On 22 January 1959, less than a month after Fidel Castro and his fellow revolutionaries drove Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista from power, 400 journalists and photographers from around the world gathered in the Habana Riviera Hotel for Operación Verdad (Operation Truth). They listened as Castro pointed out that they, as members of the media, possessed a powerful weapon: the ability to shape public opinion. Yet there was a problem. “We [Latin Americans] do not have international cables. You, journalists from Latin America, have no resort other than to accept whatever the foreign cables say.” But the Cuban revolution had shown that change was possible. “The press of Latin America,” Castro declared, “should take control of the means that will permit them to know the truth and not be victims of lies.”

Castro’s call for Latin American journalists to seize control of the means of news production and dissemination was the first official step in creating Prensa Latina, a Cuban news agency with global aspirations. Castro and his collaborators worked to provide an alternative source of information for newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs around the world. They recognized the crucial role that news agencies, or wire services, play in collecting and distributing the raw material that becomes repackaged into front-page headlines, primetime reports, and eventually even history books.

Surprisingly, scholars have largely overlooked Prensa Latina, even though the wire service produced much of the news that later generations and people at the time considered noteworthy. Even where Prensa Latina does appear in the historical record, it has been, for the most part, only a minor element of

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2. This article uses the terms “news agency” and “wire service” interchangeably.

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© 2019 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
the story or is dismissed as “only of real significance in Cuba.”3 Other aspects of Cuban and Latin American media are far better understood. Most analyses of Cuban media in particular focus on internal production and censorship, but analyzing the history of Prensa Latina uncovers complementary—and equally important—external efforts to control information.4

The previous lack of studies of Prensa Latina is part of a general trend. Wire services generally receive less attention than other forms of media from scholars and the public. After all, much of the knowledge that news agencies produce gets subsumed within more recognizable newspapers, radio, or television programs. Wire service stories frequently are used without attribution, so they become even more invisible and can be difficult to trace. As a result of this inattention to the crucial work of wire services like Prensa Latina, we know much more about final news products and their uses than about the highly contested and political process of creating and disseminating that news in the first place.5

This article is the first in-depth study in English of Prensa Latina’s creation, reception, and significance. It draws on a wide variety of archival and published sources, including Cuban media and memoirs, declassified


intelligence reports, U.S. State Department records, and newspaper articles from across the Americas. Prensa Latina was a powerful weapon in Castro's revolutionary arsenal because it provided a new way for the Cuban government to gather and shape information and to build international solidarity by sharing its side of the story with the rest of the world.

Knowledge production is an inherently political act, and struggles over who gets to produce news and whose news gets used have high stakes for everyone involved. As Lillian Guerra has observed of post-revolutionary media politics in Cuba, news mattered because “discourse shaped events and conditioned outcomes by shaping people’s perceptions of what was possible.” From the subjects of the news to the journalists who write about them, from the editors who craft the stories to the media who broadcast them, and from the governments that regulate the news to the ones that manipulate it, everyone involved in knowledge production engages in numerous contests over information.

Each of these contests takes place within multiple, interconnected contexts, and analyzing struggles over the production of knowledge can help us better understand the contexts within which that knowledge is created and contested. Prensa Latina was a product of the Cuban revolution and the Cold War. It was also a forerunner of a postcolonial movement among so-called Third World or developing countries in the 1970s to reshape the international flow of information. The story of Prensa Latina thus sheds light on the barriers that less powerful countries face—and occasionally surmount—in...
trying to change entrenched modes of information production. Examining the debates over Prensa Latina’s involvement in Cuban espionage also expands a literature on intelligence work that has predominantly focused on the United States and Europe and raises important questions about the porous divide between the acts of reporting, propagandizing, and spying. Uncovering the role of Prensa Latina in Cuban propaganda efforts helps us better understand the technologies and strategies of insurgency that allowed the Cuban revolution to become influential on a global scale. Studying the little-known history of Prensa Latina provides new insight into the production, circulation, reception, restriction, and manipulation of information during the Cold War.

Creating Prensa Latina

Even before Castro seized control over Cuba’s government, he recognized the importance of the international media and used the press to his advantage. In February 1958, Castro welcomed New York Times reporter Herbert Matthews to his camp in the Sierra Maestra Mountains to witness the insurrection firsthand. In what another New York Times journalist, Tad Szulc, later described as a performance of “guerrilla theater,” Castro and his companions gave Matthews the impression that their army was much larger and stronger...
than it actually was. In addition, the series of articles Matthews wrote proved that Batista’s reports of Castro’s death were greatly exaggerated.

Ernesto “Che” Guevara also contributed to the effort to mold the Cuban revolution’s international image by organizing what he called “the most exclusive press club in the world” in the Sierra Maestra. By April 1958, six reporters from the United States, South America, and Europe were ensconced in the mountains with the rebel army. An Argentine member of Che’s press club, Jorge Ricardo Masetti, went on a speaking tour of Argentina later that year to generate support for the Cuban revolution and published a book titled *Los que luchan y los que lloran: El Fidel Castro que yo vi* (Those Who Fight and Those Who Cry: The Fidel Castro that I Saw).

In the mountains, the Cuban revolutionaries had discussed the idea of starting a Latin American news service, and once they came to power they wasted no time in making their vision a reality. Castro and Che enlisted Masetti’s help to realize this goal. Already an enthusiastic promoter of the Cuban Revolution, Masetti had previous experience working for fledgling news agencies. Like Che, he had briefly worked with Juan Domingo Perón’s Agencia Latina de Noticias, which had come to an end with Argentina’s military coup of 1955.

