
Reviewed by Benjamin Willis

Salim Lamrani’s *Cuba, the Media, and the Challenge of Impartiality* is a study of how corporate control of media outlets can make for highly skewed reporting on any given topic. The book’s main focus is on the intransigence of the Spanish daily *El País* in regard to its editorial stance on Cuba. The newspaper belongs to Grupo PRISA, which is a major force in the US Spanish-language media and, as the author suggests, espouses a ‘viewpoint [that] is pervasive throughout the Western press’. In the introduction, Lamrani poses the question of how can the media ‘deal impartially with the factual reality ... without going up against the interests of the financial conglomerates that own them, whose sole purpose is to maintain the established order?’ (p. 9). The author notes that since 2011 *El País* has also been distributed as a supplement to the Miami Spanish-language daily *El Nuevo Herald*, a ‘paper that represents the interests of the extreme right of the Cuban exile community’ (p. 15).

Eight different topics are discussed with Lamrani confronting the ‘assumptions’ of *El País* in its allegedly biased reporting with ‘fact-based reality’. Human rights, political dissidents, Yoani Sánchez, the Cuban Five, Alan Gross, emigration to the US and the criticism of Cuba being ‘a social failure’ are all examined as the author compares what the editors at *El País* consider ‘fit to print’ with statistics and testimonies from numerous organisations including the UN, UNESCO, the WHO, the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and, thanks to Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, the US government operatives who have worked at what was the United States Interests Section in Havana. In each instance, the published articles and, more importantly, the omissions of the Spanish daily stand in stark contrast with the objective opinions and observations by some of the world’s leading authorities on issues of health, education, human rights and other pertinent social issues.

Lamrani’s argument at times reads as though it could appear as official propaganda often found in *Granma*, and for this, he has been derided as a shill for the Cuban government. However, an overwhelming amount of evidence leads the reader to agree with his assertion that ‘*El País* has broken with the covenant of impartiality essential to any journalistic activity’ and ‘abandoned the field of information provision for political profit’ (p. 95). Because of the historic announcements of 17 December 2014 between the two nations, some of the subjects (Cuban Five, Alan Gross) of the book seem somewhat dated. Nevertheless, the analysis of how the media played a role in fomenting negative
attitudes toward Cuba concerning these two seemingly insuperable dilemmas can be applied to the many remaining complications that exist because of more than half a century of enmity.

The manner in which the author portrays the media’s coverage of certain subjects such as human rights and the so-called ‘dissidents’ in the past has relevance when examining the ideological stance projected by the reporting of various news outlets during the recent embassy openings. It seems as though different cable news networks and certain major American newspapers have chosen which narrative they will exercise during the ongoing process of normalisation. Indeed, as the New York Times has conducted a campaign that has championed engagement and diplomacy through a series of editorials, the Washington Post has opted for a recalcitrant negativity that makes the Miami Herald look positively pedestrian. It would be interesting to see Lamrani’s sequel to this book ten years from now focusing on other media outlets that will no doubt try to delay the normalising of relations through their biased ‘reporting’.

As the author concludes, ‘Freedom and the duty to inform are by definition pitted against economic and financial power in an unequal battle in which truth is often the first casualty’ (p. 131). El País’ manipulated portrayal of Cuba, like other media conglomerates coverage of important topics such as race relations, climate change, inequality and the manifestations of the military-industrial complex, is often ‘singularly lacking in diversity, balance, and nuance’.

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