

"Uncensored": Another Loss for Central American Journalism

Camilo Zamora

"Today the company, the majority shareholders of the station, took the decision to close the editorial programme "uncensored" because people resorting to power to try to influence editorial policy of our news are never lacking".

Mauricio Funes



While it existed, it was considered the tribune of freedom of expression in El Salvador. With an unusual format the televised editorial programme "uncensored" was considered important progress for freedom of expression and freedom of the press. However, in Central America, freedoms still have their limit. What was silenced during the 80s with bullets or political persecution today is silenced by economic strangulation. The last editorial went out on air on 23rd March, anniversary of the assassination of archbishop Oscar Romero at the hands of Death Squads.

The Channel 12 programme "uncensored" was closed down by the owners of the television station, thanks to pressure from government and powerful business groups. Regarding the decision to close, the final programme asserts "we don't agree with the decision, closes spaces like this isn't how you build democracy in the country... a democratic society is based on free diffusion of ideas and on open debate of concepts and opinions. Tolerance is one of the most expensive currencies in the peace process which started more than ten years ago. Putting the brakes on this debate, blocking it because you are not in agreement with the ideas expressed in a space for opinions, causes more damage than good to our incipient democracy".

The history of "uncensored" begins five years ago when Mauricio Funes, the director of the news programme called "facts" and anchorman of the "up-to-date" interview, started an editorial programme for denunciations and clarification of the truth. The programme was soon applauded by many, but condemned by others. Every day Funes would set out his position on any problem the country was going through at the time, basing his arguments on facts.

The subjects taken up weren't only political but also scientific, judicial and moral. It was on "uncensored" that cases of police negligence, corruption, faults in the judicial system, or lack of transparency in government were denounced.

On "uncensored" the Salvadorean justice system was accused of incompetence for not being able to clear up the Katia Miranda crime. But it was also "uncensored" that denounced government corruption in handling international aid for the victims of the earthquakes of 2002. Funes spoke directly against the highest ranking civil servants when they couldn't account for many thousands of dollars of humanitarian aid destined for the earthquake victims.

These criticisms cost Funes the strongest of attacks against the programme by government, the President of the Republic himself, Francisco Flores, accused Channel 12 and its director of trying

to destabilise the country. However, he couldn't ever account the lost international aid.

An uncensored station

It isn't usual on Salvadorean television to see a journalist have the necessary freedom and space to present their opinion on anything. In fact most of the media in El Salvador are self-regulated by their owners who see in denunciations dangers for their own economic and political interests. Channel 12 was one of the few exceptions to this rule and without doubt the most important exception to it. The station was born with the idea of being a competitive station but different to other existing stations at the time. The founders say that the station quickly achieved successes with locally produced programmes and information, and news with greater credibility.

The station was in continuous confrontation with authorities who never really understood the true mission of the station. During the armed conflict, in the 80s, the station was subject to criticisms, threats and sabotage. In the most difficult months of the war it took the extreme measure of closing its information and news spaces because of constant harassment by state censors. But the hardest blow for the station was economic blockade imposed by national companies and the government. The lack of advertising forced the owners to sell most of the shares to the Mexican chain T.V. Azteca, who did however keep a promise to maintain the editorial policy.

Effectively for more than a decade this policy was respected. However the economic pressure brought to bear by businesses recently has forced the closure of the the most valued editorial space that the station had.

A seed

Today the guest book of the "uncensored" programme is full of messages of support for Mauricio Funes and Channel 12. But many now think that Channel 12 will never return to being what it used to be, the defeat of "uncensored" has been a defeat for all journalism locally.

Among media professionals there is some resignation about the closure of the programme. But according to Funes "we are certain that other voices and other pens will harvest what we have sown...and that there is no society that can tolerate living with injustice for very long".

Mauricio Funes has recently turned down candidature for the Presidency of the Republic with a leading political party saying that his journalistic career isn't over yet. Elections are due to be held in El Salvador.

Relevant links:

Sin Censura, TV doce
www.tvdoce.com.sv/editorial.htm

Diario Co-Latino
<http://www.diariocolatino.com>