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Communication as Development: The Power of the Press in Nicaraguan Social Change & Nicaraguan Exchanges, 2002

Emily Freeburg
University of Redlands

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**COMMUNICATION AS DEVELOPMENT: THE POWER OF THE PRESS IN
NICARAGUAN SOCIAL CHANGE
&
NICARAGUAN EXCHANGES, 2002**

**EMILY FREEBURG
Senior Thesis
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**COMMITTEE: Ed Wingenbach, Chair
Arturo Arias
Leslie Brody
Daniel Kiefer, Director of the Proudian Program**

Introduction

I've been interested in telling stories all my life. For a long time I made them up. But the more I read and learn, the more I value the way journalism and non-fiction tells a story. To print the words people say in a daily newspaper is to give that person power.

Almost every journalist I meet tells me they love their job. I saw a slide show by a *L.A. Times* Pulitzer prize-winning photojournalist Carolyn Cole, and while she showed her pictures she said:

Journalism is really not a job, it's a lifestyle and a passion. You have to know more and work harder to earn less money than in many other professions. Often you will work under a lot of pressure with little sleep, and if you are a photographer carry around a lot of heavy equipment while you're at it. You need to be resourceful, think logically, and have good people skills to capture pictures to tell the story. But, if you are good enough, those pictures and stories will move people, or teach them something they didn't know, or ultimately help someone, and you will have the satisfaction that brings. One of my favorite quotes is by Norman Mailer, who said about his writing, 'To extend human understanding is the most virtuous thing I could do.' That's why I strive to do my work.¹

For a while I considered interviewing journalists in the United States to ask them about what they felt they accomplished on a day-to-day basis, to ask why they loved what they do. I am interested in the micro level where informing the average citizen brings about change, but I did not want to lose my focus in a gigantic analysis of U.S media.

I became interested in the politics of a free press and the role of the media in democracy after taking a class called Global Democratization. I realized my favorite definition of democracy hinged upon a developed civil society and a free press. The week we read one of de Tocqueville's first chapters in Democracy in America called "Freedom of the Press in the United States" I felt I had been given a gift. I had always

¹ Carolyn Cole, 3/02

valued newspapers as a part of society, but I had never studied or known there were theories about the media and the exchange of news. I've been curious ever since how newspapers and investigative reporting help consolidate democracy. When I found out newspapers were one of the World Development Report's selected indicators of development I wanted to conduct my own investigation. How is a newspaper different under an authoritarian government? What does it mean that in Ethiopia there is only one newspaper per one thousand people?²

More than thirteen hundred journalists have been killed since 1812 in the course of their professional work reporting the news.³ Independent journalists who write under totalitarian regimes, as part of WWII resistance, in Colombia or China, who do investigative reporting about people trafficking, sweat shops or prison conditions, are my heroes.

I decided to study the influence of politics in the press in Latin America because most governments are settling into relatively new democracies, which means the beginnings of press freedom can be traced and studied within in the last 20 years. I went to Nicaragua in January of 2002 to see for myself how newspapers influence daily life. Even though my interviews and experiences are not necessarily a theme of this paper, my country choice was right on because a small body of research exists on newspapers and communication in Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan civil war was possibly the most internationally analyzed war fought in Latin America, and Sandinista leaders Tomás Borge and Ernesto Cardenal considered mass communication a main forum for public

² Selected Human Development Report Indicators, 2000/2001.

³ Collings, Introduction

education. Also, many Marxist and leftist intellectuals world wide during the 1970s and 1980s theorized about mass communication and class.

In Nicaragua I interviewed locals I met, community organizers, ex-patriots, and international development workers. I asked questions about how organizations received information, what sources they trust, and if they read newspapers. Before going to Nicaragua I had read books about the Sandinista revolution, but I did not understand it. Now I have studied the revolution extensively from different sides, and really only conclude that history builds identity. This paper is for a large part historical because to tell the story of the press in Nicaragua I must write the history of the revolution, and to tell the story of the revolution explains contemporary Nicaragua.

The other reason for the history in this paper is to illustrate that journalists in Nicaragua were witnesses of the war. Though Nicaraguan journalists were often shut out during the repressive periods of Sandinista leadership, and the U.S. refused for a long time to print the truth about the violence taking place, some of the developments of the war happened because of what reporters saw and sought. Reporters by definition must physically go to the scene of events and interview witnesses and participants which can be dangerous and taxing. In the tumultuous times of Nicaragua, the journalist that writes fairly and in depth about problems facing Nicaraguans is helping to consolidate democracy.

Paradoxically enough, but by a process familiar to students of mass movements, social revolutions apparently do not take place at the time when the reason for them appears to be most urgent. As long as the oppressed classes are completely ground under heel, as long as the masses are held under complete subjugation, nothing happens. It is only when the proletarians perceive that some other way of life is possible, only when they become acutely aware of the Contrast between their own situation and that of some other class, that ambitions are stirred and hopes revived. From then on revolt, the translation of predisposing factors and sufficient reasons into efficient causes, becomes largely a matter of the appearance of leaders.

Eyler Simpson. The Ejido, Mexicos Way Out 1937

I admit that I do not feel toward freedom of the press that complete and instantaneous love which one accords to things by their nature supremely good. I love it more from considering the evils it prevents than on account of the good it does.

Alexis de Tocqueville. Democracy in America 1835

Journalists have played an important role in the last thirty years of Nicaraguan history. When the story has broken, they have been there to write the changes down. In one sense there is no news until the story is published. But the role of the journalist in Nicaraguan is more than just a witness. To document a war is to be near the front line, and to be an editor in a civil war is to present politics to the people.

There is only one way to begin to talk about newspapers in Nicaragua, and that is with the Chamorro family. Under Anastasio Somoza's dictatorship, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was editor and publisher of *La Prensa* until his death in 1978.⁴ The following historical synopsis relies heavily on the historical account of Nicaragua by Stephen Kinzer in Blood of Brothers.

Chamorro's *La Prensa* was one of the only vocal institutions opposed to the family that had made the country their personal hacienda for the past 40 years.⁵ The two families had feuded for decades and censorship of *La Prensa* was common. The only

⁴ Kinzer 20

⁵ Guillermoprieto 36

thing that held Somoza back from shutting the paper down was his need to protect his international reputation.⁶

Pedro Joaquin Chamorro became the editor of *La Prensa* after the death of his father in 1952. During the 1950s, censorship by the Somoza regime was common knowledge. Once the paper once had to print a photo of Ava Gardner to fill the holes left from the illegal articles. The knowledge of censorship was so widespread that the newspaper hawkers would shout "*La Prensa* with Ava Gardner" in the streets so everyone would know the news had been censored by the government again.⁷

When President Anastasio Somoza Garcia was assassinated in 1956, the Somoza family was certain Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was involved. The military occupied the office of *La Prensa* and the paper was accused of being involved in the assassination. From then on *La Prensa* strictly censored.⁸

The National Guard arrested Chamorro and he was kept in one of the rooms of the Somoza family home. He also spent time in a divided cage as part of the family zoo. Big cats were kept in the other half. Chamorro was kept as a political prisoner for five months, often tortured and beaten for hours. After his release he wrote a book about his experiences and copies were smuggled to Mexico. He then fled to Costa Rica with his wife, Violeta Chamorro, where he trained as a guerilla in the escalating movement against the Somoza dynasty.⁹

When Chamorro returned to Nicaragua he threw himself into working at *La Prensa* as well as a part of the anti-Somocismo movement. He was just as vigorous and

⁶ Kinzer 20

⁷ Kodrich 15

⁸ Kodrich 15

⁹ Kinzer 19

indignant as editor as in his guerilla days, pushing the government censors as much as possible. Chamorro delivered speeches and wrote militant editorials, and he soon came to be the Nicaraguans people's hero.¹⁰

Meanwhile the Sandinistas, who had begun training in the hills in 1961,¹¹ had become such a threat in the late 1970s that a state of martial law was declared and censorship was very high. After the ban was lifted in 1977, *La Prensa* attacked (in print) the Somoza regime. *La Prensa* reporters traced Somoza to the theft of supplies donated by foreign governments after the 1972 earthquake. *La Prensa* printed a story about a company run by Somoza cronies that bought blood from poor people and sold it abroad. Somoza wrote in a letter at that time, "If I didn't make headlines my friends would say to me that Chamorro must be sick today."¹²

Chamorro's newspaper columns, even if they were directly attacking, were part of the Sandinista's intellectual conscious raising program. His editorials were framed as civics lessons; they talked about the duty of the individual in the face of evil or the nature of freedom. Chamorro coined several slogans in his columns that became battle cries of the revolution, one of them, "*Sin libertad de Prensa, no hay libertad*".—Without freedom of the press there is no liberty.¹³

Chamorro also wrote about the misery of the Nicaraguans living in the country's interior. On his trips around Nicaragua he sparked anti-Somoza passions in the people he visited. In 1977 his fame officially reached across borders, he was awarded the Maria Moors Cabot Journalism prize by Columbia University. Nicaraguans considered him

¹⁰ Kinzer 20

¹¹ Guillermprieto 30

¹² Kinzer 36

¹³ Kinser 37

more than an editor and more than a politician. Many figured his moral authority would eventually carry him to the presidency.¹⁴

Chamorro was not the only newspaperman working for social change. As the guerillas trained in the hills, the media was also aiding the Sandinista movement. Edgar Barberena, reporter in the 1970's said,

Many of us in the media would collaborate with the Sandinistas in their project to overthrow the Somozas. If you published or broadcast anything against the Somoza government, the National Security Office would call to announce that your equipment was going to be confiscated. You could also be killed. And so we would run a metro story that began, 'A taxi crashed into a bus at 9 a.m. on the corner of Roosevelt and *Calle el Triunfo*. The taxi driver's ID is available for family members to pick up at such and such a place in time... And the rebels knew that this was a signal for where and when to meet that day.¹⁵

Journalist's became a united force in 1978 with the formation of *La Union de Periodistas de Nicaragua* (UPN), the Nicaraguan Journalists Union. The UPN clandestinely spread news by word of mouth, "speaking from the catacomb" where they occupied churches and read censored radio news from the pulpit. In 1978 the UPN founded Radio Sandino which played an essential role in organizing the combat that eventually overthrew Somoza in 1979.¹⁶

In an interview in 2002, the president of the union, Juan Alberto Henríquez Oporta, said of that time:

The journalist union (*union periodista*) began exactly at the beginning of the anti-Somoza movement to oppose the journalists under Somoza. In 1978 Sandinista journalists monopolized the union. The origin of the union is anti-Somocista. Under Somoza there was censorship of the modes of communication. New in Nicaragua and new in Latin America was the questioning of censorship,

¹⁴ Kinzer 36

¹⁵ originally quoted in Pratt '99

¹⁶ Mattelart 12, '86

directly from the population in communities and universities. [In 1978] the people got together and listened to the journalists [to find out] what was happening at the time. We worked in silence without newspapers to work for. So the Nicaraguan journalism of 1978 was either popular journalism [for Somoza], or that from the catacomb. No journalist at this time got [official] support from the university. Journalist and press sectors organized across the country, and with this impetus the anti-Somocista fight gained quantity. This is how the union of periodistas started. We were only non-militant Sandinistas. We are an organization of the revolution. It is certain we made the FSLN stronger.¹⁷

Consequently, journalists were known targets of Somoza and in 1978 he allegedly made a move that would bring the end of his tyranny. On January 10, 1978 Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was driving home from work when a pickup truck swerved in front of his car. Two men jumped out of the truck and shot him through the driver side window. Pedro Joaquin Chamorro immediately became a martyr. The case is still unresolved. Neither the identity of the assassins, nor who hired them, was ever thoroughly investigated.

