

Cuba-US Relations and Freedom of the Press

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Global Research, September 09, 2015

Region: [Latin America & Caribbean, USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

At the August 14, 2015 flag-raising ceremony in Havana, Secretary of State John Kerry stated “we remain convinced the people of Cuba would be best served by [genuine democracy](#).” This US promotion of democracy for Cuba is explicitly or implicitly referring to freedom of the press, among other features. Nonetheless, Kerry’s comment on democracy was not the main focus of his remarks; rather, he spoke mainly about the administration’s policy on US-Cuba relations, in recognition of the Cuban government and of the establishment of diplomatic relations and embassies as a step toward the possible normalization of relations as neighbours rather than enemies or rivals.

But how did the US press deal with Kerry’s speech and his other formal engagements in Havana that day? Let us take CNN USA as an example. The latter sent one of its most important anchors, Jake Tapper, to Havana for the occasion. What spin did he provide to the Kerry speech? The CNN host declared: “But it is not as though, you know, snap, all of a sudden there is democracy and freedom [of the press](#).” At another time that same day, he reported, “This is a country that does not have freedom of the press, does not have the right of assembly. You can [go on and on](#).” Tapper broadcast on yet another CNN television spot that same day:

One American flag does not solve every problem or release the Castro brothers’ grip on the people here... President Eisenhower said then – [whom I] quote – ‘Our sympathy goes out to the people of Cuba now suffering under the yoke of a dictator.’ [Tapper adds:] The dictator and his yoke now [enforced \[by\] his brother, Raúl](#).

By his own account, Tapper actively sought out Cuban dissidents, among others, to interview. He hung on to every word they uttered in their opposition to the unconditional re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. He summarized that “critics claim that today [August 14] only will give legitimacy to a dictator who has no interest [in true change](#).” Tapper went further by playing a July 2007 presidential debate video clip in which then Senator Barack Obama, according to Tapper, was “laying out his rationale for engaging a [rogue regime such as Cuba](#).” However, according to CNN transcripts, the question in July 2007 was whether the presidential candidates favoured “to meet separately, without precondition, during the first year of your administration, in Washington or anywhere else, with the leaders of Iran, Syria, Venezuela, Cuba and North Korea, in order to bridge the gap that [divides our countries](#).” The question and Obama’s response did not employ the term “rogue regime.”



Thus, to summarize, while CNN did broadcast the flag-raising ceremony and Kerry's statement, whose main feature was the promotion of diplomatic relations as neighbours, in its entirety, CNN did its own editing. The cable news network jumped on Kerry's remarks about democracy for Cuba and one of its correlations, freedom of the press. During the entire day and on virtually every program going into the late evening, TV viewers were bombarded by the sound bites of "freedom of the press," "dictatorship" and "rogue regime."

What is also significant, and serving as a corollary to the treatment of Kerry's remarks, was what CNN blacked out. In addition to the flag-raising ceremony, there was a second important activity. Kerry was welcomed by his counterpart, Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs building. The meeting behind closed doors was followed by public availability to the press at the Hotel Nacional. This event included remarks by both John Kerry and Bruno Rodríguez followed by an open question and answer period. The entire activity was virtually censored by CNN. It is unfortunate, because the US audience and others around the English-speaking world served by CNN USA missed the opportunity to hear what the Cuban side had to say about "democracy for Cuba."

During the question and answer period, AP journalist Andrea Rodríguez addressed Bruno Rodríguez: "Secretary Kerry today mentioned that he hopes to see in Cuba a genuine democracy. I would like to know your comments on this." The Cuban Foreign Minister's response never reached the US public via CNN. Here is what he said:

I feel that we should work very actively in order to build confidence, mutual confidence, and to develop contacts in the areas where we have a very close approach or those areas where our ideas could come closer, and to be able to discuss in a respectful way about our respective differences. In some areas, it is true that differences are profound. However, I can say that some of these issues have been subject to an intensive international debate. For example, some electoral political models of industrialized countries that seem to be a unique model have gone into a very serious crisis, even in Europe. States have seen the need to develop their relations according to international law with peoples which have decided in the exercise of their self-determination to choose their own national destiny according to their culture and level of development. I feel very comfortable with the Cuban democracy, and at the same time there are things that could be further perfected.

