

THE ROLE OF BLOGS IN BREAKING THE MEDIA'S EMBARGO AND TELLING THE TRUTH ABOUT CUBA: COMMENT

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In order to comprehend the role that blogs play in Cuba, it is important to first understand the space blogs occupy in the rest of the world.

A number of American journalists have expressed their disdain for bloggers culminating with author and columnist Buzz Bissinger's recent expletive-filled tirade on Bob Costas' TV show. Bissinger argued that blogs are filled with lies, bloggers are mean-spirited, that there is no fact checking on blogs, and that blogs value speed over accuracy.

What old-guard journalists, like Bissinger, do not seem to understand is that the reason citizen journalists and blogs even exist in the first place is that they fill a vacuum. Whether it is a more humorous take on the world of sports or a more serious look at what is going on in Cuba, bloggers fill the void left by incomplete, inaccurate, and indifferent coverage by the regular media.

Of course there is some truth to what Bissinger says about blogs. There are unscrupulous and inaccurate bloggers. But there are also unscrupulous and inaccurate professional journalists and editors. Jayson Blair and Stephen Glass had credentials, fact checkers, and editors and still they managed to have plagiarized and fictional stories published as legitimate articles in *The New York Times* and *The New Republic*, respectively. The same *Times*, incidentally, that was instrumental, through award-winning journalist Herbert Matthews, in bringing a bit player like Fidel Castro onto the world stage and which has consistently been sympathetic to the Castro regime and hostile to the Cuban exile community ever since.

As the target of Bissinger's wrath, Will Leitch, of the popular and irreverent sports blog, Deadspin, rightly pointed out, in his defense, that the blogosphere is a meritocracy. There are literally millions of blogs on the web and most are read by only a handful of people, but a precious few have readerships larger than some newspapers. If a blog is widely read it is purely a reflection of the connection that blog's writers have made with their audience.

And this explains the mind-boggling amount of readers and comments that the courageous Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez has garnered with her blog, "Generación Y." She is reporting and commenting the truth of Cuban life in a way neither the official Cuban media can or the international media will. And she is doing it under the most inhospitable of circumstances.

I was drawn to blogging because I realized that within this wild frontier was an opportunity to draw the average person's attention to something the mainstream media in America had ignored for far too long—the dictatorship in Cuba.

Thomas Jefferson eloquently stated that "our liberty cannot be guarded but by the freedom of the press." He understood that citizens of this country, or any country, could not act rationally or in their best interest unless they were well informed of the events going on around them.

But Jefferson was not the only one that understood this link. Surely this very fact is what caused Fidel Castro to crush the independent press in Cuba when he took power and what drove him to imprison dozens of independent journalists in 2003's black spring. It is

what drove him to place an information embargo on the Cuban people. It is why Cuba today is the country with the most incarcerated independent journalists, per capita, in the world.

So whether it is in Cuba where the media can not report the truth, or in America where the media often refuses to report truth, bloggers act as the watchdogs of the media watchdogs.

Recently Yoani Sánchez had this to say about being denied an “exit visa” to leave Cuba and accept an important journalism award in Spain:

They forget that in cyberspace my voice can travel without limits, leaving and returning without asking for permission... It doesn't matter that they have taken my passport. As of a year ago I have another, on which, in the section for nationality, appears a short word: “blogger.”

I am very proud to be a fellow citizen of the same blogging nation as Yoani Sánchez and others who cover and comment on the Cuban reality.