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**Continuity and change in the Cuban media
under Raúl Castro**
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Introduction

Since the wave of demonstrations started to spread across the Arab world in 2010, through authoritarian regimes such as Tunisia and Egypt, trying to guess which non-democratic countries could be next has become commonplace.

One of most crucial tasks in the academic world or the media is to fathom how mass media and the internet might influence these possible democratisation and/or mobilization processes.

There is no consensus, agreement or enough research on the subject (Jebrel, Stetka and Loveless, 2013). What is probably certain is that Cuba—which besides North Korea is the only other remaining Cold War frontier—deserves attention in this respect.

In an effort to contribute to this debate, this paper offers an overview of the media, the uses of the internet and other strategies for sharing information on the island, which is considered one of most repressive in terms of freedom of speech (ranking 170th out of 180 in the 2014 Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders¹). The objective is also to identify elements that should be followed to track changes to this landscape in the medium term.

Cuba has embarked on a gradual but irreversible dismantling of its centralized economic system, a process that the Cuban government intends to do slowly in order to reduce potential threat to its own survival.

This means, among other things, that the communist government's plan is to guide the economy towards capitalism without losing political control or changing the single-party system. One of the factors in the success or failure of the transition led by president Raúl Castro is believed to be the way horizontal information, including political information, circulates and evolves.

That is also the main perception shared by the reduced forces of the opposition. For them, the internet is seen as a possible way to loosen the state's monopoly on information and, in the future, as a tool to build a network of popular support.

This Cuban game is played under enormous external influence, mainly because the United States imposes a strict embargo on Cuba, with implications for the internet.

¹ World Press Freedom Index 2014 <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-americas>

One of the explicit goals of Washington's policy on Cuba is to maximize the circulation of free information on the island and promote "independent journalism". Its initiatives in this field are covered with controversy.

On this chessboard, we should consider the increasingly relevant role of the Cuban diaspora—one third of the country's population lives abroad.

In order to navigate in this dynamic panorama, two main questions guided this research:

To what extent do the current "reforms" in Cuba change the media landscape and the consumption of information in that country?

Does the internet change the balance of power between the state and its citizens on an island where technology penetration is low?

To answer these questions, information was collected from previous reports, fieldwork and select data from relevant academic works on mass media in authoritarian countries. The material was enriched by in-depth interviews with influential journalists (inside and outside official media outlets), academics and political actors inside and outside of Cuba.

Despite the limitations, this paper decided to use two tools to draw an instant portrait of the use of the internet and social networks on the island. This seemed relevant because there is always the discussion if the "noise" in the internet about Cuba is from the island or abroad.

The main findings are divided into the following three chapters:

The first will describe the main media outlet in Cuba (state owned) and the incremental changes introduced over the last few years. One of the aims of this paper is to record the perception of key actors regarding these changes. This part will also present an important change in the main Cuban media landscape: the open broadcast in Cuba of Telesur, a multi-state Venezuela-based TV Channel. Since the beginning of 2013, the channel has been broadcast for 12 to 14 hours a day. Although it is controlled by Havana's close strategic ally—the Venezuelan government—this channel represents a fresh dynamic approach for an audience used to the boring official television coverage of the last five decades.

The second chapter will profile the Cuban catholic magazine "Espacio Laical" to explain why it has become a focal point in the public debate on ongoing economic reforms. The electronic version of the publication has been mixing the opinions of Cuban intellectuals, more or less aligned with the government, with those of "moderate" voices in the internal opposition of the diaspora. It's an essential look at one of the most interesting relationships in the country: the elite of the Communist Party and the re-empowered Catholic Church, in a moment of change both in Havana and the Vatican of Pope Francis, who is Argentinian.

The last chapter will explore what this paper will argue is Cuba's unique situation in terms of the internet and social media tools. Cuba is mostly "off line," with a contested official internet access rate of only 25% (most connections are under strict state control) and an estimated effective internet penetration rate of less than 3 percent, one of the lowest in the world, according to Freedom House².

The country also has one of the lowest rates of cell phone penetration in the Western Hemisphere, although it has experienced a rapid rise over the past six years (rising from 338,000 in 2008 to 2 million for a population of 11 million³). Currently, only foreigners and some professions, including journalists, and artists are authorized to legally acquire an Internet connection, but the government said last year that changes and improvements would be made in the near future.

It is perhaps necessary to say that Cuba is not China — it does not have the financial means to implement the savvy and labour-intensive censorship methods that Beijing does. Nor is it North Korea. Separated from US by only 50 miles, Cuba is far from isolated and receives a significant and growing number of foreign tourists and expatriates.

The low rate of internet penetration, primarily due to economic conditions, means it has more in common with African countries like Ethiopia or Eritrea. Even this is not necessarily a good comparison: despite the economic obstacles facing Cuba and Ethiopia, the Caribbean island has one of the highest rates of literacy in the Americas and it would be reasonable to assume that this would impact on the way people consume information and media.

This last section will discuss the "independent digital media" in Cuba and its main actors despite the limitations imposed by local conditions—led by the most famous of them, the blogger and digital activist Yoani Sánchez.

Our perception is that after the "blogs era", there are signals that the digital world in Cuba is entering in a new phase, where the digital newspapers and/or magazines, some of them with veiled support from the communist government, are trying to dispute readership and market in the island and abroad with state controlled media outlets.

Finally, this paper will also put forward as a possible topic of future research a phenomenon that is as important as it is difficult to track and document, a sort of "offline internet": the extensive off-line network established to sidestep the painfully slow and prohibitively expensive internet. This network is based on the sharing of information and entertainment through pen drives, memory cards, hard disks and cell phones (even without active cell phone accounts).

2 "Freedom in the World 2013" (Freedom House) www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2013

3 www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2014-03-11/ensanchar-la-linea-al-cliente/

Chapter 1 - Boring official media: an incremental change?

1.1 Media landscape

The scene starts in the newsroom meeting of a newspaper, a clear reference to “Granma,” the most important and biggest newspaper in Cuba, and “the official agency of the Communist Party.” After a meteorite falls on a stadium in Havana, killing 93 people, the journalists discuss what to print as the headline of the following day's edition: the victims or an Olympic record beaten on the same day?

A telephone call from the head of the Communist Party determines it will be neither, but rather the fine performance of the ports of the capital, while the protagonist observes aliens attacking the island from his window.

The synopsis above is from a series of short satirical films by the Cuban filmmaker Eduardo del Llano, a cult item that circulates hand to hand through pen drives on the island. The film, entitled “Brainstorming” and released in 2009, is a crude critical satire that reflects the views of Cubans about the newspaper.

Containing only eight pages in tabloid format, “Granma” is the most widely read newspaper in this nation of 11 million. Despite its small size, the publication features daily historic pieces recalling the heroic years of the guerrilla generation that defeated Fulgencio Batista in 1959 and has held power ever since.

The two other national newspapers “Juventud Rebelde” and “Trabajadores” are not that different from the fossilised “Granma”—not infrequently the three of them publish the same headlines and/or articles. Prensa Latina, the public agency with bureaus abroad, and the cultural magazines “Caimán Barbudo” and Bohemia, round out the list of top publications.

The situation is quite similar for television and radio. Legally, there are only 10 open TV channels available (two of them educational). Entertainment programming is to some extent up-to-date: Brazilian soap operas and US series like “Grey’s Anatomy” are broadcast regularly.

To find a parallel for journalism, we must return to the 60s or 70s. In the words of one experienced journalist who works for an official publication, “TV and radio echo what is published in ‘Granma’ and ‘J. Rebelde’”⁴.

The situation is not much better on the internet. All these publications and channels have their own websites. In accordance with the digital strategy of the government, we must also highlight the prestigious website Cubadebate.cu, which publishes “news” and opinion pieces, including ones written by Fidel Castro—even the historic leader of the revolution adopted the “online first” strategy a couple of years ago.

1.2 Journalism and reforms

This portrait of an antiquated and almost burlesque media was painted by President Raúl Castro himself in 2011. In his speech in the Communist Party Congress, he described the material released by state media outlets as “boring, improvised and superficial” and made a call for changes. “This habit of triumphalism, stridency and formalism needs to be left behind,” he said.

In his assessment, he also conceded some odd self-criticism, blaming the government for not allowing journalists “timely access to information and frequent contact with decision makers”⁵.

In the wake of these criticisms, the newspapers and the television started to promote “criticism sessions”, where citizens could complain about public services, for example.

The changes gained a new chapter early in 2014, when “Granma” launched its new website. “Today Granma sits in a dynamic framework, based on a modern content management system, enabling access from anywhere, whatever the circumstances, including format versions for computers, tablets and mobile phones”⁶, said the editorial page, not without some intrinsic irony in a country suffering from digital indigence.

The editorial also claims that “the new Granma” will promote active participation by citizens in the paper: “users should not be mere recipients, but also major providers”.

This modern message about media and participation sounds odd enough in a country where, according to the Constitution, the right to freedom of speech should be enjoyed “in accordance with the objectives of socialist society”⁷ and only through state-owned publications.

4 Journalist interviewed for this paper, whose name cannot be revealed.

5 Raul Castro speech - <http://www.cubadebate.cu/congreso-del-partido-comunista-de-cuba/informe-central-al-vi-congreso-del-partido-comunista-de-cuba-iii/#.UynAg4VpvKE>

6 <http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2014-03-18/granmacu-nuestra-nueva-cara-en-la-red>

7 Cuban Constitution, article 53

Two journalists who work for two different state publications accepted to share their views on the new trends for this paper. This research could not reveal the name of one of them, who preferred to remain anonymous: "The new critical segments on television and calls for review represent an openness to opinion in journalism and investigative journalism, which were nearly zero for many years. It seems very timely and helpful."⁸

Rafael Grillo, journalist at the cultural magazine "Caimán Barbudo", is not optimistic at all. "[The newspapers and TVs in Cuba] should be viewed as propaganda machines, not information services. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." And about the openness to "criticism": "Criticism in the media is biased and superficial. Many times it is the citizens themselves who are blamed for the country's ills. If productivity does not increase, it is because people do not work; corruption and theft are moral evils of people; and if the street is dirty, it is for lack of civic consciousness."⁹

As seen in these new sessions, there are limits to the criticism in the message from Raúl Castro: one can criticize the economy, complain about bureaucracy and the media itself—as the president did—but debates about the political system are not tolerated.

