

NPR's Dishonest Coverage of Nicaragua and COVID-19

By [Stephen Sefton](#)

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NPR's coverage of Nicaragua repeatedly bears out the fact that mainstream communications media in the US and Europe make little or no effort to give a true and fair account of the country's reality. Their reports consistently omit facts that might invalidate their coverage and they also fail to corroborate much of the information they do include.

Carrie Kahn's recent NPR report [on Nicaragua's Covid-19 policies](#) is a good example of this dishonest media behavior. In this case, inherent Western media bias against Nicaragua's government is compounded by mainstream media propaganda justifying severely restrictive policies to control Covid-19. But Nicaragua's experience has shown that such extreme policies may be neither appropriate nor necessary.

Like most Western media covering Nicaragua, NPR and Carrie Kahn claim to be combating false Nicaraguan government propaganda. But what they in fact do is to recycle false propaganda from Nicaragua's US government funded opposition, in this case, for example, the small minority of medical professionals in Nicaragua aligned with the country's political opposition. NPR openly acknowledges that opposition propagandist Wilfredo Miranda of the Nicaraguan internet media outlet Confidencial contributed to Kahn's article. Confidencial, for which Miranda writes, is directly funded by the US government. The fact that Kahn and her NPR editors describe them as independent is just one more example of the cynical hypocrisy practiced by almost all Western reporting, mainstream or alternative, when it comes to Nicaragua.

Carrie Kahn and her editors deploy two other sly tricks in their article on Nicaragua's response to Covid-19. They link to an attack piece by Associated Press to reinforce false claims by opposition aligned Nicaraguan doctors describing Nicaragua's health system as "decrepit". In fact, overall, Nicaragua has the most comprehensive, well-equipped, up to date public health system in Central America. Presumably NPR wanted to avoid repeating a gross and blatant falsehood, so they just linked to it instead, allowing them to claim they are corroborating their article's argument. In fact all they are doing is pointing to a media outlet that supports Nicaragua's political opposition just like they do.

The other sly trick Kahn deploys in her NPR article is to note that when they tried to contact

Nicaragua's Sandinista authorities for comment, they were unable to do so, implying they genuinely sought to obtain an official point of view. The egregious dishonesty of Kahn and her editors on this point is clear from the fact that NPR and Kahn omit referring to the abundant sources available to them offering the government's version of its policy on Covid-19. NPR and Kahn could have quoted from or cited innumerable declarations by health ministry officials, or excerpts from government policy documents.

They might also have cited or linked to reports from Sandinista communications media like El 19 Digital or Juventud Presidente, among many others. The fact that Kahn's report neither refers to, nor links to, nor quotes any government aligned sources exposes the bad faith of her article for NPR. The most likely reason they sought to extract a comment from Nicaragua's government was to lend their attack piece phony legitimacy, claiming at least some attempt at balance. Nicaragua's government policy is clearly to refrain from legitimizing dishonest reporting from disingenuous media outlets like NPR that have a long track record of misreporting on Nicaragua.

Kahn sets the scene with the usual false claims suggesting that Nicaragua's government is authoritarian. She notes *"much of broadcast and print media in Nicaragua is controlled by the government and members of Ortega's family"*. In fact the only national daily newspaper in Nicaragua "La Prensa" is owned by the opposition. Its coverage is typically virulently critical of the Sandinista government. Likewise television channels like Canal 10, Canal 12 and Canal 23 also broadcast fiercely critical coverage of the government, as well as online outlets like Confidencial, 100% Noticias and many similar outlets. Radio and cable television companies critical of the government, like the extreme right wing Radio Corporación have extensive audiences across the country. So it is ridiculously untrue to suggest, as Kahn clearly does, that President Ortega's government monopolizes national media.

From that false insinuation, Kahn's report goes on to make the false claim, *"Ortega has long downplayed the coronavirus. From the beginning, he has denounced lockdowns and mask mandates. His wife, Rosario Murillo, who is also vice president, encouraged large gatherings. Early in the pandemic, health care workers said they were even [barred from wearing protective gear, so as not to alarm the public.](#)"* Every one of those statements is either completely untrue or dishonestly selective. From late January 2020, Nicaragua's Health Ministry (MINSa) worked closely with the PanAmerican Health Organization to prepare for the pandemic, ensuring from February onwards that all health personnel dealing directly with patients showing symptoms of Covid-19 had the necessary training, protective wear and equipment.

