

Cuban Communicators

Sean Hawkey speaks to Cuban journalists about their lives and work, about Cuban journalism, the US blockade and their struggle for truth and justice.

"Moltó"

Antonio Moltó Martorel, known to his colleagues as simply Moltó, runs Hablando Claro (Speaking Clearly) a programme on the national Radio Rebelde. It is a highly critical programme, and deals with the internal challenges in Cuba. The programme champions the people's interests, by taking listeners' criticisms to government bodies and functionaries and demanding improvements, corrections and answers to awkward questions.

"Hablando Claro takes up the issues of what we call the 'perfectible' aspects of Cuba, the things that can be improved and need improving, things that can be better. We analyse and we criticise, and we give our opinions. It isn't funny, it isn't amusing. It isn't official news. I give my personal opinions on State Institutions, they are not always favourable ones. We talk about defects, about social problems. Our aim is to mobilise public opinion on things that we think aren't working well."

"I get 200 letters a month from listeners. People who have problems getting things, or services they need, or complaints. Generally, when people write to us, they have exhausted other means of trying to solve their problem. We read out letters, every word of them very often. There is generally a positive reaction to the criticisms, though there are some that would prefer that this wasn't done publicly. Some functionaries give the impression that they are more upset about the problems being given airtime than with the problems themselves! That's when we get into some conflict."

"Calling things by their name is essential. For example there was a case yesterday when a disabled woman was to receive building materials and extra food after the hurricane, but not all of it arrived. There are unscrupulous people out there and we must denounce them. Corruption does affect our people, and we punish it forcefully."

"I've never been told what to do, my work is to represent the public, to give them a voice. There are protests against it, but the people have a right to have their grievances heard, and we always give the right to reply."

"This sort of programme is indispensable in a country like ours, it allows participation of our people in conceiving and building our country. We've got this far with so much scarcity, and so much external pressure."

"We are subject to an aggression, a constant bombardment of broadcasts into Cuba, thousands of hours of programming every week, broadcasts that tell the Cuban people to rise up and even to attack the Cuban system... their intention is to bring about the physical disappearance of Fidel. TV Martí is one example, that used to be broadcast direct from Washington, and is now broadcast to Cuba from Florida. This campaign against our country is unparalleled, it is reasonable to call it 'Media Terrorism'."

"There are people who want the United States of America to take control of our country... I maintain that our errors have to be rectified by ourselves. Only sincere exchange between those of us building our society will take us forward."

Moltó has been in journalism for forty years from an apprentice in radio, to regional director of radio in Santiago, then moving into television and later working for nine years in the press. He founded the School of Journalism in the east of the country and worked for six years at the helm

of the Cuban Union of Journalists, UPEC. He has never left the practice of journalism, and is currently Professor of Journalism in Havana. "Every day is different in journalism" he says "doing something new is like starting all over again".

Zenaida Ferrer Martínez

A previous national champion in gymnastics, Zenaida went to the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, but as a journalist. She visited Moscow and East Germany on other occasions to cover youth movement meetings in the 80s and in 1990 she went with her husband, now an editor at Bohemia magazine, to work in Pyongyang, North Korea. They worked there for several years as correspondents for Latin American news networks and as editors for Spanish versions of Korean newspapers and magazines.

"I found some of the cultural differences very difficult" she says "especially the male domination over women, I found that was shocking, here we have equality, at least in working conditions and pay".

I asked her if she'd ever had to overcome any difficulties as a woman journalist? "No." she says confidently. "Cuban women probably have less problems than women in other countries".

"There are more women than men in journalism in Cuba, over 65% are women".

"Sure, we still work hard at home, washing, cooking, looking after children, looking after men and old people when they get ill."

She turns around a photo on her desk for me to see, it is herself with her two daughters, "you want to know about opportunities for women in Cuba?" she asks, "look at my daughters: one is a poet, a writer, she produces radio programmes on cultural issues, she speaks good English and French, she does web development too, but she earns her living as a microbiologist. The other is a dancer. But she's an intellectual too, she is working as an economist. Does that answer your question?".

José Aurelio Paz

"Living in Cuba is like being under fire in a fortress. I grew up in the [US economic] blockade, I remember the 70s crisis, when the USSR started helping. I remember when it was big event for a pair of shoes to be raffled by the CDR [Committee for the Defence of the Revolution] on our block. The day the blockade is stopped will be like lifting a yoke from our shoulders."

"From a Christian perspective, as I am a Christian, it has been considered suspicious within Church to be truly in favour of the revolution, and vice versa, to be a revolutionary and profess one's faith has also been considered suspicious. But by being honest and serious in your work, at least if you aren't accepted you are tolerated. "

"There are tensions because of potential manipulation of what we write. The Miami Herald are very aggressive, they are vultures waiting for us to speak, taking apart everything we say, and twisting it."