Masetti had little trouble recruiting other illustrious journalists and writers from around the world to join the new effort. Gabriel García Márquez, who met Masetti for the first time at the Operation Truth gathering, signed on as one of the founders of the news service, as did Masetti’s old friends and countrymen Rodolfo Walsh, Jorge Timossi, Rogelio García Lupo, and Carlos Aguirre. Other luminaries—including Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, C. Wright Mills, Carleton Beals, Waldo Frank, and Miguel Ángel Asturias—also lent their support. Prensa Latina’s prominent collaborators saw the new wire service as a welcome alternative to the long-standing dominance of U.S. and West European media. Additionally, the fact that Prensa Latina’s leadership and most famous contributors came from numerous countries helped the


news agency portray itself as a Latin American or international entity, not just a Cuban one.

Prensa Latina launched its wire service in June 1959 with an ambitious agenda. Salvador Allende, at the time a member of the Chilean Senate, predicted that “Prensa Latina [was] destined to fulfill an urgent continental need.” The editorial center in Havana began exchanging more than 400 teletype messages a day with its bureaus and correspondents in New York, Washington, and nine Latin American capital cities. Prensa Latina reports and photographs began appearing in newspapers, radio programs, and television shows across the hemisphere. According to one estimate, Prensa Latina was soon supplying stories to more than 200 newspapers and magazines in the Americas. Mainstream press outlets like The New York Times and The Boston Globe occasionally printed information supplied by Prensa Latina, but most of the wire service’s reports appeared in leftist radio broadcasts and publications ranging from the black newspaper The Chicago Defender to the Mexican magazine Política, and from the Bolivian Communist Party’s feminist magazine Voces femeninas to the Canadian Communist Party’s weekly newspaper Canadian Tribune.

Prensa Latina also became a crucial source of information for Cuban media. Newspapers such as Revolución and Granma and Radio Habana Cuba relied on the wire service for information and photographs of events taking place around the world. One year after Prensa Latina’s creation, the international news section of Revolución contained more or less equal numbers of stories from Prensa Latina and the Associated Press, and within two years nearly all of the newspaper’s international stories came from Prensa Latina. As one

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18. For examples of Prensa Latina stories in Revolución, see “Los terroristas del aire: Aviones yanquis con cargas atómicas hacen vuelo ilegal Revolución,” 1 June 1960; and “Reitera China apoyo a actitud soviética: El gobierno legítimo de Laos protesta por violarse el alto al fuego. Envián mas armas yanquis,” Revolución, 2 June 1961., pp. 3, 4-7.
former employee of both Prensa Latina and Radio Habana recalled: “During many years, Prensa Latina was the principal source for much of Cuban media. When there was no Internet, it was the only honest agency providing information about world events.”

Prensa Latina was ambitious and quickly sought to provide global coverage. In December 1959, Masetti announced that his agency would be opening branch offices in Rome and Paris and expanding its services to provide sixteen hours a day of news transmissions to the nations of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The wire service hosted a conference in January 1960 in Havana, welcoming representatives of many of the Iron Curtain and Communist news agencies, including Soviet TASS, Yugoslavia’s Tanjug, and Poland’s PAP, as well as the New China News Agency and Japan Press. A Yugoslav journalist who attended the gathering later told the chief of the U.S. State Department’s News Division that the Cubans entertained their media guests with “night spots, side trips around the island, [and] other activities where it was best one’s wife was not along.” The other wire services reportedly rejected the Cubans’ offer to swap news stories with exclusive distribution rights for free, but they did sign normal paid exchange agreements. By 1963, Prensa Latina was sending regularly scheduled transmissions of its own reports as well as point-to-point dispatches of other press agencies to New York, Moscow, Prague, and Shanghai. After a decade of operations, Prensa Latina had bureaus in Mexico City, Montevideo, Santiago, Paris, and Prague, in addition to offices or correspondents in cities in more than twenty other countries including North Vietnam, North Korea, Japan, India, Algeria, Great Britain, and Spain.

But the political nature of Prensa Latina’s services was even more important—and controversial—than their quantity or geographic reach. Masetti summed up the agency’s editorial orientation in an article leading up the January 1960 wire services conference. “We are objective, but not impartial. We consider it cowardly to be impartial, because it is impossible to

be impartial between good and evil,” he explained. “We were born in Cuba,” Masetti continued, “because the Latin American revolution was born in Cuba, and we have the mission of revolutionizing the journalism of Latin America.” At the same time, however, he instructed his reporters that “a news agency should not opine, but only inform.” A U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) report from later that year sheds light on Masetti’s seemingly contradictory statements:

Prensa Latina’s coverage of Latin American news is far better than any other service, and the material reported is usually objective and factual. The news carried is not openly propagandistic in nature, nor does it reflect the trademark of the Communist line. However, PL’s anti-American slant is shown by the selection of news rather than by editorializing or distorting. It generally reports overt Communist activity in [Latin America] much like any other routine news and without an “anti” slant. Any news which is anti-Commie or anti-Castro is either completely ignored or given very little coverage, whereas statements which are anti-American or pro-Communist receive widespread distribution. For example, a statement by a government official of a Latin American country which is pro-Soviet or anti-American is reported widely, and in such a way that it appears that such is the popular view of the Government in that country. U.S. military movements in the Caribbean are widely publicized, as in the case of the shore leave of Marines in the Dominican Republic, which was construed as a pro-Trujillo show of force.