Already by the end of February 2020, Nicaragua was indeed among the best prepared countries anywhere in the world for the Covid-19 outbreak. One very important point Kahn omits is the mass mobilization of Nicaragua's volunteer network, comprising tens of thousands of community health promoters to educate the public on public health measures and monitor community health. President Ortega's government took the threat of a dangerous pandemic very seriously, as [this May 2020 policy document demonstrates](#). Even the US dominated [International Monetary Fund recognized](#) Nicaragua's response to Covid-19, noting how the government followed World Health Organization and PHO guidance.

WHO advice at that time recommended neither the use of masks, nor the implementation of long term lockdowns. So it is an absurd falsehood to claim that Daniel Ortega "denounced

lockdowns and mask mandates” when the authorities simply followed WHO guidance. Nor is it the case that Vice President Rosario Murillo encouraged large gatherings. The last big pro-government march took place on March 16th 2020, just after the first case of Covid-19 in Nicaragua was discovered. Subsequently, there were no large public gatherings and the government strongly encouraged people to maintain distance when in public, as is obvious from television coverage of public events since then. Since April 2020 the government encouraged, in every way possible, distancing, hand-washing and masks.

Kahn and NPR offer no references to justify their claims of government negligence, because they cannot. Likewise, the claim that health workers were denied the use of protective wear is based on a virulent anti-government attack piece by Associated Press, quoting doctors aligned with Nicaragua’s political opposition. Those doctors were dismissed for publishing a scaremongering letter criticizing government policy on Covid-19. No public health authority in the world tolerates their medical staff publicly criticizing official policy, as the treatment of dissident health personnel in North America and Europe over Covid-19 has repeatedly shown. But Kahn and NPR apply a double standard when it comes to Nicaragua because, self-evidently, they support Nicaragua’s political opposition.

Kahn criticizes Nicaragua for having a low vaccination rate but she omits to note the difficulties that impoverished countries have had in obtaining vaccines, when in fact Nicaragua has done better than some of its neighbors in securing and applying vaccines, prioritizing the elderly and people with serious chronic illness. To date just over 237,000 of these especially vulnerable people have received the vaccine, a little over 3% of the population. That compares with 430,000 or 6% of people in El Salvador, 108,000 or 1% in Honduras, 1 million people or 10% of people in Costa Rica and 320,000 or under 1% in Guatemala.

Costa Rica has been able to buy commercially from Pfizer and Astra Zeneca and El Salvador has bought 2 million vaccines from China. That is the regional context of Nicaragua’s efforts to vaccinate its vulnerable population, while under illegal unilateral coercive measures imposed by the United States like the Nica Act and, soon, the Renacer Act. In that regional context, the issue of debt should also be noted. El Salvador and Costa Rica have taken on significant levels of foreign debt to fund their response to Covid-19, while Nicaragua has avoided doing so by keeping its economy open. Kahn and her editors glibly omit all of these considerations.

Kahn continues her dishonest attack piece against Nicaragua taking up the issue of statistics and how they are reported. She notes that *“Late in 2020, the legislature — filled with Ortega loyalists — passed a law criminalizing news not authorized by the government.”* In fact, Nicaragua’s legislative assembly is composed of deputies elected by Nicaragua’s people who in 2016 voted in 70 deputies for the Sandinista Front and 22 deputies for Nicaragua’s other national and regional parties.

The [cyber crime law](#) to which Kahn refers brought Nicaragua’s criminal law up to date, in line with other countries, like the United States, and addresses mainly issues like on line fraud, illegal hacking, data theft and on line harassment. Only one of the law’s 48 articles addresses false news and that in the context of avoiding provoking fear, panic and disorder among the population, which is also a criminal law provision common to jurisdictions in North America, the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Even so NPR and Kahn recycle the false claim by Nicaragua’s opposition supporters that

“this has created a hostile environment for critics and independent news outlets.” Whereas one only has to take a brief look at opposition social media or opposition media outlets to see that this claim is ridiculously untrue. Kahn and NPR take at face value both that absurd claim and too the phony data on Covid-19 in Nicaragua, collected by the opposition controlled Citizen’s Observatory group, whose unhindered operation for over a year gives the lie to their claim that they are “taking a big risk publishing such data”.

