

## The Sound of Silence



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In the last few days, as the [latest protest by the San Isidro Movement](#) has morphed from a collective poetry reading to a state of siege, an important question has emerged about the foreign press in Cuba. Where are the journalists from Reuters and the Associated Press? Why do foreign correspondents seem to ignore the situation? These are extremely important questions that warrant serious consideration and it's about time that Cubans ask them publicly. I say this as a someone who has published dozens of articles about Cuban cultural events in foreign newspapers and magazines since the 1980s, who has been denied visas by Ministry of Foreign Relations (MinRex) because of my coverage, who has been deported from Cuba due to my alliances with independent artists and writers, and who nonetheless continues to write and make films about activist efforts on the island.

It is unfortunate, however, that the issue of press silence has been posed as a matter of moral failure. The causes of the widespread silence are far more complex. Reducing the dilemma to personal principles miscasts the role of journalists as mouthpieces for interest groups – that would simply be the flipside of the current role of official Cuba media as the marketing wing of the Communist Party. No foreign journalist wants to consider him/herself hostage to the political interests of their subjects. While the emergent Cuba independent media sector devotes a great deal of attention to the regime's opponents to compensate for the obvious misrepresentation of dissent in official media, foreign journalists writing for foreign media are called upon to strive for "balance," however elusive that might be. Foreign journalists don't exercise absolute control over their article topics or the content of their reports – the decision-making process behind each publication is a complicated and highly political one.

Newspaper editors and publishers make decisions based on larger political and economic interests and goals.

It is no secret that in mainstream media outside Cuba, there exists a certain wariness about characterizing Cuba as a totalitarian state – precisely because this was the standard during the Cold War, and it remains associated with pro-American conservative foreign policy. That explains to a certain extent why the foreign media outlets that always pick up stories about repression in Cuba are those of the extreme right. For many outside and inside the US, journalistic objectivity is measured by one's distance from that hard line position. Cubans need to recognize that while it may be a radical gesture for them to publicly call the Cuban government totalitarian, that epithet is fairly old hat outside the island. Furthermore, as political scientist Claudia Hilb argued in her book, *Silencio, Cuba: la izquierda democrática frente al régimen de la Revolución Cubana*, the Latin American left refuses to criticize the Cuban government's human rights record out of a sense of indebtedness for having been sheltered by Cuba during the military dictatorships of the 1970s. Even if we put the Cold War legacy aside, the most common mandate for journalists in the US covering any region is to create an ecology of coverage that ranges from articles about official state proceedings to human interest stories to investigative reports. Given that the Cuban government prevents journalists from visiting political sensitive locales such as prisons, courts and police stations and also penalizes interactions between unauthorized citizens and foreign journalists, the possibility of producing investigative reports is negligible. Rather than complaining that foreign journalists don't investigate, Cuban activists can advocate for civil rights laws that legalize access to state institutions as a public service.

Cuban independent journalists and artists that have begun to point the finger at the absence of foreign press coverage have noted that foreign correspondents have been expelled from Cuba for publishing critical views. The best-known example of this phenomenon is the case of the Uruguayan Fernando Ravsberg, a left-wing journalist who spent nearly three decades writing from Cuba and was unceremoniously ex-communicated for his report on the negotiations between Cubana de Aviación and Global Air after the tragic accident in 2016. However, to suggest, as was done in [an article](#) in Cubanet, that foreign correspondents that do not challenge the limits of the rights accorded by MinRex are just in Cuba to engage in tourism is purely speculative and not a constructive way of arriving at understanding of the situation. In fact, many foreign journalists have covered earlier opposition related matters, sending out reports about the Varela Project, The Black Spring and the Ladies in White. However, it bears noting that during and after the rapprochement orchestrated by the Obama Administration, mainstream coverage in the U.S. shifted toward "soft" journalistic coverage of Cuba that aimed at catering to a broader readership of Americans that were naively curious about a place that they had been forbidden to visit for decades and were suddenly being invited to reconsider. Furthermore, as part of an effort at demonstrating a spirit of American good will, mainstream newspapers such as *The New York Times* dispatched teams to meet with official Cuban media outlets and published scores of cloying articles about government figures such as Mariela Castro, as well as a spate of stories about the ingenious and courageous "average" Cubans that make old cars run and start businesses on their porches. In short, what foreign correspondents are able to get published has a lot to

do with the policies of the governments they hail from and a global shift in news reporting away from hard news toward human interest stories.

There are still other considerations to take into account with regard to the dearth of foreign coverage of the current MSI protest. The rest of the world is reeling at the moment from a second surge of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflicts over the results of the US presidential election, both of which generate widespread economic and political instability. For Cubans to expect that the story of a dozen activists locked in a room would outweigh the impact of a global crisis is unrealistic. Add to this that the incoming Biden Administration is probably weighing its options regarding Cuba at the moment and is thus not ready to make pronouncements about human rights before re-opening binational negotiations. Furthermore, the dynamic between MSI and Cuban state security has become a vicious cycle of activist actions, harassment, detention, and attempts by activists to document their peaceful efforts to challenge police repression. While it may seem heartless for journalists not to respond to a hunger strike, it is highly likely that news editors may be looking from afar and noting the relatively small scale of this protest by comparison to massive protests against governments in Peru, Hong Kong and Belorussia. Indeed, the small scale of the Cuban opposition is frequently cited outside Cuba as a sign of weakness, however inaccurate that assessment may be. I have been told by news editors more than once that they won't cover Cuban protests until they are more substantial.

In conclusion, it bears noting that it is quite admirable that in recent years, Cuban independent media has developed a vital network of on the ground coverage of dissent in Cuba, and it is true that this reporting together with growing access to social media has allowed more Cubans around the world to be informed about what goes on inside the country. However, the nature of dissent has largely been reactive rather than proactive. By this I mean that Cubans tend to protest the mistreatment and arrest of individuals. The efforts of artists, journalists and filmmakers to contest Decree 349 and Decree 370 stand in contrast to that trend in that these were collective efforts aimed at challenging laws – and those efforts did receive extensive foreign media coverage. It would not be difficult to challenge policing and judicial procedure to reveal systemic racism and arbitrariness as embedded in Cuban state practice. That approach, rather than fixation on individuals, could become the basis for an alliance between Cuban civil rights activists and a growing international anti-racist movement, something which to my mind is long overdue.