The same report warned, though, that Prensa Latina was increasing its links with Communist wire services such as TASS and the New China News Agency and claimed that the January 1960 meeting of news agencies in Havana had prompted “many resignations from Prensa Latina employees who could see the Communist orientation” of the wire service.

The internal struggles over Prensa Latina’s political positioning that had caught the CIA’s attention were part of a larger struggle for power that was then building in Cuba between Castro’s 26th of July Movement and the Popular Socialist Party (PSP), representing the Communist old guard. In March 1961, debates over whether Prensa Latina would pursue a more dogmatic Communist agenda drove Masetti to resign as director. His secretary and wife, Concepción Dumois, later denied rumors that Masetti was anti-Communist,

25. Ibid., p. 240.
attributing them to the “sectarian” struggle for power between PSP leader Aníbal Escalante and Castro and Guevara that was mounting in Cuba in 1961 and 1962. She explained that Masetti’s close association with Castro and Guevara made him a target for members of the Communist old guard who were too cowardly to attack the revolutionary leaders directly.27 Ricardo Saenz, who worked as a journalist for Prensa Latina, later recalled that the Communist “sectarian microfaction” wanted Masetti to retransmit TASS cables from the Soviet Union in their entirety instead of producing original material.28 Rather than compromise his editorial objectivity and independence, Masetti resigned. Many of the news agency’s other prominent employees and collaborators followed suit and broke with Prensa Latina, including Walsh, García Márquez, and Beals. Escalante’s associates took over Prensa Latina until Castro denounced Escalante on national television in March 1962 in a general purge of PSP leaders.29 Prensa Latina then returned to its “objective, but not impartial” approach.

To that end, the agency worked to call global attention to Cuba’s achievements and those of other revolutionary movements while exposing the alleged misdeeds of the U.S. government and its allies. Prensa Latina helped to monitor the preparations in Guatemala for the Bay of Pigs invasion and provided frontline coverage of the attack (Masetti briefly returned to the wire service’s helm during the invasion), insinuated that CIA agents played a role in Brazilian president Jânio Quadros’s resignation in 1961, broadcast Castro’s declarations during the Cuban missile crisis, covered the 1973 military coup against Salvador Allende in Chile (and transmitted Pablo Neruda’s last poem protesting the events), and celebrated the Viêt Công’s victory in 1975.30 In addition to transmitting the texts of Castro’s many speeches, Prensa Latina also served as a powerful microphone for other prominent political figures including former Mexican president Lázaro Cárdenas, African American activist

29. Dumois and Molina, Jorge Ricardo Masetti, pp. 176–185. Dumois claimed that even though this struggle over Prensa Latina’s editorial stance was Masetti’s primary reason for leaving the news agency, he also left in order to pursue revolutionary activities in other parts of the world.
Stokely Carmichael, and Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero.\textsuperscript{31} Other international wire services and major newspapers, including the Associated Press and \textit{The New York Times}, grew to depend on Prensa Latina for reporting on events in Cuba.\textsuperscript{32} Over the years, the news agency’s objective yet revolutionary political orientation remained apparent in both the stories it pursued and the way it reported them.

Prensa Latina’s activities predated—and outlasted—a wider movement to reshape the international production and distribution of information. In the 1970s, other Third World leaders began voicing some of the same complaints that Castro had made of the global dominance of U.S. and West European news media. Their criticism coalesced into what became known as the World Information Debate, much of which took place within the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This effort was closely connected to simultaneous attempts within the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to address international inequality and underdevelopment by creating a New International Economic Order.\textsuperscript{33}

Representatives from 55 developing countries criticized the “neocolonial” nature of information production and demanded what they called a “New World Information and Communication Order.” They convened a group to study the problem, led by Irish Nobel laureate Seán MacBride. The MacBride Commission’s controversial report, which came out in 1980, called for governments to assert greater control over the media in order to benefit the developing world and to address the traditional imbalance of power in information production.\textsuperscript{34} In many ways, the report echoed what Castro had set out to do when he created Prensa Latina, and one of the people who had helped


create Cuba’s new wire service, García Márquez, also served on the MacBride Commission.

Public Backlash

Prensa Latina’s efforts to reshape the international flow of information posed a clear challenge both to the traditional media and to Castro’s enemies across the Americas. One of the earliest and fiercest critics was journalist Jules Dubois, Latin America correspondent for the conservative Chicago Tribune and chairman of the Inter-American Press Association’s press freedom committee. A few months after Prensa Latina’s debut, Dubois published a front-page article in The Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, and other papers in which he denounced “Castro’s ‘Hate America’ campaign. Dubois described Prensa Latina as a Communist creation “pegged to praise Castro and his revolution thru [sic] truths, half-truths, and distortions.”

Ironically, Dubois’s own reporting on Prensa Latina suffered from the same combination of ideological crusade, measured truth, and strategic misrepresentation. Dubois correctly described Prensa Latina’s goal of “selling [the Cuban] revolution to the rest of Latin America,” but his claims that “the Communists” had first sponsored Perón’s news agency before moving on to Prensa Latina were questionable and vague at best. However, what most infuriated Masetti, the wire service’s director, was Dubois’s contention that Castro had paid for the creation of Prensa Latina with $325,000 taken from the 26th of July Movement. Immediately after Dubois’s article came out, Masetti announced plans to start criminal proceedings against the U.S. journalist and accused him of lying and misrepresenting the truth. At the January 1960 meeting of international wire services in Havana, the assembly passed a resolution condemning Dubois as “not a newspaperman but an adventurer and a phony.”