Harold Dilla, a Cuban sociologist based in the Dominican Republic, also interviewed by this paper, agrees. According to him, these limitations in the official media create a "schizophrenic" debate, in which the social problems "are collateral damage" and the politics, "a minefield." "We cannot continue insisting on monolithic unity, albeit adorned with pluralistic touches."

1.3 Telesur

The monopoly on the circulation of information exercised by the Cuban state is by no means absolute. However, there are not enough comprehensive surveys to determine how much access Cubans have to other sources of information.

In the same way that the US-funded radio stations Voice of America and Radio of Liberty used to broadcast news to the Soviet Union, for Cuba Washington created TV and Radio Marti, both based in Miami and both known for their small audiences on the island. There are an unknown, and apparently growing, number of "antennas", with access to American channels and available in Cuba on the black market.

Faced with this uncertain scenario, a recent survey carried out by Freedom House¹⁰ in 2011 is one of the few sources that provide reliable information on the topic. Based on 190 qualitative interviews, the study was in agreement with previous

⁸ Journalist interviewed for this paper, whose name cannot be revealed.

⁹ Grillo said the interview reflects his personal view, and not those of his magazine.

¹⁰ Moreno, A. and Calingaert, D. Change Comes to Cuba. Citizens' Views on Reform after the Sixth Party Congress. Special Report, Freedom House, 2011.

surveys: about 92 percent of respondents said their information comes from government sources, as opposed to only 8 percent who said their main source of information is independent outlets.

The figures are even more revealing when the questions addressed the awareness of the respondents regarding sensitive political topics: 57 percent of respondents who said their main source of information is independent knew what started the revolution in Tunisia, compared to only 23 percent of those who get their news exclusively from the government.

“Limited access to information, however, remains a serious challenge. While state media has little credibility among most Cubans, the reach of independent news sources is extremely limited, and as a result, most Cubans remain cut off from news of major world events. They thus lack the means to become informed, let alone engage fellow citizens in broad discussions regarding alternatives to the system under which they currently live” (Moreno and Calingaert, 2011, p. 25).

If the picture that emerged from the study is somehow representative, a new element in the media landscape should then be very important: the broadcast of Telesur in Cuba.

Since January 2013, the multistate-owned and Caracas-based Telesur has been broadcasting in Cuba for 12 to 14 hours per day.

It is the only channel legally available that delivers live coverage. For instance, Telesur aired part of US President Barack Obama's inauguration ceremony in 2013—the first time in five decades that this has happened¹¹. The channel has also been broadcasting the demonstrations in countries like Egypt and Ukraine.

Even if the ideological filter isn't too different from the one they're already used to—the Venezuelan government is Havana's most important ally—the introduction of Telesur may make a difference in a country starving for news.

As James Painter described in his study case of Telesur in 2008:

“[Telesur] certainly includes more voices from leftwing rebels, parties or social movements. All this is not presented in the crude style of old-fashioned propaganda. This has historically been characterised by long-winded speeches from political leaders, extreme deference to those leaders, an emphasis on government achievements, negative news being kept to a

11 The channel also broadcast a symbolic moment: the Cuban-American Richard Blanco reading of his poem “One Today” during the ceremony. The hosts of the show made no comment.

minimum, few critical voices of the government, extensive coverage of visiting heads of state and an abundance of ordinary people being portrayed as benefiting from the state” (Painter, James. p. 67)¹²

The journalists from state media interviewed for this paper agree. "On the one hand, [Telesur] has exposed the technological indigence of the formal apparatus of Cubana de Television. On the other, the broadcasting of the elections in Venezuela, with the competition between various parties should promote, by contrast, more questions regarding our media and our reality (where we also have opponents, but they have been completely silenced and made invisible)"¹³, said Rafael Grillo.

The other journalist adds: “The broadcast of Telesur has been followed by an increasing number of people who compare the channel with the limited information that the state media offers.”¹⁴

In March of 2014, the former student leader and now dissident Eliécer Ávila posted on Twitter: "For the first time in the history, Cuba is listening to opponents of Venezuela’s government on Telesur! I applaud! Will we hear from Cuban opponents some day?"

A comparison between Telesur and the Cuban media was aired on TV on Cubana de Television itself, which had launched a "critical" segment called "Cuba Says" last year.

In a ten-minute report, aired twice a week, Cubans complain from the streets about housing, transportation, food prices and other topics.

The faster editing, soundtrack and critical tone—even if there is no direct mention of political issues—is an immense contrast with the other programs.

"The news on Cuban television has to change, understand? [Must be] like Telesur. The news on Telesur has surpassed ours," said a man in an episode of "Cuba Says" in November of 2013.

However, there is no consensus about the possible impact of Telesur. Bert Hoffmann, director of the Institute for Latin American Studies at the German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, does not predict a big impact of the transmission of the channel, since the television does not cover Cuban internal issues. He thinks that coverage about Cuban domestic problems would be more important in the Cuban context¹⁵.

12 Counter-Hegemonic news - a case study of Al Jazeera English and Telesur – 2008.

13 Interview with the author.

14 Name not revealed.

15 Interview with the author.

Chapter 2 - The "consent" debate: the case of the Catholic magazine "Espacio Laical"

2.1 Raúl Castro and the Catholic Church in Cuba

On an afternoon in January 2012, the archbishop of Havana, Jaime Ortega, wearing a calm smile, explained what he thought the Catholic Church's role should be in the ongoing "updating process" of the Cuban economic model—he was careful to use the government's lexicon, which rejects the word "transition".

When the interview touched on the Catholic magazine, "Espacio Laical," a publication that would become, after 2008, Cuba's most influential magazine in the reform debate, he was explicit:

"In Cuba, the word 'transition' is not used, because transition is moving on to something else, according to the government. It is said about an updating process, a shifting process. Transition means leaving a point to arrive at another. Changes are open, and do not indicate an arrival point. We do not refer to the arrival point, but to the starting point, which is what matters"¹⁶.

Ortega, who spent eight months cutting sugarcane and brush in labour camps established by the communist Cuban government in the 1960s, had mediated, two years before, the liberation of 115 political prisoners, in an unprecedented collaboration with the Raúl Castro government that sealed the new strategic position of the Catholic Church in Cuba.

After years of religious persecution and soviet-style lay preaching, the Cuban government moved, in the late 1980s and 1990s, toward an alliance. There was more room internally for the church of Pope John Paul II on the *sotto voce* condition that the Cuban arm of the institution would maintain a nationalist approach while firmly rejecting the U.S. economic embargo, which had already been denounced by the Vatican. Beside Latin America, the Vatican would be a sort of diplomatic airbag in case of accidents involving Washington.

That was the reason behind John Paul II's 1988 visit to Cuba, which has one of the lowest proportions of Catholics in Latin America¹⁷, during a deep economic crisis in Cuba.

In 2012, 14 years later, this relationship reached its pinnacle. The Church prepared the visit of Pope Benedict XVI after negotiating (and getting its way) on each point with the government: the broadcast on public television of the passion of the Christ

¹⁶ Interview with the author.

¹⁷ According to Catholic Church records, 60% to 70% of Cuba's population has been baptized, but only 4% to 5% of Catholics regularly attend Mass.

and the Pope's message at Christmas, the freedom to use the public space for pilgrimages and the freedom for its charitable organizations to operate in Cuba.

During the interview on that afternoon in Havana, it was clear that the Catholic Church elite in Cuba commanded by Ortega were interested in more than just religious and metaphysical issues¹⁸.

Ortega said that the reform process was "irreversible". He believed that all changes to give the people more economic autonomy—a reference to private small business authorized by Raúl—were also political. He selected a statement by Raúl Castro to make his case that the "outlook" was one of political opening.

"It is really interesting what President Raúl Castro declared in the last session of the National Assembly: 'Why couldn't a minister be someone who is not a party militant?' This is an outlook for openness, and not only in the field of economics, but also in others."

The words of Ortega could be taken as a corollary of the "mission" the "Espacio Laical" magazine embraced after 2008.

Counting "Espacio Laical", a magazine presented as a product of the "lay community," and the Havana Archdiocese's official magazine Palabra Nueva¹⁹, there are seven electronic newsletters in all and dozens of publications in small parishes²⁰, that together reach an estimated four million Cubans.

As Samuel Faber (2013) pointed out, "despite their limited circulation, well below 5 percent of the adult population, these publications constitute the one significant exception to the Cuban government's monopoly on the media on the island."

It was in this privileged scenario—without the need for state funding and predicated on a relationship with a special level of cordiality—that "Espacio Laical" became the most ambitious and far-reaching publication of the Raúl Era. The faces of this movement, beside Ortega himself, were Roberto Veiga and Lenier González, the editors who managed to use the magazine as a platform to unite intellectuals in Cuba and the diaspora.

Maybe because of this exclusive status, the magazine could go further than the important and relatively open magazine Temas or the wire service IPS, the foreign

18 The editorial arm was not the only way to try to push for reforms. Since 2012, the Havana Archdiocese has been offering three-month workshops and a two-year degree program taught by clergy members on the basics of private business, including sourcing of materials, accounting and tax regulations.

http://www.palabranueva.net/newpage/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=561:empujon-a-la-pequena-empresa-cubana&catid=195:dossier&Itemid=240

19 The magazine conveyed the institutional position of the Church. It is particularly interesting to follow statements made by Ortega and other eminent religious leaders and the participation of the institution in education and social work.

