

Chapter 14 / Capítulo 14



*Time, Power, and Resistances in Latin America:
Narratives, Democracy, and Global Reconfigurations
(English Version)*

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A radio station that marches with the times

Una emisora que marcha junto al tiempo

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ABSTRACT

This research offers an approach to the historical evolution of the Cuban radio station Radio Reloj, given that studies on this medium are scarce despite the fact that it has remained on air since July 1, 1947, minute by minute, with a fully live 24-hour-a-day programming as a witness to the most significant economic, political, social, and cultural events on the Island. A qualitative research design strategy was used to understand the different realities and subjective elements of the interviewees. In-depth interviews and bibliographic-documentary review were employed as techniques for data collection. The paper highlights the importance of retrospective interpretive journalism for the compilation of historical memory. Radio Reloj's working style is unique in the history of broadcasting, not only because of its continuous news format, but also due to the rigorous technical, editorial, and operational structure that sustains it. The core of the station is its "informative minute," a journalistic piece that must be written in no more than 960 characters, which requires writers to synthesize information with clear ideas, coherence, good rhythm, and without syntactic errors. What began as an experiment inspired by the Mexican station XEQK has become today the oldest continuous news channel in the world and an inseparable part of Cuba's radio heritage, as for 78 years it has kept time for the country.

Keywords: Cuba; Journalism; Broadcasting; Radio Reloj; Retrospection.

RESUMEN

La presente investigación realiza un acercamiento al devenir histórico de la emisora cubana Radio Reloj, pues los estudios sobre este medio de comunicación resultan escasos a pesar de que se mantiene al aire desde el 1 de julio de 1947, minuto a minuto, con una programación totalmente en vivo las 24 horas del día como testigo de los acontecimientos más trascendentales de la vida económica, política, social y cultural de la Isla. En la presente investigación se empleó una estrategia de diseño cualitativo para entender las diferentes realidades y elementos subjetivos de los entrevistados. Asimismo, se utilizaron la entrevista en profundidad y la revisión bibliográfico-documental como técnicas para la recogida de información. La ponencia evidenció la importancia del periodismo interpretativo retrospectivo para la compilación de la memoria histórica. El estilo de trabajo de Radio Reloj es único en la historia de la radiodifusión, no solo por su formato de noticias continuas, sino por la rigurosa estructura técnica, editorial y operativa que lo sostiene. El núcleo de la emisora es su "minuto informativo", un trabajo periodístico que debe escribirse en no más de 960 caracteres, razón por la cual los redactores deben sintetizar la información con ideas claras, coherencia, buen ritmo y sin atropellos de la

sintaxis. Lo que inició como un experimento con idea importada de la emisora mexicana XEQK constituye hoy el canal de información continua más antiguo del mundo y parte inseparable del patrimonio radiofónico de Cuba, pues durante 78 años ha marcado el tiempo de este país.

Palabras clave: Cuba; Periodismo; Radiodifusión; Radio Reloj; Retrospección.

INTRODUCTION

The raising of the flag with the lone star on May 20, 1902, at the Castillo de los Tres Reyes del Morro in Havana, not only ended the United States' military occupation of Cuba since 1899, but also marked the birth of the neocolonial Republic. This event led to the passage of certain laws and legal provisions aimed at establishing total control by the northern nation over the island's economic and political life.

The United States became the model nation to be built in Cuba. Incidentally, since June 1922, Havana newspapers had been publishing advertisements for the radio-telephone, a device considered by advertisers to be the magical vehicle that brought music, song, wit, joy, eloquence, and insight into the outside world into people's homes.

On October 10, 1922, PWX, the first radio station on the island, went on the air, marking the beginning of radio broadcasting in the country. By 1930, radio had become an industry with the creation of 61 radio stations with different formats in their programming schedules, including Radio Reloj, which has been broadcasting live 24 hours a day since July 1, 1947, with no musical accompaniment other than the voice of the announcer and the ticking of a clock. In 2025, the aforementioned radio station celebrated its 78th anniversary, but there is little material compiling its historical trajectory.

In this regard, the author of this study was only able to find two professional portfolios related to Radio Reloj: *De la antena a la red* (From the Antenna to the Network) (2015), by Leidys Hernández Lima, and *Del dial al ciberespacio* (From the Dial to Cyberspace) (2015), by Wendy Rodríguez Contino. However, there is a documentary by Cuban filmmaker Gloria.

Torres Lafont entitled *¡Si es noticia... la tiene Radio Reloj!* (If it is news... Radio Reloj has it! which covers part of the history of Cuban radio and this station in particular, as well as research by journalists Pedro Quiroga and Josefa Bracero Torres.

