

Cuba's New Generation of Independent Women Journalists

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Writers are making the most of online opportunities.

A new generation of independent female journalists is emerging in Cuba, despite ongoing censorship and repression.

Cuba ranked 173rd out of 180 countries in the latest **Freedom of the Press Index from Reporters Without Borders**. Although internet access and economic freedoms have been growing following the 2013 US-Cuba détente, these changes have been accompanied by a human rights crackdown.

A “repressive wave of renewed brutality is sweeping the island,” according to a March statement from the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba .

Yet despite this, outlets including 14 y medio, online magazine El Estornudo, Periodismo de Barrio and Cuba’s first feminist magazine Alas Tensas have emerged over the last two years. All are headed by women.

Female journalists say they have been empowered by the spread of the internet on the island, even though content has been strictly supervised by the state since Cuba first connected to the web in 1996.

At first, locals could get access to the internet at some hotels catering for foreigners, although this was expensive, or through their workplaces, universities or via computing clubs. In 2013, Cuba launched an initiative to increase public access to the internet, albeit still characterised by tight government controls and censorship.

INT'L WOMEN'S DAY



Press for Progress

Locals are still finding ways to get around this. For instance, 14ymedio.com – set up by Cuba’s best-known blogger Yoani Sánchez, 41 – is one of the top three most-read independent Cuban media outlets even though it remains blocked on the island.

Opportunities online have made all the difference for people like Regina Coyula, who heads a recent list by the US-funded media outlet Martí Noticias of **20 communicators to keep an eye on in Cuba**, alongside five other women.

She said she felt “like the floodgates had been opened” when she first realised the opportunities the online world held for her.

“Before that, I had no idea what a blog or the internet was. The connections were extremely expensive, we had to do it from the hotels,” said Coyula, who began blogging in 2009.

“For a while, even that was prohibited for Cubans. The first time I actually saw the blog I was so nervous that I forgot my password,” Coyula said. Her blog La Mala Letra (The Bad Writing), critical of the regime, was featured on the **BBC blog “Voices from Cuba”** in 2014.

“The [de facto] de-regularisation of the press online gives more room to journalists, it’s a sort of unregulated limbo,” agreed Marita Pérez Díaz, the 27-year-old co-editor of online magazine OnCuba. She noted that Cuban journalistic output was not exclusively produced on the island itself but also involved reporters and editors working in many other countries.

“Our proposal is a type of journalism that advocates more for the usefulness and beauty of the content, for the quality and contrast of sources. It is closer to reality and further away from the extreme ideas of a socialist paradise or a prison-island floating in the sea,” she concluded.

Carla Colomé, 26, is part of a generation of young journalists who learnt their trade at Cuban universities. She is now an editor and reporter with El Estornudo, an online magazine with a growing reputation among Cuban independent media.

“This generation does not want to work for the national media. Thankfully, there is the important rise of the internet, which allowed us to create El Estornudo with no budget,” she said.

MISLEADING STATISTICS

Cuba ranks 27th out of 144 countries in the **Gender Global Gap Report 2016** by the World Economic Forum, largely due to the high percentage of women in parliament and high female literacy rates thanks to universal access to education.

According to official numbers from the Union of Journalists of Cuba (Unión de Periodistas de Cuba, UPEC), nearly half of the workforce in the national, provincial and municipal media is female.

In addition, according to UPEC figures, 80 per cent of the 900 journalism students at universities across the country are women.

However, independent journalists and activists alike emphasise that these numbers do not tell the whole story.

Last year, 50-year-old Ileana Álvarez launched Alas Tensas (Strained Wings), to “fill a void on topics” ranging from domestic violence to women empowering themselves through newly emerging economic opportunities and technology.

“You never see the testimony of a survivor of domestic violence in the official press,” Álvarez said. “The government considers that all is good for women in Cuba. The statistics are hidden or they don’t even exist; there is no data concerning domestic violence or data segregated by gender.”

More stories about and by women were urgently needed, she said, adding, “Because violence is analysed in general terms, there is no such thing as hate crimes against women in Cuba. Data is essential to raise awareness about this social issue.”

Miriam Herrera Calvo, Coordinator of the Commission of Attention to Journalists and their Families, noted that “most women who work for independent news agencies and pre-internet media came in as wives and family members of the male directors”. This meant that they rarely filled senior or decision-making positions, and in Cuba’s patriarchal society, most were also fully responsible for looking after their homes and families.

Female journalists face similar dangers to their male colleagues - arbitrary detention, the seizure of work equipment such as mobile phones and computers as well as physical threats.

One in every six journalists detained in Cuba is a woman, according to the island’s Association for Free Press (APLP) NGO, which issues monthly reports on detentions. Forty female journalists were detained in 2016, the first year the organisation registered data segregated by gender.

But the repression of female media workers often has an added gender-related element.

In October last year, ten independent journalists were detained in Guantanamo province as they covered the aftermath of hurricane Matthew. According to a report in Periodismo de Barrio, the group’s three female journalists were submitted to invasive physical searches, unlike their male colleagues.

“Harassment is worse when you work outside of the capital,” Herrera Calvo said, noting that women were simply more physically vulnerable.

Nonetheless, she said that the achievements of the last few years should not be underestimated.

“There is a growing number of new independent media online emerging that are led by young women,” Herrera Calvo said. “This is a great model that should be replicated around the country,”

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