20 <http://www.ipsnoticias.net/2010/10/medios-catolicos-en-cuba-son-distintos-pero-no-ajenos/>

company which had gained ground working with local staff and through collaboration with important names of Cuban culture like the writer Leonardo Padura.

In 37 quarterly editions, over nearly a decade, the magazine addressed subjects of different levels of controversy: economic reforms, the labour force, the role of intellectuals, freedom of religion, the diaspora, the "challenges" of the Cuban press, and the state of civil society in Cuba.

A more directed debate regarding the political system and propositions about "the future" of Cuba had started in 2012. In March 2014, when the most recent issue was published until the conclusion of this paper, the magazine touched on a delicate point: the opposition in a country under a 50-year-old single party regime.

This edition would be the last one coordinated by Veiga and González, who left the magazine two months later, in June 2014, in a major episode that we will come back to later in this chapter.

2.2 Broadening the debate

In March 2008, Raúl Castro moved to lift some restrictions on daily life, allowing Cubans for the first time to buy personal computers, cell phones (until then allowed only to foreigners), some television sets and microwaves. Despite the prohibitive prices, it was the first public aspect of the reforms, which had started with changes in agriculture.

A month later, the magazine "Espacio Laical" launched an edition featuring a "dossier" on Cuba's economy. It was the first time since 1959 that experts from the Center for the Study of the Cuban Economy at the University of Havana (CEEC), the country's most important university, published papers side by side with renowned researchers from the diaspora in a magazine available to the general public in Cuba.

Pavel Vidal Alejandro, then an economist at CEEC, wrote about a thorny issue, the dual currency system²¹. A former Cuban central bank official, he described in crude terms the distortions caused by the existence of two currencies and the difficult choices that would lie ahead for the government.

In response to questions by the author about the role of "Espacio Laical," Pavel Vidal, now at Javeriana University in Cali, Colombia, reveals both the importance of the debate fostered by the magazine as well as the erratic game of advances and retreats of the institutions in Cuba society regarding censorship.

21 Since the crisis in the 1990s, Cuba has had two currencies—the peso (CUP), in which most wages are paid and local goods priced, and the convertible peso (CUC), used in tourism, foreign trade and some stores carrying imported goods. Vidal Alejandro's text can be found here: <http://www.espaciolaical.org/contens/14/2226.pdf>

Vidal lists among the advantages of the magazine the opportunity to debate with Cuban-American scholars. He said that, in an indirect way, "Espacio Laical" led to his first face-to-face meeting, in 2010, with Carmelo Mesa-Lago, a Cuban-American Emeritus Professor of Economics and Latin American Studies at the University of Pittsburgh.

Mesa-Lago contributed to the publication and, two years later, he and the Harvard professor Jorge I. Domínguez came to Havana for the first time since they emigrated²² to participate in a week of debates promoted by the church²³.

The economist also said that, after the publication of "Los salarios, los precios y la dualidad monetaria" ("Salaries, Prices and Dual Currency"), he received emails with congratulations and invitations to do public lectures in the provinces (outside Havana).

Although it would be very difficult to generalize, Pavel's mention of the impact of the publication outside Havana is an indicator of the territorial reach of the church, with small parishes throughout Cuba. The Catholic Church is the only entity outside the state to have such a presence, which probably helped to expand the reach of a publication with a circulation of only 4,500 copies. The magazine is also available on a website and its editors send out regular newsletters to registered readers.

Vidal also says that Raúl's speeches promoting economic criticism and the existence of the Catholic publications have encouraged the state media to request more interviews with him and his colleagues. State television, for example, aired a series of interviews on economic reforms between 2010 and 2011, he recalled.

"Several colleagues gave interviews to the state TV and what they said was broadcast. In my case, I was interviewed for an entire morning on the dual currency, but the channels never aired it. As I was told afterwards, Marino Murillo [the quasi "czar" of the economic reforms in Cuba] himself was the one who authorized the interviews. What I was told was that he thought that dual currency should be debated at some point in the future"²⁴.

In other words, the state TV was firm in its intention to offer coverage with the same range of themes and complexity that the government allowed "Espacio Laical". But, as this episode suggested, there were different limits for each outlet — the size of the audience was a criterion, probably.

At this point, it is also essential to remember that the greater editorial freedom enjoyed by the Catholic publication did not translate into greater tolerance for activists and independent journalists/dissidents, who continued to be suppressed

22 Usually it is not easy to get a visa for someone who left Cuba before the 1980s, especially in the case of a high profile Cuban-American.

23 Coverage in the Catholic Magazine "Palabra Nueva" (<http://www.palabranueva.net/contens/1007/000102-2.htm>).

24 Interview with the author.

using the preferred technique of the Raúl government, brief detentions (without due process)²⁵.

The behaviour of the University of Havana's administration has also exposed the ambiguities of the process²⁶. During the first few years of "Espacio Laical" there was no major resistance regarding the collaboration of its academics with the magazine. However, in 2011, the rector Gustavo José Cobreiro decided to prevent the scholars from writing in the publication.

"At a time when Raúl was strengthening ties with the church, the rector had prohibited us from publishing in "Espacio Laical." We see this as an example of the contradictions of the reforms. We did not know if he made the decision on his own, which I doubt, or followed a directive from some sector of the Party. I don't know. This sort of contradiction exists, as we saw with all the changes that could not reach a consensus in the party. There are contradictions, resistance," said Vidal.

The now former editor of the magazine, Roberto Veiga, offered his evaluation in an interview with this author:

"There are multiple opinions inside the government; nonetheless, the attitude of the government was to treat the magazine with respect and tolerance, much more respect than tolerance. When they did not like something, they handled the issue with kid gloves. We never suffered censorship or received pressure. The dean of the University of Havana had tried to block the collaboration of a lot of academics, but we cannot say that was a government policy. His behaviour does not constitute a centralized policy towards the magazine".

In Veiga's mind the magazine helped to include "more actors and more subjects" in the debate in Cuban society. This view is shared by journalists linked with the traditional state media interviewed by this author.

"[Espacio Laical] promoted the debate from different angles. There was an interview with an economist that emigrated and with a philosopher with evident links to the revolution. The interchange has been positive. For instance, they invited me to take part in a dossier about the Cuban press along with experts who are more liberal and less knowledgeable about the world inside the press", said Luis Sexto, a renowned columnist at the state-controlled paper "Juventud Rebelde".

25 According to the CPJ (Committee to Protect Journalists), the Cuban government has refrained from long-term imprisonments of journalists in recent years, though it has continued its practice of short-term detentions.

26 The university, the most important of the country, used to follow a strict policy with the foreign press. Before conceding an interview, the academics had to check whether the foreign journalist, sometimes even the ones accredited to work in the country, had obtained authorization from the Foreign Press Center.

Another journalist, Rafael Grillo, expresses the distrust that the Catholic Church provokes in some leftist intellectuals sectors in Cuba, namely the ones who support the revolution. Nevertheless, he saw the role of the publication as a tool to expand the debate.

"In my opinion, the church and military are natural allies, because there are no other institutions that are so similar with regard to their vertical way of functioning, ideology and the way they manipulate citizens. [...] Saying that I am explaining why the Catholic leadership (years ago repressed by the revolutionary power) is now the group chosen by the government (directed by a military cast) as an interlocutor on certain themes. [...] Even with the objections previously expressed, we must recognize that these media spaces of the church are helping to broaden the spectrum of choice of representation and alternative views of reality and future scenarios of the Cuban nation," said Grillo.

2.3 Opposition, loyalty and consented criticism

The journalist Rafael Grillo is far from alone in his unease in talking about the church-state relationship. Since the Church was enjoying this new prestige, it was natural that intellectuals inside and outside the country and the tiny opposition dedicated some of their time to scrutinize its role and publications.

Where should they place the Catholic Church and some intellectuals who gravitate toward "Espacio Laical" on the political spectrum?

Marc Frank, an experienced American journalist living in Cuba and author of "Cuban Revelations: Behind the Scenes in Havana" (2013), emphasizes the advantages, from the Cuban government point of view, of the strategic pact with the church, which, in his view, defends a clear opposition agenda.

"The Catholic Church is the main opposition group in Cuba. It is a national organization, distributing magazines in each province, with both economic and political support from abroad, openly defending an ideology different from the one professed by the Communist Party. The Church established a pact with the government to support economic reforms, but the institution is always talking about democratic reforms. Raúl formed this alliance because the Catholics here are nationalists, against the blockade. It makes sense. He is building a front, a coalition bigger than the Communist Party." ²⁷

²⁷ Interview with the author, 2013.

From outside the island, the Cuban-American Samuel Farber, from the City University of New York (CUNY), decided to analyse the momentum of the Catholic Church in Cuba, by comparing it with the case of Poland during the two most recent decades since Communist rule. In detail, Farber is interested in the positions taken by leftist intellectuals regarding the Church.

In "The Church and the Critical Left in Cuba,"²⁸ the sociologist recalled, just to start the discussion, that the relevance of the Catholic Church in both countries is significantly different—the almost 80% of Catholics in that European country are not comparable with the tiny portion of active Catholics in Cuba.

However, Farber draws attention to important parallels. He mentions the strategic value of the editorial arm of the Church in both cases—after the repression of the 1968 movements in Poland, some authors, like Adam Michnik, were only able to have their texts published in Catholic magazines.

Regarding the discussion on the opposition and/or pro-openness nature of the church in Cuba, Farber analyses the situation for the medium and long term.

In a broader sense, the sociologist uses the experience of Poland to say that, in an eventual democratic post-Castro future, the church could charge, in his view, a high price to support openness by imposing conservative anti-gay or anti-abortion policies, as was the case in Poland.

Considering the present landscape, Farber stresses the "moderation" and the limits of the support provided by the Catholic Church to dissident groups in Poland. He imagines a similar path in Cuba.