For this reason, this study aims to take a qualitative approach to the historical development of Radio Reloj, using bibliographic and documentary review, in-depth interviews, and journalistic interviews with subjects involved in the medium's history and its production routines as information-gathering techniques.

To speak of Radio Reloj is to refer to the heart of Cuban information. It is to think of that voice that bursts in, punctual and brief, into the homes of the Greater Antilles at any hour. However, beyond its peculiarity, it has always been a space for professional growth, journalistic passion, and silent dedication.

It is a media outlet that does not allow for distraction. There is no room for unnecessary embellishments. It is a culture of synthesis formed and transmitted from generation to generation, with the maxim that time and words must come together without stumbling.

Radio Reloj Style

Unlike most other radio stations, which make extensive use of music and sound effects, Radio Reloj has an atypical style of work where all you hear is a “tick-tock,” the sound of a second hand, and the voice of the announcer.

From an editorial point of view, the minute constitutes the information produced by journalists and contributors, which must be limited to 960 characters for two-voice pieces and up to 940 for all other genres and single-voice pieces. This allows announcers to stick to a 60-second time limit, without rushing their words or having long silences, at a normal reading pace. For their part, editors carry out their work using an automated template, taking into account the station’s writing guidelines set out in the manual or style guide: *Breviario del Relojero*.

Meanwhile, the half-hourly news bulletin (morning, afternoon, evening, and early morning) consists of 30 minutes: 2 minutes of headlines and 28 minutes of news items. The headlines must be written in a varied manner according to the editorial requirements of each time slot, must not exceed 1,5 lines of characters, and must begin with the most relevant news items deliberately placed by the shift supervisor on duty.

According to Aydenis Ortega Che (2024), thematic variety is important because it prevents a decline in listener interest. Changes in the news items in the bulletins are what maintain activity and dynamism in the news. For example, if the same bulletin is kept for three hours, the news items will have been repeated six times. However, this is not the case with *El Matutino*, which is rarely updated over the four hours; it is a news package repeated eight times. The bulletin is refreshed only when there is important breaking news.

Every half hour on the air, the station identification must be read, which includes the current anniversary of the Revolution, the day’s events, and the announcers on duty. The following is an example from October 10, 2023.

In the sixty-fifth year of the Revolution, Radio Reloj, the world’s oldest continuous news channel, broadcasts from Havana, Cuba. Today is October 10, 2023, the 155th anniversary of the beginning of the struggle for independence in our country. At this time, we are your announcers, Mirtha Aleida, Sonia Suárez, and Edier Hernández.

It is worth noting that one of the distinctive features of the radio station is that it provides an update on the time in various world capitals at 12 midnight and 12 noon every day.

El Matutino is Radio Reloj’s flagship program, as it is the bulletin with the largest audience and runs from 4 a.m. to 9 a.m. It consists of the most impactful news stories from the previous day and early morning. In its September 1, 1963, edition, *Bohemia* magazine published a telegram from the editorial staff of Radio Reloj Nacional addressed to the Cuban people, which read as follows.

Starting next Monday, from 3 a.m., RADIO RELOJ NACIONAL will offer a morning program with the latest national and international news.

RADIO RELOJ NACIONAL, responding to requests from its listeners, has spared no effort in providing this extraordinary news service every Monday from 3 a.m.

From an organizational standpoint, the Shift Editor-in-Chief is ultimately responsible for the

content published by the Shift. His role is to assign the news wires collected from the various news agencies to the editors so that they can adapt them to the station's style, as well as to review the work sent by correspondents and contributors in the provinces. Once the 28 news items have been grouped, the bulletin is assembled so it can go on air at the exact time in the broadcasting booth.

This position entails significant responsibility, which is why editors must be the best and most knowledgeable about current events, able to detect errors, and organize the news bulletin with the necessary drama and appeal to listeners.

Meanwhile, the role of the Style and Grammar Editor is to review the form and content of each paragraph, headlines, and the intent of the news item. At certain times, they must call attention to avoid repeating errors and encourage correct writing. However, at the time of this investigation, no one was in charge of this task at the station due to a staffing shortage.

The editors on each shift are responsible for maintaining the flow of information. They must cover specific geographical areas and national topics to follow up on various issues adequately. They must be ready to write headlines, gather news of interest from television or by telephone, and correct other materials.

The informative work carried out by the station's journalists culminates in the Radio Reloj broadcast. Thanks to their skill and general knowledge, the announcer's voice often saves the day by catching editing errors that went unnoticed by editors and shift supervisors.

