Cafecito with Luz Mely Reyes (2025)

Place: University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus

Moderator: Israel Rodríguez Sánchez, PhD

Translation: Israel Rodríguez Sánchez, PhD

Introduction

RAMARIS:

I am Dr. Ramaris Albert Trinidad, and this morning I will be briefly presenting this event, which we are able to host thanks to the support of the Mellon Foundation for High Impact Scholars, Artists and Journalists at the University of Texas at Austin. These Cafecitos, or "coffee breaks" —this is the second edition that we celebrate, and this is the second event of this second edition—seek to bring to Puerto Rico outstanding artists, researchers, and professionals in their area, and who, for reasons of security, crime, violence, have not necessarily been able to complete or continue their work in their home countries. In this way, the grant allows them to have a one-year residency at the University of Texas at Austin to develop their creative, professional, and research works. We have the opportunity to collaborate with this project so that these professionals come to Puerto Rico and disseminate these projects with the student community. Today, we will hold this discussion that will be moderated by Dr. Israel Rodríguez Sánchez. You know him from the Information and Journalism major; he is our coordinator as well. After a chat with journalist Luz Mely Reyes, Venezuelan journalist and founder of the digital medium *Efecto Cocuyo*, we will open questions to the public so that you, students, can exchange impressions, questions, or comments about this exhibition. Before moving on to that presentation, I would like to briefly introduce you to today's moderator, who, as I told you, is Dr. Israel Rodríguez Sánchez, and he is a journalist with 26 years of experience, specializing in political journalism, he obtained a doctorate in journalism from Universidad Complutense of Madrid and a master's degree in public communication from the University of Puerto Rico. He is an assistant professor and coordinator of the Information and Journalism Program at the College of Communication and Information. For more than two decades, he was a journalist and editor at the newspaper *El Nuevo Día*. In addition, he is the author of the book [in Spanish] *Political Scandal and Journalism in Puerto Rico*, published by Ediciones Huracán. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Puerto Rico Journalists Association and of the National Association of

Hispanic Journalists, Professional Chapter of Puerto Rico, as well as the Advisory Council of the LGBTQ+ Federation of Puerto Rico. Welcome, Israel.

ISRAEL:

Thank you very much, Ramaris. Welcome to this conversation with journalist Luz Mely Reyes, one of the most important voices in independent journalism in Venezuela and co-founder of the *Efecto Cocuyo* project. Before we hand things over to Luz Mely, I am going to read a brief profile of our guest. Luz Mely Reyes is a Venezuelan journalist, media entrepreneur, and editor, specializing in migration, and political and investigative journalism. Her current lines of research focus on Venezuelan journalists in exile in the United States, coverage of the 2024 electoral process, the situation of digital media in Venezuela, and Venezuelan migration. She completed a bachelor's degree in journalism from the Universidad Central of Venezuela and a master's degree in social communication from the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello in Caracas. Reyes' entrepreneurship and leadership led her to be co-founder and CEO of *Efecto Cocuyo,* a renowned digital, native media that promotes critical growth and advocates for social justice, particularly for the Venezuelan community. In addition, she co-founded *Venezuela Migrante*, a media project that emerged from *Efecto Cocuyo*. Reyes is an opinion columnist for Spanish edition of *The Washington Post* and for *El País*. In her career as a journalist, she served as the first woman editor-in-chief of the Venezuelan medium *Diario 2001*. Beyond journalism, Reyes has served as the author of books including *Futuro imperfecto: hacia dónde va el periodismo* [Imperfect future: where is journalism headed], published in 2020. In her distinguished career, she has received more than a dozen awards, including the Gabriel García Márquez Foundation award in 2018, the German and French Human Rights Award in 2019, and the LASA International Media Award in 2021. Reyes' achievements allowed her, in 2024, to receive the Knight Fellow scholarship from the International Center for Journalists. Currently, she is a scholar of the Mellon Scholarship for High Impact Academics, Artists and Journalists, a project that makes this initiative of the Cafecitos possible. Luz Mely, welcome to the University of Puerto Rico. It is a pleasure and an honor to have you as a guest.

LUZ MELY:

Thank you so much. Thank you, how nice. Look, there is one thing missing from that bio.
¿Oh, and what was missing? That I like to dance salsa.

ISRAEL:

That's huge.

LUZ MELY:
So, that was missing. I am a *salsera*, not a salsa lover, but a salsa dancer. I'm happy to be here, and so, now I'm in this initiative of the Mellon Foundation, but I'm very happy to be here in Puerto Rico. Because they had already prepared me psychologically, telling me that it was going to remind me a lot of Venezuela, but they hadn't prepared me for something I saw, right here, which were some macaws. I don't know if in Puerto Rico they call them "macaws," but we Caracas residents believed that macaws were just a species that we... Someone who clearly trafficked birds took them to Caracas because those are Amazonian birds. But well, they grow up and fly over there, all over Caracas, and they give us those moments of tranquility, of joy, because, well, they are very beautiful. So, I saw them here too, and then I said, "Well, no one prepared me, no one told me that there were macaws here too." So we have beaches, we have good weather, we have very nice people, we have salsa... I'm only going to bring arepas and tequeños at some point.

I prepared a presentation, after the introduction that Israel did, Professor Israel, because I want you... I want to tell you a story. I'm going to try to be as brief as possible, but hey, you know that older people like me already talk a lot. So, I'm going to begin.

There are three things I would like to tell you about myself, which you may not know, but which determine why I do what I do. Let's begin. Ok, this is me. I am now a 2024 Knight Fellow and a Mellon Fellow. Everything I do now is in English or Spanglish. Let's start with where I come from.