"By the 1970s, the Polish Catholic Church had established a satisfactory *modus vivendi* with the Communist government of Edward Gierek. Contrary to a popular belief, when shipyard workers on the Baltic Coast went on strike in August 1980 demanding the right to form independent trade unions, Cardinal Primate Wyszynski urged them to go back to work without having won their concessions to their demands. Although liberal Catholic intellectuals, like Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Jerzy Turowicz, actively supported the strikes, the church as a whole largely kept its distance. Later, after Solidarity was founded, the church did support it, but remained wary of the radical democratic spirit that inspired it at that time.[20] It is not far-fetched to assume that the Cuban hierarchy would react in a similar fashion to any comparable movement in Cuba, especially when it has already made clear that its conciliatory

28 <http://newpol.org/content/church-and-critical-left-cuba>

approach is incompatible with any clear opposition to the regime" (Farber, 2013)

In fact, the limits of the "confrontation" with the government were first tested in the days before Pope Benedict XVI, in 2012. Groups linked with a very small dissident party had decided to "occupy" churches in the country to convince the Pope to have a meeting with members of the opposition. The most forceful of them stayed for 48 hours in a Havana cathedral. They were criticized by the church, which had demanded that they leave.

"The church had already tarnished its image. During the invasion [of the Havana's cathedral], they assumed the cost [of criticising the demonstrators] and left to the government the almost gentle role of attending a request," said the Cuban sociologist Haroldo Dilla about the discreet work of the government to remove the protesters²⁹.

"Those 'unusual' situations would become more and more common during this time of change. The government and the church must understand that one cannot open small and reserved spaces where criticism is allowed and expect that the outsiders will respect that," he said.

"Espacio Laical" embraced the debate about the church, the opposition and the magazine itself and reflected it in its pages and electronic newsletters.

In July 2013, the magazine published a supplement entitled "Cuba Dreamed, Cuba Possible, Cuba Future," outlining what the country should aspire to, including freedom of speech, political association and private economic rights.

Months later, in its first edition of 2014, Roberto Veiga and Lenier González would propose the concept of "loyal opposition," a term they used to describe themselves.

A basic tenet of "loyal opposition," in their view, must be rejection of the US blockade. Another tenet is the acceptance of socialism as the path/tool to achieve a welfare society. They defend, in a nutshell, a "persistent and patient" process of social and political change.

The texts created a huge controversy. Haroldo Dilla, the Cuban sociologist, wrote that the term "loyal opposition" was a "marketing ploy". In Dilla's academic and journalistic work, the church, the magazine and aligned intellectuals are not seen as opposition at all, but represent the "consented criticism," alongside the state magazine *Temas* and some economists from CEEC.

"These are important critical segments for their impact on public opinion on the island," Dilla conceded, but, "despite their criticism, [they] recognize the Cuban

²⁹ Interview with the author.

government as legitimate interlocutors do not aspire, at least not in an explicit way, to power"³⁰.

An article written by Dilla with similar ideas was distributed as an "Espacio Laical" newsletter, as demonstration by the editor that the objective of promoting a plural debate with clear parameters was for real.

2.4 The future

Even more relevant than the intellectual debate over the texts seems to be the reaction inside the Catholic hierarchy, an institution dealing with its own transition.

According to Veiga, a key point for the development of the magazine was the support of the archbishop of Havana, Jaime Ortega. The problem is that Ortega has formally requested removal from office, as is normal for Catholic bishops who turn 75. It is up to Pope Francis to decide whether to reject or accept his application for retirement and appoint a new archbishop to the post. As of the completion of this paper, Ortega is expected to leave in the medium term.

It was in this environment charged with expectation that discussions within the church about the role of the magazine in Cuba intensified. For the more conservative sectors of society, both the "Cuba Possible" project and the debate over the "loyal opposition" went beyond the role of Catholics in Cuba and put them in the uncomfortable position of openly occupying a political role.

In June 2014, the two editors of "Espacio Laical" made the decision to leave the magazine alluding directly to this internal dispute.

"The main reason behind our resignation as editors is linked to the controversy that the publication's socio-political commentaries have stirred up in certain sectors of the Cuba's ecclesiastical community. This controversy has given rise to tensions that have been brought to bear on Havana's Archbishop and ourselves. As such, we felt and continue to feel that it is morally inappropriate to continue editing a publication that was causing divisions within the ecclesiastical community, where there are those who feel the church should not involve itself "in politics" and those who believe it should not open itself up to all sectors of Cuba's civil society. At this juncture and in view of the above, we came to the understanding that it was impossible to continue with Espacio Laical's editorial line as we have done to date."³¹

30 "Cuba: los nuevos campos de la oposición política", Haroldo Dilla Alfonso, ARI 30/2014 – 23/6/2014.

31 <http://cafefuerte.com/cuba/15023-documentos-cruce-de-cartas-sobre-espacio-laical/>

The new director of the magazine, Gustavo Andujar, did not hide the internal rift by announcing that "no one is indispensable". Shortly after, Andujar suggested that the magazine would devote more space to art, science and religious ethics, rather than an overwhelming focus on economics and politics³².

Analysts and the group interviewed for this paper have minimized the possible participation or influence of the government in changes at "Espacio Laical". The evaluations converged on the notion that the internal dynamics of the church, in this case the victory of the more conservative and 'institutionalist' sectors of society, had generated a result that pleased some in the government who have been arguing that the magazine was going too far.

By the end of July of 2014, the magazine, already under new management, launched the last edition prepared by Veiga and González, reporting on a forum organized by the duo in March in Havana—a disclaimer that it was the work of the former editors appeared just beside the title on the website. "Chile: lessons of the transition. Could this be useful to the debate in Cuba?" was one of the texts, providing a good idea of the general tone of the issue.

Another open question about the future depends on the plans for Cuba of Pope Francis, a Latin-American with outspoken views when it comes to social affairs.

"Paradoxically, 'Espacio Laical' actively involved in promoting alternative policies that combine demands for greater political freedoms with the preservation of the social gains is in line with the request of Pope Francis, in the sense that the church is not restricted to preaching in the churches. Roberto Veiga and González Lenier paid the price for promoting that vision prematurely," argues Arturo Lopez Levy³³, co-author of "Raúl Castro and the New Cuba: A Close-Up View of Change" (2011) and adviser on the editorial board of the magazine.

Even after leaving the magazine, Veiga sounded hopeful regarding the influence of the arrival of Francis in Rome: "It is too soon to see the marks of Pope Francisco in Cuba. He has many challenges ahead, and Cuba is one of them".

Veiga and González have announced the creation of a platform called "Cuba Possible" to collect ideas for the future of Cuba. It is still unclear if it will be a magazine. It remains to be seen how the government will deal with the initiative of the Holy See and institutional limits.

32 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/critical-forum-may-end-cuban-magazine-changes>

33 Interview with the author.

Chapter 3 - From blogs to “offline” internet

3.1 The Internet Landscape

After visiting Havana for the first time in June 2014, Google executive Eric Schmidt wrote: "The Internet of Cuba is trapped in the 1990s." At first, it is difficult to disagree with the image of the head of Internet giant who says he wants to promote free internet on the island—despite the controversies of his search engine company in the U.S. and China.

The communist island is the least connected country in the Western Hemisphere. According to the government, 25% of Cubans have access to internet,³⁴ a figure widely disputed because it includes access to the Cuban intranet, not the World Wide Web. Freedom House estimates that 3% of the population is effectively using internet services through exasperatingly slow connections, a figure hardly comparable even with the worst connection rates of African countries because of the poor technological infrastructure on the island.

By the time this paper was concluded, household connections were approved only for foreigners residing in Cuba and certain professional categories, including some official reporters. Because of the embargo imposed by the U.S. since 1961 and hardened by Helms Burton Act in 1996, there are no connections via fibre optic cable between the island and the U.S. mainland. The optical fibre serving the country comes from its political ally Venezuela and began operating only two years ago.

In addition to schools and workplaces, Cubans can access internet in hotels and a hundred paid access centres throughout the country. Besides compulsory identification and other constraints like censorship, the most important barrier, if not the primary one, is economic: one hour of internet can cost one third of the average Cuban salary (US\$20).

When it comes to cell phones, the statistics improve a little, but again Cuba is far behind neighbours as poor as Haiti. Only in 2008, Cubans were allowed to have cell phone lines. In 2014, 2 million people or 18% of the population were estimated to have a cell phone. In the same year, a state email service for mobile phones was launched with great success in Cuba—yet the island is the only country in the Western Hemisphere without a 3G service.

34 ONE, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas.

Havana has neither the money nor the technology to impose a system of labour intensive censorship like Beijing³⁵. The island has its version of Wikipedia (Ecured) and Facebook (RedSocial), but the services are not particularly popular. Havana, a tourist centre with a dynamic diaspora, cannot depend on isolation to maintain control like Pyongyang does.

In Cuba, the use of Google and Gmail are allowed. The sites Facebook and Twitter were authorized in 2009, but Skype, for example, remains blocked, apparently more for financial reasons, so as not to reduce income from long distance calls for the state-owned telephone company rather than for the sake of content control.