Most Nicaraguans blamed the Somoza regime, and thousands of angry mourners followed his body through the streets. Then rioters ransacked the city, targeting Somoza's national guard. One of their first targets was the blood company written about in *La Prensa*. Sandinista guerillas arrived and briefly took over parts of two Southern cities, Rivas and Granada. It took the National Guard two weeks to restore order, but it would not last. Chamorro's death had already sparked revolution.¹⁸

In the months that followed there were guerilla uprisings in the hills, usually crushed by the National Guard, though small territories were gained. But on the morning of August 22, 1978 Sandinistas attacked the National Palace. They took several congressman as hostages, holding another 67 congressmen and members of the Somoza

¹⁷ UPN Personal Interview 1/02

¹⁸ Kinzer 39

family at gunpoint. A *La Prensa* photographer had come with the Sandinistas, and that afternoon his startling photos covered the front page.¹⁹

Somoza eventually ended the siege by granting the guerillas their concessions. It took two days before he gave in, releasing Sandinista prisoners and paying a ransom to the FSLN.²⁰ This confrontation was not the end of Somoza's regime, but it was the beginning of the end and newspaper editors in the United States, unlike U.S. politicians, began to take Nicaraguan news quite seriously. Soon journalists from the U.S, Europe and Latin America were a visible presence around Nicaragua. They were on sort of a death watch, counting the days until the country collapsed. Everyone assumed it was only a matter of time before the revolution began.²¹

In March of 1979, *La Prensa* was closed by the government when civil war erupted. In June, Somoza's Guardsmen attacked the building with an armored vehicle, gasoline and missiles. "He had destroyed a building," wrote Jaime Chamorro, Pedro Joaquin's sister, "but the spirit of Pedro Joaquin and *La Prensa* were soon resurrected out of the ashes."²² From here on the accounts of journalists as well as much of the contemporary press analysis later on relies heavily on the study completed by Kris Kodrich in 1998 called Tradition and Change in the Nicaraguan Press, published in 2002.

In May and June of 1979 Sandinista fighters came up from the south and down from the hills. There was fighting all over the country, but it was not until a single event happened that Somoza left Nicaragua. On the morning of March 20, television correspondent Bill Stewart, sent by ABC despite his inability to speak Spanish and his

¹⁹ Kinzer 40

²⁰ Kinzer 41

²¹ Kinzer 43

²² Kodrich 15

inexperience in dangerous situations, approached a National Guardsmen in a Managua slum. Stewart had footage of Sandinista soldiers, but he needed footage of Guardsmen so his crew drove him to a neighborhood where there had been street fighting. His crew waited in the van while Stewart went to talk to the Guardsmen. One of the Guardsmen pushed Stewart down, kicked him in the ribs and began to walk away. Then he turned back, went to where Stewart was lying, raised his M-16 and fired a single shot into his neck. Stewart died instantly. The Guardsman, realizing he had killed a gringo reporter, motioned for the van driver to come talk to him. The van driver promised the Guardsman he would say it had been a Sandinista sniper if they let them go free. The Guardsman agreed and the crew drove away.²³

The circumstances of Stewart's murder were instantly known at the Intercontinental Hotel, a place where all foreign media congregated. Somoza announced that the Sandinistas had killed Stewart and the journalists in the Intercontinental were furious. By evening, 40 prepared to leave Nicaragua because the risk of their work was too great. Later that night the case took a stunning turn. Stewart's cameraman had been parked a block away and had filmed the entire confrontation. The cameraman had kept the films existence secret until he could get safely out of the country. The footage, broadcast all over the world and into millions of homes in the United States, destroyed the little that what was left of Somoza's credibility.²⁴

Soon after, in June of 1979, the Sandinistas announced they had named a five-member junta to serve as the next Nicaraguan government. The most famous member of the five at the time was the martyred editor's widow, Violeta Chamorro. The other

²³ Kinzer 47

²⁴ Kinzer 48

members were: Alfonso Robelo, a young entrepreneur that had organized a series of anti-Somoza business strikes; Moisés Hassan, a math professor who held a doctorate in physics from North Carolina State University; Sergio Ramírez, a leftist writer and historian; and guerilla leader Daniel Ortega. The junta presented itself as a moderate group that would take the route towards representative democracy.²⁵ The new leaders' task was to construct a country from the wreckage. Nicaragua had extensive poverty, poor health care, as well as high unemployment, homeless and illiteracy rates.²⁶

The junta members authority would change significantly as other Sandinista leaders and guerrillas gained power. Violeta Chamorro and Robelo would resign, Chamorro would turn against the party, and Robelo would be ostracized as a greedy capitalist.²⁷ The Sandinistas also began replacing the members of the junta's cabinet and the newly appointed congress with senior guerilla commandants. All the non-Sandinistas of the government were eventually pushed out of office. Banks and industries were then nationalized, food and rent prices were set and there was massive agrarian reform.²⁸

The Sandinistas immediately confiscated all media that was connected with Somoza, as well as media later connected to the Contras. This included several radio stations and the Somoza press *Novedades*. The *Novedades* facilities were turned into a Sandinista press, *Barricada*,²⁹ and the state took control of nearly half of the country's radio stations.³⁰ In 1979 the Sandinistas hailed the re-opening of La Prensa as one of the

²⁵ Kinzer 49

²⁶ Kodrich 15

²⁷ Kinzer 48

²⁸ Kodrich 15

²⁹ Kodrich 19

³⁰ A. Mattelart 9, '86

first achievements of the insurrection, printing a front-page editorial in *Barricada* welcoming back *La Prensa* after its recovery from the National Guard's bombing.³¹

The Sandinistas viewed mass communication as a tool for social reconstruction that should not be used for profit,³² meanwhile making laws regarding what could and could not be said in the media. One of their first laws prohibited degrading depictions of women as well as the commercial exploitation of women's bodies in advertising.³³

The Sandinistas defended their censorship, saying that it was necessary because Nicaragua was particularly exposed to foreign broadcasting. The Sandinistas regarded most foreign media as psychological warfare, and their worry was not unsubstantiated. Nearly 80 radio stations and 15 U.S. television stations were accessible via bordering airways of Honduras and Costa Rica.³⁴ Links between the CIA and *La Prensa* would later be discovered.³⁵

Joaquin Cuadra, chief of staff of the Sandinista army, defended the censorship saying, "Journalism has the right to be free, but it does not have the right to attack the process, even indirectly."³⁶ Carlos Chamorro, editor of Sandinista *Barricada*, justified the censorship saying the newspaper "goes beyond political opposition and has subordinated itself to the United States policy of aggression against Nicaragua." His mother, Violeta Chamorro said, "Ironically, a revolution that began with the assassination of my husband, a free journalist, has brought with it the worst censorship that Nicaraguan journalism has ever endured."³⁷

³¹ Valdivia 358

³² Valdivia 358

³³ Kodrich 19

³⁴ Mattelart 13

³⁵ Kinzer, Valdivia, Kodrich

³⁶ Kodrich 19

³⁷ Kodirch 20

But much that was censored was unrelated to the war: pictures of women, spoofs of the government, and or sports or food articles that had names similar to opposing leaders. Waiting for the censors was bad for business. It took time, and the holes left from the deleted portions had to be hurriedly filled.

After the leftist newspaper *El Pueblo* criticized the FSLN for not moving quicker towards socialism, several staff members were put in jail, the office was raided, and the paper had no other option than to shut down.³⁸ After the closure of *Novedades* and *El Pueblo*, *La Prensa* was the only remaining opposition newspaper, but the Sandinistas considered the printed attacks of the government insurgent, and considered closing *La Prensa* as well.³⁹

The pressure from the government eventually resulted in the closing of the paper for a short time in August 1980. After serious ideological conflicts between editors and reporters Sandinista leaders were forced by international pressure to devise a compromise between the factions. *La Prensa* was allowed to reopen under the control of Violeta Chamorro and the leftover pro-Sandinista faction was given government help to establish a new socialist paper, *Nuevo Diario*.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, in March of 1980 the Sandinistas began its Adult Literacy Campaign. According to government figures, the illiteracy rate was reduced from 50 to 13 percent in five months. About 60,000 *brigadistas*, young people from the cities, went to remote areas to teach. In the cities 30,000 “urban literacy guerillas” and 3,000 teachers taught half a million people to read and write. Within two years 1,100 new primary schools were built and the number of children enrolled increased from 36 percent in 1978 to 80

³⁸ Kodrich 21

³⁹ Kodrich 20

⁴⁰ Kinzer 30

percent in 1980.⁴¹ Under Somoza the only literacy campaign had been a cover for a counterinsurgency investigation. He enlisted literacy teachers as spies to see if a child's parents were members or sympathizers with the FSLN.⁴²

During this time the Sandinistas were on good terms with President Carter. This would last about a year, during which the U.S. gave Nicaragua 75 million dollars in aid. After the Sandinistas broke an agreement by arranging for a Cuban weapons shipment for the rebels in El Salvador, the U.S. withdrew the aid. The Sandinistas tried to repair their mistake by immediately stopping their Salvadoran involvement, but it was too late, the fragile political bridge had been broken, and Reagan would soon take his presidential oath.⁴³

In his campaign Reagan made it clear he opposed Carter's policies, warning that he would not tolerate a Marxist Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua. Soon Contra soldiers were training in Florida. After failed negotiations between the Sandinistas and the Assistant Secretary of State in 1982 the CIA struck. Two bridges were blown up in Northern Nicaragua and the explosions had the mark of the CIA work.⁴⁴

William Casey, CIA Director, told congress the Contras were to stop Sandinista guerillas from shipping weapons up to El Salvador. Soon after, Reagan made a visit to Tegucigalpa. Honduras denied that any Contras were within its borders, but the government could not cover it up for very long.⁴⁵

In 1983 North American journalist Stephan Kinzer and photographer Ken Silverman were able to locate a secret Contra camp in Honduras, take pictures, and live

⁴¹ Lapple-Wagenhals 36

⁴² Lapple-Wagenhals 36

⁴³ Kinzer 85

⁴⁴ Kinzer 97

⁴⁵ Kinzer 100

to see them published the next day on the front page of the *New York Times*.⁴⁶ Congress was not in session that week and the U.S. State Department spokesmen denied the validity of the story. But at that week's UN meeting, the ambassador to Poland brought Kinzer's article in his briefcase. The ensuing debate was challenging for the Honduran ambassador, who assured the UN council of his country's good faith, but did nothing to encourage the Contras to leave.⁴⁷

Following that initial story, journalists went back to the now deserted area of the reported Contra camp. Reporters were able to find evidence of other camps and publish more stories with photographs.⁴⁸ The UN then officially recognized that there was more than psychological warfare happening on Honduran soil because there were American made automatic weapons, C-4 explosives, and automatic grenade launchers in the hands of the Contras. The evidence was brought into light on the world stage. Statements from the Honduran ambassador and the U.S. State Department denying military involvement were printed in the same articles as the UN accusations.⁴⁹

Daniel Ortega, the leader of the Sandinistas, was elected president in 1984. His political platform only worsened relations with the U.S. Ortega spoke vehemently against the U.S. at his rallies, calling Reagan a death machine and crying "Sandino forever!" Not soon after Ortega's election Reagan began his second term as president, bringing with him vows from senators and CIA agents to end the Sandinista regime. The fighting escalated, the Sandinistas appealed to the Cubans for help, false Soviet

⁴⁶ Kinzer 111

⁴⁷ Kinzer 112

⁴⁸ Kinzer 113

⁴⁹ Kinzer 108

involvement was advertised to U.S. citizens, and the Contras' funding subsequently increased. There was tension all over the country, stores in the cities were void of supplies, roads were frequently closed, and the death toll was climbing in many areas.⁵⁰

Because of the civil war, the Sandinistas were able to declare a state of emergency, restricting political and press rights. They were specifically concerned about rumors of CIA involvement with *La Prensa*.⁵¹ In the early years of the Sandinista government the approval process for *La Prensa* took about two hours, by 1986 it was taking 7. The paper was on shaky financial ground, by the time it hit the streets at night the news was old and diluted.⁵² The Sandinistas considered their censorship necessary to protect Nicaragua from the CIA infiltration. However, their censorship would spiral out of control, helping to destroy the public validity and confidence in the Sandinista government.