Growing Up in Petare

LUZ MELY:
I was born and raised in an area like this in Caracas. It's called Petare, where I grew up. It was a low-class quarter where there was no running water, where electricity was stolen from the poles and where, of course, there was no good public transportation, either. Growing up in that area, I had some possibilities for the future. I am going to show you the first possibility of a future that, according to scholars, those of us who grew up in that ward had. To be a crime boss. Since I'm a person who likes to be an entrepreneur, people believed that those of us who

were in the barrio could only be criminals, right? Next slide. The other option was to get pregnant at 12 years old. The issue of early motherhood in Venezuela—I don't know if it happens here—is a major problem. In poor neighborhoods, many young women see that their life project is to get pregnant. Young men also feel that this can be a life project, and we are practically predestined to that. Next slide. The other option, which is very common in Venezuela–I don't know if you know that Venezuela is well known for oil, now for politics, but also at the time for beauty queens. So, it was a beauty contest. But well, I was aware that my beauty was not a hegemonic beauty. Therefore, I was never going to pass a Miss Venezuela audition, so I discarded that path, and finally, I listened to my mom a lot.

My mother was a woman who did not know how to write, who read and told me: "Mija, educate yourself. You study so you can get out of poverty, so that you do not depend on anyone, so that you are financially independent and, if you find a husband who is going to beat you, you send him packing." She didn't use those exact words, but we're on a college campus. So, I listened to my mother, but not so much, because I studied journalism. But hey, this is the love of my life, so I don't know how many people feel identified with that.

Take More Photos

LUZ MELY:

Moving on. There is a singer, or someone like that, who talks about whether we should take more photos. I took a lot of photos, and I wanted to share these photographs with you. This is me when I was a little girl. Look at that good girl's face, coming out of high school, sixth grade, with my mommy. My mom passed away two years ago, and I try to honor her at all the events where I am, because she was a woman who, although she had not studied and knew nothing about feminism, was a feminist and taught me to defend our rights. And well, when I showed her that I was among the guardians of *Time* magazine, my mom told me: "What is that? What is *Time* magazine?" She was neither interested nor knew about it, but hey. And this is me in the barrio, in one of the wards where I grew up, where I studied. If I have learned anything in this life, it is that—in my case, I learned it, by the way, in Brazil—you can't forget where you come from, and I think that has marked my journalistic career. Next slide.

Trajectory of Reinventions

LUZ MELY:

Well, I also have to tell you that I have reinvented myself more than Madonna, although I don't know if you know her. So, I'm going to start in 1998, to make things short. I was in the print media, I didn't miss a single coup d'état in Venezuela, that is, since I started my career. Later, *Efecto Cocuyo* was born in 2015. That's what I'm going to talk to you about, because, right now in this stage I'm in, I'm going to talk to you about it later, which is content creation and exile. Now, I'm going to share a video with you.

"Efecto Cocuyo"

VIDEO COCUYO EFFECT:

In recent years, Venezuelans have experienced coups, economic crisis, and a severe increase in physical and political insecurity. The media do not escape this reality. Today, Venezuelan journalists face censorship, lack of transparency, and the difficulty of accessing information. In addition, the purchase of mass media by capital ventures related to the government has further reduced the space for the exercise of free journalism. The few independent media that survive are left alone and isolated, weakened to the point of their disappearance. It is becoming increasingly difficult for dissenting voices to be heard. This weakens the exercise of citizens' rights. We have experienced offenses, aggressions, and threats by senior officials. Common sense tells us: "Keep quiet. You look prettier when you're quiet." We are journalists by pedigree, we are street journalists, and this is our unwavering vocation. We present to you *Efecto Cocuyo*: a medium of journalists, made by journalists. An information channel that digs deep and investigates. Which, moreover, does not depend on any power factor constraining its editorial line. We offer content with a comprehensive approach that helps you know where we stand. Through information, we contribute to achieving a more democratic society. With your support, we are going to delve into topics that few can talk about. We want to do journalism that illuminates. We want to be the medium that stands up for your right to be well informed. This is a life project. When some wants us to give up, we decide to face the issue. Dare to take a step forward. Independent journalism needs your help. Every contribution counts. From now on, we thank you. *Efecto Cocuyo*.

LUZ MELY:

That was 10 years ago, and we are still facing the issue. We still consider it a life project. Although, during this time I have had to learn a lot about all things finance and fundraising. And so, just as I told you that I've reinvented myself more than Madonna, our business model

has changed more than... Well, I don't know, maybe Shakira, right? I guess. I wanted to show you this quickly, because some may ask: "Well, why are some journalists in Venezuela going to launch an independent media?" Well, for this, among other things. Because a system of censorship, suppression, guarantees of rights to freedom of expression, of persecution was installed, which was not done overnight. It was little by little. I mean, it was like crossing a line, a line, a line, a line, until there came a moment when there was such a great suffocation that several journalists said: "Well, if we stay in the traditional media, we will not be able to do the journalism we believe in."

Digital Media Spring

And that led to what we call "the digital-media spring" in Venezuela in 2015-2016. Not only was *Efecto Cocuyo* born, but a media outlet called *Armando.info* was born, which is very important in all investigative journalism. Just as it is a political newspaper, it is reinvented itself to be a digital newspaper, a digital medium. Other initiatives began to emerge from journalists who organized themselves to have media. And this introduced a fundamental change, which was that the line of work was to do journalism. A journalism people believed in. There was a medium called *Prodavinci*, which was a magazine of great quality, of great depth. There were other media that were more popular: *Crónica uno*, *El pitazo.* In other words, a very small digital-media ecosystem began to take shape, because the big newsrooms... We always say that we were part of those big newsrooms. We live as if fragmentation grenades were thrown at us, and those large newsrooms no longer exist. That is to say, when I started in journalism—like you, perhaps—I went to a newsroom. I started when journalists were writing on typewriters—forgive me for not being so "millennial"—and ended up here until now. But those large newsrooms no longer exist. And so, that makes it difficult, sometimes, for us to work, people who have been in this for a long time, with people who are beginning, which was the way in which journalism was learned. After you left college or, along with college, you faced challenges that forced you to see how you were going to act in the face of that type of challenge. Let's move on.