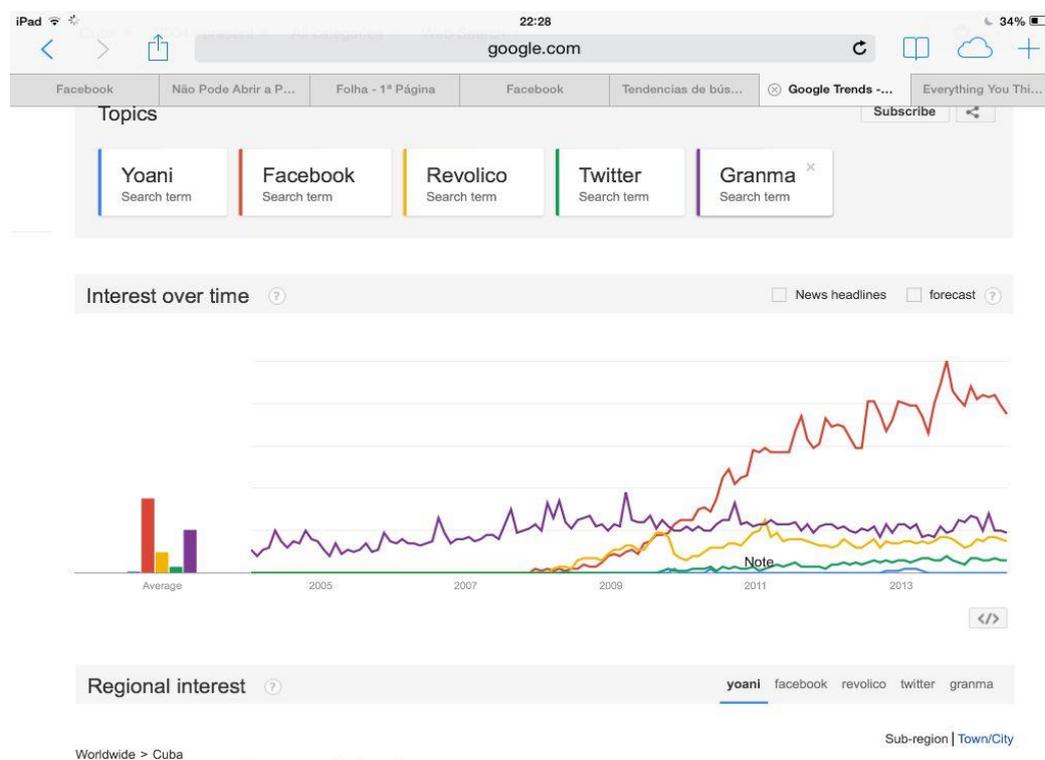
As for traditional foreign media and blogs, there appears to be no clear criteria. For instance, the site of the most famous critical blogger, Yoani Sánchez, was unblocked in 2009, but there were reports of problems accessing the digital newspaper she launched in 2014—we will discuss this topic later in this section. Likewise, you can access the BBC website (bbcmundo), but not the anti-Castro newspaper "El Nuevo Herald".

The picture above is, for obvious reasons, provisional and precarious: there is no accurate information from the Cuban government regarding access, and statistics on the use of social networks in Cuba is no less opaque. Neither Twitter nor Facebook disclose, free of charge, numbers of users in the country or other data.

What we do know, based on the basic statistics of Google searches (Chart 1) and after the release of Facebook in 2009, is that searches for the site experienced a jump. Based on this rate, we can say that this social network site, as in the rest of the world, is more popular than Twitter.

35 To read about Beijing's methods, see the work of Gary King, at Harvard: <http://gking.harvard.edu/publications/how-censorship-china-allows-government-criticism-silences-collective-expression> and <http://gking.harvard.edu/publications/randomized-experimental-study-censorship-china>

CHART 1



Interestingly enough, we see that Revolico.com, an online shopping website in Cuba that was banned by the government, has more recorded searches than the official newspaper "Granma". Searches for the blogger Yoani Sánchez are numerous enough to appear and she is probably not as irrelevant as the government would like. Even more notable is the fact that searches for Yoani peaked in early 2013, just when she was finally allowed to travel abroad and pay visits that received international coverage.

Beyond these fragile statistics, there are indirect and incomplete methods for extracting data from social networks—both through the application of free software or the use of paid tools.

Despite the limitations, this paper decided to use two paid tools to draw an instant portrait of internet use on the island. This seemed relevant because there is always the discussion of whether the "noise" on the internet in Cuba is from the island or abroad.

Thanks to the generosity of the companies Geofeedia and Trendsmap, which granted us access for free, we were able to explore some characteristics of network usage in Cuba for a short period of time. Some of the aspects gleaned from this

limited use are reported below, but should be seen for what as they are: an inaccurate glimpse which may indicate actors and trends to be monitored in the future.

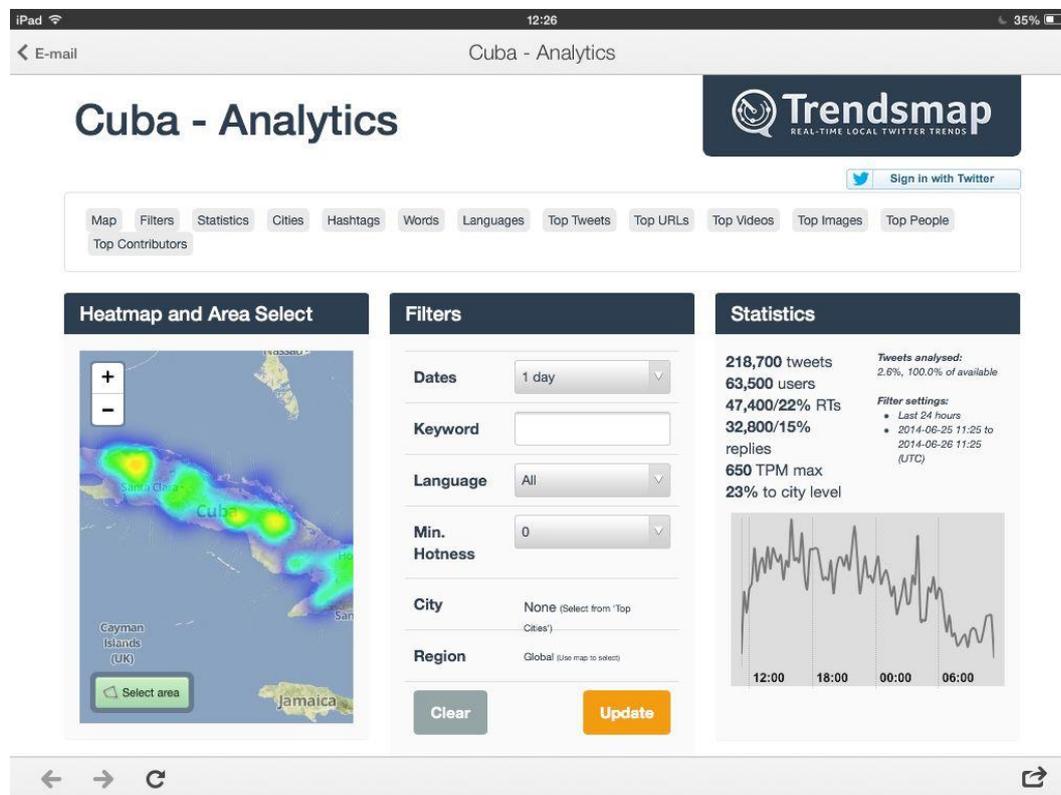
It is crucial to note that the tools work with different methods of data collection based on geographical data. It was natural to expect that a country without broad political or press freedoms—as well as legal and financial restrictions to internet access—that users would avoid using any type of information that allow screening. Some interviews conducted for this paper confirm this common sense approach.

3.2 Twitter trends

Let us first discuss what a simplified version of TrendMaps and TrendMaps Analytics showed us. The tool tracks all geo-located tweets with a proportion of tweets located to the closest city level. Typically, according to TrendsMap, they get about 30-40% of city level tweets and 40-50% of country level tweets and this is based purely on those people who enter their location on their Twitter profile (an inaccurate measure, since the user can choose their location; for instance, I could put in my Twitter account that I am in Cuba, and not in Oxford at this moment).

In our case, 30-40% people entered Havana and 40-50% entered Cuba. From this amount, the tool analysed 2.6% of the tweets. Despite this tiny sample size, two major aspects emerged in this snap shot, as shown in the chart below.

Chart 2



According to TrendsMap, in the 24 hours between the 25th and 26th of June, 218,000 tweets were written with a Havana or Cuba location. The tool counted 63,500 users. On this list of the "ten most popular Twitter accounts" for June 25, we can see the strong presence of content produced by state media outlets. Among the popular Twitter accounts in Cuba on this particularly day, four out of ten have links with the government (five, if we consider the Twitter account of Venezuela's president, Nicolas Maduro, as an official or allied source). There is a clear effort by state media outlets, such as Cuba Debate, to try to engage readers through popular events like the FIFA World Cup (the Twitter account uses the FIFA's World Cup logo).

Based on this ranking and analysing other data from TrendsMap Analytics through this week of June, we also identified the opposition Twitter account @yusnaby as an influential user.

Yusnaby Pérez, with 147,000 followers (it is uncertain how many of those are actually in Cuba), describes himself as "democracy lover," has a blog and is a very prolific Twitter user, with dozen of messages per day, most of them simple messages

and photos about the difficulties of day-to-day life in Cuba, decrepit buildings and sarcasm with socialist slogans³⁶.

"In our research, Yusnaby also appears as an important Twitter user, who uses images heavily," said Elaine Díaz, Cuban blogger³⁷, researcher and Digital Journalism professor at the University of Havana.

In the TrendsMap account during that week of June, images tweeted by Yusnaby appeared as the most shared.

Díaz also said that the strong presence of state controlled or state related Twitter accounts among the most popular in Cuba is not a surprise, because an important part of the internet access in Cuba occurs at workplaces and it stands to reason that a significant part of the authorized users are not hesitant to share state generated content.

3.3 A map of social networks in Havana

Geofeedia is a paid tool that finds data that is publicly available and can be identified by exact location in Social media. Posts using GPS-enabled devices generate most of Geofeedia's content. The tool currently searches Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Picasa, Flickr and Viddy. In an unusual measure, Geofeedia executives allowed this paper to use its technology for free for several days in June and July of 2014³⁸.