Dubois’s battle with Prensa Latina soon escalated. Ahead of the August 1960 meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) in San José, Costa Rica, Dubois published another scathing front-page article about Cuba and Prensa Latina. Dubois claimed that Castro had provided $400,000 for the founding of the news agency and again described Masetti as “a minor employee of former Dictator Juan Perón’s propaganda ministry in Argentina.”

Masetti’s response was much more personal this time. Francisco V. Portela, a Prensa Latina correspondent in New York in the early 1960s, later recalled accompanying Masetti to Costa Rica to cover the OAS meeting. According to Portela, Masetti sent the American reporter “running like a scared pig” out of a San José hotel lobby by shouting, “Dubois, you son of a bitch! You are a conman, you son of a bitch!”

Dubois was far from the only member of the media to criticize Prensa Latina, however. *U.S. News and World Report* published a lengthy exposé in May 1960, titled “How Castro Pushes ‘Hate U.S.’ All Over Latin America.” The article warned that “Fidel Castro’s Government is waging the most ambitious campaign ever undertaken to turn all of Latin America against the United States.” It identified Prensa Latina as the “spearhead” of the Cuban offensive, described the wire service and its operating expenses in extensive detail, and quoted a disillusioned former employee as saying, “If one may judge by Prensa Latina, the Cuban Revolution has taken a grave turn toward a police state, with tyranny and indifference to truth as its method and system.”

A month later, Stanley Ross, editor of *El diario de Nueva York*, published a bitter attack on Castro in *The Washington Post*. After implying that Castro was a “lousy lover” and describing his close companion Celia Sánchez as a “pinched-faced, sallow woman” with yellow teeth, Ross listed the creation of Prensa Latina among the Cuban leader’s many sins. “His news agency, Prensa Latina, spends millions to discredit the U.S. abroad,” Ross contended. He also accused the agency’s reporters of “traveling throughout the hemisphere on Cuban diplomatic passports [and undertaking] espionage for Fidel and his Communist partners.”

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Criticism of Prensa Latina appeared in the Latin American press as well. An editorial in the Peruvian newspaper *La prensa* blasted the Cuban agency for spreading news “of false and slanted character, at the service of Communist propaganda.” For example, the author of the editorial pointed out, a recent Prensa Latina story about anti-Eisenhower demonstrations during the U.S. president’s visit to Japan had grossly exaggerated the number of protesters from 1,500 to 300,000. The editorial conceded that it would be good for Latin America to have a wire service, “but that service cannot be one that is directed by a government, less by a dictatorship, and even less by a pro-Red dictatorship.” An editorial in *La prensa gráfica* of El Salvador, reprinted in Honduras, called Prensa Latina “the principal agent of Castro-Communist propaganda.” Mocking the wire service, the editorial described it as “The so-called ‘Latin Press,’ which in reality is neither press nor Latin since it actually serves the interests of Moscow.” This accusation reflected the widespread confusion over what distinction existed—if any—between the Soviet Union’s interests and those of Cuba.

In addition to denouncing Prensa Latina, other members of the media tried to ostracize the wire service by cutting off its customers. John O’Rourke, the editor of the *The Washington Daily News*, reportedly sent a personal letter in April 1960 to fellow editors around the world asking them to stop printing Prensa Latina material. He accused the agency of being a Communist and Peronist organization that “deliberately distorted information by omission.” The Inter-American Press Association, after much prompting from Dubois, adopted a resolution on 20 October 1960 recommending that members of the organization cease using Prensa Latina’s services. Less than a month later, the Inter-American Association of Broadcasters, made up of owners of radio stations across the Americas, followed suit. The broadcasters described Prensa Latina as “a vehicle serving Communist imperialism in our hemisphere” and warned its members not to use the wire service’s stories.

A few Cuban exiles took it upon themselves to harass and intimidate Prensa Latina. On 27 April 1962, six men ransacked the New York branch

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office of the wire service. Two weeks earlier, the police had warned the head of the office, Francisco Portela, that he would probably receive a visit from Cuban counterrevolutionaries in the near future. The police refused to make preemptive arrests or guard the news office, however, and Portela lacked the money to employ private guards indefinitely. The attackers struck the unprotected office in the middle of the day. They bound, gagged, and pistol-whipped four Prensa Latina employees, who had to be hospitalized. The attackers also destroyed the office's furniture and machinery, splattered red ink everywhere, and forced a teletype operator to compose a message to Castro in which the assailants swore to “fight to the last drop of our blood” to overthrow the Cuban regime. After the attacks, Prensa Latina relocated its New York office to the press section of the UN headquarters to receive more protection. The public backlash to Prensa Latina endangered not only the wire service’s reputation and customer base but also the lives of its employees.

Secret War

Members of the media and the public managed to make life difficult for Prensa Latina, especially in the early years of the agency’s existence. But the Cuban wire service faced even more formidable opponents in the governments across the Americas. U.S. officials often played a leading role in the hemispheric effort to silence Prensa Latina, but they were far from the only ones involved. Latin American leaders and their subordinates also participated enthusiastically in both the public and secret war over information.