"Te tienes que ir"

LUZ MELY:

And now, after all this—I made a very big ellipsis—here am I. Well, I am finishing—I've already finished—the research: a text, a narrative essay called "Me Tengo Que Ir" [I have to

go], which is the unfinished journey of Venezuelan journalists in exile in the United States. Next slide.

Now I need a volunteer. Two points, that's worth two points. Come here. Please help me by reading that text.

ISABEL:
Do I read it?

LUZ MELY:
Yes.

ISABEL:
Ok. You have to leave. This mandate sometimes begins as a whisper. Your intuition is screaming at you, but you try to convince yourself that you can still continue doing journalism in Venezuela. One day, what was a murmur turns into a buzz, and finally, a scream. You were mentioned by name in a television program that harasses dissenting voices. They raided your house and office. They took away your passport. They took away the cell phone with which you covered citizen protests. They pointed a nine-millimeter pistol at your head. They burned down the headquarters of the guild to which you belong. They left you without a job. They closed so many doors on you that you had to start knocking on others. And yet you stayed. When you made the decision, you weren't sure. You avoided being part of a caravan of despair. Those that leave the country by air, land, and sea, and that have taken millions of Venezuelans. You share the feeling that leaving without certainty of return is like getting divorced while still in love. And you, then, on December 21, 2021, entered the bank of the Río Bravo in Mexico and came out on the bank of the Rio Grande in the United States. It was like a new baptism. That river changes its name from one bank to the other. When you get in, you would be one and, when you emerged, you would be another, although you would have the same name.

LUZ MELY:
Thank you. What's your name?

ISABEL:

Isabel.

LUZ MELY:

Thank you, Isabel.

Let's continue, professor. I want us to listen now to this testimony of a Venezuelan journalist who was a trade unionist and who was one of the most important voices in an area in eastern Venezuela. Where she is from, by the way, in the area where Christopher Columbus entered the American continent on his third voyage. When Christopher Columbus entered that area, he wrote to the queen and said: "I have found the land of grace." Because, in addition, he was seeing how the Orinoco entered the sea, and they did not understand, because they had not seen a river of that magnitude, what was happening in those waters, which were fresh waters. This Venezuelan journalist is from this region. Let's play it.

MÓNICA:

And I always moved around protected. I said, "My God, bless me, don't let them take me." But when I got to Mexico City, God, I said, "Here it is." That is, "Here it was." And that I was received by a person I had not seen and arrived at a place where Venezuelans were all present, each with their own story. And that they took us to a point where we had to walk a very long way, which made me exhausted. And I came to the bank of that river... dear God. I mean, I was like... I couldn't believe it. I mean, I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe it, but, on the other hand, my mind told me: "This is it." (Inaudible). Because as I tell you, the only thing I had in my mind, that my children were on the other side. My children were on the other side. And I remember that day, because everyone said: "Look, the river has a current, that the water is going to reach you up to here, that you are going to drown, that whatever." And when I got to that bank of that river, there was already a group in the middle, going up, walking. And I said: "Oh, my God." In other words, I really was paralyzed at that moment. There, what I had left was to grab the water, just as one bathed in the San Juan River. I crossed myself, and said, "Forward is where I'm going." And halfway through—that is, the water reached about up to my waist—but I couldn't—I kind of couldn't do it, halfway through, because I was tired. And I remember a boy, Carlos. And I said: "Carlos, don't leave me here." All the time, with his wife, a girl.

LUZ MELY:

Did you know him?

MÓNICA:
No, no, no. I met him where the people who were on this movement gathered. And his wife– they were both young, about 19 or 20 years old—and she said to him, "Carlos, grab the lady Mónica, don't let go." And he—I held onto that boy, like well, God himself. ¡And he took me, took me, took me until we crossed! And when we reached the other end—which was a slope that had to be climbed, which I couldn't—there was an officer there. And I told him, "Help me." "I can't help you. Go up as best you can," so he told me.

LUZ MELY:
Let's continue. Let's move on. This is one of the testimonies that I have been collecting with these Venezuelan journalists in the United States. Now, I need another volunteer. Over here? On this side? Here. Come. Come on. Come on, come on, come on.

NAYRE:
And you, who one day could no longer walk freely along the fifth avenue of San Felipe, your city. Which doesn't have any skyscrapers, but does have the enviable Venezuelan weather. In September 2019, you would wander down Fifth Avenue in New York. You walked into one restaurant, into another, and another looking for a job. Since you put on an apron, your notebook would not be for taking journalistic notes, but for writing orders. Your questions, unlike when you were a reporter, are now preceded by a fake smile. You introduce yourself and tell the diners that you will be their waitress. They don't look you in the eye, and, between your teeth, you curse their mother out while you ask: "Anything else?"

LUZ MELY:
Thank you. What's your name?

NAYRE:
Nayre.

LUZ MELY:
Nayre? Thank you, Nayre. Let's continue, professor. I want another volunteer. Does anyone else dare? This one is a little bit longer. ¡Come here!

