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Digital Technology and Communications in Today's Cuba

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Abstract

Drawing on four months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Havana in 2016, this thesis focuses on how digital technologies have been integrated into Cuban society and how they have been intertwined with the Cuban government's educational goals and its attempt to control the circulation and quality of information at a time of change. Among the topics discussed are the role of digital technologies in: (1) reconfiguring space and sociality on the island; (2) expanding Cubans' options to connect with people overseas and meet their desire for knowledge and pride in being worldly and up-to-date; and (3) generating alternative sources of information and entertainment that may compete with, replace, or complement government-sanctioned sources. Overall, the analysis allows me to explore significant societal transformations and the accompanying generational and social differences that characterize contemporary Cuba.

Keywords

Summary for Lay Audience

Drawing on four months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Havana in 2016, this thesis focuses on how digital technologies have been integrated into Cuban society and how they have been intertwined with the Cuban government's educational goals and its attempt to control the circulation and quality of information at a time of change. Among the topics discussed are the role of digital technologies in: (1) reconfiguring space and sociality on the island; (2) expanding Cubans' options to connect with people overseas and meet their desire for knowledge and pride in being worldly and up-to-date; and (3) generating alternative sources of information and entertainment that may compete with, replace, or complement government-sanctioned sources. Overall, the analysis allows me to explore significant societal transformations and the accompanying generational and social differences that characterize contemporary Cuba.

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List of Acronyms

CDR	*Comité de Defensa de la Revolución* – Committee for the Defense of the Revolution
CIPS	*Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas* - Centre for Psychological and Sociological Research
CIS	*Centro de Investigaciones Sociales* - Centre for Social Research
CUC	*Peso Cubano Convertible* – Cuban Convertible Peso
ETECSA	*Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba Sociedad Anónima* – Company of Telecommunications of Cuba
GB	Gigabyte
ICAIC	*Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos* – Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industry
ICRT	*Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión* - Cuban Institute of Radio and Television
JCCE	*Joven Club de Computación y Electrónica* – Youth Clubs for Computation and Electronics
MIC	*Ministerio de la Informática y las Comunicaciones* – Ministry of Information Technology and Communications
MN	*Moneda Nacional* – National Currency
OAS	Organization of American States
TB	Terabyte
UJC	*Unión de Jovenes Comunistas* – Communist Youth Organization
UNEAC	*Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba* – National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba

Chapter 1

1   Introduction

1.1   Defining My Research: Reflecting on Change in Cuba

I went to Cuba for the first time in 2008, when I was seventeen years old, for a vacation with my father and younger brother. After landing in Santiago, Cuba's second-largest city located in the country's southeast end, we took an hour-and-a-half bus ride west to an all-inclusive resort. Based on comments made by my friends and relatives who had previously visited, I expected to encounter a Caribbean paradise with beautiful beaches, great weather, and happy-go-lucky people. Our bus ride started in the city, where we drove by faded colonial-style buildings, thin horses pulling buggies, cycle rickshaws transporting people, and old trucks delivering goods to local businesses. As we proceeded to the resort located beyond the city, we passed by the occasional bus stop, primary school children in red and white uniforms on their way home for the day, goats, cows, and chickens in small house yards, and signs that celebrated the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. Once we arrived at the resort, I thought the beach was spectacular but I could not stop thinking about life beyond the resort: I had seen enough to realize that Cuba was much more than a touristic heaven.

Since that first visit, I returned to Cuba over a dozen times. With each trip, as I visited peoples' homes and made acquaintances with their families and friends, I got further and further away from the resort-style vacation. I started learning Spanish and, in 2012, I met Harold, my future husband who, rather inconveniently, left Cuba on a work contract in the summer of 2016, just as I was planning to travel to the island to commence my M.A. research.

My initial research plans entailed exploring how the December 2014 announcement regarding the rapprochement between Cuba and the United States was being received by average Cubans. The announcement made by Raúl Castro and Barack Obama had come after more than five decades of political antagonism between the two countries - an

antagonism that was directly linked to Cuba's adoption of socialism.[1] Many journalists and academics from around the world speculated about what this shift in relations might mean for Cuba and its future (Alzugaray 2015; Leogrande 2015; Trotta and Wroughton 2015; Watts and Brodzinsky 2015). Moved by the hype around shifting US-Cuba relations, I had decided to dedicate my M.A. research to exploring how average Cubans were experiencing this supposedly momentous shift. My chosen topic seemed timely as less than two months prior to my fieldwork, in March 2016, Barack Obama made a three-day trip to Havana where he met Raúl Castro and also hosted local entrepreneurs (*cuentapropistas*) and political dissidents at the newly reinstated US embassy (McKelvey 2016).[2] Obama's visit marked the first time since 1928 that a sitting US President had visited Cuba - an event that understandably received much media attention in and outside of the Caribbean nation (Gaouette 2016; Rodríguez Guerrero 2016; San Miguel 2016).

To my surprise, once in Cuba, I realized that the average citizen did not feel that rapprochement with the US would translate into significant or desirable shifts in everyday life. Havana residents obviously noticed some changes in the city, such as the takeover of some hotels by the US company Starwood and the greater presence of American visitors encouraged by new direct flights between Cuba and the US (Gómez 2016; Pérez Cabrera and Gómez 2016; Trejos 2016). Nevertheless, people with whom I spoke were skeptical. For instance, my friend Tania, a woman in her mid-30s who lives in Havana's Vedado district and works as a waitress at a small private restaurant, commented: "Obama came, he left, and nothing has changed. We have not seen any changes and we never will."

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[1] Leogrande (2015) argues that the shift in US policy toward the socialist country occurred, among other things, because the US embargo against Cuba was losing support in Latin America and the Caribbean. As many governments in the region were moving to the left during the start of the 21st century, their desire to restore ties with Cuba was indicated in 2009 when the majority of member-states in the Organization of American States (OAS) voted to repeal the 1962 resolution that banned Cuba as a member.

[2] The US Embassy in Havana was reinstated in July 2015 (McCarthy 2015).

(Informal conversation, August 2016).[3] Comments like Tania's made me reconsider my original research project and left me, quite literally, lost in the field.

As I struggled to come up with a new research topic, I worked on becoming more familiar with life in Havana by walking the city's streets and spending time with my friends and acquaintances. I had ample opportunity to reflect on what change might mean in a country like Cuba whose revolutionary project, at least in the beginning, embarked on radical transformations of society. Going back to Tania's comment, it was true that Obama's meeting with Raúl had not set off the kind of radical changes foreign media had forecasted at the time, yet it seemed to me that most Cubans would disagree with her that "nothing has changed… [and] never will." A mere review of Cuban government policies over the last decades suggests otherwise.

