

A year after Nicaragua's coup, the media's regime-change deceptions are still unraveling

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The Gray Zone, July 15, 2019



Corporate media outlets blamed Nicaragua's government for a deadly arson attack during the 2018 coup attempt, but new information raises serious doubts about the official story, highlighting the campaign of regime-change misinformation.

By John Perry

Last year's [failed coup in Nicaragua](#) erupted when student protests against social security reforms quickly turned into an armed attempt to bring down the government of Daniel Ortega. The regime-change attempt was a battle for people's minds as well as for control of the streets.

Violence was used to terrorize government supporters, but it was even more important as a propaganda vehicle.

A journalist shot while on camera, demonstrators hit by sniper fire, or an arson attack on a family home were all high-profile crimes that were immediately blamed on the government. Key to the anti-Sandinista public relations blitz was an organized barrage of social media postings, indignant statements by local "human rights" bodies condemning the government, right-wing media reaching the same judgment, and local people intimidated into "confirming" the story.

At the Global Conference for the Freedom of the Press in London, on July 11, Nicaragua's Minister for National Policy Paul Oquist launched a [blistering attack](#) on the almost uniformly pro-opposition coverage of his country's political crisis by mainstream US and British outlets.

“Facts and truth don’t matter to the aggressors in the Post-Truth era, only placing their interests first, above all else. This is a new level of perverse freedom; freedom from all ethics and all morality,” Oquist thundered. “Fake news in the post-truth era supports coordinated destabilization campaigns, illegal sanctions and the criminalization of those who defy them, threats of aggression and armed aggression.”

During their push for Ortega’s ouster in mid-2018, opposition groups acted on the largely correct assumption that if they were quick to portray any violence as being the government’s fault, a compliant international press would repeat it. Major international human rights NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch could be relied on to take the judgments of their local counterparts at face value.

Once a consensus about how to portray the violence had been reached internationally, it would be repeated by regional and global bodies such as the [Organization of American States \(OAS\)](#) and the UN, and inevitably by the US State Department.

After a series of such violent incidents, the reputation of the Ortega government internationally was sealed.

Dubious reports on arson attack

The worst of these attacks occurred on June 16 last year. At 6 in the morning, in the Managua barrio known as Carlos Marx, masked youths threw Molotov cocktails into an occupied three-story house.

Fire spread quickly from the ground floor, used for a family business of making mattresses, to the living rooms upstairs where the family was beginning its day. Neighbors rushed to help, but six people were burnt alive, including a baby and a 2-year-old girl.



This could easily have been a self-inflicted blow to the “peaceful” image the protesters had created. But instead it became emblematic of the government’s supposed violent response to the protests. How was this achieved?

Among those quickly on the scene was Gonzalo Carrion, a representative of local “human rights” body called CENIDH. Student eyewitnesses reported that Carrion had been present when opposition militants took over the campus of the UNAN university earlier in the attempted coup, and had even been a bystander to their violence.

Without any obvious prior investigation, Carrion recorded an interview blaming the fire on government supporters, calling it the act of a “terrorist state.” This was, of course, consistent with [a pattern of misreporting by CENIDH](#) throughout the coup.

Also quick to arrive were reporters from *Canal 10*, the opposition-supporting TV channel. They interviewed one of the survivors, pressuring him to blame the police for the arson attack.

Much later the man would explain how his vulnerability was abused, in the midst of attempts to find his family, while he was surrounded by opposition supporters.

Nicaragua's main daily right-wing newspaper, *La Prensa*, also had no doubt who the culprits were: "Ortega mobs burn and kill a Managua family" ran its [headline](#) the following day.

At that stage, the reality was that no outsiders knew who the masked youths were who had started the fire, nor did the journalists who arrived make much attempt to find out. Hundreds of thousands of social media messages began to appear, blaming the government.

Unsubstantiated claims spread by international corporate media

The international press, as on so many occasions, took its lead from the local media. [Reuters](#), an agency which has consistently taken an [anti-Ortega line](#), gave prominence to the government's accusers and quoted the secretary of the Organization of American States describing it as "a crime against humanity."