Besides censorship, there was a concentrated campaign from Minister of Interior Tomás Borge to sabotage *La Prensa*. He initiated cutbacks in paper supply, reduced foreign allocations needed to buy ink, and even intimidated the vendors who sold the newspaper on the street. But Sandinista suspicions would turn out to be true. U.S. Journalist John Spicer Nichols was able to uncover through the Freedom of Information Act that the CIA had not only provided funding for press and supplies, but also financially reimbursed pro-Contra editorials in U.S. newspapers. In the *Columbia Journalism Review* Nichols concludes, "The record clearly shows that most U.S. aid to

⁵⁰ Kinzer 248

⁵² Kodrich 19

La Prensa was an integral part of the campaign to help the Contras overthrow the Sandinista government.”⁵³

In June of 1986 the House of Congress approved \$100 million in military and humanitarian aid for the Contras. *La Prensa* was shut down the next day by the Sandinistas and stayed closed for the next year.⁵⁴

Despite the censorship, mass communication was considered to play a “fundamental role in this society, in the construction of a new society,” said Nelba Blandon, director of the Sandinista government’s communications department in 1980. The department emphasized the cultural significance of the mass media and recognized information and communication as social goods and not as merchandise. Most important to the Sandinista government, was the collaboration with and the service of the interests of the people.⁵⁵

Espinoza, the director of the journalism school during the 1980s, said that communication “is also form of pressure from the social classes,” and that the Nicaraguan journalist “has to be an organizer and a leader.” In 1982 Espinoza referred to the training at his school as new saying, “Before, journalism was sensational. Our present-day journalism is polemic and critical. Our preoccupation is now to make a journalism which is more serious, more responsible, more truthful.”⁵⁶

Initially one of the Sandinista’s core values was keeping channels of contact with the government open. Because the population during the beginnings of the revolutionary government was highly organized, direct dialogue was able to take place between

⁵³ Valdivia 362

⁵⁴ Kodrich 21

⁵⁵ Läßle-Wagenhals 40

⁵⁶ Läßle-Wagenhals 40

politicians and citizens. Political leaders often traveled throughout the countryside and talked with the population. At the grass roots level, the heads of unions were considered caveats for the public voice and were required to know what channels of organizations to go through to communicate with the government.⁵⁷ As the war wore on this tiered system would eventually be the Sandinista's downfall. Lower-level party cadres would be afraid to give bad news to their superiors, and mid-level party officials were insufficiently trained therefore the government was left uninformed.⁵⁸

One of the ways the Sandinista government tried to stay in touch was by a special radio program, *Linea Directa*, where citizens could call in and ask politicians questions on the air. There was also a television program *Al cara del pueblo*, (With the face of the people/town) where Sandinista leaders went to the countryside and had discussions with citizens in rural areas. The government also frequently held press conferences and interviews with domestic and foreign journalists. This new model of participation, contrary to the vertical model in place during the Somoza regime, was intended to create open access and participation from the popular sectors.⁵⁹

But the Sandinistas would make a lot of mistakes and lose their international credibility as well as trust from Nicaraguans. Believing there was a directed CIA effort in the Miskito region on the Atlantic coast near the Honduran border, the Sandinistas relocated tens of thousands of Creole and Native Indians to new lands, burning their crops and villages so the Contras would be unable to profit from them. Reagan

⁵⁷ Lapple-Wagenhals 116

⁵⁸ Gillermoprieto 36

⁵⁹ Lapple-Wagenhals 40

sensationalized the Sandinista's removal of the Miskitos from their ancient homeland, using their displacement as a platform for U.S. involvement.⁶⁰

The government lost most of its popular support with the implementation of the draft. Sandinista trucks would come into villages and towns unannounced and take all the young men away.⁶¹ During the war over 300,000 people joined the army, more than 10 percent of the population.⁶² The fighting destroyed national agriculture since farms became war zones and men were fighting instead of tending their land. Many schools and cooperatives were destroyed in the fighting, and hundreds of schools were shut down for years. In the mid 1980s, 35 percent of the national budget went towards the Army, and the cost of treating the wounded was left up to the families.⁶³ Attacks from Costa Rican and Honduran Contra bases killed an estimated 40 thousand, weakened infrastructure and drove the country further into economic crisis.⁶⁴

Real progress towards peace did not begin until August of 1987 when President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica engineered Central American peace talks that included only the presidents of all Central American countries. Though the talks were for all of Central America, Arias specifically intended to reach peace in Nicaragua. The five governments signed an accord in which they pledged to permit full political and press freedom, hold periodic elections monitored by the UN and the OAS, the Organization of American States. Countries with deep social divisions were committed to begin dialogue

⁶⁰ Kinzer 262

⁶¹ Guillermprieto 29

⁶² Kinzer 391

⁶³ Guillermprieto 31

⁶⁴ Kinzer 392

between the opposing sides and all “states of emergency” were to be lifted. All countries were to enter cease-fire negotiations and offer amnesty to enemies.⁶⁵

The accord specifically stated that,

The governments of the five Central American states will ask governments in the region, and extra-regional governments which openly or covertly provide military, logistical, financial, or propaganda aid in manpower, arms, munitions, and supplies to irregular forces or insurrectional movements, to cease such aid, as an indispensable element in the achievement of stable and lasting peace.⁶⁶

To Ortega, these negotiations were concessions, the “bourgeoisie democracy” the Sandinista’s had always scorned, but it meant the Contras would be forced to leave.⁶⁷

There were many issues and reasons for the war, but when journalist Stephen Kinzer interviewed Arias later, the president pointedly said, “The lesson of history is so clear,” and spread his palms out and up at the sky, “No Communist system can survive without the freedom of the press,”⁶⁸ proving that though censorship may not necessarily have resulted in the loss thousands of lives lost, it inherently damaged the government’s reputation.

But the accord’s stipulations did not happen overnight. Shortly after its signing an anti-Sandinista rally was violently broken up by the police. A few months after the accord Reagan proposed to Congress that the U.S. give \$270 million dollars aid to the Contras, but it did not pass.⁶⁹ The terms of the peace accord were that it had to be enforced within ninety days. In September the Catholic radio station was reopened but the radio station was forbidden to broadcast news. The Sandinistas also refused to let 20

⁶⁵ Kinzer 350

⁶⁶ Kinzer 351

⁶⁷ Kinzer 351

⁶⁸ Kinzer 352

⁶⁹ Kinzer 353

radio programs that had been closed since 1982 back on the air, and ignored requests for a non-Sandinista television station.⁷⁰

However on October 1, 1987, following the conditions of the peace accord, *La Prensa* printed its first edition after 16 months of closure. The paper immediately began printing attacks on the government. These attacks renewed Sandinista charges that *La Prensa* was collaborating with the U.S. government. These charges were not far from the truth; *La Prensa* editors openly admitted they received \$98,000 from the National Endowment of Democracy, a congressionally funded foundation serving Reagan's international goals, to purchase ink and supplies.⁷¹

But media disagreements were not the only disputes left to settle. There was still no ceasefire. On March 23, 1989, a press conference was called. On the stage were senior Sandinista leaders Daniel Ortega and Humberto Ortega along side Contra leaders Adolfo Calero and Alfredo César. The OAS secretary general read to the crowd of reporters that a ceasefire had been reached. The news was immediately picked up by the radio and spread across Nicaragua and the world.⁷² After that, the fighting stopped. The soldiers walked through the abandoned and destroyed country back to their homes, if they were still there, to find who was left of their families.

Riding on the success of the peace talks, and to prove Nicaragua was truly a democracy, Ortega announced that the new democratic election would be held early. Ortega ran as the Sandinista candidate, his campaign was well choreographed and funded. Violeta Chamorro was chosen as the opposition candidate, her campaign was modest and her rallies poorly attended. She won with 55 percent of the vote.

⁷⁰ Kinzer 357

⁷¹ Kodrich 21

⁷² Kinzer 353

The Sandinistas could not have conceived their defeat, but Nicaraguans were tired of the destitution and loss from a war that had lasted over a decade. It was also widespread knowledge in Nicaragua that if Ortega won the U.S. would continue supporting the Contras. Ortega gave his final speech and peacefully turned over the presidency to Chamorro.⁷³

With the election of Violeta Chamorro, press freedom became more of a reality than ever before in history. But even under Chamorro a Sandinista news program was suspended after being accused of inciting strikers. In 1995, constitutional reform made it illegal for the government to confiscate equipment from the newspaper, radio, or TV news offices.⁷⁴ During her seven years in office Chamorro worked toward consolidating democratic institutions, making peace with the Contras, reducing the size of the army from 96,000 to 15,000, and welcoming back Nicaraguans that had fled abroad.⁷⁵ The government privatized more than 350 state enterprises, reduced inflation and cut foreign debt in half. The economy finally began expanding in 1994; and GDP reached nearly 2 billion in the mid 1990s.⁷⁶

In 1996 Managua Mayor Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo, leader of the center-right liberal alliance, was elected president. His main pledge was to increase economic activity with foreign investors, but he eventually became hated by most of the population for his corruption, specifically the misuse of Hurricane Mitch foreign aid. His vice president, Enrique Bolanos, was elected to the presidency in 2002.

⁷³ Kinzer 390

⁷⁴ Pratt '99

⁷⁵ Kodrich 23

⁷⁶ Kodrich 31

The 20th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution has passed. Now this paper will take a contemporary look at the war's influence on the press today, consider the present politics that confront newspapers, and analyze the role of the journalist in the transition and consolidation of democracy.

History has created a dual identity for the Nicaraguan journalist as a revolutionary and as writer. The past censorship brought tremendous international criticism, at the same time it has been heavily analyzed. Many scholars believe the censorship was necessary to protect Nicaragua from the CIA, some suggest that the limiting of press freedom brought the downfall of the Sandinistas. The correct level of access to information during times of war is not what this paper is about, but rather how diversity in publications is part of democracy. This paper will also examine in-depth reporting because it can be a reflection of society and crucial to forming national identity.

