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A few regulars dragged their chairs over to the small community television in the park. But this evening, instead of the standard soap opera, Cuba's bearded leader took over the screen to begin what would be a two hour speech on education, healthcare and international relations. Amidst moans of indignation, someone changed the station, and then changed it again. Fidel Castro was on all three Cuban television channels.

Perhaps nowhere else in Cuba is the revolution more present than in its media. Every day, Cuban citizens are bombarded with a campaign of pro-government propaganda. Even the most mundane local news takes on a revolutionary guise when reported through the lens of Cuban media. But what does media look like on the socialist island and do the people there buy it? Does state control of the media have any redeeming factors? And in the end, is it that much different than corporate controlled media in the U.S.?

Granma and Rebellious Youth: Daily News Resources

Fortunately, Cuban public opinion regarding national media varies more than the media itself. "All news sources here are controlled by the state. The government uses what is convenient for them to show in the news and nothing else," Sarai, a young

mother in suburban Havana, commented. On the other hand, one middle-aged landscaper from Havana commented, "Our government is very dedicated to keeping us informed and everyone thinks so. Cubans know everything about what is going on in Cuba and in the rest of the world."

The national daily newspapers in Cuba are Juventud Rebelde (Rebellious Youth), Trabajadores (Workers) of the national workers union and Granma, the official communist party newspaper, named after the boat on which Castro and others rode from Mexico to Cuba to start the revolution. Though Juventud Rebelde caters to youth groups and street parties, Trabajadores discusses worker's issues and Granma takes a more staid approach, all three papers are consistently under ten pages long and cover similar topics.

In a recent issue of the eight-page Granma, the most popular of the three publications, the front page consisted of articles dedicated to Che Guevara's contributions to mining technology, and the history of a battle in Santa Clara that took place during the Cuban Revolution. Other main articles in the issue included coverage of the successful potato production in a Cuban province, the tenth anniversary of Zapatistas in Mexico, a few pieces on Iraq and Colombia and then another interview and article on the same battle in Santa Clara. Ironically, a special interest article which filled the last page was entitled, "A Grand Eye Watches the City," describing an aging periscope turned tourist attraction looking over Havana. The article ended with a description of the viewing of a woman sunbathing on her balcony.

While some Cubans prefer one newspaper to the other, many joke that the publications are more useful as toilet paper, and cheaper. Still, even the most critical readers point out that though the media publishes the news that it finds convenient, avoiding other controversial issues, it does not lie, a sentiment that is not shared by many critics of U.S. media. On the other hand, it is rather difficult to obtain a realistic idea of events from the bits and pieces of information provided by Cuban media. "For that reason," commented sociologist Juan Valdez Paz in Havana, "as investigators, we have to speak with hypotheses, instead of affirmations."

Professor Zelia Perez spoke about the most popular newspaper. "Granma is bad. Very bad. It is bad for the government, bad for Cuba, bad for the communist party, and it would be bad for capitalism. Cubans know this but they read it anyway. People learn to read between the lines. You can read an announcement of an event and then go and find out what really happened, if you know the variables of the issue. Just like in The New York Times." However, many U.S. citizens don't feel like they have to read between the lines of their newspapers and it seems that many Cubans don't either. For example, Ernesto, a middle aged construction worker, reads Granma every day. "It is a great supplement to TV news with coverage about everything, international and national news. I like it, it is sufficient." Many other Cubans concur.

In addition to the national newspapers, other daily publications in Cuba include a local paper, specific to each province, similar in content to the national publications, and The Orbe, a weekly

"international newspaper edited by the Latino Press." Though filled with the same rhetoric, The Orbe is probably the closest thing to a "normal newspaper" to be found in Cuba. Its sixteen pages include sections entitled "weekly news, economy, politics, variety, culture, science and technology, and sports." However, as a weekly publication, it can not fill the void of a good daily newspaper, nor can the multitudes of cultural and literary magazines that exist in the country.

According to Professor Perez, the web publication La Jiribilla (www.lajiribilla.cubaweb.cu) played an important role during the recent detentions of dissidents and executions of boat hijackers during April, 2003. In coverage of these controversial events, La Jiribilla published international defenses and criticisms such as Eduardo Galeano's commentary "Cuba Duele" or "Cuba Hurts." The more accessible paper edition of the website, La Jiribilla de Papel, is a sixteen page bi-monthly publication with selected pieces from the website, and manages to publish constant criticisms of censorship and propaganda in other countries without touching similar issues within Cuba itself.

Living in the Bubble

The single evening news program in Cuba is widely popular, as most Cubans, even those living in rural areas, have televisions. The TV news program is forty-five minutes long and focuses on the same topics and issues as the newspapers, with the same propaganda and motives. Footage for the world news is often

borrowed from news conglomerates such as CNN and BBC, but commentary is always voiced over by a Cuban newscaster. Every night, after the studio presentation of the evening news, a "news analyst" explains the government's interpretation of international issues such as the war in Iraq. Other sources of political information include "Mesas Redondas", or "Round Tables" which are discussion forums in which topics are debated within the limits of official government standpoints. Aside from news programs, soap operas and cartoons, one of the three channels on Cuban television is dedicated solely to educational programs such as science, language and history lessons.