1.2 Cuba's Special Period and Economic Reforms

The 1989 disintegration of the Soviet Union, Cuba's socialist ally and most significant trading partner since the start of the US trade embargo in the 1960s, triggered an economic crisis in Cuba known as the Special Period in Times of Peace (The Special Period for short). By 1992, Cuba's international trade had dropped by 75% translating into severe shortages in agricultural imports, food, medical supplies, oil, public transportation, electricity, and other necessities (Brandwayn 1993; Saney 2004; Hernández-Reguant 2009). In order to cope with circumstances that replicated the shortages experienced by a country at war, the Cuban government was forced to reorganize the country's economy, labour force, and development plans.[4] For instance, to address oil shortages that inhibited the government's ability to transport people to state

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[3] Although it is not my intention here to outright dismiss Tania's or other Cubans' desire for radical change or to belittle their frustration with years of economic hardship, it was evident to me that Tania's position was more indicative of her political views than a statement of fact about societal transformations.

[4] In the countryside, the shortage of oil that affected agriculture was addressed by shifting from a development plan that had emphasized large-scale, high-input, centralized agriculture to one that endorsed small-scale, decentralized, sustainable agriculture (Premat 2012; Rosset and Benjamin 1994).

workplaces,[5] the government relocated people to work at places close to their homes and encouraged individuals to engage in private entrepreneurial activity known in Cuba as *cuentapropismo*.[6] To deal with the state's shortage of hard currency, among other actions, the government developed an internationally-oriented tourism industry, often entering into joint enterprises with foreign investors. Limited foreign investment was also allowed in other areas (with the exceptions of healthcare, education, and defence), though in all cases the Cuban state[7] retained ultimate control of assets (Saney 2004; Eckstein 1994; Kirk and Sagebien 2000). To provide the population with goods the state could no longer subsidize, in 1993, the government opened up state hard currency stores, which provided a way for the state to collect hard currency derived from remittances and work in the tourism sector while meeting the needs of a portion of the population (Chomsky 2011, 155). This, as pointed out by many (Brandwayn 1993; Alzugaray Treto 2009; Hernández-Reguant 2009; Chomsky 2011; Andaya 2013), was a less than perfect solution since it created a situation where Cubans with access to dollars could live better than those without.

Scholars in and outside of Cuba had much to say about what these changes meant for the future of the revolutionary project. Some argued that the Special Period exposed the limits of Cuba's socialist system and celebrated reforms that diminished the state's control over the economy, such as opening up to foreign investment and encouraging entrepreneurialism (Cardoso and Helwege 1992; Pastor Jr. and Zimbalist 1995; Klinghoffer 1998). Others criticized the reforms for compromising the Revolution's efforts to create a more egalitarian society (Marshall 1998; Pickel 1998; Jennissen and

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[5] Shortly after the triumph of the revolution, the state became the primary employer, so that most Cubans were, until the Special Period, employed in state workplaces.

[6] Self-employment existed in Cuba since as early as 1976 (Díaz Fernández and Barreiro Pousa 2019) and was significantly expanded during the Special Period.

[7] Here, when I refer to "the Cuban state" in the singular, I draw upon common Cuban usage where *el estado* (the state) refers to the government and its official plans and objectives which are always presented as unified. My choice here does not mean that I do not recognize that the state, in reality, is made up of multiple organizations and actors whose goals and actions are far from unified and represent institutional and individual agendas that are, at times, at odds with each other.

Lundy 2001). Although many of the reforms helped prevent Cuba's economic freefall, some of them had the effect of creating noticeable social inequalities among average citizens. Scarce or higher quality goods available through newly opened hard currency stores, for instance, were largely inaccessible to those earning meagre state salaries in the national currency, the Cuban Peso (*moneda nacional*, or MN). On the other hand, those working in new hard currency sectors (e.g. tourism, export industry, etc.) or receiving regular remittances enjoyed greater purchasing power and, hence, had greater privileges than their fellow citizens (Hernández-Reguant 2009; Vidal Alejandro 2012).[8]

As the Cuban government restructured the economy to keep up with changing global circumstances during the Special Period, Cubans were quick to adapt. As the state's capacity to provide well-paying employment decreased, some Cubans left their previous professions to engage in better remunerated work in more profitable sectors. In this way, teachers, engineers and doctors became taxi drivers, tourist guides and bartenders, leaving their previously prestigious occupations behind.[9] Even those who stayed at their peso-paying jobs found ways to supplement their meagre salaries by engaging in the underground economy. An acquaintance of mine, a 50 year-old professor at the University of Havana named Kostya, explained the situation in the following words:

> It is impossible to live just off of a state salary today in this country. People who have state jobs have to find other means of earning money, be it by selling goods *por la izquierda* [in the underground economy] or receiving money from relatives abroad to supplement their state salaries (Informal conversation, August 2016).

As he put it, socialism in this respect depended on capitalist activities. He told me: "We have this joke here that says, 'what fuels our country's socialism is not socialism, but capitalism.'" While, as suggested by the mentioned joke, Cuba's economy might have

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[8] The American dollar was legalized in 1993 and was used as a currency in Cuba until 2003, when it was fully substituted by the convertible Cuban Peso (CUC), whose value is pegged to that of the American dollar (Vidal Alejandro 2012).

[9] The expansion of Cuba's tourism industry also resulted in the reemergence of prostitution and *jineterismo* (which literally translates to jockeying, however this terms broadly encapsulates the act of informally trying to get money or gifts from tourists, be it by befriending them or engaging in prostitution).

survived at least in part due to remittances and private entrepreneurial activity, it would be foolish to conclude that the socialist project is dead in this Caribbean country.

