn't contributed in an adequate way to the pluralization of electoral politics, nor to increasing the level of civic spirit necessary for these elections. On the contrary, it's increased the level of rancor and hatred. Every day, the media injects into the electoral campaign more violence, blood and death. Since the release several days ago of the Supreme Electoral Council's ruling (on campaign ethics), we've seen a slight reduction in tone. Normally the tone is troglodyte. Normally they fill the pages with people who've been beaten, massacred...this is not conducive of [building] civic spirit. N: What is the level of journalistic training in Nicaragua? EYS: I never graduated from journalism school. I'm a lawyer. Based upon my knowledge of students who've come out of journalism school, on an academic level, the school of journalism hasn't taught them much. Their academic level is lamentable, not simply in terms of their mastery of the technical aspects of journalism, but their knowledge of culture, of world history. Ask some of them questions about something that happened in Nicaragua 50 years ago and they know absolutely nothing. Much less can you talk to them about what happened in France 200 years ago, in Spain 150 years ago or in Russia. They can barely write without committing spelling errors. They think journalism is carrying a tape recorder, taking it to some man, asking a series of questions and then transcribing the answers. And usually this isn't a series of questions they've come up with. The director of their newspaper has. Obviously this isn't journalism. With the exception of one person, here at La Cronica no one has gone to journalism school. N: What is it about La Cronica that makes it more objective in style than Nicaragua's three major dailies? EYS: Here, we all come from different political sectors. There are people working for us who are activists in the Socialist Party, with the Christian Democrats, with the Conservatives; there are some who...if not Sandinista, at least they're sympathizers. Some of our people come out of the Patriotic Military Service, and some from the Interior Ministry. Some have worked for La Prensa, others for Barricada, others for Nuevo Diario. In

the year we've been working here we've developed a new mentality. We've never tried to support the Conservatives, the Christian Democrats, the Popular Social Christians or the Communists. Every person who comes through the door here forgets about their political affiliation and dedicates him/herself to work. N: Is there freedom of the press in Nicaragua? EYS: There are two types of press freedom: the first is what the government has officially granted, and the second is what the owners, directors and editors of the newspapers apply. Internal or self-censorship is tougher than external censorship. There is no real external censorship. You can put in a newspaper whatever you want. The government won't throw you in jail or even put you on trial, although there is a media law which sets certain types of sanctions. What has to be feared is whether the directors, editors and assistant editors apply the law. Managing editors go up to people and say, "Look, you're going to interview President Ortega. Remember that he's a Sandinista, he's a bad guy, he's responsible for the war, he's brought the country to ruin, to bankruptcy. Write your story according to these precepts." The limits of freedom within which this journalist is going to operate in his or her daily work is predetermined by the instructions given by the managing editor or editor, or general editor or director. This is the most serious thing. It's self-censorship. We don't practice that here at La Cronica.

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