BIANCA:

It's been nine, eight, seven, six, five, four years since you left. At the end of the year, you miss the Pantone 300, the technical name for the color of the sky in Caracas in December. It is a shade of blue that produces an enchantment. At seven in the morning, it has already reached the intensity that has been sublimated by musicians and poets. At this point in the game, you know that the skies can be beautiful anywhere in the world, even if they do not contrast with the greens of that mass that is El Ávila, the totem mountains of Caracas' people. Even if you have to work your ass off washing dishes or toilets, serving food to ungrateful customers, while singing *japiveldituyú* [Happy Birthday]. Even if you have to rewire your brain to understand that a sunny day does not necessarily imply heat. And you dream that one day you will return to journalism. You've thought about your crossover. To do so, you dare to decipher the word *networking*. You learn how to work *in slack*. You understand that there is no Venezuelan time, because punctuality is the norm. You review, over and over again, how you pronounce *journalism*. You doubt if you said *bitches* instead of *beaches* when you told the Uber passenger you are driving how beautiful Venezuelan beaches are. At this stage of the journey, you have already understood that, perhaps, as Sofia Vergara often jokes, you are smarter in Spanish than in English. But also, that even Bad Bunny pronounces all the consonants when he wants to make himself understood in that language.

LUZ MELY:

Thank you! What's your name?

BIANCA:

Bianca Rodríguez

LUZ MELY:

Bianca, thank you. Moving on to a close. I want to put this testimony, because we have spoken with young journalists, with intermediate journalists, and with a journalist who I call the "silver age," who is this iconic voice of Venezuelan radio journalism. In addition, he was the narrator of the album *Siembra*. He worked with Rubén Blades, and wrote a book that went around the world of salsa singers called *El libro de la salsa*, or the book of salsa. His name is César Miguel Rondón.

And let's go onto the other one. I'm going to close with this. Well, I'll explain this later if anyone wants me to, how this was done in methodological terms. What I want to tell you is that my methodological advisor had a seizure when I told him: "I'm going to do a narrative essay, because—even though I did all the methodological part of the exhibition and all these kinds of things—what I felt in my process is that I have to tell a story. The best way to tell the story is by doing what I have always done, which is to do journalism. So, that's why I chose this. And then, there's a deliverable that I'm working on which is a podcast and a third deliverable is a stand-up, because part of the search for narratives is how we can tell stories that can contain very hard topics, but are also part of everyday life. And perhaps, Venezuelans—perhaps, Puerto Ricans too—tend to make jokes about all the misfortunes we have. So, well, we laugh at our misfortunes, but some paths are also opening up. And I believe that—in the period in which we are eight years, nine years of people who have left the country—where are we and what are we going to look for. I'm going to close with this, which is my dramatic part, and it's the following: One day, like my colleagues interviewed here, I had to make the decision to leave Venezuela temporarily. What began with a meanwhile, is taking on a permanent aspect. I heard a voice that insistently warned me: "You have to leave." I understood it most fully in the verses of Shire, a Somali poet: "No one leaves their home until home is a sweaty voice in your ear, saying, leave, run away from me now. I don't know what I've become, but I know that anywhere else is safer than here." Like many, today I am here, and I am still there, in my country. If leaving unintentionally is like getting divorced—as César Miguel says—while you are in love, returning freely should be like a reunion with the love of your life. While I dream of returning to those arms, to those kisses of the morning breeze that come from El Ávila to those caresses of the sun at dawn, I try to take care of the small shoots that stubbornly germinate miles away, and that keep me connected to my trade and my Venezuelanness. Thank you very much.

Questions or Doubts

ISRAEL:

Thank you very much, Luz Mely, for your presentation. I have several questions, but the idea is to open the forum to students and the public. If anyone has a question, you can ask it now, or as the conversation progresses, you can raise your hand, and we'll let you participate. Does anyone have any questions? No? Well, before I get into the topics of your presentation, I'd like to start a little by talking about your personal history in journalism, given that we have an

audience composed mainly of journalism students. What made you fall in love with journalism and what led you to choose this profession?

Discovering that You Are Poor

LUZ MELY:

Yes, I always get asked that. So, I can say that it was not love at first sight. I mean, I knew I wanted to be a journalist. Lies. I, as I told you initially, grew up in a very poor quarter, so my goal at the age of nine, when I discovered that I was poor... Because they know that you are poor, and you don't know that you are poor. Just as sometimes you are Black, and don't know that you are Black. And I discovered that I was a woman in the United States, because they asked me, "How does a Black woman, moreover, run a media outlet in Venezuela?" I had never thought about that in Venezuela, because among the many virtues that my country has, is that there is a lot of race-mixing. So, well, I would walk around, normally. So, I didn't know I was poor. When I found out I was poor, I said, I have to do something to get out of poverty. I was around nine years old. So, that was my goal. And I was studying and studying and studying, because I was going to apply for to a... Imagine what I was going to apply to—the Venezuelan Navy. Why? Like any young man from a low-class background, well, looking for something that would give me a profession, a quick trade. I had already discarded what I told you at the beginning: I was not going to be a crime boss, I was not going to get pregnant, I was not going to be Miss Venezuela, obviously.

Finding Your Calling

So, I said, I have to study. And I came to journalism, by chance, too. I had one of the highest academic rates in Venezuela at the time I graduated, because I tell you, I had to study. My mom instilled in me the fact that I had to study so much that I continued studying. At the time, I was 16 years old and had a very high index. And it occurred to me to get into a career in social communication at the Universidad Central of Venezuela, which is the main university in Venezuela. My family wanted to kill me, because they said, "Please study something productive." And I said, "Well, let me be here for a year." I was a young woman. And I entered without any expectation. I said, "I'm going to try one year—I'm 16, then 17— I'm still young," but then I fell in love. And then I always say that one of the most beautiful things is when you discover what your calling is. You fall in love with your vocation and you have some talent for it. I'm not very modest, I don't believe in false modesty, I've trained a lot to do journalism.

And, well, nothing, I discovered that calling in those days. Martín Caparrós wrote that vocation was the privilege of knowing what one wanted to do and doing everything to do it. And that's why, well, I'm in love with journalism, which is my vocation, my true calling, my passion, and the love of my professional life.