In 2002 there are five circulating daily newspapers in Managua. There are also weekly newsmagazines, tabloids and business news supplements. There are a variety of publication styles: traditional or cutting edge, color or black and white, with coverage of business, gossip or both. The newspapers are all trying to find the magic combination of coverage and image to fill the biggest niche in the market. *La Prensa* is the first Nicaraguan paper to publish the Wall Street Journal as a weekly supplement.⁷⁷ In the top right hand corner of ibw.com, Nicaragua's national web page, the media links are displayed. *Noticias y Medios Escritos* (News and Written Media) has direct web links to daily newspapers *La Prensa*, *Nuevo Diario*, and *Confidencial*, as well as several weekly newspapers, and Central and North American dailies. Under the media icon there are

⁷⁷ Pratt '99

links to Nicaragua's main businesses, NGO's, tourism, investment, government, entertainment, schools and health.⁷⁸

This relative quantity of information available is an interesting contrast to the 50.3 percent of people in Nicaragua living below the poverty line. In rural areas 76.1 percent of the population live below the poverty line. Illiteracy has climbed back up to 31 percent.⁷⁹

The total circulation of all newspapers according to UNESCO is 135,000, but the projection by the Universidad de Central America is much smaller. In 1999 the UCA said El Nuevo Diario sold about 15,000 copies a day, *La Prensa* 13,000 and *La Tribuna* 3,500.⁸⁰ Per 1000 people, 30 daily newspapers are purchased,⁸¹ down from 50 per 1000 in 1990.⁸² A daily newspaper is unaffordable to most of the population, costing three cordobas, about .35 cents depending on the exchange rate. *La Prensa* and *Nuevo Diario* continue to dominate the market.

During the war circulation was much higher. In 1982, *La Prensa* reportedly sold 70,000 copies a day, *Nuevo Diario* (sympathetic to the FSLN) 35,000, and *Barricada* (the official paper of the FSLN) 35,000. Readership began to fall dramatically after Chamorro's economic restructuring in the early 1990's, with the fall of purchasing power.⁸³ Newspapers are trying to survive in a place where illiteracy rates are high and the average income is \$420.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ ibw.com

⁷⁹ World Development Report 2001

⁸⁰ Kodrich 56

⁸¹ World Development Report 2001

⁸² Kodrich 56

⁸³ Kodrich 56

⁸⁴ World Bank Group 2002

Part of the decrease in circulation is a product of post-democratic transition. In many cases after democratic transition, political participation declines.⁸⁵ When there is no more war to read about people stop buying papers. People start living their lives as individuals instead of factions, and focus on themselves, not their country.

Circulation of newspapers is low because of other competing media sources. Television and radio broadcasts are much more accessible by the rural population. According to one survey newspapers are less appealing to Nicaraguans than listening to the radio or TV. UCA professor Alfonso Malespin said that only 11 percent of Nicaraguans choose newspapers as their preferred news source. He summarized that newspapers must increase their circulation to financially survive, and therefore Nicaragua can really only support two newspapers.⁸⁶

With the number of TV and radio stations, new publications, supplements and internet links, there are not enough readers and advertisers to go around.⁸⁷ Union Periodista Nacional (UPN) President Henríquez describes the limited media market saying,

“There are too many conditions [on journalists]. Our numbers are small and businesses have so many demands on them from the economy and the state that they are not able to utilize, maintain, and sustain relations with the media and modes of communication such as cable television, radio and small broadcasts.”⁸⁸

According to the UPN, poor economic conditions and advertising pressures had closed more than 40 information spaces, specifically radio and news programs.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Fitzsimmons & Anners in “Civil Society in a Post-war period...” The study of post-transition political decline originates with Schmitter and O’donnell.

⁸⁶ Kodrich 136

⁸⁷ Kodrich 56

⁸⁸ UPN personal interview 1/02

⁸⁹ Kodrich 57

Unemployment in Nicaragua from official sources hovers around 20-40 percent; unofficially Nicaraguans say it has been at times 70 percent. If unemployment is in fact only 20 percent, underemployment affects at least another 60 percent.⁹⁰ According to the National Board of the Nicaraguan Journalists Union, 550 out of 1,050 journalists were unemployed or underemployed.⁹¹ According to some sources, journalists in Nicaragua are the poorest paid in Latin America.⁹²

Though economic conditions are impossible to ignore, the number of newspapers and information sources in Nicaragua is a signal of some democratic success. Some of the progress for Nicaraguan journalists and newspapers, as well as Nicaraguan democracy, has come from the softening the Nicaraguan tradition of partiality in news coverage.⁹³ *La Prensa* now has several reporters that once worked for *Barricada*, the Sandinista opposition paper during the '80s.⁹⁴ Says current editor of *La Prensa*, Eduardo Enriquez, "In the last decade we've learned a lot as journalists here in Nicaragua. Before the press was very political and party-driven. Now, people have shown that they want a serious, independent and professional press... one that helps the community."⁹⁵ Without the oppressive umbrellas of Somocismo and Sandanismo, the journalist and the newspaper is a different kind of actor in society.

According to the president of the journalist union, Alberto Henríquez, the union is a professional organization as opposed to a political one. Some members are leftist, others conservative or mainstream. "From the point of the view of the journalist we are

⁹⁰ CIA world fact book says 20 percent in 2001, Benda says 40 percent in 1999, personal interview with Horold Urbina Cruz says 80 percent in 2002.

⁹¹ CPJ.org

⁹² Some sources in Kodrich, CPJ and personal interview with UPN president.

⁹³ Kodrich 87

⁹⁴ Pratt '99

⁹⁵ originally quoted in Pratt '99

the best journalists in the country and there are almost no other journalists than us. We are the graduates, professionals.”⁹⁶ The post-war professionalism of journalism is similar in its importance to the professionalism of cops or the military in making the transition to democracy. A non-partisan union is important to providing a non-discriminating work environment across Nicaragua. Less party influence on the journalist means there are employees for all types of publications in Nicaragua, papers that are known for supporting one political side like *Nuevo Diario* and others that are more politically objective like *La Tribuna*. The Nicaraguan can then make the choice of what view they want to read.

Some international groups are working to aid journalistic professionalism through increased training,⁹⁷ but workshops alone do not affect the root of the problem.

Democratic theorist Thomas Carothers writes about the pressures that take away from the possibilities of more in-depth reporting:

With the media sector, these conditions usually include persistent state dominance of television, ingrown structures of ownership in what private media does exist, rising pressure for sensationalism with increased commercialization of the sector, and an inadequate advertising base due to the countries economic troubles. Training courses may make journalists more knowledgeable and skillful, but they will not ameliorate these negative factors.⁹⁸

Since 1990, the country’s first democratic election, Nicaragua has had no serious cases of press freedom violations. Under Chamorro, the Nicaraguan press received praise from the Inter American Press Association, a nonprofit organization dedicated to defending press freedom throughout the Americas. The Nicaraguan press system was

⁹⁶ personal interview '02

⁹⁷ CPJ.org

⁹⁸ Carothers, 243 '99

said to operate freely and effectively with less problems than would be expected in an underdeveloped country with new democratic institutions.⁹⁹

The Nicaraguan public now considers the media to be one of the country's most credible institutions. One study found the media a more trusted institution than the Catholic Church. In a 1998 survey of 360 random Managua homes in 30 different neighborhoods, 75 percent of those surveyed thought the mass media was credible compared to 68 percent for the Catholic Church. The government comptroller was thought to be credible by 65 percent of those surveyed, the National Police 54 percent, National Assembly 49 percent, and the presidential office 47 percent.

This pattern can be seen all across Latin America: the Catholic Church and the press typically have the most public confidence. The support is mainly due to the exposure of government corruption by journalists.¹⁰⁰ This public sentiment is echoed in the words of *La Tribuna* columnist Wilfredo Montalvan when he says "In a democratic system, such as the one we are trying to consolidate in Nicaragua, freedom of expression is considered a cornerstone or backbone of democracy. This is true, for without freedom of expression there can be no democracy."¹⁰¹

But support from the public sector is not the same as cooperation from the government. There are still significant conflict and power struggles between the media and the government. The government claims the media is constantly trying to tarnish its achievements and reputation. In March newspapers reported that Byron Jerez, Director of General Revenues, had written fraudulent checks totaling almost a half a million U.S. dollars. Three months later, after conducting a four-month investigation, weekly

⁹⁹ Kodrich 26-27

¹⁰⁰ Kodrich 26

¹⁰¹ Source originally quoted in Kodrich 29

newspaper *Confidencial* reported Jerez allegedly built a summer home with funds earmarked for Hurricane Mitch assistance. Soon after that story was printed Jerez was fired.¹⁰² As a result, tax authorities harass media and television organizations. In August of 2002 the government attempted to collect \$500,000 from *La Prensa* in tax penalties. The fines were the result of *La Prensa's* audit 1999, shortly after they published a report on government corruption.¹⁰³

At the same time, journalists are working with the government to pass a law that gives them legal protections and a higher living wage. In February of 2000, President Alemán announced during his weekly radio broadcast from a government station that his administration planned to pass a minimum wage law for journalists. Ley 372 was tabled after media owners protested strongly. The UPN then worked with the government to rewrite the law so it would not limit rights to source access or discourage independent reporting by requiring all journalists to register with the national colegio, but the law was passed without modifications. Journalists argued that the unrestricted and low wages encouraged journalists to sell advertisements to politicians and businessmen for favorable coverage.¹⁰⁴

Many journalists are discouraged by working long hours for little pay. According to a survey by Kris Kodrich in 1998 of 62 Nicaraguan journalists, 53 percent of reporters worked eight to ten hours a day and 28 percent said they worked more than ten hours a day. Reporters and photographers usually worked for 12 consecutive days and then had a weekend off earning between \$300 and \$500 a month. Nicaraguans consider U.S. \$500 enough to live modestly. Comparatively, schoolteachers make about U.S. \$100 a

¹⁰² CPJ.org

¹⁰³ CPJ.org

¹⁰⁴ CPJ.org

month.¹⁰⁵ In the new era of journalism, like in the days of CIA infiltration, the reporter is still tempted to take offers from businesses that will pay him or her extra to print favorable news.

The integrity of the journalists is not the only thing to be compromised by economic gain. The PLC led government is the country's largest advertiser. This means advertising revenues are potentially affected by whether or not a newspaper's editorial stance pleases the government. In August of 2000 *La Prensa* denounced the government tax agency for placing 6.4 times more advertising in the official newspaper *La Noticia* even though *La Prensa's* circulation was ten times that of *La Noticia*. In September 2000 President Alemán promised that political criteria would no longer influence state advertising policy.¹⁰⁶

While the press's uncovering of government misconduct is necessary to provide political transparency and consolidate democracy, official sources such as the government, press conferences and experts, are almost solely relied upon.¹⁰⁷ In other words, the media has not yet transgressed to writing about non-traditional sources like the daily struggles of individuals and communities.