 In April 2016, Raúl Castro, who replaced his brother Fidel as Cuba's President in 2006, declared during his opening remarks to the 7th Congress of the Communist Party that the goal remained to construct "a prosperous and sustainable socialism" - an objective that would now entail a fine tuning (*perfeccionamiento)* of Cuban socialism via the continued decentralization of many economic activities, the use of material incentives to encourage greater productivity and efficiency in the state sector, and the encouragement of regulated private entrepreneurship. The challenge was to balance these changes with a renewed commitment to the values and ideals of a socialist Revolution that had consistently privileged equality and the greater good.[10]

Prior to my M.A. research, many scholars working on Cuba in the areas of cultural production, agriculture and health during and after the Special Period (Hernández-Reguant 2004; Fernandes 2006; Andaya 2009; Brotherton 2012; Premat 2012; Wilson 2014) had pointed to the many contradictions that came out of the delicate balancing act between newly introduced economic and social reforms and socialist revolutionary values. One area that was largely unexplored in this literature included new digital technologies that, at least at the time of my research, seemed to be all important in Havana. As I walked around the city in search of a worthwhile project, I could not help but notice an abundance of Cubans connecting to the Internet at public Wi-Fi zones using smartphones or tablets to communicate with acquaintances, friends, and loved ones. I also noticed related commercial activity that had not existed a few years prior, such as private stores that offered services like cell phone repair or the transfer of electronic files to phones and USB flash drives. The more I learned about these new activities related to communication and information technologies, the more I realized they offered an

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[10] Although Raúl Castro stepped down from the presidency in April 2018, the principal missions he outlined at the 7th Congress have been adopted and carried forward by his successor, Miguel Díaz-Canel, who represents a younger generation of Cubans born after the triumph of the Revolution (Díaz-Canel Bermúdez 2018).

interesting window to explore the tensions other researchers had noted regarding this period of rapid change and adaptation in Cuba.

I asked myself, is there something unique about the development and use of digital technologies in Cuba? How much control does the government have over the use and dissemination of communication and information technologies and what is its long-term plan for developing and expanding access to them? How do digital technologies fit with official government-endorsed educational and entertainment projects? Does the Internet compete with government-sanctioned sources of information like radio and television or does it complement them? What is the social profile of those who access the Internet and other digital technologies? How is the growing reliance on mobile electronic devices and increased Internet connectivity changing, if at all, the way Cubans socialize and entertain themselves? What place do these technologies, necessary equipment, and related services have in the formal and informal economies and how do they connect with rising private entrepreneurial activity? Is the increased presence and popularity of digital technologies in Cuba connected at all to rapprochement with the US? What could reflecting on these questions teach us about the nature of recent reforms in Cuba and the strengths, limitations, and future prospects of the revolutionary project? In this thesis, I explore the answers to some of these questions.

1.3   Methodology

I conducted fieldwork in Cuba's capital, Havana, for nearly four months between May and September of 2016. In the beginning, I spent many hours visiting friends at their homes, walking and busing, chatting with acquaintances I made along the way, and hanging around popular gathering places (e.g. parks, the seaside promenade, etc). I conducted 15 interviews with individuals residing in different parts of Havana. While I had recruited them prior to my change of topic because of their connection to relatives living in the US, it turned out that these interviews and the individuals involved illuminated my understanding of the place and importance of new digital technologies in the life of contemporary Cubans.

Given my topic, I ended up spending a lot of time at the city's public Wi-Fi zones where many Cubans gather to connect to the Internet via their smartphones or computers. I visited the zones several times a week and spent an average of 7 to 8 hours per week at these places conducting observations, conversing with other Wi-Fi users and connecting to the Internet myself to talk to family and friends abroad. I often went to these Wi-Fi zones on my own but I also went there accompanied by friends for whom these locations were favourite hangout spots.

My research also encompassed my experiences in people's homes as they went about their daily activities, including reading the paper, watching television or enjoying the offerings of the unofficial, alternative digital media package known as *el paquete semanal* (the weekly package). I chatted informally with them about the news, their favourite shows, and exchanged views on US series I myself watched when I was at home in Canada. I also interviewed them about the cost of various technologies and their distribution (where they had acquired their cell phones, how they purchased *el paquete semanal*, etc.) and the frequency with which they used the digital technologies and visited places I was interested in (e.g. public Wi-Fi zones).

My interest in understanding the uses and meanings of digital technology in Havana, and Cuba more generally, led me to visit a number of small private stores connected to the distribution of *el paquete semanal* or the sale and repair of phones and laptops. I recorded the prices of cell phones and the cost of connecting at public Wi-Fi zones. I quickly realized the need to place the technologies I was studying in their proper historical context and this required me to move beyond what I had learned observing and talking to users of these technologies in Havana. In order to understand the evolution of the Internet and other technological advances in Cuba from the perspective of the government, for instance, I followed what government representatives said about these in official Cuban newspapers and television programs. I also reviewed international media coverage on digital technologies and, in particular, what they had to say about *el paquete semanal* which, existing in a gray zone between the legal and illegal sector, is not widely discussed in the Cuban media. With respect to *el paquete semanal*'s production and distribution, I found the work of a few foreign scholars who have published on the

subject (Pertierra 2012; Henken 2017; Dye et al. 2018) particularly useful. I also consulted two theses recently written by Cuban students that helped me better understand the *paquete's* popularity among Cuban youth (Brito Chávez 2015; Concepción Llanes 2015b). As I learned more about the subject, I was able to probe my friends and acquaintances for more information about aspects of the digital technology experience that I had not considered when conducting my initial semi-structured interviews.

1.4   Field Research and Personal Growth

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, my knowledge of Cuba when I first travelled there in 2008 was mediated by the tourism industry's representations of the place as a Caribbean paradise. My knowledge about Cuba's political history and Cubans' everyday experiences was minimal and embarrassingly shallow. The experience of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Havana has been transformative for me on a personal level and has allowed me to deepen my understanding of a place, and a revolutionary process, that is often unfairly caricatured in tourist brochures and foreign media reports.

As I travelled through the city to visit acquaintances and potential research subjects, I experienced the heat and crowds in the morning bus commute and learned where and how to catch a ride in the more expensive shared taxis (*almendrones*) that allow those who can afford them a way to avoid the discomfort and delays of public transport. As I went about getting my own food, I learned where to buy groceries and how their availability and prices vary considerably depending on where one buys them (e.g. state vegetable stands have better prices than the independent farmers' markets known as *agromercados*). I also learned that the venues for eating out present considerable variation in pricing, quality, and service, ranging from the inexpensive private pizza stands that sell a filling, doughy and very oily individual pizza for as little as 10 Cuban pesos to the fancier and more expensive private restaurants (*paladares*) where one can get a full meal starting around 10 dollars, which is equal to 240 Cuban pesos, or one third

of an average monthly salary.[11] While a minority of Cubans with access to dollars are able to enjoy some of the more expensive comforts I found in the city, most do not make enough money to do so. As Cuba continues to deal with economic challenges that have been exacerbated by the continued US blockade, economic inequalities continue to mount.