Career Linked to Political Changes in Venezuela

ISRAEL:

Very well. Luz Mely, I read that your first great day as a professional journalist was on February 4, 1992, in the midst of the attempted coup d'état against President Carlos Andrés Pérez. How did you live that experience and how did it mark your career?

LUZ MELY:

Israel, thank you. Israel is a political journalist. It was just like that, exactly. I had gone to an area of Venezuela that is very close to Caracas—112 miles away—and it was my first day of work in a regional newspaper. And when I wake up—I was at my sister's house—my mother says to me, "There's a coup d'état going on." And I said, "A coup d'état!" So, I get ready to go to work, and my mom tells me, "But you can't go out because it's too dangerous." And then, I tell her, "No, but I have to go because I am a journalist." It was my first day of work, and I left as best I could, arrived at the newsroom, and from there I went out to cover.

And I've always said that, my whole career—over time I have come to appreciate it even more—my entire journalistic career—I cover a lot of politics, I really cover politics—has been linked to political changes in Venezuela. And those changes started with coup d'etats. Since that time, we, well, since before, but that is another story, we have been living experiences of a lot of violence, which we did not know either. So, now, we are seeing that it is a process of a lot of violence in Venezuela. And I feel that this has also marked my journalistic exercise: to understand where we are moving and what we can do, from journalism, to reduce the spaces for that confrontation.

"Efecto Cocuyo"

ISRAEL:

I would like to talk a little about *Efecto Cocuyo*, which you already mentioned something—you already mentioned something—in your presentation. For the public's purposes, can you tell them what is a *cocuyo* for those who do not know?

LUZ MELY:
No, no. To those who are not Venezuelans, who knows what a *cocuyo* is? No one.

ISRAEL:
Here we have a cousin in Puerto Rico, I think.

LUZ MELY:
No, but someone else, let's go, come on. I'm going to say: "One, two, three," and I am going to talk to a professor so that he or she can give you at least one point for participation.

STUDENT 1:
It is the cousin of the *cucubano*.

LUZ MELY:
Aha, a cousin. And what is a *cucubano* like? How is it? Tell me what it's like.

STUDENT 1:
It looks like a firefly.

LUZ MELY:
Does it look like a firefly? Aha. But do you know what the difference is between the firefly and the cocuyo? That the firefly has the light in the... Can I say it? … In the butt, and the cocuyo has it here [points to her forehead]. So, we did an investigation, and that's why we did that, let's say we got that name, which I did not come up with, it was proposed by a person from the team, because we all talked about the need to connect in the community—we were born on Twitter—journalists and people who were producing information. That is why it is called *Efecto Cocuyo*, the "Cocuyo Effect."

ISRAEL:

Thank you. You mentioned, in your presentation, that *Efecto Cocuyo* was born in 2015, in a context of censorship and crisis of journalism in Venezuela. How have you managed to maintain and sustain an independent project in an environment perhaps as hostile as that?

LUZ MELY:

Well, you see that the answer is that I can't go to Venezuela anymore. My entire team is in Venezuela, but I am not. And I think we have maintained the project because the team, even though it has been rotating, because we work with young journalists. In other words, three very young journalists who have not yet graduated from university were also co-founders of *Efecto Cocuyo*. And nothing, what we have done is to be aware of that vocation we have and that desire we have to continue doing journalism, to be very aligned with our code of ethics and to understand the historical responsibility we have, in the sense that this is the way of life that we have. I am an existentialist. I mean, what am I going to do during all this time? Not because I'm going to die tomorrow, but on the contrary, if I'm alive and in 10 years, 15 years, 20 years I wonder when I look back, "And what did I do?" So, if I'm wrong or not—I at least want to have an answer about what I did, and not live like sometimes when people come to certain periods of their lives to be complaining about what I didn't do.

ISRAEL:

Efecto Cocuyo is a media outlet founded, directed, and managed by women. What does this leadership mean to you and how has it changed the way journalism is done in Venezuela?

LUZ MELY:

Oh, Israel. Thank you for that question! It is most beautiful, because, certainly, we were a team of three founders; and then, four directors, all women. In addition, not only women, but of different social origin and different physical characteristics. So, for us, that sensitivity of combining our origins and our vocation for journalism made us have other views on the issues we wanted to work on, and that's why we got into issues of how to cover violence, how to cover certain things of Venezuelan daily life. But behind that there was a reflection, and the reflection was how we can be a gender-sensitive media in a country in which talking about feminism is practically forbidden, due to polarization. Because some believed that, if you spoke of defending women's rights, it was to be aligned with an ideological or political position in power. And then we, well, focus on everything that is the defense of human rights for the coverage of issues with LGBT communities, with communities in the barrios, in poor areas,

with different communities that were the least visible—in general—in the media. That has marked us a lot, and we continue to do so.

Journalism and Activism

ISRAEL:

Your answer leads me to another question. You have spoken about the importance of activism in journalism and how it can drive change in society. I'd like to explore that topic with you.

LUZ MELY:

That is a subject which we call *pelúo*, that is... hairy.

ISRAEL:

That's why I bring it up.