Even Kahn admits that the data compiled by this group of opposition activists offers a list of cases and deaths the group “says are from COVID-19”, when even the official figures can only be legitimately appraised once the Nicaraguan institute responsible for compiling national statistics (the INIDE) will have produced its report for 2020, due out in the next couple of months. Kahn falsely describes heavily prejudiced research based on data from just the first six months of the Covid-19 outbreak in Nicaragua by the USAID funded opposition online media outlet Confidencial as “independent”,.

But the data derived from the currently available statistics vary hugely depending on their treatment, as one can see from data for the same period presented by the [Financial Times](#) when compared with data for that period from [the Economist](#). Kahn cites MINSA’s own data from [its health map](#) as if this were definitive statistical data rather than provisional data aimed at giving a reasonable idea of health care trends in different parts of the country. For example, Kahn might have noted the difference between the Health Map’s figure for deaths in 2020 in its table of causes of mortality, 26,183 and the figure for total mortality in the text accompanying that table which is 31,911.

Kahn exhibits zero curiosity about that difference and glibly compares the tabular figure for 2019 of 16,321 with the tabular figure for 2020, claiming the difference of 10,000 proves that the government’s own figures demonstrate a massive number of unreported deaths from Covid-19. But, just as in the case of 2020, the text accompanying the table clearly states that the total number of deaths in 2019 was 25,388. So the difference in the total number of deaths between 2019 and 2020 according to MINSA’s figures is 6,523.

That is still an increase in the mortality rate from 35.6 (2019) to around 43 (2020) per 10,000, but much less than what Kahn suggests in her article and even less than the normal mortality rate assigned to Nicaragua in [Wikipedia’s relevant article](#), for example. Perhaps more importantly is MINSA’s data on the number of cases of people diagnosed with Covid-19 which, like their figures for deaths from Covid-19 are much lower than in the other Central American countries and these too are accepted by the World Health Organization. In any case, until the INIDE figures are published, MINSA’s data for overall mortality in 2020 have to be treated as provisional.

Nor is there any way of knowing how many of those deaths can be directly attributed to Covid-19. The Nicaraguan government has followed the German government’s practice of distinguishing between people who died of Covid-19 and people who died of underlying comorbidities complicated by Covid-19. Likewise, it is legitimate to speculate that a large but unknown number of deaths were caused by the opposition’s vicious campaign of scaremongering in April, May and June of 2020, frightening seriously ill people from seeking hospital treatment and leading them to die as a result. There were periods at that time when the number of patients attending hospital fell well below normal for the time of year.

Nicaragua’s hospitals, even in the capital Managua, were always well able to cope with the number of patients seeking care. At that time, too, in that second quarter of 2020, the same

opposition groups associated with the Citizen's Observatory posted ghoulish propaganda in their social media and news media, odiously distorting the situation in Nicaragua. For example photographs of the disastrous situation in Ecuador falsely claiming they were from Nicaragua. Kahn and the NPR's article follows the standard anti-Sandinista recipe of uncorroborated hearsay, counterfactual assertions, opposition propaganda, lazy research and incompetent analysis which generally prevails in North American and European media coverage of the country.

What practically all foreign reports on the progress of Covid-19 in Nicaragua omit is the reality of daily life here from the start of the Covid-19 outbreak to date. Public offices have never closed, public schools have remained open, public transport has never stopped. Overall economic activity, especially tourism, declined in the second and third quarters of 2020 but has now recovered to the point where the country can expect around 3% to 4% growth in 2021 as well as record exports, despite the effects not only of the pandemic on trade and services, but also the double blow of Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November last year.

Similarly, the government declined to impose restrictions on economic life and constantly encourages people to wear masks, as well as to maintain safe distancing and other measures like hand washing, contrary to Kahn's false report on NPR. Daily life in Nicaragua over the last year bears no relation to the false opposition caricature of the country portrayed so dishonestly by Kahn and NPR. No one should find that surprising.

The role of practically all Western mainstream and alternative media is to promote the false beliefs that Western governments mean well and that their profit focused capitalist system promotes optimal outcomes. Conversely, their job entails trashing the government of any country, like Nicaragua, where revolutionary socialist policies focused on the development of the human person produce tangibly better outcomes for their peoples. That explains the abysmal quality of NPR's reporting on Nicaragua, as demonstrated by Carrie Kahn's article - lazy, incompetent, dishonest.

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Featured image: Health brigadistas doing house to house visits monitoring Covid-19 (Photo: La Voz del Sandinismo)

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