For Nicaraguan journalists to make the transgression to investigative reporting that upholds democratic as well as journalistic ethics like fairness in reporting, journalists need more resources to more fully cover their stories and use their time effectively. Reporters spend many of their working hours waiting for rides. Buses don't go everywhere newsworthy events happen, and journalists cannot necessarily afford the taxi

¹⁰⁵ Kodrich 129

¹⁰⁶ CPJ.org

¹⁰⁷ Kodrich 133

fare.¹⁰⁸ Though the offices have phones, phone service and the delivery of messages is unreliable. For one reason or another people don't call back. Rural areas and poor areas of Managua have no phone lines. Nor does the average family in Managua. For every one thousand people, there are only 31 phone lines in Nicaragua. In 2001 cell phone use was only four people per thousand.¹⁰⁹

One North American NGO worker has described the communication process in Nicaragua as difficult. Sara Woodard, Jubilee House Community has said:

To work here you must assume that nothing has really gone through, you get wrong numbers and your emails don't mail, but they don't bounce back. The dilemma is whether to call back and harass, or is their silence a way of saying no? It makes life complicated, just when you think you got a system that works some leg of the communication breaks down.¹¹⁰

Internet use is even more out of reach than telephones. In January of 2001, there were 2.04 Internet hosts per 10,000 people.¹¹¹ At newspaper offices there are usually one or two computers with Internet access, but the computers are often tied up since the entire staff shares them.¹¹²

Communication in Nicaragua operates at a human level: word of mouth. In tropical Nicaragua people spend a lot of time in their neighborhood streets, and this is how information is passed. When I talked to Nicaraguan community organizer "Shaggy" Horold Urbina Cruz, he said:

In every neighborhood we visit people in their own houses and invite them to come [to the party meeting, or English class]. It is the only way to get the message. Sometimes we use media or publicity, but it is not so easy to get to a TV channel and go on the air. There are a few radio stations let us on the air... Communication is something difficult, when I worked [at an organization with a

¹⁰⁸ Kodrich 130

¹⁰⁹ World Development Report 2000/2001

¹¹⁰ Personal Interview with Sara Woodard 2002, Jubilee House Community Member

¹¹¹ World Development Report 2000/2001

¹¹² Kodrich 131

phone] it was easy to call a radio station and denounce something. Most people have no radio, no TV and are always depending on personal communication and always visiting neighborhood... All organizations know each other, members are from communities, neighbors.¹¹³

From a development standpoint word of mouth is bad for business, implying delays and misinformation. It is possible that newspapers could alleviate some miscommunications with more in-depth coverage and diversity in reporting.

Newspapers coverage of the human rights issues Urbina is working for would help his fight for social justice. Through public exposure the entrenched problems of Nicaragua and Latin America like human rights violations, lack of full equality and opportunity for women, ecological damage and the gap between the rich and the poor,¹¹⁴ could be further understood and the country less susceptible to exploitation. This assumption is optimistic, relying on the hope that knowledge alone will make what is best for society possible.

The role of the media in democracy as defined by the USAID Center for Democracy and Governance is:

For example the support for media may yield results in governance activities, particularly those related to decentralization, anti-corruption, and citizen participation in the policy process. The rule of law may be further institutionalized by support for an independent media that keeps a check on the judiciary, reports on the courts, and promotes a legal enabling environment suitable for press freedom.

The danger of linking media to government transparency is that reporters will rely too heavily on official sources. The decline in political participation typical to post-democratic transition can result in a barrage of messages from the competing parties,

¹¹³ Personal interview, Harold "Shaggy" Urbina Cruz

¹¹⁴ Entrenched problems listed in Freidman, Hochsteler & Clark essay.

drowning out popular sentiments leaving citizens cynical.¹¹⁵ The media as a societal apparatus has the potential to bridge the popular and political sphere. Kodrich's survey has showed that story ideas mainly came from coverage of meetings, press conferences and faxes that came in throughout the day. More investigative reporting will take more than an ideological shift in the media sector, but will depend on better use of resources by journalists, better training at Universities, and further access to resources.¹¹⁶ It is also important to consider the editorial choices of the newspapers themselves. Editors assign certain stories according to how they view society and by what readers want. In this sense it is very good that Managua has five dailies even though the economy cannot support them all. The editorial choices of two people would not be sufficient to represent all reader's views.

USAID specifically mentions in its progress report for Nicaragua in 2000 that "civil society must be given more systematic avenues of expression (public hearings, for example)."¹¹⁷ Part of the work of an editor for a newspaper with the intent to help build civil society is to create a systematic avenue of expression for the public. Part of the difficulty is getting society to consider the press a viable apparatus as a space for the representation of their concerns.

The Sandinista Minister of Interior Tomás Borge Martínez wrote in 1984 that:

[M]edia must open themselves more to the popular project, creatively and without falling into either populism or empiricism. At the same time, we should deepen our own marginal experiences and sensitize all of society which is not conscious of the importance of communication, the transcendent importance of the dissemination apparatuses in the building of a new society. In Nicaragua we

¹¹⁵ Bennett

¹¹⁶ Kodrich 121

¹¹⁷ USAID.com, USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse, released July 1, 2000, written March 28, 2000.

are fully aware of the military defense apparatus, as we should be, but we are not aware of the role of communication.¹¹⁸

The freedom the media apparatus operates under is key to Martinez's statement. Freedom House rates Nicaragua's press freedom, considering similar avenues in civil society as USAID. Nicaragua rates as only "partly free," with a rating of 40, where 1-30 is free, and 31-60 is partly free and 60-100 is not free. In Latin America 52 percent (17) of countries are rated free, 42 percent (14) are partly free and 6 percent (2) are not free. Freedom House reports that worldwide press manipulation is becoming more subtle.¹¹⁹

The USAID report in 2000 summarized Nicaraguan "Political Participation, Compromise and Transparency" as

Progress towards objectives is not meeting expectations. Political participation may be adversely affected by the implementation of power-sharing agreement between the two dominant political parties, and by related legal and constitutional reforms. Progress is slow on decentralization and resolution of property cases, and there continues to be inadequate transparency in government operations.¹²⁰

"Inadequate transparency in government" means information about what the government does is not truly circulating. If news coverage is dominated by press conferences, meetings or public hearings, and USAID says there needs to be more public hearings, then the press is reinforcing the limited reach of the government by printing only their limited range of news. However, it is not the sole responsibility of the press to provide transparency in government. The press would not have strive to expose corruption if the political system was more transparent.

¹¹⁸ Martinez 112, Mattelart '86. Martinez originally said this in a speech at a Participatory radio conference in 1984.

¹¹⁹ Freedomhouse.org

¹²⁰ USAID.com, USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse, released July 1, 2000, written March 28, 2000.

Nicaraguan media needs to provide more spaces for civic dialogue unrelated to politics. More human-interest or daily-life type sections will help develop a more plural political identity in the current two-party polarity which pushes political beliefs and the identifications of organization to either the left or right. In larger, economically boundless nation-states, the quantity of independent media creates a sort of freedom through capitalism since there are more niches available in the market that make it possible to avoid direct political and advertising pressures. Unfortunately economic opportunity cannot really be chosen. In the United States the sheer number of publications available because of its physical size, ethnic diversity, and economy creates many more dialogic spaces. Tight economic conditions in Nicaragua mean less mobility for Nicaraguans to communicate and reflect on identity.

If radio stations and newspapers are partial to the left or right they are contributing to the politicalization of national spaces because of the limited number of newspaper and radio stations. That is not to say that the two opposing political parties are not part of Nicaraguan identity. Centralized politics would not be an improvement if they result in a press reflective of only the center. Theoretically responsible economic development, time for political diffusion so that governments and parties can be more receptive, increased training and resources for journalists to do investigative reporting, more identity “spaces” in civil society would aid democratic consolidation.

Silvio Waisboard argues that

The role the media play in identity building needs to be examined by analyzing how citizenship is created and recreated in local situations. Identity formation has been intrinsically linked to participation in local and national politics. In this sense citizenship continues to be grounded in particular historical conditions and locally and nationally defined political spaces.¹²¹

¹²¹ Waisboard '98

For Nicaraguans to advance from the boundaries of a history that requires citizenship to be defined by political identification, it is necessary to dissuade immediate monologic categorization and labeling of civil society's participants to ensure that public space contains diverse opinions protected by the law and invigorated by a free press.

This is not to say that a Nicaraguan identity needs to be built. Nicaraguan identity already exists, it is full of the contradictions and evolutions, like I have begun to outline in the Nicaraguan press, that resist the reductionism traditionally practiced in political science, cultural theory and anthropology until recently in singular colonialist models. Journalism in Nicaragua has also only recently come out of colonization, first by the Spanish, then by Somocismo and Sandanismo. That does not mean the press or the population have always followed the direction of the power holders. Instead, there is a history of finding non-traditional outlets, like the press of the catacombs, where civic dialogue happens. It has been a little more than ten years for new journalistic practices to grow from the traditional, blend with the international, and become Nicaragua's own.

Cultural theorist Marc Zimmerman explains where Nicaraguan identity is located amongst the contradictions when he writes,

In Central America, as in other regions of the postcolonial world, intellectuals and bodies of ideas are not necessarily of the same sorts or located in the same places as in the metropolitan centers... but in an informal literary public sphere constituted, often quite haphazardly and precariously, by journals, newspapers, editorials, manifestos, tracts, letters, testimonios and memoirs...¹²²

Diversity in news and range of available media sources in Nicaragua play a role in Zimmerman's depiction of informal Central American identity, but it is likely that the era of the newspaper's importance to civil society has passed. The important political role of

¹²² Zimmerman

the press during the late 1970's and the high circulation rates throughout the 1980's were probably the peak for the Nicaraguan press. Zimmerman goes on to argue that the current forum for Central American identity is poetry. Though this paper has focused on the press, the future societal space where dialogue and identity reflection will probably not occur through newspapers. The written word on the page will always have power and be able to create change, but will always be less accessible, entertaining and immediate than radio or television, especially with a large illiterate population.

What is important to recognize about the press in Nicaragua despite a poor economy or significant illiteracy is that the media still represents various voices simply by the sheer number of publications available that represent diverse beliefs. The concern offered in this analysis is that the market-economy in Nicaragua will become so tight and fraught with exploitive foreign influence that more media spaces will be lost. Further, if Nicaraguan politics become more centered instead of the current left and right dichotomy less civic dialogue will be stimulated and the activity of civil society will lessen in centrist apathy. Zimmerman's point that Nicaraguan intellectual bodies will find their own forms specific to Nicaraguan culture provides hope that this bleak prospect of centrist societal deadening is not in the near future. Also when considering this disheartening prediction for a Nicaragua bereft of discourse, it is important to remember that across Latin America there is no tradition of political apathy, and throughout history political developments are consistently unpredictable.

The Nicaraguan journalist has already secured a role in history as a hero. I have no doubt journalists will forget their history or disappear as civic actors. There will always be journalists that investigate and write to convey objective informative truth, just

like there will always be doctors and artists that want to heal or create. Readers will not stop reading and writers will not stop writing. We are currently in an “information age” where life is being more analyzed by the day. How this affects lesser-developed countries is still being understood and the availability of information is intrinsic to the current trend of international development aid.

Globalization has brought the information age for both rich and poor countries, but this does not necessarily mean increased freedom or better living conditions. Economics are still the biggest determining factor. Nor does globalization mean that country identity will be diluted by international exchange. How and which other sources besides economics will influence culture is more my question.