During my four months in Havana, I learned that life in contemporary Cuba is not just defined by the hardships and social inequality I just mentioned; it is also characterized by the security and peace of mind that comes from having basic necessities met by the state. As I talked to my acquaintances formally and informally about life in revolutionary Cuba, I found that many felt extremely proud of the achievements of *la revolución*. In particular, many underscored their gratefulness for revolutionary achievements such as free and universal access to healthcare. Germán**,** a 68-year-old retiree who has travelled multiple times to the US to visit family, described the quality of Cuban healthcare as "exemplary" in comparison to the United States, where, "if you get sick, you do not recover – not just in terms of health, but also financially" (Informal conversation, June 2016). Others spoke to me about the importance of government policies that aim to provide all Cubans with basic necessities such as food. Eduardo, a 40-year old cook that works at a *paladar*, told me: "Here in Cuba, you can […] eat [and] you do not die from starvation here. I still have not seen such a case. [...] Something is [always available to be] eaten" (Interview, August 2016). I also learned that people who are unable to take care of basic expenses on their own (due to their health, for example) are always assisted by the government. Joaquín, a fisherman who was born in the mid-1960s and grew up in a poor fishing town in the eastern province of Holguín, explained to me:

> Now if I were an invalid, if I were unable to pay the electricity bill […] and the gas, the state subsidizes you. The state does not leave you without electricity and without gas. You understand? The state subsidizes you and it gives it to you for free and in another country in the world that does not happen. […] This [the state's protection of all citizens] is a cup of gold [precious]! (Joaquín, interview, August 2016)

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[11] As of 2016, the average state salary is 740 MN (*moneda nacional*) or 30.83 CUC (Cubadebate 2017). The value of the CUC is pegged to the US dollar (1 CUC = 1 USD).

The Cubans I spoke to also pointed out other benefits of living in a socialist country where many amenities are still accessible to all. Despite shortages, many Cubans continue to enjoy free public performances, concerts, and events. They also enjoy the simple pleasures of life in neighbourhoods that are close-knit and where families have shared life for several generations.[12] Social interactions not just at the level of the neighbourhood but the entire city are characterized by much laughter and joking. This, of course, does not mean that everyone gets along but there is a general feeling of solidarity expressed even by strangers standing in line waiting for a bus, the bank, or other public service. I was, at first, surprised at how the elderly couple with whom I lived would regularly receive visitors who would just drop by without having to call ahead as is customary in places like Canada. I found these sort of impromptu visits were typical at the homes of my other acquaintances too, as their neighbours would often drop by to check up on their friends or to spread the latest neighbourhood gossip. The public space of the sidewalk and the street are seldom quiet and one can often find neighbours and children either chatting or playing outdoors. These lively scenes of sociality are often punctuated by the shouts of street vendors selling food, cleaning supplies, or other goods and services.

Although I encountered plenty of people who were critical of the revolutionary leadership, it was interesting to see how even these individuals reconsidered their views after the death of Fidel Castro in November 2016. As I travelled to Havana with my supervisor to witness this historic moment, I found a general atmosphere of sadness and reflection. I was particularly struck by how many people stood under the blistering sun at the Plaza de la Revolución (Revolution Square)[13] to pay their respects to the late leader. I recall my supervisor and I chatting with a young man in his late-20s who said he was critical of the government but was there on behalf of his elderly grandmother who could not attend the event. As we spoke to him afterwards, we realized he had a more nuanced

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[12] Due to housing shortages, it is not uncommon for multiple generations to live together in a home that has been in their family since the beginning of the Revolution.

[13] Throughout the Revolution, Cubans have gathered at this square for political rallies and important occasions such as International Workers' Day.

view of the revolutionary process, recognizing its achievements but also being quite critical of what he felt were lack of personal freedoms (interestingly, he mentioned the banning of marijuana as an example!).

Depending on their age and personal history, Cubans have a complicated relationship to what is usually referred to as *la revolución* and its leadership. I found that young people who have grown up during the Special Period and have lived most of their lives in a Cuba characterized by economic difficulties may have different opinions of the Revolution than older generations who were part of disadvantaged groups under capitalism and experienced firsthand the beneficial transformations brought on by the revolutionary government. But even those who praised the past achievements of the Revolution express unhappiness at many, though not all, of the changes that have taken place since the Special Period. The older generation often complains about the excessive *metalización* (dollarization, commercialization) of life and expresses concerns about how rising inequality will affect Cuban youth and their future. Such concerns align with those of the revolutionary leadership who, as mentioned earlier, continues to work to strike a balance between reforms considered necessary to ensure a prosperous economy and the goal of ensuring social justice and equality.

1.5 Key Themes, Relevant Literature, and Outline of Chapters

My thesis focuses on how digital technologies have been integrated into Cuban society and how they have been intertwined with the Cuban government's attempt to adapt to changing circumstances while retaining the goal of modernizing the country. I consider how these technologies illuminate key agendas of the revolutionary leadership, including the maintenance of sovereignty and control over the circulation and quality of information and the provision of universal access to information and technology. I also discuss how Cubans working in the underground economy participate in the digital technology market and query whether this participation generates alternative sources of information and entertainment that compete with, or replace, state sources that are considered limited by consumers. I further underscore the important role of digital technologies in expanding Cubans' options to communicate with relatives, friends, and

acquaintances overseas and how these technologies have reconfigured space and sociality. Ultimately, I look at how things like cell phones and the Internet fit into the lives and dreams of average Cubans, meeting their general desire for knowledge, connection, and pride in being worldly and up-to-date. This analysis allows me to explore significant generational differences, rising social inequalities and the challenges that informal uses of digital technologies pose for a nation-state that needs to guard its sovereignty, among other things, by controlling communication and the circulation of information. It is important for me to underscore, here, that the position of the Cuban government regarding the control of information is not unique. All governments restrict and regulate the flow of information to a lesser or a greater degree. This is particularly so in cases where a government, like that of Cuba, has to contend with a powerful enemy like the U.S. which has for years disseminated anti-government propaganda aimed at influencing public opinion and undermining the morale of people living on the island. This clarification is important because, in discussing censorship in the Cuban context, I do not wish to reproduce widely-circulated stereotypes about the Cuban government being exceptional in monitoring and even restricting access to information.

In writing this thesis, I have drawn particular inspiration from the academic literature on technology and globalization.[14] With the emergence of the World Wide Web and the so-called Internet "Revolution," many scholars initially hypothesized that this new technology would "subvert existing power structures" and democratize the world by providing online platforms where people from all social strata across national boundaries could take part in solidarity actions and the free exchange of ideas and information (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 450-2). Time proved the Internet to be less "revolutionary" than was originally anticipated and, far from creating a democratic space, it has reproduced (and even exacerbated) inequalities at both global and local levels. Not only are digital technologies unevenly distributed around the world depending on unique local factors such as political systems and infrastructural limitations (Hoffmann 2004; Howard

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[14] In the literature I use, globalization is defined as the rapid flow of information, goods, money, and people across space facilitated by technological innovations.

et al. 2010; Van Volkom et al. 2014; Deursen and Solis Andrade 2018) but individual socio-economic differences (e.g. income, education, technological literacy, etc.) also influence access to, and use of, these technologies. Besides the question of access, content production is not necessarily driven by independent individual users but bears the mark (and financing) of commercial and political interests (Goldsmith and Wu 2006; Schenier 2013; Chenoweth 2016).