Surprisingly, some of Hollywood's more moralistic movies are also a staple of Cuban television. "If there is no American movie on TV on a Saturday night, people would take to the streets," one Havana resident said, only half-joking. Often the selected movies exhibit communist values such as team work, social equality and solidarity.

In the U.S., regardless of how deficient the local or national news is, one can almost always go on the internet to read news from other countries or choose from a variety of alternative news sources. Cubans don't have that option. The exorbitant rates for what little internet access there is limits use to primarily tourists. Furthermore, it is illegal for Cubans to have computers or internet access in their homes unless for work authorized by the government.

Articles published in Cuban media regarding the benefits and dangers of the internet have been largely critical. One article in Juventud Rebelde discussed whether internet users are in turn being used by the technology, (12/30/03). An article in La Jiribilla debated whether the internet was immoral or not, and cited the difficulty of censorship on the net as one of its dangers (9/8/03). While the rest of the world connects in ways that were never before possible, Cuba's decision to remain off-line has left the island more isolated that ever.

As a twenty-seven year old book seller said, "We are living in a bubble. Most people know it, but can't do anything about it. It's just like in Orwell's books." He went on to add that he owned a boxed copy of his favorite book, 1984, illegal in Cuba. Yet in Cuba, like anywhere else, there are plenty of people who are too busy working and taking care of their families to concern themselves with news and politics. Other citizens simply don't care. Maria Valdez, a single mother, said, "Fidel takes care of me, what happens in the world outside doesn't affect me. I have my rights within Cuba and that is what is important."

The Only Alternative

The absence of corporate control and advertisements in Cuban media, while making funding more difficult, allows for a media which does not have to prostitute itself to big businesses in order to survive. In a recent speech, Castro even cited the lack of ads on TV as an important success for the revolution. This would be an

amazing achievement if there wasn't a plentiful amount of nationalist propaganda ready to fill that space. However, the lack of ads and corporate influence does allow for a greater focus on constructive local news,often presenting educative information about the country, its industries and institutions.

The anti-US slant and humanistic coverage of international news in the Cuban press is often comparable to the perspectives of alternative media in the U.S.. Articles on Hugo Chavez's achievements as the president of Venezuela and updates on the Zapatistas in Mexico are common in Cuban media. Since the beginning of the war in Iraq, Cuban media has been ceaselessly critical and anti-war and coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is consistently pro-Palestinian.

Still, nothing can be considered to be "alternative" if it is the only option. Right or left, no one point of view is sufficient to satisfy an intelligent public. In this light, inadequate news sources are not the biggest problem in Cuban media. Weak and narrow minded newspapers, television and radio news programs exist all over the world. What Cuba lacks is variety in media, partly due to a shortage of internet access and partly because of state control, which results in a lack of competition for quality in reporting or in-depth information.

In nearly every country in the world the media is primarily controlled by those in power. While U.S. media is largely controlled by corporations and businesses, in Cuba, the government takes on

that role. News sources are controlled in each country depending on how much of a threat they pose to those in power. There is an enormous amount of critical, intelligent, and alternative journalism in the U.S., but often it doesn't pose a serious threat to the objectives of the mainstream media, and so is not censored. In Cuba, because of the history of tensions with the U.S., any form of dissent, including opposition publications are immediately accused of being U.S. conspiracies against the Cuban government.

However, as Rafael Hernandez, the editor of the cultural magazine Temas, explains: "You cannot write anything against the revolution, but within the revolution you can be a critic. The interpretation of where this line is has always been an object of discussion. The artists and intellectuals of Cuba continue to win spaces of expression for themselves. We have not been given this liberty, we have won this liberty."

Media Crusades: Reading Between Regimes

For years, the greatest threat to the U.S. Empire was the "bad" example of communism. Now it is supposedly terrorism. In Cuba, the threat, or enemy, has always been imperialism, and the personification of that enemy has and will be Uncle Sam. As one of the last socialist countries in the world, the diminutive island of Cuba is fighting with its teeth and fingernails against its closest and most radically different neighbor to maintain its sovereignty. Control of the media is only one of the manifestations of this struggle.

Recently, patriotism in the U.S. has reached a fevered pitch, at times comparable to the extreme nationalism of places like Cuba. Overuse of the word "Terrorism" in the US has come to be as hollow as the word "Imperialism" in Cuba. The "War on Terrorism" has given the Bush administration an excuse to clamp down on civil liberties due to the "threat" these terrorists pose to U.S. society. The U.S. trade embargo and the five Cuban prisoners in the U.S. give Castro an excuse to clamp down on civil liberties and control of freedoms of expression. Cuba detains possible dissenters in their jails and the U.S. detains possible terrorists inGuantanamo Bay, Cuba. Though the political perspectives of these two countries are opposite, their ways of demonizing "the enemy" are the same. Both governments depend upon their respective vague and omnipresent enemies in order to create fear, solidarity and remain in power. Media is the fundamental tool for these objectives. Though the manipulation of Cuban media is less subtle, media crusades in both countries glorify and over simplify, making news mean what those in power want it to mean, and leaving the discerning citizen trying to read between the lines.

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