The limitations of freedom in Nicaragua’s past, as well as other dictatorships and controlled societies worldwide, have taught us that no matter what agenda a government purports, be it egalitarian or exploitative, if the government is at the point where it must censor the press in order to protect its power it is doomed to failure. At the micro level, it is the job of the journalist and the editorial board of the newspaper, no matter what sweeping movement takes the country, to stay objective and present balanced news to the public. Since news sources will always have their own agendas, like *La Prensa* and *Nuevo Diario*’s known political stances, it is necessary for society to support a number of media sources so information can conflict and in the contradictions a truthful news portrayals is available for anyone who wants to find out all sides of any issue. Keeping lots of breathing room in societal dialogic space will provide the success of Nicaraguan democracy. If the economy contracts further and more media outlets are closed, the representations of Nicaraguan identity will either find other outlets like Zimmerman

outlined, or society will become as limited by the rule of economics as with the rule of an authoritarian or communist regime. If there is another revolution, be it linked to frustration with economic destitution enforced by global exploitation or dissatisfaction with government corruption, it is hard to imagine what it will look like. More revolutions, despite continuing hard times, do not seem to be looming in the future. Latin America is nearly 15 years out of its era of revolution and war, and people do not want to live under those conditions again.

The Nicaraguan journalist, though he or she has a difficult job for little pay like almost every job in Nicaragua right now, is not in any danger of disappearing. Nor is Nicaraguan identity going to suddenly dissipate. The duty of the Nicaraguan press is to reflect the shifting, contradicting and developing identity of Nicaragua, and through the consistent spread of information economic stability, representative democracy and healthy civil society will be cultivated.

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Nicararguan Exchanges, 2002

It is pitch black on the island of Ometepe by 7 p.m. There are no street lights and the bus slowly swims through the potholes. The 12 kilometers to the next town might as well be 100. From the bus windows we can see into the one-room houses along the road. The windows are open holes to the hot night, letting in the sounds of the jungle, the neighbors and the stray dogs. In one house we pass there are ten people gathered around a TV. In Nicaragua, it's not an uncommon scene.

Nicaragua is the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti. Its recent history includes frequent natural disasters, political corruption and civil war. In 1969 the Sandanista revolution overthrew Dictator Anastasio Somoza, who left the country with \$3.5 million in the national treasury and \$1.6 billion in foreign debt.

The Sandanistas started from scratch, emphasizing popular participation, increasing social services and land redistribution. U.S. President Carter originally supported the Sandanista revolution, but the U.S. changed its policies while Reagan was in office, sponsoring the Contra rebels with more than 100 million dollars in training and weaponry. Nicaragua lost an estimated 20,000-40,000 people in the civil war. In a country with population hovering around five million, the devastation reached everyone.

As soon as some progress was made in reconstruction after the civil war, Hurricane Mitch hit in 1998 leaving 3,000 people dead, 30,000 displaced, and many damaged crops, roads and bridges. Most repair and permanent relocation projects are still pending, forgotten by the government. The capital city of Managua still hasn't been rebuilt from an earthquake in 1972. Statistically, times are only hard and harder.



I went to Nicaragua in January of 2002 with another student, April Conway. When our plane flew in over Managua the country was dark except for long thin lines of fire winding through the green black. My seatmate, a Nicaraguan banker, told me they were burning sugarcane. When the plane landed everyone clapped. We went into the small airport to claim our bags and were immediately pushed out by the crowd into the hot street full of eager cab drivers.

I became interested in Nicaragua for "typical" reasons: the near success of a people's revolution and the devastating U.S. involvement. I came to Nicaragua romantic about the implications of the Sandanistas. I wanted to see if the legacy of Sandanista ideology somehow gave people more tools to construct enriched civic life even in the face of widespread poverty. What I found out, whether left over from the Sandanista movement or not, was the importance of operations that function at a community level and how individuals make grass roots projects happen.

Through our hostel the Quaker House in Managua, part of a larger Quaker volunteer project

called ProNica, we were able to network interviews and contacts. We met American development workers, people from the hostel's neighborhood Las Brisas, and local Sandanista party leaders. We looked through the phone book, walked the unwalkable city, and read everything we could get our hands on.

The Sandanista (*Frente Sandanista Liberacion Nacional*) party is definitely a visible part of daily life. Their party colors, black and red, are painted on the bottoms of telephone poles, left over from the past two elections. The FSLN logo is across building walls and a red meetinghouse is near the center of every town.

This year Daniel Ortega, the party's candidate for the recent and the previous presidential election, added a new color: hot pink. His platform wanted nothing of the dark Sandanista memories, he was aiming more along the lines of peace and love. The hot pink banners are still painted on many buildings.

In the park in front of the National Museum and Congress, the FSLN flags wave next to the blue and white flags from the *Partido Liberal Conservador*, or PLC. The country is divided almost 50/50 and almost everyone somehow participates politically. In the last election 90% of the people voted, but polls showed that people remained undecided up until voting day. Enrique Bolanos of the PLC won by 53%. Ortega recognized his loss and conceded peacefully saying,



"we will continue to work to support democracy and its institutions."

Important to understanding Nicaragua is to realize that a vote for president is a vote for stability. People were afraid to vote for Daniel Ortega, because to vote for socialism is to vote to upset the U.S., and because in post-Sept. 11 uncertainty, a socialist can be easily fabricated into a terrorist.

To aid his campaign, Bolanos brought up past Sandanista party ties to Gadhafi in Libya and guerilla leader Tirafijo in Colombia. But what alienated his supporters were the molestation charges brought against Ortega by his stepdaughter years before. The scandal exposed a man twisted and power hungry in his own domestic life and broke the trust of even his most loyal followers.

However, Bolanos' record wasn't clean either. Bolanos was vice-president for Aleman, a president nationally hated for his massive amounts of corruption.

The country's political divide, in a sense, defines Nicaragua. Families and neighborhoods are at odds, and whether someone is hired for a job can depend on the applicant's politics. Many social services and unions (those remaining) are





historically Sandanista. And the key representation of democracy, the media, is particularly politically polarized.

By asking which party someone supports, a Nicaraguan's choice of newspaper is pretty obvious. One could simply ask what newspaper someone reads to figure out his or her party preference. The newspaper vendors that typically wait at stoplights and then push the papers into the open taxicab windows are usually selling one of two papers: *La Prensa*, Nicaragua's more conservative and economically focused daily, or *Nuevo Diario*, the less circulated but popular socialist press. Managua has five daily papers, impressive for a city of about one million with one-third of the population illiterate.

I was interested in newspapers because I wanted to see how Nicaragua represents itself and if newspapers reflected the realities of Nicaraguans. But in interviewing I found that asking about the "spread of information" and people's newspaper preferences made for a short and abstract conversation since I wasn't only talking to Nicaraguan journalists.

It was more immediate and satisfying to find out what daily life in Nicaragua was like, how history has affected the present and how grass roots work and NGOs function.

April and I traveled through neighborhoods and communities, essentially meeting social

workers and asking them about their work. My project changed, went outward to looking at different forms of communication in different parts of society. It was enough of a learning process just to be someone trying to communicate with Nicaraguans I met.

But as I thought about the media as an actor in society, I realized that part of my interest hinged on my own conviction that a healthy civil society includes effective channels of communication within the country. How was information spread? How fast? What sources did people trust and why?

What I was daily learning was that communication is organic, it is word of mouth, and it springs from and helps build community. The community level of society is important because that is where the real development work through training and education is happening.

Can a unified community build identity?

I met Jaeda Harmon, FUNDECI coordinator, on our pilgrimage to Casa Ben Linder, a house dedicated in memory of an engineer from the United States who was the only U.S. citizen killed by Contra soldiers.

The house is covered in murals of images from his life. Ben Linder liked to dress up as a clown and ride his unicycle at Sandanista rallies or through the streets for the children where he worked. His death brought significant attention to the realities of United States involvement in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

FUNDECI, *Fundacion Nicaragüense pro Desarrollo Comunitario Integral* (Nicaraguan Foundation for Integrative Community Development) and several other organizations use the house as an office. FUNDECI used to work with several neighborhoods, but after a few years realized they had spread themselves too thin. Rather than trying to support 53 of Managua's poorest

barrios, they worked for a sustained presence in a few neighborhoods.

One of their projects is in Nueva Vida in Memorial Sandino, a relatively new sprawl of impoverished people not far outside of Managua. The area became a neighborhood after Hurricane Mitch displaced thousands of people in 1998 and the government set up temporary camps.

Except after the creation of this makeshift city people were left to fend for themselves. Phone lines, electricity, and decent roads still have not been run out to the neighborhood. If there are few jobs in central Managua, there are few to none in peripheral Memorial Sandino. The streets that lead out to Memorial Sandino are unsafe besides being unbearably dusty in the dry summer and muddy pits in the rainy season.

In her work as Memorial Sandino Project Coordinator, Harmon plans neighborhood events, supports a community preschool, and has founded a women's leadership group. Raising social consciousness is part of the women's leadership training.

Part of the objective of the group is to learn technical skills, so Harmon took a survey to find out what the women wanted to know how to do. Their answers were almost exclusively cooking, beauty school and sewing lessons, things that can be done in the home.

Harmon says for some of these women, half the accomplishment is getting permission to leave the house from their husbands. She tells me about asking the women if they would be interested in other kinds of job training, maybe something less domestic, but they were not interested.

For Nicaraguans the range of jobs is so limited that gaining employment and income is enough of a battle. Unemployment is officially 30 percent according to the World Bank, but several Nicaraguans I met said it was closer to 70 percent.

Harmon, from the U.S., is in her mid 20s. She has small features and wears dangly earrings. The longer she stays in Nicaragua, the more she learns how to narrow the focus of the community organization to strengthen the effects of its work.

She has been in Nicaragua two years and will soon go back to the United States.

Speaking of her development work with the neighborhood organization and the four other NGOs in the area Harmon says, "The idea is somehow to create ongoing coordination and have meetings to avoid duplicating efforts and avoiding the people of the community feeling divided loyalty. All the NGOs agree to [work to] strengthen



community, and to do that by standing behind the neighborhood organization."

The neighborhood organization has become a space all local groups can use. Communication between other organizations is mostly word of mouth, phone calls and meetings. Harmon says she used to do a lot of walking and talking, but with the growth of the neighborhood association she can now let its channels act as her publicity.

Because the Nicaraguan state government is unreliable, work at the grass roots level is invaluable. But NGOs must be careful because their work is seen as subversive by the government, and without government support they cannot do their projects.

"The problem is Nicaragua is so politicized," Harmon said, "we are trying to build a community vision as opposed to a political party

vision." There is a difference between room for political space for a diversity of groups and the forced politicization of all groups in the public sphere. Right now Nicaraguan society operates in between those two categories.

Harmon is working to involve the people in Memorial Sandino in improving their own lives, no party strings attached. FUNDECI is working to make a free non-political neighborhood space, but community work in Nicaragua is rooted in Sandanista tradition. Not enough time has passed for the government to ideologically separate social work and civic development from Sandanismo.

Harmon's subtler, overarching work, is to change an entrenched leadership style left over from intense political tradition.

She says, "Historically, leaders are political leaders, which make for an authoritarian model. The point is not just getting people to show up to meetings, but to take on responsibility. The struggle is for a collective leadership model."

Some of what she tells me is about her own leadership development, about working with others, delegating and cultural complications. Underneath her words I can tell she is thinking about how things will go after she has gone back to the U.S. Who will do the work and how? How does someone give so much of themselves and then just walk away? I guess she will just move on, keeping Nicaragua in the back of her memory.