The history of Radio Reloj

Óscar Luis López (1998) reports that Radio Reloj went on the air at six o'clock in the morning on Tuesday, July 1, 1947, from a location on the roof of the old CMQ Circuit, on Monte Street, at the corner of Prado, in the Cuban capital. It was considered a major event at the time because the Cuban Telephone Company was the only company authorized to give the official time throughout the country. However, Goar Mestre, owner of CMQ and, therefore, of the fledgling media outlet, obtained authorization to broadcast it through his station thanks to his government connections. It was a limited-time experiment to gauge interest in the new system.

The idea of creating this radio station was brought to Cuba by the businessman and artistic director of CMQ, Gaspar Pumajero, who knew of a station in Mexico called XEQK, belonging to Cadena Radiodifusora Mexicana S.A., which announced the time every minute, interspersed with recorded announcements.

In the documentary by Cuban filmmaker Gloria Torres, entitled *Si es noticia... la tiene Radio Reloj* (If it is news... Radio Reloj has it), broadcaster Ibrahim Aput (undated) refers to the birth of the radio station:

He (Goar Mestre) was interested because radio stations lived off advertising. You had to wait until a 15-minute or half-hour program ended to introduce the commercials. Radio Reloj had the advantage of including commercials every minute. It was a gold mine.

Below are two examples of commercials that were heard on Radio Reloj in the 1950s, taken from Gloria Torres' documentary (undated):

- "Nowhere else in the world can you find a beauty soap as gentle as Cadal. Do not

let any other soap come into contact with your skin! What your skin needs is the care of gentle Cadal soap!”

- “You do not need the sun to help whiten your clothes. A packet of Lavasol solves the problem right away.”

Initially, the team of announcers was composed exclusively of men, and women were expressly forbidden from entering the booth, as they worked in light clothing due to the hot conditions in the small studio on the roof of the CMQ building. According to Avelino Víctor Couceiro (undated), the founders were Héctor de Soto, Félix Travieso, Reinerio Flores, Julián Espinal, Eduardo Tristá, and Ramón Irigoyen, who worked during the first fifteen days of the station. On July 15 of that same year, Ramiro Hernández joined the team.

Josefa Bracero explains in her book *Silencio... se habla* (Silence... speaking) that Reloj broadcast the news provided by the CMQ news program, located on the floor below, which Roberto López, the assistant, transported, while Jorge Burbakis was in charge of summarizing the information and adapting it to the requirements of the radio station.

From its founding, Radio Reloj broadcast from 6:00 a.m. to midnight. However, it was two and a half months after its creation that it became known, following the events in Orfila, when two gangster groups supported by the government of Ramón Grau San Martín clashed on September 15, 1947.

According to López (1998), this event is closely linked to Radio Reloj, as the person who broke the news to the country was Walterio Voigt, an advertising salesman for CMQ, who was near the scene and narrated the events by telephone. Following the success of this “journalistic scoop,” Goar Mestre suggested extending the station’s hours to 24 hours a day, arguing that this would be the way to maintain the first permanent news program broadcast in Cuba without a team of editors. However, this did not happen until July 10, 1950.

Radio Reloj continued to develop and gain prestige in the country, and other announcers joined the team, including Carlos Torres, Luis Izaguirre, and Armando Pérez Roura. At the same time, the population began to take an interest in the station’s internal workings, and it was decided to build a studio on the ground floor so the public could watch the work. However, locating a fully operational radio station in an area that was very turbulent due to student demonstrations and strikes was not conducive to keeping the booth there. Therefore, it was decided to move the studio back to the first floor of the institution and later to the fourth floor. Óscar Luis López (1998) reports that other stations attempted to emulate Radio Reloj’s style, including Radio Cron, Radio Caribe, and Radihora, but were unable to do so.

By the second half of the 1950s, Reloj had gained recognized prestige and a large audience, and began to venture into the training of specialized announcers, some to read the news and others to deliver commercials and the time. It is worth noting that, depending on the time slot, the larger the audience, the more expensive the cost per advertisement.

Given this situation, it is not difficult to understand why José Antonio Echeverría, together with the Revolutionary Directorate (DR), decided to take over the station on March 13, 1957, in conjunction with the attack on the Presidential Palace to execute dictator Fulgencio Batista. It is worth noting that José Antonio Echeverría was studying architecture at the University of Havana and became a fervent opponent of the tyrannical regime, participating in protests and

demonstrations denouncing the government's poor management and repressive apparatus. He was president of the University Student Federation between 1954 and 1957. He was also the founder of the DR, the students' armed wing.

Given the historical importance of the takeover of Radio Reloj for Cuba, on November 8, 2019, the island's National Monuments Commission declared the Radio Reloj studio a National Monument.