LUZ MELY:

Yes, yes, I know. I'm from the old school of journalism; that is, I am from the old school that proposes that those who do journalism do *jour-nal-ism*. However, I had to learn from human rights defenders that, when the environment in which you are going to do journalism—exercising the right to freedom of expression and freedom of information—when that environment shuts down, the only exercise of journalism in defense of that right that you have—because it is your profession—and that the whole society also has, of course, it ends up turning you into an activist. So, I think that there is a very tenuous line that we have to be very aware of, because one thing is that you assume very frontally, in my case I am like that, I do journalism, and I am going to do everything possible to continue doing journalism. A whole different thing is that you are partial to one of the, let's say, to the poles in the part, especially in spaces of polarization. So, I think it's very delicate. What does that mean? That is a discussion that has yet to take place, that continues to take place in journalism. Because you can have a position, a feminist position, for example, and you are going to defend rights, and you are going to defend that view. That does not mean that you renounce, let's say, the dynamics of journalism, which is rigor, adjusting to the facts, reviewing, verifying. In other words, that contract that you have with the citizens, you cannot break it for the sake of perhaps benefiting the cause for which you are fighting.

The Limits of Journalism

ISRAEL:

Certainly, this issue tends to generate a debate among those who think that journalists should inform, and not defend causes. I understand your answer, but what were the boundaries between one thing and the other?

LUZ MELY:

Look, I'm going to give an example of people who worked in an environmental-rights organization. In Venezuela, that was a scandal. Once they were talking about the killing of dolphins. All the media began to cover it, because it was a criminal act, right? And then, it was discovered that the organization that worked in defense of dolphins faked the fact, and faked it to generate these reactions in people. So, that's where you start; that is, that's not where you start to wonder, but I think that's where you, for example, are one of the limits. Another limit... For example, I, who have covered all the coups d'état in Venezuela, have to say—there I put them on the slide—that there are media and journalists who participated in the coups d'état; conspired for those coups' d'état. I believe that, from my perspective, this is inadmissible for the practice of journalism. You can do it as a citizen, but not while doing journalism. And if you do, you have to tell people where you're talking from. That is why I told them at the beginning where am I talking to you from. Because, obviously, if I cover early motherhood or how poor people are excluded from certain systems, or if I cover that has to do with the defense of the public university, public schools, or public health, that has a reason for being. And then, you see? That's the limit. Because I can make an editorial decision to do that kind of coverage, but I can't lie, I can't manipulate, I have to adjust to the facts, I have to contrast. In other words, everything that the little book gives you that you, your professors, have surely insisted on a lot. You can't put all that aside because you have a position on an issue.

Elections in Venezuela

ISRAEL:

Thank you. Luz Mely, and how do you see the international coverage of Venezuela—the case of Venezuela—and how difficult it is to bring that information to international audiences about what is really happening in your country?

LUZ MELY:

Well, what happens is that I think people like me are fighting so much for people's attention. So, right now, with all this fragmentation of information—information is fragmented everywhere—it is much easier for some stereotypes. That is, let's say, Venezuela, when you say to a person... That's why I showed him the picture of the 25 years, because in Venezuela the civic space was closed. That was something that happened over time, but people don't understand. I mean, people don't understand, and don't have the time to understand that kind of thing. I'm going to say something that may sound horrible, and they're going to "ostracize" me, it doesn't matter, they can do it. In Venezuela, an electoral process took place on July 28, a national process. I'm one of those people who promote electoral participation and dialogue, and we did excellent coverage. The government decided to steal the election. So, of course, that's where the limit is, when you said something between one thing and another. So, they told me, but why do you say that they stole it? Well, because not only does evidence exist, but non-evidence does not exist. That is to say, the government has not shown the data, as established by law, where it is shown that they did, they say that their party won, that they won. On the other hand, on the other side, you see this. Because there is not only a succession, alternation, at stake, but also democracy is at stake. The little bit, the little thread, the little thread of democracy where we are sustaining ourselves, that was, let's say, destroyed. So, telling people about that is very difficult, in a context of international polarization. Because, as I was saying, if you defended women's rights or saw everything that was happening in Argentina and in other countries, then to think that this does not happen in Venezuela, that although there is a government that calls itself leftist, there is no rule in favor of minorities. They opposed equal marriage, all these kinds of things. And you do that kind of coverage, how do you explain to people, in a polarized context, that this process has not taken place in Venezuela? And I would say that, for example, the president of Chile, Gabriel Boric, I really like his approach, because he is a man of the left, he defends leftist values, but he is clear about what is happening in Venezuela. But when we go to the United States, I also have to say it, because we find many Venezuelans who support Donald Trump. And you tell them, but it's authoritarianism, yet blond and passed through a sun-tanning machine. I mean, it's a thing! But when you analyze, it's the same authoritarian structure. And as one writer says, "Authoritarianism is not an ideology, it is a way of exercising power." And that means reducing the spaces for discussion; taking away funds so that people do not have funding to express themselves; attacking, for example, the values of equity, equality, inclusion. And everything is

done in a context, certainly, of polarization that makes it difficult for people to understand what is happening at times.

ISRAEL:

Speaking of Trump, I would like to talk about the Washington-Caracas relationship, but before I go there, I want to know if anyone in the audience has any questions, any students, professors, or any guests... Bianca.

The Love for Journalism Over the Years

BIANCA:

I wanted to ask how your perception of what journalism is has changed, from the time you began to study it until now. Because, I mean, the question again, because one changes a lot over time. When you're more... Like when you're starting out at university, you can see things with a lot of enthusiasm, but then you face what reality is, right? And, well, it's beautiful, because it's the real thing. It includes the good and the bad, so that's the question.