A number of anthropologists have considered how national allegiances have been affected by technologies that have blurred national boundaries and erased the lines between "here" and "there" (Appadurai 1990; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Gupta 1995; Inda and Rosaldo 2008). In particular, they have explored how the immediate and widespread sharing of information across national boundaries has eroded the power of the nation-state and reconfigured state-civil society relations. Aihwa Ong (2003), for instance, shows how online forums bringing together people of Chinese descent around the globe were effectively mobilized by the Chinese community in Indonesia to bring global attention to the racism and violence that was being inflicted on them by members of the Indonesian state. This mobilization, which forced the Indonesian government to change its course of action, not only illustrates how the power of the nation-state can be undermined by the Internet but also how national governments may have reason to be suspicious of the unregulated exchange of information online. As recent events have shown, this suspicion may be justified in a world where foreign governments use the Internet and social media to interfere in national politics. Aside from the much-publicized Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential elections via social media messages intended to sway voters in favour of Donald Trump (Prier 2017; Shuya 2018), there have been many other cases,[15] including the US government's sponsorship of social media applications for use within Cuba (e.g. ZunZuneo in 2009, Piramideo in 2013) which were intended for fueling dissidence via subversive text messages to subscribers (Erlich 2014).

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[15] Two years later, China replicated this meddling via social media in Taiwan's midterm elections (Jakhar 2018). Also, a 2019 Netflix documentary called *The Great Hack* looks at how social networking sites like Facebook have been used to manipulate public opinion in the UK and other countries.

While digital technology has at times undermined the power of the nation-state, it has also made it easier for national governments to surveil their citizens by identifying potentially subversive individuals and their networks, and even tracking their activities and location via IP addresses and GPS technology (Schenier 2013; Hochwald 2013; Chenoweth 2016). Although civil society actors pursue anti-government projects using new communication technology, it is also used by governments for their own ends. This may inhibit the online expression of critical political views, particularly in places where such criticism may be considered part of illicit anti-patriotic or anti-government movements. Xinyuan Wang's (2016) ethnographic study of social media use in China found that people there chose not to express their political critiques online, reserving these opinions for offline interactions with trusted others.

Earlier studies of digital communications presumed that their use would alter sociality and undermine the significance of place-based communities. The presumption was that face-to-face interaction in particular geographical localities would become secondary to virtual connections in online communities that brought together individuals sharing similar interests. The reality has been much more complex and researchers have shown that, in many cases, digital communications have been used to foster place-based communities and sociality. Anthropologists Smart and Smart (2003) draw upon a Toronto study that demonstrates how the Internet is used to connect people who live close by, fomenting place-centered activities, solidarity and sociality among neighbours. John Postill (2014) has explored the interconnections between online political activities and offline street protests in Spain, further illustrating the geographical rootedness of some online communities. As Miller and Slater (2000) argued, it is wrong to presume that "online" and "offline" communities are wholly disconnected.

Daniel Miller (2016), an anthropologist who has done an extensive amount of research on the Internet and social media, has made the point that "no one lives just online" and the social and cultural contexts in which individual Internet users are embedded make a difference. The way identities are performed online, for instance, can vary depending on the local context. Whereas in some places where individuality is celebrated and Facebook might be used to celebrate lives that break from the norm, in Southeast Turkey, Elisabetta

Costa (2016, 58-60) found that women use Facebook to reproduce societal expectations, posting photos of themselves in which they adhere to conservative gender "norms of respectability and decorum" which, interestingly, do not always match their real, offline lives. Other studies in the recent ethnographic collection, *How the World Changed Social Media (*2016), further underscore how social and cultural differences are consistently reflected in the locally-specific uses and meanings given to digital communications and related technologies. In these works, technology in and of itself is not a causal factor, but a medium for the expression of cultural difference.

Another important body of literature that is relevant for this work is concerned with the role of mass media in nationalist projects. As Anderson (2006) demonstrates using the example of print media in the late 18th century, mass media has been central to the promotion of nationalist sentiments and was used by new nation-states at the time to foment feelings of horizontal solidarity among people who did not, up to that point, feel they belonged to the same community. According to Anderson, nations as "imagined communities" were constructed around the notion of an "invented" shared culture and history whose dissemination was aided by new technological innovations such as the print media. From the beginning, mass communication technologies like radio and TV, first introduced into private homes in the US in the early and late 1920s, respectively (Lippmann 2007; McAdams 2013), have been similarly used by governments all over the world to promote a unified vision of the nation, its citizenry, and its future aspirations. Utilizing their educational potential, these modes of mass communication were used not just to transmit information but to promote values, practices and subjectivities considered desirable by those in power. This was as much the case in the progressive Egypt of Nasser (Abu-Lughod 2005) as in the Brazil of oppressive, conservative military dictatorships from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s (Pace and Hinote 2013).

As mass media are implicated in the realization of national projects, they are "at once cultural products and social processes, as well as extremely potent arenas of political struggle" (Spitulnik 1993, 303). Ginsburg (1991), for instance, has illustrated through her work on indigenous film production in Australia how mass media can be used by subaltern communities to exercise self-determination, express pride, and contest

dominant understandings of indigenous history and culture. They can also be used, as in the case of Cuba's culture industry, to allow artists to voice valid critiques of Cuban society and encourage debate within the Revolution (Fernandes 2006).