One of the first government officials to raise the alarm about Prensa Latina was a man with a front-row seat to the action in Havana: U.S. Ambassador to Cuba Philip Bonsal. Less than two months after the news agency’s debut, Bonsal sent a Prensa Latina article to the assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, Roy R. Rubottom Jr. In a letter accompanying the article, the ambassador warned, “This Prensa Latina bunch is very bad news.”

may have otherwise been difficult to obtain, like details from a Prensa Latina dispatch from Pyongyang about Cuba’s establishment of diplomatic relations with North Korea.\footnote{Philip W. Bonsal, “Airgram from Habana to Department of State,” 12 October 1960, in NARA, RG 59, CDF 1960–1963, Box 1331, Decimal 637.95A/10-1260.} After Bonsal’s departure, other U.S. officials in Havana continued to use Prensa Latina reports from locales as far-flung as Hanoi and East Berlin to collect information about Cuba’s foreign affairs.\footnote{Daniel M. Braddock, “Airgram from Havana to Department of State,” 6 December 1960, in NARA, RG 59, CDF 1960–1963, Box 1329, Decimal Folder 637.49A/4-2161; and Daniel M. Braddock, “Airgram from Habana to Department of State,” 22 December 1960, in NARA, RG 59, CDF 1960–1963, Box 1330, Decimal Folder 637.61A/2-1560.}

The CIA was also quick to take note of the new Cuban wire service. In September 1959, the agency reported that “although Prensa Latina has tried to establish a reputation for independence and objectivity, it is believed to be substantially financed by the Castro regime, and its staff is composed largely of persons with an anti-U.S. bias, some of them suspected Communists.”\footnote{CIA Office of Current Intelligence, “Current Intelligence Weekly Summary: Prensa Latina, Cuban-Backed News Agency.”} The deputy director of the CIA, General Charles P. Cabell, testified about Prensa Latina before a U.S. Senate subcommittee meeting in November 1959. When asked whether the Communists controlled the wire service, Cabell hedged by saying that the CIA suspected the Communists were influencing Prensa Latina. “The Communists undoubtedly encouraged or even inspired the organization of Prensa Latina, have infiltrated the organization, and have aided it both by providing news and utilizing its services,” he explained. Cabell reassured the senators that the CIA was watching the news agency “like a hawk.”\footnote{Communist Threat to the United States through the Caribbean (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959), pp. 156–157.} True to Cabell’s word, a CIA weekly summary noted a few weeks later that Prensa Latina was playing “an active propaganda role” in helping the Cuban government appeal to “disaffected elements in several Latin American countries.”\footnote{CIA Office of Current Intelligence, “Current Intelligence Weekly Summary,” 10 December 1959, in NARA, CIA CREST Database.}

Members of the U.S. Congress gathered information about Prensa Latina from other sources as well and used it as evidence of Castro’s evil intentions. Representative Katharine St. George of New York read to her fellow legislators from a letter a constituent had sent about the many problems confronting the United States in Latin America. Among those problems was the new Cuban wire service. The letter warned that Prensa Latina’s “legitimate news articles are heavily interlarded with Communist propaganda and all stories play up...
the Communist point of view.” Senator Kenneth Keating, also of New York, used a series of four articles in *The New York Times* to show that “the typical pattern of Communism . . . [was] being ruthlessly practiced by the Cuban dictator.” The senator read a section about Prensa Latina from the second article in the series, published 13 June 1961, to demonstrate Castro’s propaganda capacity. He then repeated a proposal he had made months earlier that the OAS should adopt a complete air and sea embargo against Cuba. In 1963, the U.S. House Special Subcommittee on Cuba and Subversion in the Western Hemisphere, also seeking stronger action against Castro, described Prensa Latina as “perhaps the most important vehicle for the dissemination of the Communist message to the mass audience in Central and South America.” The lawmakers did not attack Prensa Latina directly but instead used the news agency to demonstrate the overall danger Cuba posed to the hemisphere.

While the U.S. Congress was concerned with the Cuban threat in general, the State Department targeted its attacks on Prensa Latina’s activities. In May 1960, Secretary of State Christian Herter circulated a long memorandum about the news service to all U.S. embassies throughout the Americas. The memorandum, a joint report produced by the State Department and the United States Information Agency (USIA), was titled “Prensa Latina: Fidel Castro’s Unreliable Propaganda Voice for the Hemisphere.” It claimed that the wire service was “largely, if not entirely, supported by the Castro Government” and that its guiding principle was “calculated distortion” of the news. The report warned that Prensa Latina dispatches were being used by “known pro-Communist publications in Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, and other countries to serve their purposes, i.e. to weaken the bonds of continental solidarity” and to “exaggerate unrest in regimes that Castro does not like.” The report also provided specific examples of occasions when Prensa Latina had broadcast erroneous or exaggerated stories and claimed that “editors are increasingly wary of the reliability of Prensa Latina material.” Herter’s instructions attached to the report encouraged U.S. diplomats to use it in conversations with local officials and in press stories without attribution.

