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## ARCHIVE

From issue: **Media in the Americas: Threats to Free Speech** (Fall 2013)

### ■ AQ FEATURE

# Journalists Speak Out

BY [Carlos Dada](#), [Jorge Ramos](#), [Ricardo Uceda](#), [Tim Padgett](#), [Michèle Montas-Dominique](#) and [Alfredo Corchado](#)

## **Past winners of the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal for reporting on the Americas assess the future of journalism in the region.** *(video available)*

In this issue of *AQ*, we are proud to spotlight six journalists, all past winners of the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal, whom we asked to reflect on how their profession and the environment for reporting have changed in recent years, and what it will mean for future generations of journalists.

**Click below to view an exclusive AQ interview with Alfredo Corchado, the Mexico bureau chief of the *Dallas Morning News*, about his experiences as a reporter in Mexico.**

Interview by Carin Zissis.

Read the responses from the following journalists:

[Carlos Dada](#)

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## *An Interview with Carlos Dada*

**When you received the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal in 2011, you—and the website you founded, *El Faro*—were cited for your courageous work in investigative journalism in the midst of difficult circumstances. Has the situation for journalism in El Salvador improved in the past two years?**

Investigating crime and corruption has never been easy in El Salvador, above all due to the lack of guarantees from state and public officials, who are complicit when it comes to this type of crime. But it's much more difficult for local journalists, who live and work in small communities far from the large urban centers. They're exposed to greater risks because the criminals and the corrupt officials whom they seek to expose live in the same town or are people who hold great power in their regions.

In 2012, journalists were increasingly under attack from organized crime. The situation is much worse in Honduras and Guatemala, where a number of journalists have been assassinated.

**How do you see the situation beyond El Salvador in terms of the advances in and challenges to journalism and the freedom of expression?**

If we compare the current situation for freedom of speech in Latin America with that of several decades ago—when most of the region was controlled by military regimes or in the midst of armed conflicts—there is great progress to be celebrated. Now, in general, there is great political freedom, and institutions and the rule of law are more stable—though by no means perfect. Society has also become more tolerant, and the era when armies or paramilitaries could openly attack citizens for expressing their political views has ended.

There is also a greater degree of media diversity, which provides citizens with a wider range of opinions and information beyond those of the traditional elite. Additionally, technology has led to the rise of new media that, in Latin America, have created a space and demand for long-term investigations and exposés.

Still, there is much to be done. Today, more governments are using their economic power to punish dissenting media outlets and filing lawsuits against their owners.

In Central America and Mexico, we have found ourselves more caught by the increased power of organized crime syndicates that corrupt the state and the rule of law and target those who disagree with them (including in the media). And the situation only seems to be getting worse.

**What advice do you give to young journalists or journalism students today?**

From the outside, the current crisis in the media's traditional business model appears to be a huge threat to the future of journalism and those who dedicate their lives to it. But in reality, it's an exciting moment to be a journalist.

New technology is transforming our profession. The challenge can be seen as an opportunity to reinvent the old, failed business models of the past, and create new ways to communicate and inform.

Today we have many more efficient means to stay informed and communicate with the public. We have more access to knowledge than ever before, and we have at our disposal very effective technology to investigate cases and dig up information.

We still don't know how journalism will be 10 or 15 years from now, but I have no doubt that content will

continue being the principal element that sets apart media outlets. The way we communicate is changing, but the public continues to be interested in good stories, and citizens still need reliable information to make better decisions.

## *An interview with Jorge Ramos*

**When you received the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal in 2001 for your work as a news anchor and freelance reporter at *Univision*, Spanish-language media in the United States was becoming a mainstream phenomenon. In what ways has the importance and role of Spanish-language media changed?**



After getting the Cabot award in 2001—in a very somber ceremony in New York City shortly after 9/11—I ended up going to the war in Afghanistan and, two years later, to Iraq. The most symbolic issue for the Hispanic community—immigration reform—also changed. President George W. Bush’s promise to push for the legalization of millions of undocumented immigrants was moved to the side because of newfound concerns about national security. But the rise of

Spanish-language media as a mainstream phenomenon came hand in hand with the impressive growth of the Hispanic community—55 million now, 140 million predicted in 2050—and a new rule in American politics: no one can make it to the White House without the Latino vote. The last presidential candidate who declined to talk to Spanish-language television was Bob Dole in 1996 and, of course, he lost. Since then, every single presidential contender knows that the best way to attract Hispanic voters is in Spanish.