Out of all the anthropologists who have researched mass media,[16] I found Abu-Lughod's (2005) study in Egypt especially relevant to my research, as she illustrates the way the content and messages of television programming shifted in the 1980s and 90s as the nation moved from a modernist and nationalist agenda under the socialist government of Nasser in the 1960s and 70s to a neoliberal, globally-oriented plan implemented by subsequent governments including those of Sadat and Mubarak. Under Nasser, the goal was not simply to entertain the population but to instill national pride and a sense of shared history and destiny while creating "modern" citizens that valued progress and knowledge (Abu-Lughod 2005, 62). After Nasser's presidency, subsequent governments opted for a different model of development, one based on neoliberal ideas that placed the individual consumer (as opposed to the government) as the central agent of change and assumed that a free, unregulated market that encouraged private enterprise, foreign investment, and consumerism would function more efficiently and lead to national prosperity. Abu-Lughod (2005, 199) specifically describes how Egypt's opening to foreign investment in the 1990s led to the introduction of satellite television and the proliferation of privately-sponsored productions and advertisements that marketed foreign goods and luxurious lifestyles that "only a wealthy minority could dream of having." In this respect, far from encouraging a sense of belonging to a national community where equality was valued, new television content seemed to naturalize inequalities and erode feelings of horizontal solidarity among citizens. Abu-Lughod's ethnography further illustrates how old messages and values that aimed to produce modern Egyptian citizens had not completely disappeared from television content in the

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[16] It should be noted that, for a long time, anthropologists were hesitant about studying mass communications because it represented a departure from their traditional focus on everyday life in particular localities. In the 1990s, as anthropologists started studying uprooted communities and globalization processes, some turned to consider the intersection of mass media and cultural practice. To this day, there are not that many anthropologists focusing on television and social media.

1990s but competed for the public's attention with new programming associated with the grooming of individual capitalist consumers. Inasmuch as Abu-Lughod's work illuminates a time of transition in Egypt and how it is reflected in the messages of television content, her insights are valuable for an analysis of present-day Cuba where the communitarian ethos associated with socialism appears to be in tension with an emergent capitalist ethos (Hernández -Reguant 2004) that values private solutions and entrepreneurial activity, and appears to disregard rising social inequalities. As will be shown in this thesis, communication and information technologies offer a window into this tension and other recent changes in Cuban society.

I have organized this thesis into four chapters. The first one is this introduction which sets the stage for the ethnographic case studies addressed in the following chapters by recounting how I arrived at my topic, describing the relevant historical context, discussing the way I went about carrying out my research, outlining my guiding questions, and highlighting key ideas from the relevant academic literature. In Chapter 2, entitled "*Crazy About the Internet!": Exploring Cuba's Digital Revolution,* I focus on how the Internet "Revolution" has uniquely manifested in the Cuban context with a particular focus on Havana's public spaces, where the use of mobile phones and Wi-Fi connection is a relatively recent phenomenon. I begin by reviewing the history of Cuba's Internet development, paying particular attention to the Cuban government's intention of providing universal access and the political and infrastructural obstacles that have stood in the way. I then turn to discuss the current cost of using the Internet through official and unofficial channels and describe the underground market and entrepreneurial ventures that have grown around it. I further comment on how this new communication phenomenon variously reflects growing socioeconomic inequalities related to income, knowledge, and age. Finally, I explore how these digital technologies are being used by Cubans to socialize with people within the country and abroad and how they are reconfiguring the use and feel of Havana's public spaces. While Chapter 2 focuses on public spaces, Chapter 3, entitled *Catering to Cubans' Desires for Alternatives: Cuba's Version of Netflix*, moves to the private space of the home to consider a novel digital media product called *el paquete semanal* (the weekly package) which expands Cubans' options for entertainment and information. As with the previous chapter, I first provide

the reader with necessary background information by describing the Cuban government's success in providing universal access to education and culture and the centrality of both in the government's stated plan to produce an idealized, modern socialist citizenry. Next, I illustrate how Cubans' desire for alternative sources of information and entertainment is met by the offerings of *el paquete semanal*. After outlining *el paquete's* content and costs and discussing how it is compiled and distributed by private entrepreneurs working in the grey zone between the formal and informal economy, I briefly consider how foreign media view this Cuban version of Netflix. In Chapter 4, "*Caught Between Digital and Analog Worlds?*", I summarize insights derived from these case studies and move beyond them by asking two broad questions: (1) do new media sources complement or conflict with official state sources of information and entertainment?; and (2) what impact are new communication and information technologies having on the Cuban government's ability to create modern socialist citizens? In answering these questions, drawing on my modest ethnographic experience, I hope to underscore the significance of my chosen topic and to generate further questions for future research.

Chapter 2

2 "Crazy About the Internet": Exploring Cuba's Digital Revolution

This chapter introduces the reader to the phenomenon of Internet use in public places in Havana. After describing the pervasiveness of this practice in the Cuban capital at the time of my research and commenting on how it has changed sociality in public spaces, I outline the revolutionary government's plans and challenges as it has tried to make Internet access more universal. As part of this discussion, I address the cost of digital connectivity for individual Cubans and how it connects with growing social disparities and new entrepreneurial opportunities. Finally, I consider how Internet use relates to generational differences and Cubans' desire for connections with the world outside.

2.1 New Ways of "Connecting": Wiring Havana's Public Spaces and Changing Sociality

Hotel Presidente is located in Havana's tourist and commercial area known as Vedado, on Calzada Street between Streets F and G (Figure 1). It is not the largest hotel in the city but it does have several stories and a good location close to the seaside promenade, the Malecón. On the first floor, surrounding the building's entrances, is a balcony where guests relax and connect to the Internet. This balcony always stood out to me because of the way it pointed to the difference between the hotels' clients and non-clients. The clients sit on the balcony in comfortable chairs, sip on mojitos or some other popular Cuban drink, and watch the famous old cars locally known as "the jewels of Havana" drive by.

Figure 1: Map of Vedado tourist and commercial area. Wi-Fi Zones are marked in red. Source: Google Maps (label modifications by author).

Below the balcony are mostly Cuban citizens (and foreign visitors like myself) sitting on the street curb or leaning against the wall of the building, trying to connect to the Internet because they have no Internet access in their places of residence. For those on the street, the Internet is the primary reason for being there. For the tourists on the balcony, the music that plays on occasion from the hotel's band and the old cars passing by are likely part of a desired experience of being in Havana, which they can enjoy from the comfort of the hotel balcony. For those trying to connect to the Internet just below the balcony, the band and the cars are just noise pollution that makes using the Internet in a public place a little less comfortable. Sitting on the curb or leaning against the balcony wall allows them to get as close as possible to the signal but some choose to position themselves across the street from the hotel where they can be in the shade. Sitting further away from the Wi-Fi source might weaken the strength of their signal, but they are able to enjoy the comfort of the shade offered by trees on that side of the road. As many visitors to the island have noticed, it is not uncommon for people to poach a hotel's connection, as I and many others regularly did at Hotel Presidente. While people are

never asked to leave what is otherwise a public area, this way of accessing the Internet is not officially approved by the government which now provides Internet access to the public at various locations throughout the city, from the most popular urban landmarks to the relatively remote neighbourhood plazas.