From Harmon I got a sense of what the work of community organizing entails, as well as the importance of NGOs communicating so

they can work together and build upon each other's accomplishments.

Looking back, Harmon's work was really helping to build community and individual identity: she is empowering the women of her group with skills so they can make their own opportunities, but also so they can get to know themselves, which eventually helps to strengthen community identity.



Communicating social change

On the Nicaraguan April and I were lucky to meet, Horold Urbina Cruz, who goes by Shaggy, is an organizer for the *Movimiento Juvenil Para la Promocion y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*, the Youth Movement

for the Promotion of Human Rights.

His work, at its core, is also identity work: strengthening grass roots groups and teaching people their individual rights. He told us a slogan his organization uses, "A right not defended is a right that may as well be lost." He said most people attend school until about eighth grade, then people stop because it is no longer free so the general population is uneducated in what human rights actually are.

He said "If people have no chance to learn about human rights they have no chance to defend them. There is a problem with the national police, no one is watching to supervise what they do."

His organization holds workshops about twice a month. "Poor equals guilty and youth equals suspects. Even gangsters have the right to know their rights when it comes to the police. The main problem is unemployment, around 70 percent, and 40 percent [of the population] lives in extreme



poverty. People do not realize that they have a right to education and health.”

Shaggy also teaches English classes at the community center at night. We accompanied him to class to help students with pronunciation. We walked with him for what seemed like miles, through three different barrios finally to a room that faced the street next to a church. The room, lit up like a stage to the dark neighborhood, had bookshelves full of hundreds of cheap English romance novels.

About seven men came for the lesson, distracted or tired after the long day, their clothes still ironed and crisp after the day's heat. They had no pencils or paper until Shaggy passed them out. We spent an hour working on one exercise: a fifty-word conversation of a woman and her seat partner on a plane to Miami.

Afterwards, the room was used as a dance studio. Three girls followed the steps of one male instructor while the neighborhood watched. Shaggy offered us the chance to stay and dance and we quickly said no. Our different faces and clothes made us stand out anyways; we didn't need to dance poorly in the lit room for spectators.

Then we walked with him back through the streets to the hostel, over the broken sidewalks, through the traffic in air that was finally more or less cool. We walked back with all of the men from the class, and realized that they were all one group of friends. Before class

started, we had gone by each of their houses to pick them up individually until the whole class was walking together.

Shaggy considers his work a *movimiento communal*, a bigger community movement. “In every neighborhood we visit people in their own houses and invite them to come [to the party meeting, or English class]. It is the only way to get the message. Sometimes we use media or publicity, but it is not so easy to get to a TV channel and go on the air. There are a few radio stations [that] let us on the air.”

It is also hard for his organizations to get attention from the press because then the newspapers could lose government advertising. “Right now we are negotiating with a newspaper about an article about human rights violations, we are still waiting. There is a clear polarization among the population; the media is divided as well. *Nuevo Diario* is the only paper that supports the left wing movement; the rest of the newspapers would never publish an article against the government. *La Prensa* was used by the CIA in the '80s. In theory laws are fact, but in practice they are not happening. The main investor in publicity is the government. The majority of enterprises are linked to the government, so if a newspaper or the media writes against the government they lose support.”

From Shaggy we learned that communication mostly works at a micro level. “All organizations know each other, members are from communities, neighbors.” I told Shaggy that I



could romanticize the fact that so much information was spread word of mouth. He looked at me like he couldn't understand what I was talking about. I saw the closeness of organizations and citizens as an advantage. In the U.S. word of mouth is more limited, people stay in their houses, companies fax things back and forth.

"Communication [in Nicaragua] is something difficult," Shaggy said. "When I worked here [at an organization with a phone] it was easy to call a radio station and denounce something. Most people have no radio, no TV and are always depending on personal communication and always visiting the neighborhood," he said.

But by not being able to easily spread information and get attention, the Nicaraguan people and the government miss messages that are important for them to hear.

Shaggy said, "We could contact the deputies in parliament and make proposals using the FSLN as a mediator and arrange a meeting to propose what we want to do. In this so-called Western democracy we can talk to the government, visit the ministry of education or talk to the PLC, which in fact is very difficult to do. Unfortunately for the ordinary person the idea of democracy is to vote and after the election they do not pay attention."

Underdevelopment and cultural misunderstanding

While in Nicaragua, and more so after coming home, I've thought about why people choose to work for different causes. Why do people work with troubled teens as opposed to inside an air-conditioned bank? What exactly makes people dedicate themselves to something bigger, to communities or ideologies? Religion, the appeal

for something different, pleasure in sacrifice or hardship? Maybe people come when the problems are so big they can't be ignored anymore, or people come because something inside them makes them want to help other people. Some people stay. I especially thought about why people choose harsh conditions when I met North Americans living and working in Nicaragua.

April and I soon realized in our travels that all NGOs, especially ones with foreigners, knew each other. The longer we stayed in Managua, the smaller the city became. Through Harmon and Shaggy we heard of the Jubilee House, a commune of Americans working to help set up cooperatives and coordinate volunteers out near Ciudad Sandino.

The community was on property that was once owned by a relative of Somoza. There was a large sunken pool and several old, giant birdcages scattered around the property. The estate had definitely once been grand but now it was a work in progress, a bizarre time

capsule in the middle of nowhere. The town was half a mile away and dry empty fields surrounded the property.

About 50 yards to the west of the house was a cooperative, started by the community, making cement blocks. The blocks were for a building next to the house that was half built, soon to be a woodshop for a carpenter's cooperative. In another cooperative closer to the road, a dozen women worked in a simple building sewing ethically made organic t-shirts which the Jubilee House sold on the international market.

I talked to Sara Woodard, a Jubilee house community member, about the cooperatives and "communication." She was from the U.S., 40-





something, in shorts and covered in dust and cobwebs from wiring phone lines through the attic.

She said the Jubilee House had been there eight years without a phone line. After pestering the government repeatedly for months and months, on the day that we visited, they were finally wiring for the one slot they had just been allowed on the circuit.

Jubilee House had originally appealed for six phone lines, one for the house, the business, and a few for the other cooperatives and farmers in the area. After Woodard's persistence the phone company Enetel had somehow magically found room for them on the grid.

"To work here," said Woodard, "you must assume that nothing has really gone through. You get wrong numbers and your emails don't mail, but they don't bounce back. The dilemma is whether to call back and harass, or is their silence a way of saying no? It makes life complicated, just when you think you got a system that works some leg of the communication breaks down. To ask when will it be ready in the States means saying what [the people asking] want to hear. No one is lying [when they say no], it is incorrect to say lying, its rude for someone to say no, they're not able to do it. We are communicating with people with no phone, no mail. We want to tell them there is a buyer for their sesame, but they are two days out in the boonies. It is hard to adapt first world schedules to people who say we'll come in when the mud is not too deep and then two days later they go away."

Listening to her experience was partly listening to a U.S. citizen's work ethic confront another culture. But the work of the Jubilee House was giving Nicaraguans tools to support themselves. The cooperatives they support are by definition owned by the workers, a practice of the collective leadership model.

The Jubilee House also serves as a work camp for foreign volunteers who pay to stay in the bunkhouses and do construction on the property or in town. The Jubilee House functions collectively on a domestic level as well. The North American residents live communally, pool their income and help raise each other's children.

The witness as a political actor

The other organization from the U.S. I talked to, Witness for Peace, particularly interested me because I knew their mission was to be politically independent and to act as a "witness," as observers of the government. They especially monitor human rights violations, and then report what they find to their base in the United States.

WFP has an office in Managua as well as Cuba, Colombia and Mexico. Their work originally began in 1983 when they first started bringing people to Nicaragua to relate back to the U.S. an alternate vision of Reagan's campaign.

WFP used personal testimonies and photos of kids hurt by land mines to show the U.S. what their tax dollars for "freedom fighters" were really doing. WFP's principle goal during the war was to be a physical presence in the communities. Just by being visible in the neighborhoods U.S. citizens protected Nicaraguans because it was not in the Contra's best interest to kill the North Americans. At one point there were 40 North Americans with WFP in Nicaragua.

North Americans were relatively safe during the civil war. There was one incident where the Contras kidnapped a WFP worker for 24 hours. The Contras killed only one U.S. citizen, Ben Linder, though they killed over 30 international workers after the start of the civil war.

In the current political climate WFP has a relatively low profile. "We consider ourselves support for Nicaragua, to focus on corruption and the U.S. government, to bring truth to the U.S. where the power is," said Melinda St. Louis, International WFP team member and labor liaison. "We put the human face on policy, on economics, debt and war. We go to the campo and visit the peasant farmer."

WFP's work as an independent reporter or watchdog means it looks to many sources to find the full picture.

St. Louis told me about WFP'S work contacting unions, the ministry of labor, human rights organizations, lawyers and the U.S. Embassy to see the different sides of the issues and find a middle ground. "We get two newspapers, *Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa*. We read the same story in both of them and the truth is somewhere in the middle."

Part of the Witness for Peace mission is to bring information back to the United States. They publish a newsletter, work on larger documents and make presentations. Most recently they were trying to bring attention to U.S. involvement in the Nicaraguan presidential elections.

"As an activist the focus is on the press in the United States," said St. Louis. "The [U.S.] media plays a strong role in [U.S.] attitudes, and through our work we hope to bring the wisdom of the people here [in Nicaragua] to the people in the U.S. Change in U.S. policy would help Nicaragua. Even if the Nicaraguan government wanted to help the people, they have little space to move. The U.S. economic model says export, not educate. I believe in the good in the people of the U.S., but they are ignorant and there is a concentrated effort to keep them that way."



Currently, WFP's first priority is to lead and facilitate delegations, groups of about 15, usually from the U.S., that visit for a political and cultural education. The groups hear Nicaraguans speak, visit different representative neighborhoods and then analyze and reflect as a group.

WFP's work seems to bridge two communication models: media presentation of information and community networking within the United States by word of mouth taken back by the delegations.

As a student I identified with WFP because I was conducting my own investigation. It was important for me to understand different versions of Nicaragua so I could take different sides of the story with me back to the U.S.

Young people and the legacy of the draft

April and I were always meeting Nicaraguans, but the best contacts came from English speaking ex-patriots who helped us set up interviews. We interviewed two teenage boys, Felipe Antonio Mantaluan Duffis, 19, and Jorge Alberto Obando Rocha, 17. We had met Felipe's father at a reggae concert (he was the lead singer) through Lillian Hall, the coordinator of ProNica, and he had graciously volunteered his son and his son's friend.

The two boys rode up to our hostel on little bikes on their way to a party dressed like they were in Los Angeles; Nike and Fila head to toe. We were dressed in tank tops and sarongs, sweating and socially inappropriate in the heat.

They were a bit surprised to be asked about their political beliefs, but we asked them about their families, schools, and what music they liked. They

considered themselves middle or upper middle class.

They said they heard about news and current events from their family, friends, newspapers and school. They said they thought their school history books gave a fair portrayal of the truth.

"The books are written from those who lived through the time," said Duffis. "Big [Sandanista] trucks came to my house and took away my uncle and cousin, they took away all the youth and it was not voluntary, that is why people left Nicaragua." Nevertheless Duffis's family is still Sandanista.