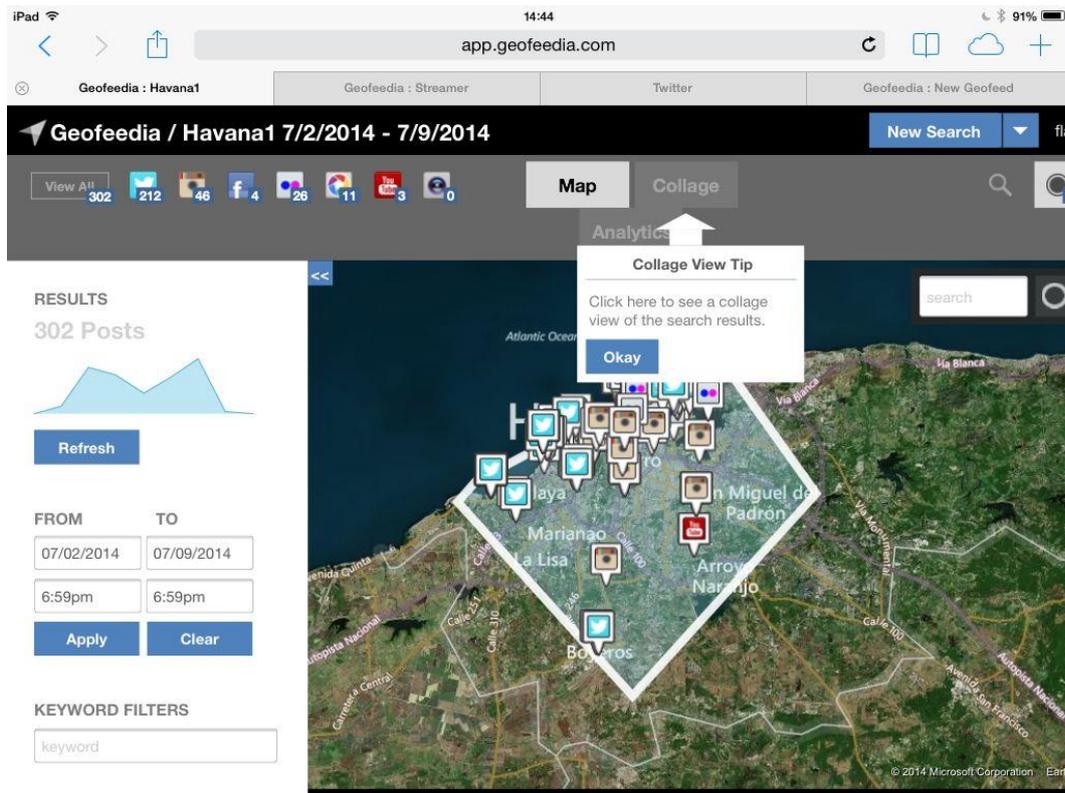
Using Geofeedia, we outlined an area in Havana, the capital of Cuba, and briefly analysed the results.

36 A simple analysis of the Yusnaby network leads us to conclude that this blogger is very close to famous Cuban American politicians in Miami.

37 Interview with the author.

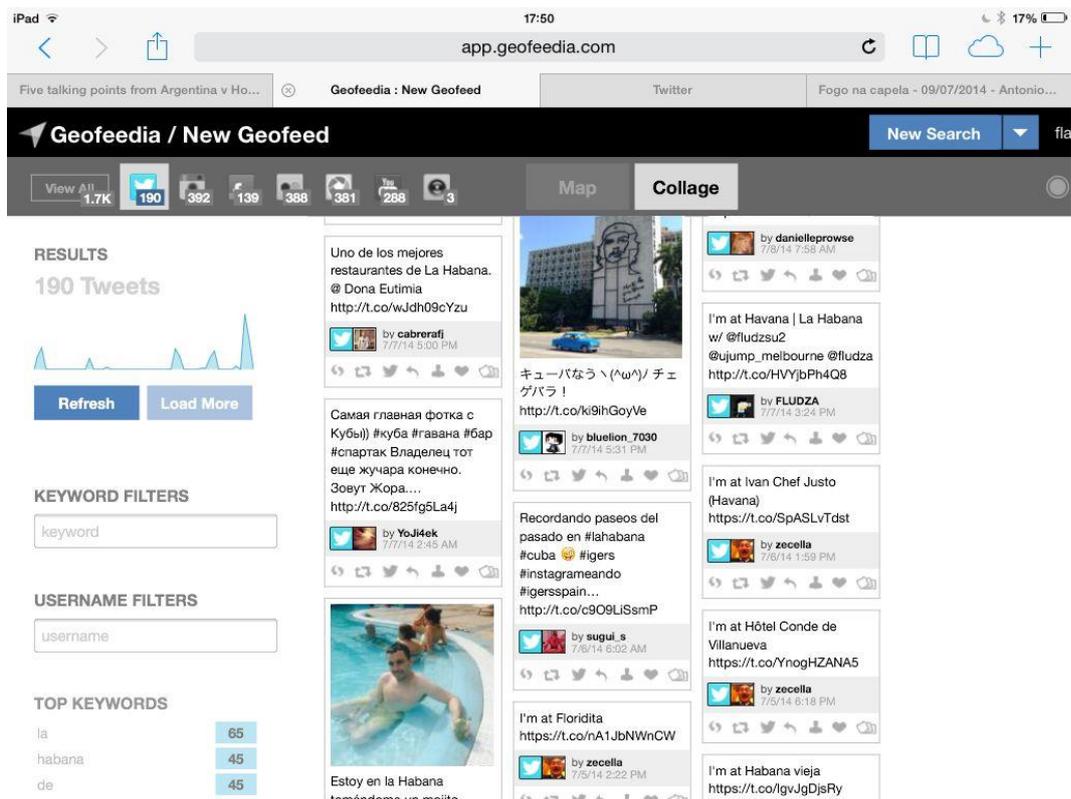
38 All social media services, and most GPS enabled devices, have privacy settings that allow users to turn off geo-location, and certain social media services permit the user to define their posts as private. Private data, or data without an identified location, will not be visible to you on Geofeedia.

CHART 3



One of the major aspects is a preponderance of posts related to tourism and tourists. One of the theories for that concerns the main characteristic of the tool, which collected data with GPS coordinates. As we pointed out above, monitoring or following regular local users, who are less willing to give their exact location than in other parts of the world, is probably a limitation.

CHART 4



A basic comparison between the data collected in a small area in Miami, known as Little Havana, and a considerably bigger area in the real Havana shows, or confirms, that the density of use of social networks in Cuba's capital is still very low.

3.4 New players in the Cuba's media environment on the internet

Thanks to recent studies by Bert Hoffman (2004, 2007, 2011), Ted Henken (2010, 2011), Elaine Díaz (2011, 2014), and others, we now know a lot more about the size and the behaviour of the Cuban bloggers on the island. There are at least 2,000 blogs about Cuba, both on the island and abroad, with different levels of support or opposition to Cuba's government.

There are semi-official blogs and Twitters accounts, like those of Yoandry Fontana, who attracts a certain amount of distrust: Is he a blogger for real or an agent of the government? There are also bloggers who do not consider themselves "opposition" or "dissident," but write with relative freedom and treat the government with severe criticism, like Elaine Díaz sometimes does in "La Polemica Digital," or those who are openly critical and persecuted in some way by the government like Yoani Sánchez, the most famous dissident in Cuba since 2000 (Hoffman, 2013).

This environment with email lists, blogs and "offline" interaction has been developing since 2006. In general terms, we agree with Bert Hoffmann (2011) and those interviewed for this paper who argue that the digital world, despite its size, is relevant in Cuba. To bolster this perception, Díaz just presented her Master of Philosophy dissertation in January 2014 at the University of Havana, entitled: "Derechos sexuales en Cuba: del silencio a la red," which is a complete study about the unusually strong controversy over a vote by Cuba in favour of an amendment that left out the specific mention of sexual orientation in a United Nations General Assembly resolution on extrajudicial, arbitrary or summary executions in 2010.

Díaz, a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University in 2014/2015, mapped the interaction between the tiny digital world in Cuba, the foreign press, an institution headed by Raúl Castro's daughter, Mariela, and the government to conclude that the "digital noise" does matter.

With this picture in mind, this section now turns to two news players in the digital media world in Havana: the digital newspaper by Yoani Sánchez, "14 y Medio," and the semi-official magazine "Cuba Contemporanea".

Our perception is that after the "blog era," there are signs that the digital world is entering in a new phase, where digital newspapers and/or magazines are fighting over readership and market share on the island and abroad with state-controlled media outlets.

3.5 Yoani wants a newsroom

Launched in May 2014, "14 y Medio" is the digital newspaper published by Yoani Sánchez, which she defines as a means to overcome "barricade journalism," a metaphor to describe journalism in "times of war" or under "exceptional circumstances," which is more interested in denouncing than following the basic rules of accuracy of the Western style journalism manuals.

In 2012, Yoani Sánchez announced that she would use the funds raised from the journalism awards she has received to create a digital newspaper in Cuba. She and her husband, the journalist and blogger Reinaldo Escobar, himself a former employee of the state media, launched a product with a clean design, in line with journalistic standards and services found in Western markets.

The inclusion of cultural programming for Havana, as a sign that the outlet also wants to be a useful service, merits special attention. When reading the site, the feeling one gets is that the blogger does not want to talk only to the converted—with very strong opinions against the regime—but to show that journalism can be a useful tool both in daily life or enhance the comprehension of government policy if it meets basic rules, in a sharp contrast with the state media.

A basic analysis of the menu offered at the site in July 2014 shows that the team, which also includes journalists who do not identify themselves to avoid reprisals, is looking for a tone. The piece on the departure of the directors of the magazine "Espacio Laical" is a good example of an effort to go beyond the opinions of Yoani herself, who has criticized, in the past, the conduct of magazines she considered too "safe" and "friendly" with the government.

In an interview with this paper, the Cuban economist Pavel Vidal, a critic of the government, said that, after a quick review, the texts of Yoani's newspaper seemed to be contaminated with stereotypes and lack analysis, more oriented towards an foreign audience "expecting to confirm a certain view on Cuba" than towards someone like him. This suggests, to some extent, the challenge that lies ahead for "14 y Medio" in terms of readership.