Walking a few blocks away from Hotel Presidente, one arrives at the corner of Streets 23 and L. This intersection is a social hub where tourists can be seen coming out of the historically renowned Habana Libre Hotel where, for a few months in 1959, the triumphant revolutionary army held its headquarters.[17] On the Southwest side of the intersection stands another landmark: the very popular ice cream parlour, Coppelia, where on any day of the week one can see Cubans lining up to get what many feel is the best ice cream on the island. This intersection is not only a transportation hub where multiple bus lines cross but also a popular hangout spot for young people. In particular, the area around Coppelia and Yara, the movie theatre across the street, has long had a reputation as a pick-up point for male Cubans looking for potential partners and, in the recent past, it was not uncommon to find Cuban *jineteros* (male prostitutes) sitting there in the evenings on the lookout for tourists.[18] The feel of the place, however, has radically changed since the area became a public Wi-Fi zone frequented by Cubans and foreigners who, like those sitting by the Hotel Presidente, are there primarily to connect to the Internet via their mobile devices.

From this intersection, one can walk on Calle 23, down the slope known as *La Rampa* ("The Ramp") to the Malecón. During the day, this part of the Malecón is visited mostly by tourists taking photos and trying to catch some of the sea breeze. As the sun sets and the intense heat of the day dies down, Cubans gather there with friends, lovers, and family, simply sitting on the seaside wall socializing, sometimes with accompanying

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[17] Before the Revolution, the Habana Libre Hotel was called the Habana Hilton, under the American hotel chain.

[18] This area's association with the gay community was even showcased in the opening scene of the internationally-renowned 1994 movie *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate) which critiqued how gays had been excluded from the revolutionary project.

music and even drinks. These quintessential Malecón activities portrayed in Cuban postcards that depict the sociality that characterizes this part of the city, today, also include many Cubans on cell phones or laptops connecting to the Internet.

In other parts of the city, away from Havana's tourist hubs, one finds similar scenes of Cuban citizens huddling around mobile devices in public places. For example, in the municipality of El Cerro, a 15-minute bus ride away from 23 and L, at the outdoor grounds of the Estadio Latinoamericano, a favourite baseball stadium and a popular spot for playing ball or exercising, one also finds people connecting to the Internet (Figure 2). At another public space an hour south of 23 and L, in the city's southern-most neighbourhood of Santiago de Las Vegas, the scene repeats itself as people at the main public park named after Cuban independence hero José Martí seem to be more focused on their cell phones and laptops than on socializing with those around them. All these scenes are suggestive of the changes that have been taking place in Cuba since 2015, when the government inaugurated public Wi-Fi zones - an act that has considerably reconfigured the use and feel of public spaces.

Figure 2: Typical scene at a public Wi-Fi zone, Estadio Latinoamericano, municipality of El Cerro. Source: Author, August 2016.

New forms of digital technology, such as smartphones and Wi-Fi, have become a common element of life for many in Havana and have considerably altered people's use of public spaces. These changes were noticed almost immediately and commented on by the national daily newspaper *Granma,* which reported on the effects and public reactions to these Wi-Fi zones shortly after the inauguration in July 2015. Carlos Enrique Paz, a citizen of Pinar del Rio, a city west of Havana, enthusiastically commented on the impact of Wi-Fi connection on a nearby park: "It is as if this part of the city has come to life. […] In fact, finding an empty bench has become quite difficult, in a place where, until recently, there was more than enough space for couples in love and small groups of sports fans who held their gatherings here" (Saborit Alfonso, 2015b). The installation of Wi-Fi zones has modified the feel and use of public spaces, such as parks, where people used to gather to interact with others in-person. When I first visited Parque José Martí in 2014, I was there for about an hour with my boyfriend during which time we saw people sitting around, just having conversations with those around them. Upon my return in 2016, the activities taking place at the park had changed. Now, over half the people there were using cell phones and other mobile devices to chat with people in other places. The image of people at parks and other public spaces staring into their mobile devices and chatting with others abroad was a sight I frequently encountered during my fieldwork. In public spaces equipped with Wi-Fi connections, sociality has come to include not only people spending time with those immediately around them, but also people talking with acquaintances in places far away. As Internet connectivity and other digital technologies expand, their effect on sociality seems to replicate the situation encountered in other parts of the world, where people in public places (like parks, cafes, buses, etc.) spend more time using their mobile devices to tap into the virtual world of the Internet than they do conversing with those immediately around them. In this respect, the impact of digital technologies on sociality is, of course, not unique to Cuba. What is different is the socio-political and economic context that has shaped (and restricted) the growth and meaning of the Internet in this Caribbean nation.

2.2   Modernizing Cuba, Ensuring Internet Access: The Perspective of the State[19]

For over a decade, the Cuban government has publicly expressed its commitment towards the continued modernization of Cuba via achieving universal connectivity. As early as 2004, the popular daily TV program called *Mesa Redonda* (Round Table, a program designed to inform the public about subjects considered significant by the government) was dedicating entire sessions to debates that focused on the importance of the new technology, the challenges that needed to be overcome to attain full national coverage, and the government's plans to develop full Internet coverage across the country.[20] In a program broadcast that year, Roberto del Puerto, then Director of the National Office of Information, an office of the Ministry of Information Technology and Communications (*Ministerio de la Informática y las Comunicaciones*, or MIC), commented on the government's plan to disseminate knowledge about computers and equal access to the Internet (Cubadebate 2004). Using statistics from other Latin American and Caribbean countries, Del Puerto underscored how the global Internet "Revolution" had actually exacerbated or highlighted existing inequalities in other countries so that, for instance, those who lacked electricity and education were excluded from partaking in the new technology. This meant that in countries of the region with adequate infrastructure but great social disparities, 90% of people still had no Internet access. The assumption seemed to be that Cuba was in a better position to provide equal access once infrastructure and technological hurdles were overcome. Until then, access had to be carefully managed.

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[19] As I explained in footnote 7, in this thesis, when I refer to "the state" as a single actor, I am following common Cuban usage that equates *el estado* with a single vision and agenda. I draw on this usage whenever I am describing official state plans and practices as outlined in the publicized speeches and documents of government leaders and functionaries. Unfortunately, given time and other restrictions, I was unable to carry out a proper ethnography of state actors involved in the phenomena that interested me. In emphasizing official plans in an idealized form, I do not mean to suggest that all state actors share a unified perspective and agenda.

[20] As explained by José Antonio Fernández, then President of Cuba's telecommunications company, Cuba has overcome the stark rural/urban divide existing elsewhere in the Latin American and Caribbean region so that rural residents expect the same kinds of services as city-dwellers (Cubadebate 2004).