Today we are working actively as part of the processes related to the updating of our economic and social, socialist model. I can say that we are ready to speak on those issues on the basis of reciprocity, on sovereign equality. We have also a lot to say, we have concerns to share. There are attempts to increase international cooperation to solve problems related to civil and political liberties, which, in our opinion, should be guaranteed, such as the right to food, the right to gender equality, the right to life, the right to [education](#).

[and health care.](#)



Readers can reach their own conclusion as to why these comments were suppressed by CNN. One take is that the Cuban Foreign Minister enunciated, as expected, some views that fly in the face of the CNN sound bites. On the question of democracy, he turned the attention toward a concern shared by many people in the US and elsewhere in the West. This preoccupation consists in the quality of democracy and the electoral process in these advanced industrial countries. This Cuban interjection throws a wrench in the CNN narrative regarding democracy. This portrayal hammers Cuba but leaves the US unscathed or even as the model, seeing as the US bases itself on the US-centric conception of democracy. The Minister's remarks in defence of Cuban democracy were qualified with the very important caveat that it has to be improved. This logic of combining sovereign decisions with the recognition of improvements within the Cuban traditions and values also flies in the face of the US mainstream press such as CNN. Finally, the Minister threw the ball back into the court of the US in a very diplomatic manner by indicating that Cuba highly regards, for all countries, the guarantee for civil and political liberties, such as the right to food, the right to gender equality, the right to life, the right to education and to health care. Cuba's accomplishments in these fields are well-known and internationally recognized, while the lack of these guarantees in the US is increasingly notorious in the country itself and internationally.

How did the Cuban press deal with August 14? Did it carry out censorship, blackouts and misinformation? No. On the contrary, the entire day was broadcast live on Cuban TV and radio. This began with the arrival by Kerry at the airport in Havana and an informational biography of the Secretary of State that was not at all tinged by derogatory statements or qualifications. The entire ceremony and Kerry's remarks at the US Embassy were transmitted. The full press availability mentioned above was equally on Cuban TV. The next day, the Cuban official press carried the full transcripts in Spanish of the [flag-raising ceremony](#) and the [press availability](#).

This aversion to censorship is part of the Cuban tradition when it comes to striving to normalize relations with the US. For example, in 2002, former President Jimmy Carter visited President Fidel Castro in Cuba. On this occasion, Carter's speech in Spanish was broadcast in its entirety by Cuban TV and radio, even though it contained comments regarding democracy for Cuba similar to Kerry's August 2015 remarks. In his own report on the visit, Carter wrote:

That evening at the University of Havana I made a speech and then answered questions that, as promised, was carried live on television and radio. It was later rebroadcast, and the entire transcript was published in the two Cuban newspapers. Subsequently, we could not find anyone on the streets or in the markets [who had not heard it](#).

The diametrically opposed approaches of the Cuban press and of CNN in covering August 14 indicate that CNN does not have any grounds to criticize Cuba for the lack of freedom of the press. In fact, it was Cuba that gave a lesson to CNN about opposing censorship, blackouts and misinformation. Cuba turned the tables on the US.

In the US, “freedom of the press,” like “democracy” itself, is presented in the abstract. They are buzzwords that are designed to make people in the US and abroad kneel down in homage to the US as the model. The First Amendment to the US Constitution (1791) proscribes that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government [for a redress of grievances](#).” The amendment gives the impression that there are no restrictions by abstracting the press from the socio-economic context in which it operates. Thus, supposedly, anybody can write and say anything.

In Cuba, on the other hand, as the US logic goes, there are restrictions. Article 53 of the Cuban Constitution indicates that “citizens have freedom of speech and of the press in keeping with the objectives [of socialist society](#).” The US-centric framework dictates that in Cuba, there is no real freedom of the press, as there are constraints, while in the US there are supposedly no conditions.

