

Presentation by Arnold August

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Colleagues,

I visited Cuba more than 40 times between the early 1990s and 2009. Many of my trips lasted several weeks while I investigated and analyzed in detail the Cuban elections in 1997–1998 and 2007–2008, as well as the functioning of the state at all levels between elections. The purpose of my inquiries was to write books – the first one published in 1999 and the second one just released in January. While writing my second book, from 2009 to 2013, I once again took up my devotion to journalism. And so I found myself carrying out two tasks simultaneously – writing the current book and writing articles, most of them in English, Spanish and French. I took up journalism again because I simply could not keep quiet in light of the media war that was underway against Cuba, knowing full well that the writing and publication of a book is a long-term effort. And so I threw myself into the battle and wrote a few dozen articles during that period. They dealt with the disinformation campaigns against Cuba such as the so-called dissident hunger strikes. I also interviewed wives of the Cuban Five and their mothers who were deputies in the Parliament (ANPP) deputies at the time. A series of articles on the coup d'état in Honduras and the role of the Obama administration constituted another theme. I wrote in defence of Cuba on human rights issues and Cuban elections and democracy. Much of my writing dealt with the Cuban Five, including letters to Obama seeking their release. I also focused on Cuba in the new Latin America and U.S. policies toward what they considered their former backyard. And so I am here before you today as a journalist – like many others here, I imagine – compelled

into this profession by a need for the truth to be written about events as they unfold before our very eyes.

While I did not visit Cuba as frequently between 2009 and 2012 as I had in the past, I grew to appreciate the work of Cuban journalists even more. During this period, I was fortunate to have access to Cuban television via satellite, which picks up all the Cuban channels. Even the U.S. – positioned as it is between Cuba and Canada – cannot stop the airwaves from providing me with this window into Cuba. Additionally, many radio programs are available online. What's more, my morning routine begins with reading the digital versions of the main Cuban press, including *Granma*, *Juventud Rebelde*, *UPEC*, *Trabajadores*, as well as the ANPP and Cubadebate websites, and many more. I have been particularly interested in the new wave of Cuban bloggers who defend Cuba against the so-called “left” dissidents and the openly right-wing ones.

Many themes come to mind when one thinks of Cuban journalism. It is most inspiring to see how the Cuban medical missions in outlying areas in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and other countries carry out their work. However, Cuban journalists and their crews are the ones who bring these stories to us, in the same way that they have brought home the truth about Cuban aid to Haiti before and after the earthquake. The changes going on in Cuba today are increasingly being followed and analyzed by the Cuban press as it strives to improve its work on this front.

One feature reflected so well by Cuban journalists never ceases to astound me: the number of people of all ages involved in a wide variety of cultural activities. Watching Cuban TV and reading the press online, I find myself asking if there is anyone in Cuba **not** involved in cultural activities of one sort or another. This is a great achievement of the Cuban Revolution

and it is so well reflected by the journalists. Sports comprise another aspect, whether it is the Olympic Games in other countries or the local baseball series in which I have a keen interest, trying to be objective even as an *Industrialista* (a fan of the Havana baseball team, the *Industriales*).

In the international arena, especially lately in collaboration with TeleSUR, Cuba and its affiliates are the only source of sound information as to what is transpiring in Libya, Syria, Iraq, the Middle East, Latin America and elsewhere. Your country is in a very difficult position with regard to the U.S., but you journalists never give up principle for the sake of convenience. Your support of the Palestinian people against Israel – the main U.S. ally in the region – is a prime example. Cuba represents dignity, and Cuban journalists strive to reflect this in every manner – from international missions and culture, to current changes in society and the economy, to sports and international affairs.

I would like to close by saying a few words with regard to the passing of Hugo Chávez. In my latest book, I deal with democracies in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. After completing the eighth draft of my book in December 2012, I indicated, regarding the Venezuelan people, that – and I quote here – “participatory democracy is a daily way of life for a growing number of people.” In the same vein, and linked to this, I wrote that one cannot view the role of Hugo Chávez from the U.S.-centric point of view as simply an elected representative or president. Rather, Hugo Chávez and the PSUV (*Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* – United Socialist Party of Venezuela) – quoting once again from my book – are “part of the Bolivarian Revolution.” Thus, when Venezuelans took up the slogan *Yo Soy Chávez* during his long period of illness, each person was declaring that the Bolivarian Revolution was **his or her own**

Revolution. They were thus increasingly empowering themselves to carry on the Revolution.

This further development of participatory democracy was their pledge to the person who was and will always be part of the Bolivarian Revolution and its leader. Like the Cuban Revolution, the Bolivarian Revolution will continue. Journalists in Cuba and around the world have the professional duty to contribute to this. You are not alone, and I am not alone either, as there are thousands of other journalists and writers like me in Canada, the U.S., the United Kingdom and elsewhere who firmly and unhesitatingly uphold principle and truth before any other consideration.

It is a great honour for me to receive this Félix Elmuza Award. After a heroic career as a journalist, Félix Elmuza was killed in action after the landing of the Granma expedition, of which he was part. I have felt close to the Moncada and Granma experiences ever since my university days. Today, for the first time in my life, I feel vindicated.

Thank you.