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Broadcasting a Vision of Democracy Into a Void

The U.S. has sunk nearly \$200 million into TV Marti's programming aimed at Cuba. But one scholar estimates it has 'nearly zero viewership.'

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MIAMI — Tune in to TV Marti, and you can see anything from global news and hard-hitting documentaries to a sitcom with a bearded revolutionary wreaking havoc on a mythical island shaped a lot like Cuba.

But after 16 years and nearly \$200 million from U.S. taxpayers, a question nags at its critics and even some who support the pro-democracy mission of the propaganda outlet: Is anyone in Cuba watching?

As TV Marti prepares to buy a \$10-million airplane to carry its signal aloft in hope of outflanking the Communist government's routine jamming, there is mounting evidence that fate and Fidel Castro have so far succeeded in keeping the exile-produced broadcasts a nonentity in most Cuban households.

For all but the few Cubans rich and brave enough to acquire a forbidden satellite dish, TV Marti is available only in the form of snow on the jammed UHF channel in Havana. In October, Hurricane Wilma knocked out the station's antenna and transmitter, cutting the signal entirely.

Since then, a lumbering C-130 aircraft borrowed from the Pennsylvania National Guard has transmitted a four-hour segment on the occasional Saturday. But the plane has other demands on its time, including forays to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"The new plane will give us at least 30 hours per week" by making the transmitter a moving target and less susceptible to jamming, Radio/TV Marti director Pedro Roig said. The plane is expected to be flying this spring. Radio Marti's signal is also jammed, but less successfully, and its broadcasts are less problematic for its intended audience because it

can be listened to less conspicuously.

But getting the signal into Cuban homes is only part of the problem in conveying the U.S. government's message.

TV Marti pays a private network to relay its signal via satellite for Cubans with access to clandestine dishes, but its homemade programming competes with dozens of other news and entertainment channels for that privileged audience.

"If a Cuban has the choice of seeing old exiles shout at each other or to watch CNN or HBO, what do you think they are going to do?" said John Nichols, head of the Film/Video and Media Studies department at Pennsylvania State University. A scholar of the U.S. government's efforts to broadcast to Cuba, he has concluded that there is "virtually zero viewership of TV Marti."

In addition to being ineffectual, the communications professor said, TV Marti operates in violation of the International Telecommunication Convention governing the use of world airwaves. Both the United States and Cuba are signatories. The frequency TV Marti uses is assigned to Cuba, and the convention prohibits other nations from deliberately intruding.

"The plane will not make a difference," Nichols said. "It is an effort to defy the laws of physics as well as the laws of nations, and it's going to fail on both accounts."

Even some who share Marti executives' goal of undermining Castro contend that the broadcasts are an expensive failure.

"I'm so ashamed at how gullible my community is, the way the government sells them on what they are supposedly doing for freedom and democracy in Cuba. Radio and TV Marti — they have a \$28-million budget. For what? Nothing, that's what," said Jose Basulto, a stridently anti-Castro exile who founded Brothers to the Rescue, which steered Cuban migrants to safety during the 1996 rafters crisis.

Government handlers for TV Marti and its radio counterpart defend their broadcasts.

"Cuba complains to the ITU [International Telecommunication Union] every year that we're violating standards, but U.S. policymakers have decided that's not a viable argument," said Alberto Mascaro, chief of staff for the Office of Cuba Broadcasting. He said he didn't know the details of the ITU agreement and that he was obliged only to follow U.S. regulations.

TV Marti executives argue that the broadcast is a good investment because it will be a vital means of communicating with Cubans when Castro dies and the country needs guidance on how to reinvent itself after the failed experiment with communism.

"Radio and TV Marti will be even more important during the transition to democracy in Cuba than it is now," programming director Jorge Luis Hernandez said. "People have been

suffering under dictatorship for nearly half a century. People will need education in democracy."

With no means of accurately assessing the popularity or effectiveness of TV Marti, its Cuban exile producers have to rely on the trickle of rafters and other emigres reaching Miami each year to provide feedback. Interviewer Juanita Isa also keeps in touch with dissidents on the island, calling them regularly to collect the latest tidbits on anti-Castro actions and the Havana government's crackdowns.

"The most difficult thing for us is to target an audience. Cuba is not an open society that you can assess viewer reactions and adapt your programming," Roig said. "We have to depend on new arrivals for our focus groups."

The director measures success by the number of calls made to the station or to Cuban Americans here in which someone mentions having seen a broadcast.

The TV station's high-water mark was 600 viewer reports last summer, from a population of 11.2 million. That blip in August and another in December prompted the exile-run Cubanet news blog to post jubilant accounts of the station's breakthroughs.

A recent visitor to Havana, home to 2.2 million prospective viewers, queried every resident she encountered and all but one professed to have no knowledge of or interest in the U.S. media effort.

One young laborer said he had caught glimpses of TV Marti programs but didn't dare stay on the channel for long in an apartment where, like most in the Cuban capital, doors and windows are open to shared corridors, landings and sidewalks — and the probing eyes of revolutionary enforcers.

Such anecdotal surveys are reinforced by the U.S. government's own findings. In August 2001, researchers for the International Broadcasting Bureau, the U.S. federal agency that oversees the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, polled 1,000 Cubans by telephone to ask whether they had seen any TV Marti programs over the previous week. All but three said they hadn't.

Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.), a ranking member on the Senate Finance Committee, has long been critical of the operation.

"The federal government keeps spending millions in tax dollars and precious military assets to unjam TV Marti," Baucus said when asked about the new aerial transmission outlay. "There's a better way to bring the message of democracy to Cuba: Lift the travel ban and let the American people share about the benefits of freedom face to face."

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