

Nov 04, 2016 by [Alvin Snyder](#)

US broadcasting to Cuba marks its 20th anniversary in 2005 with improved programs, delivery ^[1]


MIAMI -- 2005 could be remembered as the year that Radio and TV Marti finally got their act together.

The timing is perfect for the U.S. government's broadcasting services to Cuba, because 2005 marks the 400th anniversary of the founding of Havana -- and the 20th anniversary of Radio Marti.

I have been keeping tabs on U.S. broadcasting to Cuba since Radio Marti went on the air May 20, 1985. During much of that decade I headed the U.S. Information Agency's (USIA) worldwide Television and Film Service -- which excluded Cuba broadcasting -- but they worked around the corner when headquartered in Washington, DC.

The Martis have outlived the old USIA, an outcome no one could have predicted twenty years ago. The USIA was disbanded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, while U.S. broadcasting to Cuba continues today to work hard on besting Castro. The Martis seem to be improving with age, while Castro is showing his, captured recently by TV cameras tripping while stepping down from a stage and falling hard to the floor.

The Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), now headquartered in Miami, which oversees Radio and TV Marti, relies much more these days on audience research for program decisions.

"Over 60% of Cuba's listeners want the news," said the OCB's Director, Pedro Roig, in an [interview](#)  earlier this month at his office. "Based on this research, Radio Marti has moved to an all-news and information program schedule. We also present news analysis programs. People in Cuba actually mention the name of the programs, so we know they are listening."

Radio Marti is the number one international radio station in Cuba with just under one million listeners, according to audience surveys cited by Marti, followed by the BBC and the Voice of America.

Discussion programs are aimed at a younger audience. On one program, "The Children of the Revolution," guests have included Castro's daughter, now living in exile in the U.S., and the son of the former head of the Cuban secret police.

"But we present all points of view, to show the Cuban people the importance of criticism in discussion," said Roig. "It's fundamental in a democracy to be presented with the opportunity to dissent without fear of reprisals."

The mission of U.S. broadcasts to Cuba is unchanged since the days of the Cold War. It is to

pressure Castro into being more open to admitting problems inside Cuba and to showcase democratic values. Before the fall of the Soviet Union, Marti carried full coverage of such stories as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, a story which Castro's press largely ignored. Today, radio and TV Marti carried full coverage of Saddam Hussein's capture, which the Cuban press reported only as a brief aside -- four days after the fact.

To counter Castro's crackdown on Internet access, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting has had to be creative, according to Chief of Staff Alberto F. Mascaro.

"We put the front page of our Web site as text on 30,000 e-mails," Mascaro said. "We have a headline with a brief synopsis of stories that can be clicked on and read in full. We're seeing a steady growth in our monthly tracking reports.

In 1990, after Marti added a television service to its original radio broadcasts, I wrote rather extensively about it, citing some of its programming of dubious value, such as Spanish language versions of "The Gong Show," "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" and "Wrestlemania." One critic dubbed it "The Peter Sellers-inspired plan to overthrow Castro." Thankfully for some, the programs were successfully jammed by the Cuban government.

Today, broadcasts can be beamed more successfully into Cuba by TV satellite, which are almost impossible to jam, and by some creative technical maneuvering from a high-flying helium-inflated balloon and its powerful transmitter 12,000 feet over the Florida Keys. Signals are also beamed successfully from a C-130 U.S. military plane off the coast of Southern Florida.

"The plane has been flying for three months," said Roig, "once a week on Saturday, from 6:00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. "Reports are extraordinary. For the first time, independent journalists have reported seeing the signal in Cuba. One of the programs is a make-believe republic, run by an old man with a beard, usually in a fatigue uniform. That satire is a favorite program of TV Marti viewers in Cuba."

Perhaps U.S. broadcasting to Cuba has improved not only because of new leadership, but because it is largely left alone, all but ignored by official Washington. Unlike the old days when Marti was center stage, it is mentioned today only as a footnote in Congressional oversight hearings. Today, Middle East broadcasting takes center stage.

In addition, the management of the Office of Cuba Broadcasting is decidedly less flamboyant than in the days when its founder, Jorge Mas Canosa, would be seen driving around Miami's Little Havana in a bullet-proof Mercedes, packing .357 Magnum.

"I live a normal life," says Roig. "I go to the Versailles restaurant to have cafecito."

But he closely watches Fidel Castro's every move.