LUZ MELY:

No, thank you, Bianca. Look, when I told you that I had found the love of my life—and I'm divorced and I had several boyfriends too, but don't talk about it—well, I found the love of my professional life. When you find that, I think it's a gift. That is a gift that one has to take great care of, because, sometimes, as you say, one changes. There are things that change, but in any case, when you find a love that can be the love of your life, and you give it things, and it take care of you, and you take care of it, even if that ends, it was a beautiful moment, wasn't it? It was nice while it lasted. So, I think that must also be respected. And finally, then, I have been a journalist all my life. What I have done—which, as I joked—that I have reinvented myself more than Madonna, is because, precisely, I want to continue doing journalism. I have changed formats. I had to learn how to do streaming. I had to learn. I almost became a Youtuber. I do Instagram. I make reels. Well, I'm not an influencer, but I understand the link between opinion leadership and social media use, because I have almost twenty or so years writing opinion journalism. So, what I've done is to get comfortable, just as you get comfortable when you're with a partner that you decided, in the case of those of us who are heterosexual, I get married, I had a child, I raised him and all this... Well, the boy was growing, and as he grew older, I changed his diapers until he was three months old. Later on, he learned to change his own

diapers. Later, I learned to do such a thing. He learned other things, and now we are in another stage, but the bond always continues. And I think that, I don't know if it sums up or... I get intense with that, because well, I love what I do, like I love my country. It's those loves, "attachments" to which you are bound.

Caravans of Despair

BIANCA:

Thank you very much. I have another question, finally. What has been the most in-depth or difficult story or article you've covered?

LUZ MELY:

When the crossing of Venezuelans began through the Rio Grande, the river... Well, we went to do that coverage, I had already been covering Venezuelan migrants on foot throughout the continent. When I saw people getting into that river, crossing the street, changing clothes. I mean, in the end you changed your clothes, you took off all your clothes. One day, they arrived, and someone said a word and I asked him, "Where are you from?" When they heard my accent, they began to say, "From Valera", "From Maracaibo". You know, about places, I don't know, as if talking here about Ponce, I don't know what other place there can be here, about La Perla, about such... When I saw that, it broke my heart because I saw families crossing there. Some people will say, "Well, but other populations have moved like this, and perhaps in more difficult conditions." It's fine, I respect each other's processes, but this is our story, and we have never seen Venezuelans come out like this. Those caravans of despair that I mention in the text, we had never seen them, and we are seeing them. That moves me a lot. There is another thing that has moved me a lot, which leads me to the following: what happens next? When I did these interviews with these ten colleagues in the United States—we chose them in the United States because there are no data on the Venezuelan journalistic diaspora. But, if 8 million people have left Venezuela, many of those people are journalists too, then... But there are no data, and the only approximation that there was was that most had gone to the United States, those who have left, those who answered a survey, unlike, let's say, the destinies of Venezuelans in general. So, I said, "Well, let me see what happened to these journalists in the United States." There came a time when I said, "Hey, we have to do other things here." There, then, I would get into the most activist part, because I'd say, "I'm not an activist." But what was clear is that spaces for conversation are needed, spaces to heal one other, to see each other,

to caress each other and to spend our mourning in company. Because there are people who say that the country's mourning bears a difficulty. When a family member or a pet or something you love dies, people always comfort you, because we've all been through that. But when the country hurts, when it is the country that is taken away from you, only the people who, perhaps, have gone through it can accompany you, and maybe they are also living their grief. So, me, this kind of thing for me is hard to cover. Thank you.

BIANCA:
I am very grateful for the answer.

LUZ MELY:
Thank you, Bianca!

ISRAEL:
Are there any other questions? Cristian, go ahead.

Ethics in the Practice of Journalism

CHRISTIAN:
Good afternoon. I wanted to ask you, since you mentioned these issues that are stories very close to your life, because they are people who are from your country, how have you found the tools to deal with those emotions? Because, when we're working with stories that are so close to our own, sometimes, it's hard not to feel a certain way. How have you created those tools to deal with them?

LUZ MELY:
There are two things that I think are fundamental. First, journalists have to have self-care dynamics. There is something called "vicarious trauma," I don't know if you have seen it, which happens to you when, from covering certain things so much, you feel what is happening to that person, that is, you feel the pain of that person. So, the limit between empathy and professional practice, I think that we also have to be very clear about that. In my case, what are those tools? Well though I have a gaze... And I insist, it is a gaze from this perspective, from here, from the perspective of the one who is leaving, of all of this, and that moves me to this... That doesn't mean I'm going to stop covering the things that are journalistically important. But

it does lead me to the following reflection, which I've told others about these days in informal conversations. For example, with everything that my colleagues told me, which is why I told them not to share this part, because if I were to remain only as a journalist who seeks conflict, who seeks such and such a thing, I have what we call *lomito*, [the cream of the crop] that is, because they are very important stories, but I also have a responsibility. I have a responsibility, because when people open up to you so much, you also have to take care of the person. Sometimes, people tell you things, and that happens at all levels in the exercise of journalism, that even if they have told you, you have to see that it is not going to revictimize them, that it is not going to expose them, because you can't hide yourself as, "They already told me about it. I'm a journalist, and they've already told me about it." No, then, I mean, that's a complete dialogue, people talk a lot about journalistic ethics, but journalistic ethics implies a constant discussion about the practice of journalism. Thank you.

ISRAEL:
Thank you. Any other questions? Caridad, go ahead.

CARIDAD:
Hi, I wanted to ask you if you thought, in this post-truth era, where lies spread so quickly, if journalism—it's clear that journalism is essential—but whether is it enough.