With regard to reach, there are two interesting points to be addressed: 1 - the success or failure of Yoani in her strategy of distributing her product through the island's "offline internet," the content distribution chain that uses flash drives and hard disks, which we discuss at the end of this chapter; 2 - the treatment of the new medium by the government. At the launch, the website was hacked, presumably by people connected with the government or at least aligned. Readers in Cuba were redirected to a page called "Yoanilandia," which contained accusations that the blogger receives money from the US³⁹.

As Bert Hoffmann said in an interview, it is "too early" to tell what kind of approach the government would adopt toward the digital newspaper: it could receive "de facto" tolerance, as happened with the blog after a lockout period, or something less permissive⁴⁰.

3.6 In search of the market, with official blessing

To the picture of the new media available on the internet in Cuba, we must add at least three publications—the magazines "Cuba Contemporanea," "OnCuba" and "Progreso Semanal". All of them present themselves as market products with head offices located abroad—Spain and USA, respectively—but a large amount of the content is generated locally in Cuba. More importantly, judging only by the advertising from Cuban state companies and the way they claim to be accredited by

39 To see more about the launch of "14 y Medio": <http://cpj.org/blog/2014/05/cuban-blogger-yoani-sanchez-launches-independent-n.php> and <http://www.newsweek.com/new-independent-digital-newspaper-cuba-quickly-hacked-252147>

⁴⁰ In December 2014, the government of Cuba for the first time issued accreditation to an official cultural event "14 y Medio". This is a positive development, but it is too early to say what would be the approach of the government with the website. <http://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/cuba-acreditacion-diario-yoanisanchez-festivalcine.html>

the strict Foreign Press Centre, it can be concluded that these three publications enjoy excellent relations with the communist government.

The three publications have print versions with limited sizes, so what interests us here is the presence of journalistic material about Cuba available and permitted on the island's internet.

As pointed out in an interview by Elaine Díaz, journalists who work or have worked in the official press are also on the staff of that magazine, another sign of the fluid relationship with the government. Recognized actors in Cuban's cultural life are also members of staff.

The less laudatory style, quality of reporting and variety of themes represents a clear contrast to the official press. "A fresh view of Cuba," preaches the description "OnCuba," available for purchase in Miami and in the US book chain Barnes and Noble.

A central theme here is advertising. If in Cuba they do not allow advertising in the official media or other types of vehicles, these new media are eager to attract foreign and local business advertisements, and especially owners of new small businesses authorized by the government. To some extent, these unofficial, or at least without the official seal, publications try to fill that void.

Take the example of "Cuba Contemporanea". The magazine, whose website says the owner is a Spanish publishing company in Valencia (Spain), presents itself as receiving "editorial assistance" from the Casa de las Americas, one of the most prestigious cultural institutions in Cuba.

In an interview, Maria Caridad González, project director for "Cuba Contemporanea" on the island, said they had printed 10,000 copies monthly since 2012 and they have plans to increase it to 15,000 soon. According to her, the magazines are distributed on flights of the national airline Cubana de Aviacion, a state company.

At 108 pages, the well-designed magazine covers cultural topics, and has a section devoted to private entrepreneurs. Among the three new publications mentioned here, "Cuba Contemporanea" is the one that sounds most "official." Special mention should be made to the explicit advertisement policy of the magazine, which offers "news coverage" to whoever decides to advertise. "If a client contracts a banner for a month, we will cover four company events and interview managers"⁴¹.

In short, it is worthwhile to follow how these publications evolve and what their impact will be, if any, on the traditional state media, for both print and internet publishing.

41 <http://www.cubacontemporanea.com/anuncios>.

3.7 "Offline" internet

Elaine Díaz worked for seven years a professor of digital journalism at the University of Havana. It was a task that flirted with a sort of magical realism, in a school with few hours available to use the internet connection, which was exasperatingly slow when downloading or running more complex programs.

To explain the main tools, she says she drew models and functions on the blackboard: a class in digital journalism, but taught "offline".

The story serves as an image for the Cuban situation as a whole. As far as technology and expanding access are concerned, Cuba is stuck in the 1990s, as the Google executive said earlier in this chapter. But like Díaz, a significant number of Cubans, who have high levels of education and constant contact with other countries, is fully aware of the situation they are in and are constantly thinking what they could do to close the gap.

One of the increasingly popular ways to do this in Cuba is to participate in a sort of "offline internet": the extensive offline network based on the sharing of information and entertainment through pen drives, memory cards, hard disks and cell phones (even without an active cell phone account).

The users of this network avail themselves of any technology at hand, including Bluetooth. The data transmission technology using low-power radio waves, ignored in the rest of the world with the popularisation of 3G and 4G, is still extremely popular in Cuba.

Free and untraceable, Bluetooth allows the transfer of megabytes of video, books and music. It makes the cell phone, even one without a phone number, an important element of the net.

And it is through this network that adolescents who do not have e-mail accounts and have never visited Youtube, keep up to date, with a lag of only a few days, and consume the same American entertainment as anyone else.

In this underground network there is room for simple camaraderie—those who have new songs or series or something they've received from a relative abroad share their stuff—and, of course, make a little money in return.

The products are designed to fit different budgets. A pirate CD almost always costs one US dollar. If it is a more difficult program to find, it can cost three times this amount.

The package, usually released on Mondays, will depreciate over the week as the content "gets old" and its distribution, including "for free," increases⁴².

The force of the offline world also appears in the development of apps that, once installed, are also useful offline⁴³.

"All you have to do is call. A guy will arrive at your door, on a motorcycle, carrying a hard disk. Then he will transfer the complete programming to your computer," explains Alejandro Solís, a consumer of the "packages", in an interview with the author in 2013.

Solis and other interviews conducted during that trip would repeat the same thing: 'everything circulates'. The verb "irrigate" is the term preferred by Cubans to talk about the off-line network, but rarely does someone risk themselves or their business by including subjects that could irritate the government, such as sensitive political material.

One of the "irrigators" of the network, Yordane Carrazana, a young man from Havana, who at the time made money by recording and selling CDs, explained he is looking for new material every week. He buys packages of data, with films, music, series and Brazilian soap operas. Although he has an illegal internet connection at home, Carranza depends on his providers, who have access to a connection that allows them to download larger files. The typical profile of a major provider is a public servant who, as an administrator of a network, has a better connection and makes a living passing on content—other actors can pass on smaller amounts of content recorded directly from illegal satellite TV dishes.

"We aren't behind the times at all compared to the rest of the world. I believe that as we don't have other distractions like the Internet or cable TV, Cubans place more value on music; they are very demanding," he said. "The people that I buy from are on the Internet all day long. Reggaeton won't last for long. Every month there is a new hit, and I've got to have it."

His statement is in line with what anthropologist Anna Cristina Pertierra wrote in "Cuba: The Struggle for Consumption," her research on consumption on the island published in 2011. In a chapter devoted to the consumption of media, she says:

"Although there are undoubtedly deeply illegal activities that do take place within the circuits of media I have described—anti-Castro satire, political documentaries and pornography do of course travel along these routes—for the most part media

42 For more information, read Folha's 2013 piece, <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/fsp/ilustrissima/96525-as-tramas-da-rede-cubana.shtml> and the BBC's correspondent Fernando Ravsberg's piece in 2014; <http://oncubamagazine.com/deep-down/the-cuban-youtube/>

43 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yoani-sanchez/the-ten-most-popular-andr_b_4581921.html

sharing and consumption is not problematic because of the content enjoyed". (Pertierra, 2011, p. 235)

Pertierra describes the consumption of media and entertainment as a tool of "social differentiation," and it is not difficult to see that in the "depreciating process" of the package or in the eagerness of Cubans to acquire and exhibit new hardware.

"The growing material inequality between citizens in contemporary Cuba and the resulting social differentiation is being mapped primarily through the new leisure practices made possible by media and communication technologies in a society where cash is only a partial indicator of economic status". (Pertierra, 2011, p. 247)

Reports, academic literature and interviews used for this paper agree that the "offline" internet currently contains little political information. However, Cuban networks, whether online or "offline," are not devoid of political content.

The island already has its "offline viral" politicians and political satire. Allegations of corruption of leaders, with photos and documents, or unpleasant news for the government, such as the recent cholera outbreak, pass from one mobile device to the memory of another.

Among the essentially political videos, one of the most celebrated and innovative starred a then important pro-government student leader, Eliécer Ávila. In 2008, Ávila, president of the Communist Youth Union at UCI, Cuba's leading information technology university, questioned a senior official about the regime's policies, such as the ban against travel abroad without authorization from the government (which only ended last January) and restrictions on the use of the internet.

The video ended up on the network—and was seen outside of Cuba—but primarily circulated from hand to hand on the island.

"The most important result of this meeting [recorded on video] was the start of a new stage in the history of public political debate in Cuba. To be able to say those words and continue studying at the university extended the limits of debate," said Ávila in an interview.

After the video became popular, he says he was able to graduate, but was then quickly sent to the interior of the country, as part of compulsory social work after graduation. Ávila considers the transfer a disguised punishment and broke away definitively from the government.

It is because of this current situation where the "offline" internet is seen as a potential transmitter of political information that the network is increasingly disputed territory—in the same way the traditional internet is.

Therefore, the communist government, activists like Yoani Sánchez, anti-Castro Miami and Washington all move their pieces around.

Sánchez, a savvy digital activist, has followed the phenomenon since the beginning and her posts have always circulated on flash drives as part of a select portion of the offline network. As mentioned above, now she wants to make her digital newspaper a part of "the package".

Activists are promoting "packages of take-away internet," with a lot of severe criticism of the government.

As for the U.S., its interest in developing and funding programs related to "digital democracy" on the island is the centrepiece of the political battle with the Raúl Castro government.

There are illustrative episodes where Washington has tried to influence both the offline methods of transmitting information as well as the online, all with the purpose of reaching the declared foreign policy goal of a regime change in Cuba.