**What do you see as the future for Spanish-language media in the United States?**

For the first time in television history, during the ratings sweeps in July 2013, *Univision* beat every other network in the U.S. in prime time in the key demographic of ages 18 to 49, despite language. This change owes in large part to the incredible demographic revolution we are living in this country. However, those numbers don’t necessarily translate into politics. No Hispanic journalist, for example, was chosen to be a moderator for the presidential debates during the 2012 election. Also, because of the language barrier, many of our reports fail to influence specific policies or issues. But starting this October, *ABC News* and *Univision* are launching a new network in English called *Fusion* to attract Latino Millennials and even a more traditional English-language audience. For the first time, those Latinos and non-Latinos who don’t get their news in Spanish will be able to know about Hispanic issues in English. This might be a game-changer in the television industry and in American politics.

**What advice do you give young journalists and journalism students about what they should expect in the field and how their career will change in the future?**

Social media, the Internet and cell phones have dramatically transformed the process of getting information and reporting it. A news organization can’t be in all places all the time. Twitter and Facebook can. Technology-oriented audiences don’t wait until 6:30 p.m. every day to get their news. So the role of journalism is changing in ways we can’t foresee. Still, journalists are needed now more than ever. First, as always, we have to get our facts right. Credibility is what sets us apart from billions of unconfirmed data online. Our responsibility is to put information in context and emphasize what is relevant from what is spam. Finally, our main social responsibility is still intact: to prevent abuses committed by those in power. If

we don't ask the tough questions, who is going to do it? And honestly? This is a fun job. I don't know of any other profession in the world that allows you to be young and challenge authority as a way of life.

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## *An Interview with Ricardo Uceda*

**In 2000, you received the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal for your work as an investigative reporter during the government of Alberto Fujimori—a time of incredible levels of corruption and attacks against freedom of expression. Since then, have conditions improved for journalists in Peru?**

Investigative journalism played a key role during the decade that President Fujimori was in power, a time when democratic institutions were failing, corruption was rampant, and human rights were threatened. The corruption extended to the media, most notably TV stations, which received cash payments from Fujimori intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos in exchange for broadcasting government propaganda.

And despite greater political freedom, improvements in democracy and economic growth under the three governments that have followed the collapse of the Fujimori regime, there are still stark social disparities and a great deal of corruption.

Moreover, the media itself has not democratized. In fact, ownership in radio and print media has become more concentrated, and the same companies are snapping up new digital and radio frequencies made possible by technology. Though there have been important developments in independent journalism and more honest, objective coverage of news, we need to break free of the burden of business interests.

By this, I'm not referring to the willingness and ability of the media or journalists to simply denounce government abuse or corruption, but rather to objectively, thoroughly and professionally cover what's happening in the entire country, and not just in Lima. To this end, there are two sectors that must become stronger: businesses committed to quality journalism and journalism itself.

**How do you see the situation beyond Peru in terms of the advances in and challenges to journalism and freedom of expression?**

I think we've made significant progress when it comes to standards of protection and monitoring government excess and malfeasance. But in countries such as Venezuela and Ecuador there is still an unacceptable hostility toward the basic idea of independent media and watchdogs, which stems from their authoritarian concepts of government.

Violence perpetrated by organized crime against the media also continues to be a principal cause for concern in some countries.

Journalists and NGOs should view these challenges from the responsibility we have to the public. How can we keep the public better informed?

In fundamental areas such as education and health, or the environment and organized crime, just to name a few, we can't just go out there and report, simply because many of us don't have the background. We need training to better cover these important policy areas and promote popular understanding. We also need to understand and provide better information on excluded segments of the population.

All of this implies a larger investment in journalistic services, and I just don't see this happening right now.

Foundations should directly support in-depth or investigative journalism. For example (albeit for the United States), the Ford Foundation just donated \$500,000 to *Univision's* Investigative Journalism Unit.

### **What advice do you give to young journalists or journalism students today?**

The most important thing is to have a solid foundation in the liberal arts and humanities, which isn't the approach of many universities. Technique, despite being fundamental, can be learned afterwards.

It's also important to reflect upon one's own identity as a journalist. At the end of the day, it boils down to the question: what is our role?