Even before the State Department directed U.S. representatives to sow seeds of doubt about Prensa Latina across the Americas, some local officials were already taking measures against the news agency. On 28 March 1960, Mexican intelligence agents reported that five members of their country’s secret service had raided the Mexico City offices of Prensa Latina and dismantled the wire service’s radio equipment, searching for a transmitter. Intelligence agents continued to keep a close watch over the news agency’s activities in Mexico and helped the CIA monitor the messages and mail that Prensa Latina exchanged with its central office in Havana. Agents of Mexico’s Department of Federal Security conducted a detailed investigation of the wire service and concluded that “Prensa Latina receives direct instructions from the Cuban Embassy in Mexico, distorting the news . . . provoking agitation and supporting movements that have arisen against the governments of Latin America.” The agents claimed that in Mexico, Prensa Latina controlled the national university's Radio Universidad, affiliated with various leftist and Communist groups, and supported the protest campaign on behalf of political prisoners. Mexican federal agents arrested a Prensa Latina reporter in August 1961 for carrying weapons in Mexico City International Airport and detained another reporter in November 1962 for painting “Viva Cuba” on a public wall in red lipstick. Yet, the Mexican government never closed down the Prensa Latina bureau office because allowing the wire service to operate was part of Mexico’s ambivalent and inconsistent defense of Cuba and one of its periodic demonstrations of independence from the United States.

Other governments had fewer qualms about confronting Castro and his wire service. Across the Americas, officials used a variety of excuses and
methods to obstruct Prensa Latina’s operations. In May 1960, the Guatemalan government shut down the local Prensa Latina bureau, claiming that the news service was “of Marxist origin and at the service of that ideology.” 64 Ecuadorian officials deported the head of Prensa Latina’s Quito branch office a couple of months later, claiming he had overstayed his visa. The Ecuadorians also assured the U.S. embassy that no replacement would be permitted. 65 In December 1960, Argentine police shut down Prensa Latina’s Buenos Aires bureau, confiscated its machinery, and arrested four employees. 66 The Peruvian government stripped Prensa Latina of its license to operate a radio receiver that same month, arguing that the agency had violated the terms of its license by using its equipment to transmit news instead of just receiving it. Peruvian officials claimed that the news sent from Peru “had been of tendentious or revolutionary character and in some cases had been an affront to national dignity.” 67 Venezuela followed suit in shutting down the agency’s operations in May 1961, complaining of the “distorted pro-Castro and anti-Betancourt [Venezuelan president Rómulo Betancourt] treatment given to political and economic news items disseminated by Prensa Latina within Venezuela.” 68 Closing Prensa Latina offices became an important element of a larger hemispheric effort to weaken Castro’s government through isolation.

Each time another Latin American country shut down a Prensa Latina office, the State Department and USIA circulated reports about it to all U.S. embassies in the hemisphere. The reports were accompanied with instructions to use each closing as an example to persuade other governments to make “all appropriate efforts” to frustrate the activities of Prensa Latina. The instructions also noted that it would be “helpful” for U.S. representatives to collect samples of “flagrantly false and prejudicial” Prensa Latina reports published in one country about another. The State Department suggested that newspaper tear sheets containing offensive Prensa Latina stories could be

discreetly presented to government officials of the target country to provide extra motivation.69

U.S. officials took various measures to curtail Prensa Latina’s activities within the United States as well. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) monitored the news agency’s finances on a regular basis and in December 1961 indicted Prensa Latina and arrested its New York bureau chief, Francisco Portela, for failure to comply with the Foreign Agents Registration Act.70 Portela initially denied the charges, but after a few months Prensa Latina pled no contest, paid a $2,000 fine, and agreed to register with the Justice Department as an agent of the Cuban government.71 Prensa Latina’s operations in New York became even more restricted in 1969 when President Richard Nixon revoked the wire service’s license to report on U.S. news in retaliation against Castro’s eviction of the Associated Press and United Press International.72 After receiving an appeal from UN Secretary General U Thant, U.S. officials allowed Prensa Latina to maintain its office in the UN headquarters but warned the Cubans that under the new license they could report only on UN activities.73 The U.S. Treasury Department also severely curtailed the amount of money the news agency was allowed to spend each month under the new license to less than half the previous monthly operating budget.74 All of these restrictions were part of the secret and overt war the U.S. government and those of other countries across the Americas waged to silence Prensa Latina through physical isolation and economic strangulation.


Handmaidens to the Intelligence Services

Why did U.S. officials and those of governments across the Americas go to so much trouble to fight Prensa Latina? According to their public justifications, it was because the Cubans were using the wire service to spread Communist propaganda and misinformation. But government officials had additional reasons for fearing Prensa Latina, reasons that did not make it into public pronouncements or newspaper headlines.

U.S. and Latin American officials were convinced that Prensa Latina was not only collecting and distributing information for journalistic or propaganda purposes but also engaging in espionage and other subversive activities. When Pedro L. Roig, a commercial representative in Cuba’s Mexico City embassy, defected in June 1962, Mexican intelligence agents interrogated him about Prensa Latina and other Cuban operations. At the time, Roig did not say much about the news agency other than that its reporters “received special instructions” and had more liberty to operate than Cuban embassy officials. Roig had much more to say about Prensa Latina two years later, however, when he published an exposé about Cuba’s espionage tactics. He explained that before leaving for Mexico he had worked in Castro’s press services in both the Presidential Palace and the Ministry of Foreign Relations. Roig claimed to have witnessed a visit that the head of Cuban intelligence, Manuel “Redbeard” Piñeiro, made to a training school for foreign service officers, which included Prensa Latina employees. “The truth,” Piñeiro supposedly told the students, “is that you will receive classes to graduate as officials of national security, or in other words, officials of the glorious G2.” Roig claimed that Prensa Latina employees used this secret training to maintain an “extensive network of espionage” in their offices around the world.