It was as an agent of one of these "digital pro-democracy" programs that the American Alan Gross was arrested in Cuba in 2009. He was caught illegally distributing, according to Cuban law, cell phones and equipment to access the Internet via satellite (cutting-edge technology used by the Pentagon) in the small Cuban Jewish community.

Later, in 2014, the Associated Press broke the story about ZunZuneo, a complete piece about this social network that is similar to Twitter, but uses SMS, funded by the U.S. aid agency USAID.

The idea seems to have been inspired by the successful sending of bulk SMS in Cuba, mainly to promote parties and shows, which rarely awakened a surge of censorship in the state-owned phone company—another "offline" version to spread current or Whatsapp events on Facebook.

With Zunzuneo, the idea was to spread "tweets" in Cuba and try to promote a "Cuban spring"⁴⁴.

At its peak, ZunZuneo, launched in 2009, had some 40,000 Cuban subscribers. It was closed in 2012 after around two years of operation. The idea was aborted because the U.S. was paying the Cuban phone company to run the service, not a good thing considering the embargo.

44 <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/us-secretly-created-cuban-twitter-stir-unrest>

The two episodes were fully exploited by the Cuban Government, which once again stated that the opposition bloggers are all paid by Washington and warned about the subversive plots behind "Promoting free internet".

Considering the advances and retreats of the government regarding the Internet, this paper tends to agree with the researcher Elaine Díaz, who witnessed students using Zunzuneo at journalism school and, in an interview, considered Zunzuneo "bad news," as it was more fuel for the hard liners.

"Foreign initiatives, even the positive ones, can complicate things," Díaz said, commenting on the initiative of U.S. NGOs who were campaigning to raise pen drives, old computers and mobile phones to distribute in Cuba.

Recently, there have been reports about the government's effort to dismantle illegal Wi-Fi networks in Havana. Regarding the "offline internet," there are no reports, as of the completion of this paper, about concrete government actions to curb the circuit, especially what appears to be its most successful product, the "package of the week".

The government, however, spoke publicly on the issue in 2014. The former Minister of Culture and now advisor to the President, Abel Prieto, referred to the "package of the week" and attributed its success to the poor quality of the material available in the state media. He said that trying to restrict "the package" was not the best way out. "We already know what happens when you forbid things".

Although the offline internet is difficult to track and document, it is noteworthy that the phenomenon is now on the government's radar screen, and is now included in public speeches.

Perhaps even more relevant is the fact that the "offline" network is being used to distribute advertising for new businesses authorized by the government—in the absence of a clear legal framework for advertising. There's even a magazine on culture and celebrities, Vistar, produced only for circulation in the package, a type of "native" media—using the jargon for this type of initiative on the traditional internet.

More research is needed on the size of the group that is actually providing the content for the "packages" and how diverse this market is. Analysing this information would make it possible to infer how easy it would be for the government to repress the service. Or, seen from another angle, to what extent the "curators" of the "package," are interested in keeping it out of trouble with the government, through auto-censorship or co-option.

Apparently, the entrepreneurs of the package seem to be guided by market criteria. In this case, it would be valuable to know how receptive the population would be to material that directly questioned not the country's problems, but the legitimacy of the government, which is virtually impossible through traditional surveys.

At this point, there are observations to consider, harvested during fieldwork and interviews for this paper. The first is from the journalist Luis Sexto, who depicted Cuba as being in a "precarious balance": there is a profound crisis, but for now, there is balance. Roberto Veiga, a former editor of the Catholic magazine "Espacio Laical," thinks there is still no consensus among unhappy Cubans about where to go.

Speaking on the situation, the veteran journalist Marc Frank uses the concept of the "grey zone":

"We could call most of the population of Cuba dissident. Because they have been living in crisis for 20 years now and they want change. They do not necessarily want the changes that developed countries want. They have their own vision. They want to keep education, Cuba's health care system, keep its Civil Defence. This is the grey area: the mass of people in Cuba who say it's time for change. The political battle between the Communist Party and all other actors is to know who will captivate these people".⁴⁵

In any case, the media and the flow of information are always listed among factors linked to the emergence of social and political movements. The question that remains open, not only for Cuba but for the whole world, is the role that journalism (traditional or otherwise) circulating in modern and antiquated networks plays in the fermentation of social mobilization.

In the case of Cuba, a wise quote here comes from Nael Jebril, Václav Stetka and Matthew Loveless, who have argued that little is known about the transmission dynamics of political content and the role of the media and the messages in transition processes or political opening.

"Despite the significant effort the Communist governments put into deterring these broadcasts, by jamming their signals as well as imposing harsh penalties on their listeners (Downing, 1996), there is a need to enhance our knowledge about the dynamics of media landscapes and audiences in transitional contexts. Future studies should further our understanding about how information-seeking behaviour and/or preferences for political information consumption are affected by rapid changes to political and information environments in democratising contexts, and how audiences make sense of complex media transformations that accompany political transitions". (Jebril, Stetka, Loveless, 2013)

45 Interview with the author

On the other hand, it is important to remember that authoritarian governments are uncomfortable with the horizontal exchange of information—in this specific case, either by internet or the traditional Cuban version.

This perception became more acute after protests and revolutions that have used the network and multimodal forms of communication and organization, with multiple foci of emission, at least as an instrument. For some, like Manuel Castells (2013), there is no doubt that more than an instrument, the networks did bolster the processes by acting on the emotions of the demonstrations—diminishing fear and cost of association and leveraging indignation.

Given the situation, this paper agrees with the view of Bert Hoffmann:

"This study does not support the simplistic argument of technological determinism that technology in itself will act as a key driver of social change. Instead, the Cuban case confirms the "first law of technology" formulated by Kranzberg (1986) according to which "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (Kranzberg 1986, p. 544). At the same time the Cuban experience highlights the role of ICT in facilitating a healthy activation of civic spirit. Even in regimes that severely restrain and control citizens' access to the Web, ICT can help people to articulate their claims to a public voice as a citizen right". (Hoffmann, 2013)

Conclusions

It is obviously impossible to predict what will happen in Cuba in the coming years, as we know the risks from hesitant liberalization "from above," as Raúl Castro's reforms seem to imply. The political transition expected to take place in 2018, when Fidel's brother has promised to resign, 59 years after the victory of the guerrilla movement, is particularly important.

This is the main reason why this paper decided to offer an analytical overview of the state of the media and internet in Raúl Castro's Cuba from 2008 to 2014 and give some aspects to track in the coming years rather than try, in an adventurous way, to guess how they will evolve.

In conclusion, it is generally safe to say that the monopoly on the circulation of information exercised by the Cuban state is by no means absolute. However, there are not enough surveys to determine how much access Cubans have to other sources of information.

During our research, it became clear how economic reforms, implemented by Fidel's brother since 2008, have contributed to improving the range of themes and the freedom of critical material available in Cuba's state press, including television.

In general terms, one can criticize the economy, complain about bureaucracy and the media itself, as Raúl Castro does often, but discussions about the political system are not tolerated.

In 2014, all the official websites for media outlets were re-designed. The government is clearly moving to publish more entertainment and sports to engage their readership. The main official website, Cuba Debate, changed its logo for the 2014 World Cup, for example. Are these steps toward a press with sustainable market and economic goals, like the main state-controlled Chinese outlets? It is too soon to say.

Regarding the broadcasting of Telesur, which started in Cuba in 2013, we consider that—although it is controlled by Havana's close strategic ally, the Venezuelan government, and biased—the channel represents a fresh approach to the Cuban audience. At least Telesur shows the opposition and protests in other countries and the Cubans are able to follow live coverage for the first time in decades.

This paper also recounted an important chapter of Cuban media history under Raúl Castro: the Catholic magazine "Espacio Laical". It is an essential look at one of the most interesting relationships in the country between the elite of the Communist Party and the re-empowered Catholic Church.

The publication has been mixing the opinions of Cuban intellectuals linked with the government with those of "moderate" voices in the internal opposition and from the

diaspora. Economic reforms, private property, direct democracy, opposition and the press have all been discussed.

During my research, the two main directors of the publication were sacked from their posts and there was some expectation that "Espacio Laical" would take a more "low profile" approach to politics. At the time this paper was concluded, the panorama was full of uncertainty, mainly because the Catholic Church in Cuba—and in Rome, with the new leadership of Pope Francis—was navigating its own sort of transition.

Regarding the Internet, we are in uncharted territory where there is no accurate information from the Cuban government. The statistics on the use of social networks in Cuba is no less opaque. Neither Twitter nor Facebook disclose, free of charge, numbers of users in the country or other data.

Because of that, this paper decided to use tools to analyse the traffic of information in Cuba on the internet. Despite the short span of time for the research and other limitations, we judged this approach relevant because there is always a dispute regarding how much the "noise" on the internet in Cuba is from the island or from abroad.

We used geolocation tools to follow social networks and statistics from Google Analytics to delineate a strong presence of state generated content and some new actors from the opposition.

If Cuba is in some ways stuck in the late 1990s—exasperating slow access, with tiny coverage—in other aspects the island is completely aware of what is happening elsewhere and it has reacted by "inventing" an impressive circuit of interchange of CDs, pen drives and hard disks and a considerable market of "offline" apps, where the political content is largely marginal, but does exist.

In other words, Twitter and other social networks that facilitated the Arab Spring are part of Cuba's environment, but so is the pen drive, whose analogical ancestor could be the recordings on cassette tapes with which the Ayatollah Khomeini incited the Islamic revolution in Iran, at the end of the 1970s. In that sense, Cuba appears to be, technologically, halfway between the two experiences and our argument here is that this unique environment deserves attention from journalists, political and social research.

In more practical and immediate terms, this paper believes that Raúl Castro is willing to expand access to the internet in order to promote new private and business opportunities, but the high cost of getting online and censorship—used in a casuistic way—will no doubt continue to be used as tool for control by the government, in a sort of sophisticated approach to the "dictator's dilemma".

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