A [BBC report](#) was more balanced, but still emphasized the accusations against the government. *The New York Times* put the house fire together with other incidents to describe what it called [a campaign of terror](#) by forces backing Ortega.

The US State Department quickly [concurred](#), saying the attack was "government sponsored." Within a week, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [repeated the accusation](#), based on "public statements" that it didn't identify.

When the fire occurred, I was preparing an article about the coup for *The Nation*. Not surprisingly, they asked me to extend the article to include it. Writing only 48 hours afterwards, and influenced by the initial reports, my assessment ([published on June 22](#)) was inevitably tentative:

"The government was quickly blamed, because allegedly the fire was in reprisal for the owner's refusal to allow snipers to operate from his roof. Government denials seemed plausible, as the barrio concerned has numerous barricades controlled by the opposition. On the other hand, a surviving family member backs up the opposition version. The truth is difficult to ascertain, and if proof emerges, it is unlikely to dispel the media verdicts about who the real culprits were."

Mountains of countervailing evidence

As I live in Masaya, a city which at the time was cut off from the rest of Nicaragua by opposition roadblocks, I could not personally visit Managua. Had I done so, I would have quickly seen that the consensus view of who caused the fire was unlikely to be correct, because for weeks the Carlos Marx barrio had been sealed off by roadblocks manned by armed protesters.

A [video](#) posted on Facebook, allegedly showing police trucks in the barrio, was later shown to have been made almost two months earlier.

There were other obvious questions about the incident. For example, how was it that the CENIDH representatives (well known to be anti-government) were on the scene so quickly? Why would police or government supporters suddenly start setting houses on fire, when it was the opposition that had recently burned down a local government office in the same barrio?

Why did no one investigate explicit social media threats which had been made against the family by protesters – including one made only [38 hours before the fire was started](#)?

Or the fact that four members of the M-19 (an armed opposition group) were on the scene later the same day, to record a [video](#) (now erased) where they accuse the government of “state terrorism” and admit they controlled the roadblocks in the area? Their message said: “We are not going to remove the roadblocks, they are in our hands and those of the people, and we will not take them off. I want you to know: if the people do not unite, it will end up in new massacres like this one.”

Flawed coverage in *The Guardian*

My assertion, that any doubts about who caused the fire would be unlikely to dispel the media verdicts, was proved correct. The simple reason was that neither local nor international media were interested in addressing these questions, as was soon demonstrated by coverage in the UK by *The Guardian*.

The newspaper had already published 13 news stories about the violence in Nicaragua by early July. Its Latin American correspondent had visited the country in June and I had told him about the opposition’s arson attacks. By the time *The Guardian*’s freelance reporters [Carl David Goette-Luciak](#) and [Caroline Houck](#) covered the story on July 5, some of the facts about the fire had begun to emerge. Even so, rather than questioning the consensus narrative, they reinforced it.

Their article highlighted the [tiny coffins](#) photographed during the burial of the youngest victims and portrayed them as symbolic of the Ortega government’s indiscriminate violence. In their analysis, “a pro-Daniel Ortega militia” had “allegedly” committed the crime.

The report consisted largely of allegations that it was vengeance by police or government agents because of the family’s refusal to allow the house to be used as “a sniper’s nest.” As a result, “... about 50 masked men – some wearing black, others police uniforms covered by bulletproof vests – descended on Managua’s Carlos Marx neighborhood ... in a convoy of pickup trucks” before attacking the house. One short paragraph in the middle of the story was given to the government’s version of events, ascribing the crime to violent protesters.

By the time *The Guardian* story appeared, police had succeeded in reaching the crime scene. But it was not until December 19 that the police were able to arrest two

suspects and identify four others (local media quickly labelled those arrested as “political prisoners”).