U.S. officials learned more about Prensa Latina’s involvement in covert activities by debriefing other Cuban exiles. Vladimir Rodríguez Lahera, who had worked for Cuba’s intelligence services in El Salvador, gave U.S. authorities numerous documents that he had stolen before he defected in April 1964. The documents included a long list of intelligence directives for Cuban agents posted in foreign countries. The Cuban intelligence agents were instructed to

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76. Cuba’s intelligence services were originally known as the G2, then later also as the General Intelligence Department (Dirección General de Inteligencia, or DGI).
investigate Prensa Latina’s functioning as well as the possibilities of using the news agency’s directors and correspondents “in our work.”  

Another former intelligence agent who defected in 1969, Orlando Castro Hidalgo, contended that Prensa Latina had indeed become much more involved in the work of espionage and subversion as Cuba’s revolution radicalized in the 1960s. He told reporters from *The Christian Science Monitor* that Prensa Latina had participated in a plot to infiltrate pro-Castro agents into Peru’s ruling military junta. Castro Hidalgo also testified to the U.S. Senate about Cuba’s subversive activities. He told the senators that Cuba’s intelligence department, the General Intelligence Department (DGI), had “taken over” the news agency and that “many, if not the majority, of Prensa Latina representatives overseas, are actually DGI officers and agents undercover.”

The testimony of these Cuban exiles added weight to the CIA’s earlier claims that Prensa Latina was engaging in espionage. Even before Rodríguez Lahera and Castro Hidalgo started pointing fingers at the news agency, CIA Deputy Director of Counterintelligence James Angleton had composed a working paper about Cuba’s subversive capabilities that he circulated to the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, the FBI, the State Department, the National Security Agency, the Department of Justice, and the Department of the Treasury, among others. In the report, Angleton claimed that Cuban intelligence personnel were “known to operate” within Prensa Latina offices in many Latin American countries.

Prensa Latina did, in fact, have close ties to Cuba’s intelligence services, and the news agency’s employees did engage in espionage work. The relationship between Prensa Latina and Cuban intelligence agencies dated back to the wire service’s earliest years. Masetti was on friendly terms with Ramiro Valdés, head of Cuba’s G2, and with Manuel Piñeiro, the director of the DGI. Pedro Martínez Pírez, chief of Prensa Latina’s special programs division from 1968 to 1973, recalls that Piñeiro remained close to the wire service even

78. CIA, “Information Report: Subject Policy Guidance Directives for Cuban Intelligence Representatives in Mexico as Issued by the MA Department of the General Directorate of Intelligence,” 24 August 1964, in Mary Ferrell Foundation Digital Archive (MFFDA), 104-10185-10115.
82. Arrosagaray, *Rodolfo Walsh en Cuba*, p. 120.
after Masetti’s departure. “I will never forget Manuel Piñeiro, who visited our installations frequently in his constant search for information about the situation in the world and especially in Latin America and the Caribbean,” Martínez Pérez told interviewers. “He also brought us ‘off the record’ information that allowed us to better understand the events that were going on in this continent.”

Rodolfo Walsh, one of the founders and lead reporters of Prensa Latina in its early years, decoded secret U.S. cables that contained the exact details of the preparations in Guatemala for the Bay of Pigs invasion. Walsh’s discovery helped the Cuban government begin preparing for the invasion months in advance.

José Prado, who worked in Prensa Latina’s Brazil bureau and in Valdés’s counterintelligence unit in the early 1960s, confessed to an interviewer years later that the Brazilian government had expelled him because “I had done some activities there that were not very journalistic.”

Former Cuban intelligence officer Ulises Estrada told interviewers about a Prensa Latina reporter stationed in Grenada in 1979 who used a tube of toothpaste to sneak a secret message into Cuba for Castro from the leader of the Marxist New Jewel Movement, Maurice Bishop.

In addition to engaging in espionage, Prensa Latina employees also received military training and pursued revolutionary activities. Masetti established a military training regime for his wire service workers in case they had to work in combat conditions, and he formed a militia within the news agency known as the “special team.” This team, one of its members recalled, was responsible for “activities that had to do with journalism but also with revolution and politics.” These activities included battling counterrevolutionary guerrilla groups in the Escambray Mountains and fighting alongside Cuban soldiers during the Bay of Pigs invasion.

After leaving Prensa Latina, Masetti began working full-time for Cuba’s intelligence services, and he helped

85. Ibid., 204.
smuggle weapons to rebel leaders in Algeria. He was killed in April 1964 while trying to lead a revolutionary uprising in his home country of Argentina. Masetti and other Prensa Latina employees were committed to encouraging revolution by any means necessary, and their actions frequently crossed the blurry lines that separate journalism from espionage and even warfare.

Prensa Latina became an increasingly valuable tool of Cuban foreign policy as Cuba’s access to the rest of Latin America became more restricted over the course of the 1960s, especially after the OAS resolved in 1964 to cut all remaining diplomatic and economic ties to the island. All member countries except Mexico complied. In a report about Castro’s efforts to expand informal contacts in countries where formal diplomatic relations had been severed, the CIA referred to Prensa Latina as “Havana’s official news agency and an arm of its intelligence service.” The report claimed that Cuba sent Prensa Latina correspondents to countries such as Ecuador and Peru where “the newsmen usually perform other functions to further Cuban interests.” Some of the organization’s “extracurricular activities” were covert, but they could also extend to humanitarian work such as coordinating disaster relief for the 1970 Peruvian earthquake victims. According to former Prensa Latina employee Martínez Piérez, by the late 1960s, “just like in the first years of its creation, Prensa Latina operated in some Latin American countries as a sort of Cuban embassy.”