Rebuilding Credibility in Journalism

LUZ MELY:
No, I don't think so, journalism is not enough, but also that more than ever we need to do better journalism. It's not enough, why? Because we... We are going through a process of changing the business model of the vehicle that allowed you to do that media journalism. We already know that has changed, all these kinds of things. But also, there is something that has changed a lot, there is a generational change, which is like... That was the pact of credibility that existed. That is, people believed in the media, and if they didn't believe in the media, at least they said, "They don't lie to us so much." So, that pact was broken and surely because of the whole issue of internet disruption, so, there, that contributes to that space for disinformation. So, let people still argue, right now, that the earth is flat. I mean, dammit, forgive me, but I study a lot. You come here—who knows what you have to pay, how much your parents, yourselves, have to pay to come and study here—to go listen to a person who tells you that the earth is flat or that

they are not going to get vaccinated against COVID or measles. That is, as if to dispute the scientific facts that have already been proven. So, yes, I think journalism is not enough, but it is more necessary than ever to be able to do it better. I think a lot of experimentation is needed, to have spaces for experimentation to find ways to relate—in the case of us as media, for example—to relate to specific audiences, which can be audiences that can explain to them in the terms in which they consume the information. I know that, well, yes, TikTok, all this kind of stuff, but that has a narrative and a way of telling things. They are spaces people are using. And... Or I always say with this that, if there is a very good party... They tell me that in La Perla there is a good party on the weekend, I'm going to see if I go... I'm not going to host another party. What I'm going to try is to go to that party and take what I can contribute at that party. So, I think that is needed, and I think that a lot of dialogue is needed between those who do journalism, those who make the journalistic industry, people in technology, and citizens. Because journalists, a long time ago, thought we were like deified, right? And what all this technological disruption has done is, "ta, ta, ta, ta," it has brought us down to earth. So, I think it's an exercise in conversation, dialogue and searching for formats that you're not going to have the definitive answer. I don't think, I don't think that, at least what I have left of vital existence, we are going to find it. What we are going to do is continue experimenting.

CARIDAD:
Thank you.

LUZ MELY:
Thank you.

ISRAEL:
Thank you, Caridad. Any other questions? César.

CÉSAR:
I wanted to ask, what is the method that you follow in the media to look for that information—perhaps, interviews, data—in an environment where information is suppressed and people may be afraid to speak up?

LUZ MELY:

Yes, well, that's important too. What happens is that, as we have been dealing with the closure of sources of information for 26 years, what we have been doing is, one, generating spaces of trust. That's very important, that people... You know that they always tell us that the only thing a journalist has is their name. Really, it's the only thing, because we already know that we are not millionaires. So how do you cultivate that name and that confidence? How do you guarantee people that their safety won't be compromised? That is part of your responsibility as a journalist as well, in authoritarian contexts. And then, we lived through it a lot, as a result of the post-electoral repression, when many people remained silent. I didn't want to say anything at all. And we said, "Well, but what can we do about this?" So, editorially, "We're going to explain this," "We're going to do this." So, it is complicated, but there are ways to get the information.

Information Is Like Rain

LUZ MELY:

When I have told you this whole story, it's that information is, as we see it, sometimes, as if it were rain, water, that starts to drain, and you don't know where it's going to go. There, your own intelligence as a journalist is not to put the little pots like that to see where the water falls, but to go and look for where those riverbeds, those springs are, going out to be able to drink them and be able to have good information. That's part of one's job, too.

CÉSAR:

Thank you very much.

LUZ MELY:

Thank you.

Rights of Venezuelans in the United States

ISRAEL:

We are running out of time, but I wanted to ask you one last question that I had left out, although we have very little time for the answer. How do you see the relationship between Washington and Caracas after all the measures that Trump has announced, which affect the Venezuelan community in the United States and Puerto Rico? The elimination of the humanitarian aid, mass deportations, detentions in Guantánamo. How do you see this situation? You are also an analyst; how do you see all this?

LUZ MELY:

Look, I think that... That relationship... Let's talk in political terms. I'm not going to talk about what I believe in, but you, when you have a relationship, you have to look for the springs of that relationship. During the Biden administration and the first Trump administration, there were many links there, many links. When this second administration of Donald Trump comes, those ties seem to have been lost, and besides, there is something that Donald Trump does, which is the interests of the United States. Really, it has always been like this. What happens is that Donald Trump is more direct, and he says so. In other words, they are the interests of the United States. It's up to us to look after our interests. And there I do believe that it is necessary that—in these dynamics of democratic forces, seeking to provide spaces for the rescue of Venezuela's democracy—you are going to have to have relations with the United States and make an impact. Because the criminalization of Venezuelans—whether we were all criminals and all these kinds of things or the elimination of parole, which also contributed to family reunification—are things that are affecting all Venezuelans, and they are supposed to affect Venezuelans who had to leave Venezuela fleeing, not only from the crisis there, but of all the persecution.

The Logic of Money

ISRAEL:

Many of these things were also happening under the Biden administration, but Trump has an interest in "civilizing" himself, in his campaign of fear or whatever you want to call it.

LUZ MELY:

Yes, because the way he negotiates is good. During Biden, when the negotiation of a game change by Biden to open the space for the elections to take place, people were very confused because he said: "But well, how is it that they are giving and giving things to the [Venezuelan] government?" But it was a negotiation that was also proposed by the government of Venezuela from, well, "Give me this, and I'll see if I give you that." And there, the objective was to reach the election of July 28. That election was reached, and that election was won by the democratic force. What happens is that the change, passing the torch in the government, could not be executed. And then, when you see the Biden administration from afar, at the time, it made sense. In other words, the logic was flexibility, to give incentives to encourage elections to take

place, and perhaps, those elections would lead to a democratic transition. In this case there is no logic. In other words, the only logic there is is the logic of money. Donald Trump has a logic. It has been applied to Mexico; it applies to the whole world. I think that his I do feel that he is not a politician, but a businessman, and he is applying his business techniques to politics, which affects us all, because we are all splashed with those decisions made by Donald Trump.

ISRAEL:

Thank you very much, Luz Mely. We would continue talking but we are running out of time. Thank you very much for this very fruitful dialogue. We have learned a lot from your experiences and from everything you have told us, from your research, also what you are doing now, mainly with migrants. So, we hope you enjoy your stay in Puerto Rico and that you can dance salsa, at least, before you leave. Thank you very much.

LUZ MELY:

That's right, thank you. Thank you so much. I also learned a lot, thank you.