As independent media blossoms in Cuba, journalists face a crackdown

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By Ed Augustin

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/20/independent-media-cuba-journalists-crackdown>

Since graduating from the University of Havana’s faculty of journalism in 2021, Pedro Sosa, 24, has photographed families of political prisoners and written about the chronic lack of medicine and syringes in [Cuba](https://www.theguardian.com/world/cuba)’s fraying medical system.

It was risky work on an island that brooks little dissent, but in September things came to a head: he was interrogated by state security and told that if he didn’t renounce his work for the independent media outlets El Toque (the Touch) and El Estornudo (the Sneeze) he could face jail.

“It was tough,” he said. “I was doing what I loved, trying to be an honest journalist … After that I fell into a deep depression.”

Rumbled by a deep economic crisis, a [growing domestic opposition](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/18/im-surprised-it-took-so-long-cubans-find-anger-in-their-souls) and the return of tense relations with Washington, Cuban authorities are cracking down on journalists.

Begrudgingly tolerated a few years ago, Cuban reporters are now regularly detained, can have their phones and laptops seized, and their internet cut. Independent journalism in [Cuba](https://www.theguardian.com/world/cuba) – usually supported by foreign funding – has blossomed since 2018, the year in which the state punctured its monopoly on information by unleashing relatively uncensored mobile internet.

With half the population now online, readers have chosen well-designed websites like El Toque which offer real reporting over stodgy state media, which is highly censored and rose-tints reality.

Talented young journalists have migrated to new private outlets, which overwhelmingly take an anti-government line, where they can work with more freedom.

They’ve blazed a trail: covering the effects of lead poisoning in children in Havana, independently monitoring election results and reporting on the exile of prominent activists – all taboos for state media.

Tiny state salaries have also been unable to compete with the private sector: the maximum salary for a journalist at Granma, the Communist party daily, is the equivalent of $23 a month; El Toque pays $200 a month.

In December a new criminal code came into effect, under which reporters receiving foreign financing face up to 10 years in prison. Amnesty International described it as “a chilling prospect for independent journalists”.

The new law comes as repression is on the rise: 670 Cubans remain imprisoned after [last year’s mass protests](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/15/cuba-protesters-sentences-sedition), according to Justicia 11J, a local human rights group.

El Estornudo, which can only be accessed via VPN on the island, [lists](https://revistaelestornudo.com/el-estornudo-dinero-periodismo-independiente-cuba/) the US National Endowment for Democracy as one of its funders. El Toque said it has received US federal funds “indirectly” as part of a mix of money from corporations and foundations that make the website sustainable.

José Jasán Nieves, El Toque’s general editor, who emigrated to Florida with his wife and young children in 2019 after being detained for several hours in his house in Havana because of his reporting, vigorously defended the legitimacy of the website’s funding sources, saying they “allow us to implement the projects we dream about”.

Pedro Sosa, the former staff writer, said he was able to choose his topics and how he covered them. “El Toque doesn’t respond to the orders of the US government,” he said.

Financing media has long been part of Washington’s diplomatic toolkit.

In the 1960s in Cuba, Radio Swan, a CIA [covert action programme](https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v06/d481), attempted not only a propaganda offensive to undermine support for Fidel Castro, but [doubled up](https://www.nytimes.com/1977/12/26/archives/worldwide-propaganda-network-built-by-the-cia-a-worldwide-network.html) as a communication link, sending coded messages to paramilitaries during the failed Bay of Pigs invasion of 1961.

A decade ago it [emerged](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/03/us-cuban-twitter-zunzuneo-stir-unrest) that the US government had paid contractors to create ZunZuneo, a social network built on texts, to organize “smart mobs” on the island. And during historic, largely spontaneous anti-government protests on the island in 2021, [externally funded, externally directed bots](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/03/why-the-internet-in-cuba-has-become-a-us-political-hot-potato) made anti-government hashtags trend on Twitter.

“A lot of the so-called independent journalists are indirectly funded by the US,” said Fulton Armstrong, the US intelligence community’s most senior analyst for Latin America from 2000 to 2004, who noted that the Biden administration spends $20m a year on “democracy promotion” programmes on the island.

“US programs are designed with a win-win strategy,” he added. “We win if the opposition media gain a foothold, and we win if they provoke government repression. That thrusts the government into a dilemma – to let the organizing and funding go forward or to risk image and credibility by crushing it.”

Cuban officials have argued that the way the state deals with journalists “has nothing to do with the way they are treated elsewhere in Latin America”, where reporters can be beaten, jailed and [assassinated](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/23/mexico-journalist-killed-15th-media-2022), [sometimes with state collusion](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/feb/28/berta-caceres-honduras-military-intelligence-us-trained-special-forces).

Yet 20 journalists writing for El Toque have been pressured into exile over the last two years, while journalists for other outlets report being kicked out of private rented accommodation after landlords were pressured by state security.

“In Cuba people’s fear has never been that they will kill you,” said Dr Julio Antonio Fernández, who writes for El Toque, but left the island earlier this year after being interrogated over a dozen times and is currently a fellow at the Scholars at Risk Program at Harvard University.

“It’s about how citizens deal with an omnipresent state and party with only one ideology … this produces a type of relation which is half dependence, half fear.”

José Jasán Nieves, El Toque’s general editor, added: “Why do they need to hit you when they can turn you into shit psychologically?”