A CIA study of Cuba’s growing relations with Panama under Omar Torrijos in 1972 observed that the opening of a new Prensa Latina office in Panama City the previous year had given the two governments an “informal communication channel.” Ten years later, a CIA assessment of Castro’s foreign policy summed up the agency’s position on Prensa Latina:

Perhaps the most effective—and, from the U.S. viewpoint, most dangerous—Cuban propaganda weapon is Prensa Latina, which not only disseminates a daily stream of propaganda hostile to the United States but also serves as a cover for

89. CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “Weekly Summary,” 2 July 1970, in NARA, CIA CREST Database.
90. Suárez Salazar and Kruijt, La revolución cubana en nuestra América, Loc. 725.
intelligence collection and operations; on occasion it fills a diplomatic function by using branch offices as de facto embassies.\(^{92}\)

The CIA was convinced that Prensa Latina was far exceeding its original official mandate of serving Latin America’s news needs.

The CIA at this time was itself being exposed for shady dealings with the media. In 1973, under congressional pressure, the agency disclosed to the public that some “three dozen” journalists had been working as undercover informants or full-time intelligence agents.\(^{93}\) Senator Frank Church, at the helm of the Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, conducted an extraordinary series of investigations and hearings in the mid-1970s about the CIA. The senators discovered, among other things, that the agency’s campaign against Allende’s government in Chile had included publishing CIA-generated articles in European and Latin American newspapers, subsidizing wire services and opposition media, and orchestrating messages of protest from foreign newspapers.\(^{94}\) Perennial government watchdog Carl Bernstein published a cover story in *Rolling Stone* a few years later that contended that the CIA’s involvement with the media was even more extensive than what the Church committee hearings had uncovered. According to Bernstein, the agency’s close ties with the media dated back to the earliest years of the Cold War, when CIA Director Allen Dulles worked to build a “recruit-and-cover” relationship with the most prestigious journalistic institutions in the United States. Bernstein condemned the publishers and news executives for allowing themselves and their organizations to become “handmaidens to the intelligence services.”\(^{95}\) Bernstein, Church, and others maintained that the media in the United States was no less of a propaganda weapon than Prensa Latina; it just operated with different procedures under different structures with different agendas.

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\(^{92}\) CIA Directorate of Intelligence, “Cuba: Castro’s Propaganda Apparatus and Foreign Policy,” December 1983, in NARA, CIA CREST Database.


Conclusion

Prensa Latina played a major role in promoting and sustaining the Cuban revolution. Its founders hoped to create an alternative source of news and information for Cuba, Latin America, and the rest of the world, and they succeeded. But the news agency also grew into much more. Prensa Latina was a way for Castro to fight the U.S. campaign of isolation by maintaining and even strengthening Cuba’s ties to the wider world. The wire service’s dispatches kept Castro and other Cubans informed about foreign events at the same time that they spread favorable news about Cuba and other revolutionary movements to newspapers, magazines, and radio and television programs around the globe. Prensa Latina’s bureaus served as unofficial embassies where Cuba had none, and its reporters worked as informal diplomats. On occasion, the news agency’s employees also engaged in covert activities that were admittedly “not very journalistic.”

But the U.S. government was just as guilty as Castro of using the media for espionage and propaganda. Prensa Latina most likely was involved in spy work and subversive activities, just as the CIA claimed, but so were numerous U.S. journalists, newspapers, and wire services. The history of Prensa Latina underscores the fact that the relationship between journalism and politics, between the press and the state, is always fraught, and the dividing lines are inherently messy. Prensa Latina was more dependent on the Cuban government than the U.S. media was on the U.S. government, but the difference was a matter of degree, not absolutes.

Ultimately, Prensa Latina survived—but did not win—the Cold War contest over information. Even though the Cuban news agency is nowhere near as influential or ubiquitous as the major U.S. and European news agencies, it does continue to have global reach. It outlasted other efforts to reshape the international flow of information, such as the New World Information and Communication Order movement, which lost steam in the 1980s. Prensa Latina currently sends more than 400 dispatches a day to subscribers around the world in Spanish, Portuguese, English, Italian, Russian, and Turkish. The Cuban news agency has also expanded its range of services and produces television broadcasts and radio programs, prints books, and publishes more than 30 periodicals, including the magazines *Orbe*, *Cuba International*, and *Vietnam Illustrated*. Prensa Latina has not only transitioned from one geopolitical...
era to another but has also made a successful technological transition into the digital age and currently uses seventeen websites to deliver its services.97

In some ways, survival alone could be considered a victory. Just as Castro’s ability to remain in power in the face of unrelenting U.S. hostility could be interpreted as a triumph, Prensa Latina’s ability to withstand numerous attacks is impressive and unprecedented. Members of the press publicly denounced Prensa Latina, vigilantes attacked the wire service’s employees, and governments across the hemisphere took measures to restrict and counter Prensa Latina’s activities. Nonetheless, Prensa Latina survived, expanded, and even flourished. For better or worse, Cuba continues its revolutionary quest for control over information.

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