I think that if we clearly perceive ourselves as public servants, it will be easier to face the various dilemmas this profession entails, and the difficulties and risks that abound.

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## ***An Interview with Tim Padgett***

**In 2005, you received the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal for your extensive coverage of Latin American issues in *Newsweek* and *TIME* magazine. Since then, how have multimedia and social media changed the coverage of the region and journalism?**

No region in the world uses social media more than Latin America. The irony, though, is that despite Latin American's connection to social media, print journalism is still thriving in the region, rather than collapsing as it is in the United States. That tells you that perhaps people in Latin America are not using the Internet for news as much as readers in the United States.

While we haven't seen social-media-fueled upheavals like the Arab Spring in Latin America, we have seen instances of social media being used effectively in places such as Mexico, where protests against Enrique Peña Nieto's presidential campaign last year were spearheaded by the movement known as #YoSoy132. And similarly, social media figured prominently in mobilizing demonstrators and communicating with the news media during this summer's protests in Brazil.

On the dark side, drug cartels have also been using social media to send warnings to people in Mexico. However, I believe there is great potential for the use of social media as a political tool in Latin America.

**When you look across the region today, what do you see as the advances in and challenges to journalism and freedom of expression?**

In terms of quality journalism, one of the main challenges is getting rid of a culture that still exists in many countries of patronage journalism: media and/or journalists who can be explicitly or implicitly purchased.

In small markets, journalism still can be either bought or partisan. The challenge is developing more independent journalism from the urban to the rural areas.

In general, Latin American journalism in the past decade has taken a very impressive leap in areas such as investigative reporting. However, it has two main obstacles.

The first is violence. Violence against independent reporters by drug cartels and political interests is the biggest problem in places like Mexico, Colombia and Honduras, for example.

The second—which we see mostly in left-leaning governments like Ecuador and Venezuela but also in right-leaning ones like Panama—is the increasing move to criminalize free speech, free expression and journalism.

**As the new Americas correspondent for *WLRN-Miami Herald News*, you have recently made the jump from print to broadcast journalism. What is the relevance of the radio as a medium in the U.S. today?**

Radio is a particularly healthy medium both financially and professionally. It seems to be a more resilient medium.

**What do you tell journalism students and aspiring journalists?**

Journalism students and young journalists are going to find fewer and fewer staff positions. Work is going to be increasingly more on the contractor or stringer level, particularly for foreign correspondents.

Before I left *TIME* as its Latin American bureau chief, I would often hire stringers based on their multimedia skills. I think that one of the best ways to carve out a career in journalism is by becoming as multimedia as possible.

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## *An Interview with Michèle Montas-Dominique*

**In 2002, you received the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal for your work as the director of *Radio Haiti Inter*, which has been an active voice even during the years of the Jean-Claude Duvalier dictatorship (1957–1986). Have freedom of expression and the safety of journalists improved since the end of the Duvalier regime and since your recognition by the Maria Moors Cabot committee?**

Since the mid-1970s, I have worked as a journalist through dictatorships, military regimes and elected governments in Haiti. I survived the murder of my husband, journalist Jean Dominique, in April 2000, and two assassination attempts that forced me to close our station, *Radio Haiti*, in 2003. I was forced to live outside the country three separate times, once under an elected government. Our reporters have been attacked and assaulted countless times, and our radio station has been sabotaged by different military regimes. Throughout all of this, I have also championed a 13-year and so-far-fruitless demand for justice for the assassination of Jean Dominique.

Today, the airwaves across Haiti are filled by dozens of radio stations buzzing with passionate debates about the latest political scandals. A demanding Haitian public considers its hard-won freedom of speech as the most precious victory of the post-dictatorial years. However, 27 years after the overthrow of the Duvalier dictatorship, the sound and the fury on the airwaves elicit deeper questions about press freedom. The nature of the challenge has changed. While isolated cases of intimidation and threats remain, direct attacks on the Haitian press have dropped significantly. In Haiti, under the Duvalier dictatorship or the military regimes that followed, journalists faced a clear enemy—structured, heavily armed and dangerous: the state.

An energetic and event-driven press has emerged in Haiti from the 30-year battle for freedom of the press

and the devastating 2010 earthquake, which killed about 40 journalists and destroyed dozens of media outlets. Despite these tragedies, our freedom to express our views and demands continues. It derives its strength from the successful struggle of a majority of Haitians for the right to speak out and be heard.