"The people believe in us, they depend on us to bring their needs to the light and resolve their problems, and that is what gives me the greatest satisfaction. "

"Journalists here aren't killed or disappeared like they are in other countries. If you criticise a functionary here they mightn't like it but they won't have you killed, or take you to court, except for defamation. "

What's the difference, I ask, between a dissident and a critical journalist?

"Dissidents want an intervention from outside, from the United States of America. They don't accept the validity of the State. They want to end the revolution, they want Fidel out... there are cases like El Camaján, where it is clearly proven that the person was recruited, trained, handled, infiltrated and paid by the CIA."

"Outside Cuba, people think you can't criticise here, that is not true. The media here is full of criticism and debate. Foreign press often manipulate internal debate to present it as criticism of the system. Also they say that any criticism in the press is official, and therefore represents division and weakness in the system, that isn't true either. "

"For many years the press has been plural, seeking a broad and representative variety of opinions. A subject of debate among journalists for many years has been the difference between propaganda and journalism. Is it propaganda to say, for example, that our children are better off here than anywhere else? Where does one end and other begin?"

"One participant at this [Global Communicators Network] meeting was asking me about socialism and trying to tell me that in India they have a perfect democracy. I had to ask her, if it is so perfect, why are so many children dying of hunger there?"

Lisanka ? Berta Georgina González Suárez

Lisanka heads the information dept for Granma International newspaper that works in 6 languages.

"Our role is to communicate Cuba abroad ? our strengths, our struggles, our challenges."

"We want people to understand our reality, our values, objectives of our work, our human values. We'd like Latin America to unite. In Venezuela we are working together to set up economic bases. We try to be an example, recognising our errors, without being triumphalist, but setting out the achievements. It isn't easy. We also try to be educational, we try to counter papers like Miami Herald, that respond to interests. Look at Posada Carriles, a terrorist who has been active across Latin America, now harboured in the United States. We try to counter the campaigns of disinformation from people who spend their lives trying to rubbish the truth."

"Hurricane Wilma had just passed without the loss of life in Cuba. "Look at disaster preparedness! In other countries people are left on their own. With this hurricane we didn't lose even one person. And look at what we do elsewhere. Our doctors our in Kashmir attending the disaster as we speak. But constantly other countries twist our reality, according to them we are the bad guys! Look at Operation Miracle, how many thousands of Venezuelans have gained their sight back through this!"

Lisanka is a sociologist and graduated as a journalist in 1973. She was the first war correspondent for the Army and was posted in Vietnam and Angola. "Now every two years there is an international meeting of war correspondents, I am the Vice-President of the organisation, we have people who are working in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the last meeting we welcomed the family of the Spanish journalist who was killed by US Forces in the Hotel Palestine in Baghdad."

Joel García León

Joel writes for Trabajadores (Workers), a weekly publication for workers in Cuba with a circulation of 300,000 and a daily online version that attracts 60,000 visitors a day.

"We bring out the life stories of the workers, we are more interested in their efforts and sacrifices. We value their stories. We also have educational elements and reflections."

"Our press, compared with the rest of the world, is alternative press. We still can't get our stories into the world's mass media, we have to be alternative media. Our view of the world is different."

"When the world was saying that Iraq had nuclear weapons, we never said that. The best resistance to mis-information, is the truth, always the truth, that's what our job is, to publish the truth."

"Our readers know how to read between the lines, which is what we have to do with foreign press."

"Cuba has 20% ownership of TeleSur, this is in human capital. Access to education is free and universal, so we have lots of prepared people. This is an important space. It will be the CNN of Latin America. It will have its own satellite, it will have technology, but the important thing is what we are going to say."

"We'll be able to raise the interests of the indigenous people, the poor, the environment, things that will never be seen on CNN. Right now for example we're talking about Haitian culture, and the first revolution in Latin America ? that won't be seen on CNN. Through TeleSur we can really get to know each other."

"I was in Africa in 2001, in Equatorial Guinea. The only Spanish-speaking colony in the continent. I went to support Cuban doctors [there are 30,000 Cuban doctors abroad, of a total of 60,000] and to report on their work. I had the chance to report incredible things, depravation that in the 21st Century shouldn't exist. I was reporting on Cuban doctors saving lives, accompanying the poorest of the poor."

"I was also working on education. There was a local law prohibiting doctors from telling people they were HIV+."

"At the same time an invasion of foreign companies exploit resources and run TV and radio stations to represent their interests. In my view the people of Equatorial Guinea, and all other poor countries need their own media, at the very least to run educational campaigns for their own health."

"I was in the Dominican Republic for the Panamerican Games. There they tend to read newspapers more for sport, especially US baseball, than for national news. That's a problem, they don't know what is going on, they don't see what their real problems are."

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