After the Revolution's triumph on January 1, 1959, the station eliminated advertising. It adopted the information policy outlined by the Communist Party of Cuba, in its capacity as the leading force in society. The station was responsible for broadcasting the decrees and official announcements of the Revolution during the tense days of the 1962 Missile Crisis, covering the progress of the socialist process on the island, transmitting information on the literacy campaign, reforms in education and public health, and efforts to industrialize the country.

Yuzaima Cardona Villena, current Director General of Radio Cubana and journalist at Radio Reloj between 1992 and 2005, states (personal communication, May 24, 2025) that the station's newsroom was characterized by its international editors specializing in specific geographical areas; 16 correspondents in the provinces, and 15 reporters covering specific sectors and ministries. This enabled the production of around 300 news items per day. However, she clarifies that this situation changed due to a decline in the number of professionals, driven by tensions in the national economy. Nevertheless, "closing Reloj would be fatal because it is a media outlet that has left its mark on the history of Cuba."

The arrival of the Internet in Cuba marked the beginning of a new form of journalism, and Radio Reloj was no exception. Isidro Betancourt, director of the station from April 2000 to September 2007, reports (personal communication, January 5, 2025) that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Radio Reloj was one of the first Cuban media outlets to have websites, even managing three: Notinet, radioreloj. cu, and elian. cu. Today, the media outlet has a presence on various digital platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Equis.

It should also be noted that in November 2019, the station signed a collaboration agreement with the Faculty of Communication at the University of Havana, whereby the radio station became a teaching unit attached to the higher education center. The main contribution of this measure is the comprehensive training of students involved in the station's production routines from the first year of their studies.

Currently, the station is not at its best, reflecting the economic crisis the country is going through. However, the greatest credit goes to those who work there, as they keep it on the air 24 hours a day, marking the time in Cuba.

Another distinguishing feature of Radio Reloj is its collaboration with its audience. In this regard, the Radio Reloj Listeners' Club was founded on August 9, 2009. It started with 807 members, 65 % of whom were senior citizens, and now has over 2,370 members. This group communicates directly with the station's general management. It suggests topics for the daily schedule and weekend programs, including the Listener's Mailbox, which addresses issues of interest to the public, and the Weekly Magazine on Sundays and holidays.

Between March 2020 and much of 2022, the world was affected by the pandemic caused by

the SARS-Cov-2 virus, a highly contagious and, in some cases, potentially deadly pathogen. In Cuba specifically, the official number of infected people rose to more than 1 113 000 citizens, while the number of deaths exceeded 8 500.

Because it is a highly contagious disease, spread through droplets of saliva from person to person that enter the body through the eyes, nose, or mouth, Radio Reloj found it necessary to reinvent its work routines in order to stay on the air, just like the rest of the Cuban media system.

According to the director of the radio station at the time, Liuba Moreno Álvarez, the Media System, together with the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, the Ministry of Public Health, and other agencies, set up a working group that collaboratively designed an information and communication policy focused on the prevention, control, and treatment of the disease.

It also sought to keep the public informed about new infections, hospitalizations, recoveries, and deaths both in the country and around the world. To achieve these objectives, work shifts were modified, teleworking was encouraged for non-essential personnel, and plans for epidemiological measures and contingencies were implemented and closely monitored.

Moreno Álvarez adds that in view of the impact of the pandemic: The content agenda was redesigned in light of COVID-19, so the message was repeated to provide the audience with as much relevant information as possible. The regular sections that alternate with the news in the bulletins were aired with new titles in order to inform, guide, and alert the population on how to deal with the epidemiological situation. (personal communication, December 26, 2024)

Along these lines, specialized sections were created to cater to the schedules and audiences of each time of day. In the morning-afternoon shift, on Mondays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, the program *Quédate en Casa* (Stay at Home) was aired, whose thematic lines were aimed at addressing protective measures against the danger of contagion, the protocol of action dictated by the health authorities, the conduct to be followed at all times, as well as reflection on measures to prevent the disease.

CONCLUSIONS

Studying the history of Cuban media outlets such as Radio Reloj is a valid line of research for furthering historical studies of the profession.

Compiling the different stages of Radio Reloj's historical development in a single medium offers a more comprehensive view of the station, its working style, and the moments it has gone through in its 78 years of operation.

Keeping an audience informed through a very demanding station, given the amount of information published in a single day, is evidence of the dedication of Radio Reloj journalists.

Using journalistic interviews with a system of strategic questions allowed us to delve not only into the interviewee but also into the station.

The use of retrospective journalism placed the interviewees in situations that made them reflect on their experiences and offer critical assessments of their professional performance in the service of Radio Reloj.

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