### **How do you see the situation beyond Haiti in terms of the advances in and challenges to journalism and freedom of expression?**

Today, in Haiti and elsewhere in the Americas, journalists continue to be caught in the winds of intolerance and conflicting political passions, but the dangers come from multiple sources. Hired gunmen may act now on behalf of local officials, political parties, or private interests. But more important, the cloak of impunity around cases of murdered journalists and public figures has created an insidious culture of self-censorship.

This climate of impunity explains in part why today there is little or no investigative work in the media. Editors and reporters turn a blind eye to deeper issues of kidnapping, corruption and drug trafficking. The expressions of opinion seem to flow freely on the airwaves, but journalists know that they cannot count on essential guarantees of security and justice.

The issue of impunity in the case of murdered journalists is a dark issue for our continent. Of the 149 cases of journalists killed in the Americas since 1992, 100 remain unsolved, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). Brazil, with 21 journalist murders, is ranked tenth worst on the CPJ world Impunity Index. In Colombia, 35 cases remain unsolved—crimes without punishment.

### **What do you tell aspiring journalists or journalism students today?**

The Haitian media landscape might seem confusing. It is too easy to fall into the usual clichés about poverty and corruption that appear in the international media and the Internet, without delving deeper into a rich culture of resistance and survival. Covering Haiti or any other land scarred by dictatorships means, first, beyond the technical tools of journalism, listening to the voices of the people.

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## *An Interview with Alfredo Corchado*

*Watch an exclusive AQ interview with Corchado below.*



Interview by Carin Zissis.

**When you received the Maria Moors Cabot Gold Medal in 2007 for your investigative reporting in Mexico, it was the first year of President Felipe Calderón’s war on narcotics trafficking. Since that time, what has changed in Mexico for freedom of expression, journalists and the overall level of violence?**

I received the official notification that I had won the Maria Moors Cabot award the same week I received a death threat. What stunned me was how much protection and concern was expressed to me by authorities from both sides of the border. A large part of the reaction was because I have a U.S. passport—though I was born in Mexico. Unfortunately, many of my colleagues don’t have the same advantages.

The chilling effect on freedom of expression in Mexico has been alarming. Many reporters have been censored, scared, kidnapped, disappeared, or killed. Mexico remains one of the most dangerous places to do journalism today. The result: regions, especially in the north, have simply fallen into silence. Little is known about the violence that’s affected entire communities. Much of the information today comes from online postings, material that’s often not verifiable or confirmed.

I also fear that there’s growing fatigue among the U.S. public, frustration about the ongoing story. More bodies hanging from bridges? Big deal. Yesterday’s news. That’s worrisome. The biggest test we face remains exposing the real links between drug traffickers and politicians.

As civil society becomes more active and vocal in its efforts to keep the powerful accountable, so do journalists. One feeds off the other. This is where I see hope in Mexico.

More journalists are also using Mexico’s freedom of information law—known as IFAI—to find secrets, dig into numbers and reveal the collusion between leaders and criminals to write about the gray zones between legality and illegality.

**How do you see the situation beyond Mexico in terms of the advances in and challenges to journalism and freedom of expression in the region?**

As hopeful as I remain, I also see challenges ahead for Mexico and beyond. At one point, the *Dallas Morning News* had the largest bureau of any U.S. media. We had 12 people, including a TV bureau that was part of Belo broadcasting. Over the years, the industry changed due the growth of online news and content and the economic crisis. We all paid the price, especially foreign bureaus. The industry lost many reporters. Many shut down foreign operations. Today, the *Dallas Morning News* is the only newspaper in the Southwest with a bureau in Mexico.

### **What advice do you give to young journalists or journalism students today?**

There is no more important time than today to become a journalist. People are learning to appreciate that journalism means quality, that someone is actually vetting news content, sources and every item that gets into what people read or view.

A large part of that is storytelling. The importance of weaving a good story out of facts and human interaction didn't end with the invention of radio, or television, nor will it end with the arrival of online media. I would tell the next generation to honor the time-tested virtues of journalism. Much of what I do today still revolves around checking, and winning the trust of sources and verifying everything said. But once the information is obtained and verified, the options for sharing that story are mindboggling — something many in my generation are just beginning to fully understand and aspiring journalists should learn.

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