Rocha is for the PLC, or Liberales. Their party lines came out immediately. Rocha's family story is similar to Duffis, everyone in Nicaragua can tell a story about their family members being drafted for the war.

"It was just people following something they did not know, [the Sandanistas] would do some traps, say there was going to be a party and then carry people off to be soldiers and not tell their families," said Rocha. "I am for the PLC, the Sandanistas were the worst of Nicaragua, they corrupted the country."

At the height of the civil war, the combined size of both the Contras and the Sandanistas was 300,000, over 10 percent of the country's population. There are a lot of bureaucratic reasons why the Sandanistas were not re-elected in the pivotal election of 1990. The tiered socialist system of the party had lost touch with the general population, and therefore the Sandanistas were overconfident in regards to Ortega's voter support. This lost Ortega the election because the he did

not feel the need to repeal the draft. Thousands of teenage voters were waiting to hear otherwise.

The voting age in Nicaragua is 16. "It is very important young people pay attention. I hope to be a professional and know what was happening in my country," said Duffis.



Sandanista loyalty and the hearts of Nicaraguans

The draft will take a few generations to leave collective memory. It always came up when I talked with Nicaraguans about the war.

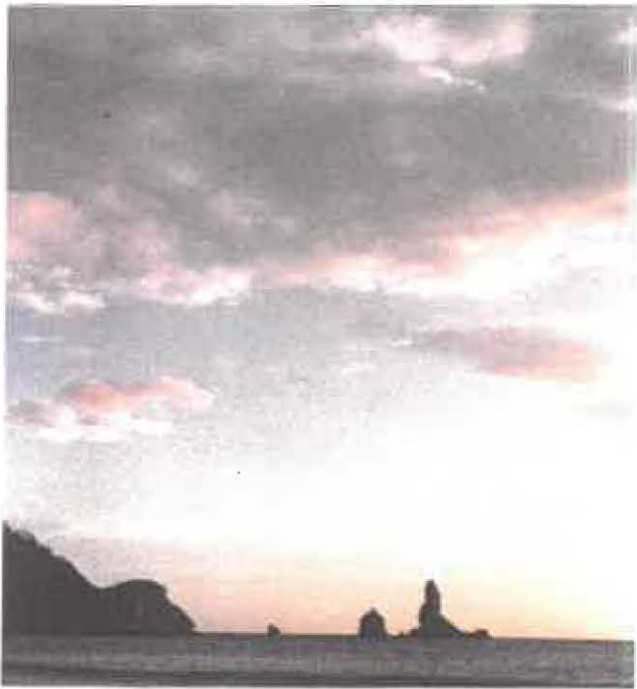
April and I spoke with Manuel Aburto, a Sandanista, on the southwestern coast of Nicaragua at one of the most idyllic beaches I've ever seen. Aburto told us that getting a visa to the United States was impossible for him because he is an independent truck driver and has no proof that he has a business, a visa requirement.

Though Aburto is Sandanista, he thinks President Bolanos will be OK because he will work to increase the workforce. Aburto told us he was Sandanista because he was Sandanista when he was young. During the war he was in the reserves because he was older than the draft age.

Aburto said he is still Sandanista because he saw the party lift up the country, so 15 years later he is still with them. This reasoning made sense to us, loyalty does not change overnight, and loyalty does not mean complete agreement.

His political concerns were also practical: the external debt and market credibility. He thought that better relations with the U.S. would bring more market confidence.

Aburto's mind was sharp, his clothes well ironed, and he was patient with the language barrier. He didn't seem to mind us asking



questions about his personal history. His son sat next to him, his back to the beach. He looked about 20, and was not interested in us or our questions at all.

It was ironic that asking personal and controversial questions in another language was easier than speaking with someone in English. That ease was because I had no hope of implying the right nuance of political correctness or politeness. Aburto told April and we were as tourists, *turistas*, hope for the country because we would bring the heart of the Nicaraguans back with us to the United States, and then more tourists would come to Nicaragua.

April and I were staying at an "eco-lodge" in San Juan del Sur. It was set between two coves and a rock cliff that jutted into the ocean and curved out like a question mark. The white sand turned to rolling brown jungle. A family of 12 howler monkeys lived on the property. They kept us up at night, at one point it seemed like they were on the roof of our tent.

The owner of the lodge, a quick-witted Australian ex-patriot named Paul, helped us set up the interview with Aburto. Paul had laughed at us when we told him we had to leave his paradise to

study, and then he told us the history of the site. Before his ownership the property had been developed as a place to train Sandanista guerillas.

Paul said the lodge was one of Daniel Ortega's favorite vacation spots. Ortega had booked it for the week after the election, but didn't end up vacationing because he lost. Paul said he knew Ortega and his family fairly well. Our mouths dropped open and he laughed at us again. He said Ortega, who has run for office four times with the ardent belief that the presidency of Nicaragua is his destiny, is just a normal guy.

There were people from all over the world staying at the lodge. We talked with other students from the U.S., Dutch women just out of school, and an Italian man. Everyone would come sit on the sand to watch the sunset and then stay up half the night talking about where to go, what to see, and what to read. The best travel spots were found out by word of mouth. Everyone was hungry to know the that lay off the beaten track.

Women, men and schools

Most of the Nicaraguans we talked with were men. April and I were constantly meeting men and boys in the streets wherever we went.



The story of women in Nicaragua is hard for me to think about. As a single, young woman from the U.S. walking around asking everyone questions, I had a very different world role than the local women.

The country, as I've said, is void of employment and full of men without purpose. The women have fewer options, mostly housecleaning and making food to sell on the street. The rate of childbirth is nearly four live births per woman, and for every man who comes home at night and provides for his family, there are five who don't.

The Sandanista promised increased opportunities for women after the revolution, but the resources of the country were drained by the Contra campaign. Women were guerrillas and had high positions in the revolutionary government, but there were no real changes in authoritarian machista ideas about women. Now, since times are less tumultuous, and jobs are hard to find, women have fallen back into traditional roles.

I was lucky to get to know Panchita Fletes, the housekeeper of the hostel in Managua we stayed in for two weeks. She had been working at the Quaker House for eight years. She was friendly, patient, and used a hose to clean the tile floor inside the house because the water evaporates so fast.

I talked to Panchita about men, tabloids, and the past and future of Nicaragua. She is a single mother with two children. Her husband left her two years ago. She says she is lucky she only has two children because she can just afford to pay 75 *cordobas* (about \$5) a month for them to go to school. If she had five children it would be impossible. Both of her boys are teenagers. She said they are still going to school because there is no work. Panchita said the men of this country take no responsibility for their kids and there is no other help for women.

Of Nicaragua she said, "*estamos mal*," we are bad. It was such a simple phrase said immediately and bluntly, to hear it hurt the way it hurts when a friend is admitting to you that she believes herself a failure, except this was collective failure.

She said, "*Esta paiz nunca va adelante porque corrupcion, es triste*," this country is never going to go forward because of corruption, it is sad. Panchita used the example from Hurricane Mitch when millions of dollars in international aid was given to Nicaragua, but never reached the people for which it was intended.

Panchita believes Daniel Ortega lost the election because of his affair with his stepdaughter, and because U.S. terrorism made people afraid to vote for him. She said during the time the Sandanistas were in power, in the war, people had to have food ration cards. People were afraid because there was no work, they were hungry, and there was nothing to buy.

When Somoza was overthrown, she said, everyone was happy and the country was at peace. She didn't think the bad times were the Sandanistas' fault, but because no support came from other countries. She said Nicaragua would never advance without help from other countries.

Panchita thinks people are confused about the political difference between left and right





because they can still remember how it felt to live under the threat of the draft.

I talked to Panchita in the hostel living room in whicker chairs while she was eating lunch. She was happy to be asked what she knew, to be listened to. I was more comfortable with her than I had been in my other interviews. I had been staying at the hostel for a few weeks and we had become friends. She could talk to me about Nicaragua and I could ask her questions because we were both interested in one another.

The places we didn't go

After April and I were back in the United States three weeks, we heard via email that the hostel had been robbed while Panchita was working. She had run out into the street and the robbers had beaten her with a shovel so she was taking a few weeks off to recover. I hoped she was not too hurt to keep working so her boys can stay in school.

Throughout our three weeks in Nicaragua we almost always felt safe. But there are many places we did not go, markets or neighborhoods far past where the dirt roads ended. We traveled with men a lot, did not go out much at night. In the evenings, we

were overwhelmed and exhausted.

We cooked eggs and potatoes or went out for beans and rice, then read books about the history of the war until we fell asleep. Most nights stayed hot. We took cold showers and did not complain because afterwards we were immediately hot again. It was January, we couldn't imagine how people could be in the city for the dry season in May.

No matter where we were in the country, we were kept up all night by dogs barking, people fighting, roosters, sometimes the wind. The nights were full of murky dreams, bug bites and sweat. When I woke up in the morning, I usually felt like I had lived another life while I slept.

While we were in Nicaragua, April and I caught a lot of buses, taxis, a ferry, speedboats, several canoes, one horse cart, and sometimes even hitchhiked. Then we got on a plane, flew over Cuba and the long fingers of swampland off Florida and landed in Miami where the sun was setting far sooner than my body anticipated. Much of the airport staff spoke only Spanish and people wore fashions I had never seen in L.A.

Now that I have a chance to look back, I think about the position I put myself in as a traveler, but also as a student. Inside of me is this will to do the best project, to find out all the information, to *take* knowledge. I think about all the conversations and interviews I had while I was there. Was I taking





from Nicaragua? To interview is to take people's time, then to take their ideas back home. But by the nature of conversation, I was giving simply by participating. Even if I did not say much, my body language, my attentiveness, left an impression. The people I talked to did it out of human will to communicate, maybe with a sense of an international dialog between the U.S. and Nicaragua.

I started this project wanting to know how important newspapers were to the formation of culture and the spread of information. Instead I found a whole world of interactions. Culture is formed by what is exchanged: news, events, ideas, books, and people are always birthing themselves and new identities are always emerging.

Whether I was hanging out in the street with the neighborhood kids, or talking to other international travelers, I learned more about Nicaragua and human nature than I could have read in a document. Now, writing this, I am responding to what I have learned. I have the responsibility to put it out into the world, to continue the dialog.

People communicate and share all over the world, and their culture and access to resources affects that exchange. In Nicaragua news is spread by word of mouth, especially within neighborhoods. In the U.S. people aren't as close

to each other, but there is a developed infrastructure with more civic spaces for dialog. It is not a matter of better or worse systems, it is just how it is.

Right now times are hard in Nicaragua. Hope was something that existed when there was a revolution, after there were peace talks. Now people are tired of hoping. There is so much work to be done to make the infrastructure and the government more effective. The harsh economic conditions have created a space for the world market, the

media and the U.S. to enter and do business, essentially exploiting Nicaragua. Concerning the increasing exposure to world media I am less worried. Nicaraguans have a rich culture and history which alters international influences to make them a part of Nicaragua's own complex identity.

My exchange with Nicaragua is the positive side of a globalization. My trip allowed me to see myself in a global context, not just as a privileged person, but simply as a person who is part of the world. This is the beginning of a longer study of communication and exchange. Because I was able to recognize the many ways information is communicated in Nicaragua, I have a fresh perspective on the vehicles and spaces for communication in my own community and country.