Obstacles from opposition groups

Why did it take so long to identify the arsonists? Apart from the difficulty the police had in entering the barrio, there were other obstacles. The roadblocks made it very easy for the masked attackers to slip away undetected, and local people were frightened to denounce them even if they knew who they were.

Soon after escaping the fire, the surviving family members were surrounded by protesters and opposition journalists demanding that they denounce the police, which some of them did. These family members were then quickly taken into hiding by CENIDH, the “human rights” group, in a way which one of the family later described as being kidnapped. They were prevented from making phone calls “for their own safety,” and of course were unavailable for police interviews.

In January, independent journalists Dick and Miriam Emanuelsson started to ask the questions that the international media had ignored. They found that, six months after the fire, local people in the Carlos Marx barrio were more willing to talk. They also interviewed a police official responsible for the investigation.

Their [report](#) casts further light on events. First, it is now clear that there were around 30 roadblocks preventing movement into or around the barrio. Second, local people confirmed that the armed groups controlling the roadblocks determined who could pass through.

Third, in lengthy interviews, the surviving family members (one a 14 year-old girl with horrendous burns) described how they were threatened by the protesters, before and after the fire. The survivors said that they were scared by the opposition into denouncing the police and were whisked away while injured and in severe shock, then later offered visas by CENIDH to leave the country.

Fourth, the police explain the evidence they were able to assemble and how they did it, including testimony from protesters who knew who had carried out the attack. Some of the evidence and interviews are now available in English, one year after the fire, in [a short documentary](#) that is part of a series produced by local film producers *Juventud Presidente*.

A pattern of misleading reporting

If the treatment by the international media of the Carlos Marx house fire were exceptional, it might not be so important that they overlooked basic facts in this case. But sadly this pattern was repeated in coverage of most of the worst incidents in last year’s violence in Nicaragua, including the murder of the journalist Ángel Gahona while he was broadcasting live in Bluefields (also [covered by Goette-Luciak](#) for *The*

Guardian), and the murder of four police officers and a teacher in an armed attack in the small town of Morrito.

Hardly an incident occurred in which the main international media, including outlets like *The Guardian* who take pride in their independent journalism, based their reports on opposition accusations that crimes were committed by government supporters, when in fact the culprits were armed protesters.

Not only that, but *The Guardian*, in particular, has failed to address criticisms of its reporting, for example when it refused to publish a letter about its Nicaraguan coverage that had been [signed by some 30 international commentators](#).

The same freelance reporters, Goette-Luciak and Houck, had earlier [reported from Masaya](#) for the *Washington Post*, where they also minimized opposition violence. They went on to produce a similarly unbalanced story for *The Guardian* on [September 7](#), about an opposition-led strike. It was [strongly criticized](#) for its bias by former Amnesty International-recognized prisoner of conscience Camilo Mejia.

Later, in a surprising twist, Goette-Luciak was exposed by journalist and The Grayzone editor [Max Blumenthal](#) as being far from politically neutral: He was actively working with anti-Ortega opposition groups. Blumenthal was in turn [denounced](#) by *The Guardian*, but they then failed to respond to [a complaint sent to the newspaper](#) by a friend of Goette-Luciak who had been directly involved in his anti-government activities, and who was able to substantiate Blumenthal's arguments.

Media attacks on Nicaraguans as a whole

The terrible incident in the Carlos Marx barrio is one example of Nicaragua's treatment by the international media since the protests took place last year. Instead of asking what is really happening in the country, *The Guardian* and the rest of the international press have eagerly promoted Washington's preferred narrative about Nicaragua.

As the writer Nick Davies put it in his book [Flat Earth News](#), it's not journalism's job to report that people say it's raining; it's journalism's job to look out of the window.

In a country like Nicaragua, if the international media send reporters who simply repeat what they're told by one side, then they're serving that side's interests.

When their reports bolster the arguments of a Trump administration looking to impose its neoliberal model on the whole of Latin America, they become far more than an attack on Daniel Ortega's government: They are an attack on the majority of Nicaraguans who now want a return to peace and economic stability.

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