Does pure freedom of the press exist in the US? Let us take CNN’s reporting on August 14, 2015 as our ongoing example. How did host Jake Tapper and the other CNN anchors come to spin their story and reporting? It is possible that no one instructed them on exactly what angle to take. However, there was no need to, as they know that, in order to advance their careers, certain concepts have to be promoted, while others have to be blacked out or distorted. All of these contortions are broadcast in order to make their story coincide with the preconceived notions and interests of the ruling circles. Noam Chomsky unravelled the role of the US media as part of the establishment in his classic book *Manufacturing Consent*. He and his co-author wrote that the “media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them.” Chomsky goes on to unveil the inner workings of this phenomenon by indicating that the constraint that the establishment exercises over the media “is normally not accomplished by crude intervention, but by the selection of right-thinking personnel and by the editors’ and working journalists’ internalization of priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to the institution’s policy.”¹ Yet it is well known that “crude intervention” [also takes place](#).

Taking into account the Chomsky view on the US media related to CNN and Jake Tapper, we can give the cable news outlet the benefit of the doubt that “crude intervention” was not carried out for the August 14 angle on US-Cuba relations. However, following the Chomsky thesis, in December 2012, Tapper was first selected by CNN, based on his career, as a “right-thinking” person. On August 14, 2015, he “internalized” or embodied the angle that CNN desired. In other words, by incarnating the US long-term view on Cuba held by some sections in the establishment, Tapper knew perfectly well what he was doing. It is part of building a career with the monetary rewards that accompany climbing the ladder.

Tapper is a rising star in CNN and thus has been chosen to moderate the September 16, 2015 Republican presidential debate. There is a serious struggle between Fox News and CNN to capture more and higher- priced ads and increase their ratings as part of these [Republican presidential debates](#). CNN is banking on Tapper to contribute toward attaining its

goals. The corporate “freedom of the press” situation in the US is further emphasized when contrasted with the Cuban approach. Article 53 of its Constitution stipulates that the “mass media are state or social property and can [never be private property](#).” This is not a restriction but rather a liberating factor, especially if one compares the US-corporate controlled press to the Cuban approach.

However, as indicated above, Cuba, for its part, has an explicit constraint on freedom of the press: the press must coincide with the objectives of socialist society. There is no hypocritical attempt to hide it. The objectives of the Cuban socialist society and its principles with regard to Cuba-US relations require that diplomacy be fostered to the utmost as a crucial input toward bringing about changes to Cuba’s socialist model. This Cuban diplomatic effort included full press coverage of Kerry’s visit, irrespective of his declarations. For Cuba, it is also a question of principle to treat its US guests in that way, as did Fidel Castro with President Carter.

Did CNN’s reporting on the August 14 activities in Havana contradict the current official US policy on Cuba? Did it represent one section of the ruling circles that is not favourable to the thawing of relations between the two neighbours against another faction of the US establishment that is inclined to the normalizing option? The situation is complex. One has to keep in mind that on August 17, 2014, when Presidents Obama and Castro made the surprising simultaneous announcement of the new US policy, both the White House and the State Department made – and continue to make – one point very clear. The new US approach represents only a change of *tactics*, while the *objective* of the US remains in place. US officials continue to promote the US version of democracy for Cuba. This ultimate goal, couched in a more diplomatic manner, and thus not as boorish as CNN, requires ongoing propaganda that Cuba is not democratic, that there is no freedom of the press, etc. The question remains as to why CNN did not contribute to the evolution of the diplomatic efforts by both countries by professionally informing the US public, as did the Cuban press with its people. CNN’s crass reporting serves as another reminder of this new situation with its very positive perspectives for both Cubans and Americans, as well as the dangers for Cuba. Cubans are very aware of this. Its press and journalists’ blogs presently serve as a forum for a very mature and lively debate on the significance of the new US approach. This debate is a result of the attempts by the leadership and the journalists to improve the Cuban press as part of the wide-ranging changes going on in Cuba.

Arnold August, a Canadian journalist and lecturer, is the author of Democracy in Cuba and the 1997–98 Elections and, more recently, [Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion](#). Cuba’s neighbours under consideration are the US, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Arnold can be followed on Twitter [@Arnold_August](#).

Notes

1. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002), XI.

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