José Antonio Fernández, then President of Cuba's telecommunications company, ETECSA (*Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba Sociedad Anónima*), also in attendance at the same *Mesa Redonda,* explained that given Cuba's limited infrastructure, the Internet had to be treated as a scarce resource whose access had to be fairly distributed across all municipalities and strategic sectors to ensure the greatest public (as opposed to individual) benefit. Here, it should be noted that when Cuba first connected to the World Wide Web in 1996, it did so via satellite, "which implies higher transmission costs and smaller bandwidth connectivity" (Hoffmann 2004, 215) and it was not until 2011 that the Caribbean nation was connected to the much faster fibre-optic cable called ALBA-1 that runs from Venezuela to the island (Marrero 2011). In fact, Cuba was the last country in the Western Hemisphere to connect to the Internet via fibre-optic technology due to a combination of limits imposed by the US embargo and ideological concerns on the part of the revolutionary leadership (Hoffmann 2004; Marrero 2011; The Telegraph 2011). Minister of Communications Maimir Mesa insisted in 2015 the ultimate goal of the Cuban government is to extend service to private homes but it is equally important to ensure sovereignty and national security. He explained: "The government is determined to network Cuban society, but will do so at a pace permitted by current infrastructure and cyber security requirements" (Lee, Rodríguez, et al. 2015).

Prior to the inauguration of public Wi-Fi zones in 2015, there were various ways in which Cubans could access local servers or the World Wide Web. These early forms of connectivity encompassed a relatively small segment of the population because, lacking the required infrastructure for wider coverage, the government first prioritized connecting individuals associated with sectors of strategic importance (e.g. medicine, tourism, research and education). Some could connect for free via their workplaces or educational institutions. For instance, key employees at the Ministry of Health, neighbourhood doctors and university students had access to email and Cuban servers because this was deemed necessary for their work or educational program (Uxó 2009, 129).[21] Others had

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[21] In the case of doctors and other professionals, some were also granted access to the Internet in their private homes.

temporary use of a networked computer at paid venues like Internet rooms (*salas de navegación*), sometimes located at hotels. Yet others could connect free of charge via Youth Computer Clubs (*Los Joven Clubs de Computación y Electrónica*, or JCCE) which, starting in 1991, offered club members access to the Cuban Intranet server known as *TinoRed* and later on, in 1999, expanded this service to include the World Wide Web (Cubadebate 2004).[22]

In March 2015, thanks to the Cuban artist Alexis Leyva Machado, known as KCHO, Havana got its first free Wi-Fi zone at this artist's museum (Museo Orgánico de Romerillo) located in a marginal area in the municipality of Playa.[23] As a place dedicated to artistic and technological experimentation and innovation, the museum houses various Google-donated devices (Chrome laptops, Nexus 5 mobile phones and a live streaming camera) that allow museum visitors to connect to the Internet for free to use email, surf the web, and engage in virtual reality simulations and educational exchanges with American professors and students (Domínguez 2016).[24] KCHO arranged to pay for the connection[25] at this location so others could use it for free (Plautz 2015; BBC 2015) while Google donated the equipment[26] and ETECSA made the connection possible. KCHO's project aligned with the Cuban government's stated desire to "democratize"

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[22] The JCCEs opened in 1987 and have since offered free courses and training for using computer programs, such as Microsoft Word and Excel (Martínez García 2017).

[23] While Playa is home to several embassies, hotels, and large meeting places like the Palacio de Convenciones (where the Nationally Assembly is held) and the Pabexpo convention centre, the residential area of Playa where KCHO's museum is located, Romerillo, is known for being a "marginal community" (Durant 2014).

[24] Chromebooks use Gmail accounts and Google Drive which allow users to save data on the cloud. This way, Cubans who visit the Museo Orgánico de Romerillo do not need any other devices to access and store information they find on the Internet using the Chromebooks.

[25] As mentioned by Ariana Hernández-Reguant (2004), during the Special Period, world-recognized Cuban artists gained the possibility to profit from their art and were under indirect pressure to use some of their newly-gained wealth to benefit society at large.

[26] Cuban media reported that Google donated these technological devices to KCHO, but there was no official contract between the two parties because of restrictions under the US embargo against Cuba (Domínguez 2016).

Internet access (Cubadebate 2004) and, as such, received official approval and praise (Domínguez 2016).[27]

KCHO seemed to have gone to great lengths to underscore how Internet access could be part of the Revolution, rather than a symbol of its erosion. While I was doing my fieldwork in 2016, on several occasions, I came across graffiti created by KCHO depicting the national hero José Martí wearing a t-shirt that reads "I <3 free wifi" (Figure 3). This graffiti combines the demand for expanding free Wi-Fi while playing with the image of the revolutionary icon José Martí, a hero of the war for independence against Spain and ever since a symbol of Cuba's struggle for national sovereignty. On the one hand, this playful graffiti could be read as a broader demand for Internet access aimed at the Cuban government and, on the other hand, it could be interpreted as a hopeful commentary on the possibilities of modernizing and connecting Cuba to the world, via the Internet, while retaining Cuba's distinctiveness and independence. Here, the emphasis on "free" access as well as on the figure of Martí underscores how digital connectivity is not necessarily incompatible with the revolutionary project.

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[27] KCHO's close links with the government preceded the Google project. Attesting to his alignment with the government, KCHO inaugurated the museum on January 8th, 2014 in celebration of the 55th anniversary of the arrival of the rebel army to Havana after the triumph of the 1959 Revolution (Duarte de la Rosa 2014). Fidel Castro himself attended the museum's inauguration and the event was reported in the national newspaper, *Granma,* receiving front-page status for two days in a row (Rodríguez Derivet 2014; Duarte de la Rosa 2014).

Figure 3: Graffiti, José Martí in a "I <3 free wifi" t-shirt. Source: Author, July 2016.

By July 2015, Cuba's infrastructure had been developed enough to allow for the expansion of Internet connectivity in the form of 35 official public Wi-Fi zones inaugurated under the auspices of Cuba's telecommunications company, ETECSA. In the international media, these public Wi-Fi zones were applauded and presented as a symbol of the changes brought about in Cuba as a result of the country's 2014 rapprochement with the United States (Hamre 2015; Miroff 2015; Oppmann 2015). However, as illustrated by the *Mesa Redonda* discussions cited above, these changes had been planned long ago. Vice Minister of Communications José Luis Perdomo, insisted that "Cuba has been and is committed to connect to the world, despite propaganda that suggests otherwise…" (Rodríguez Guerrero and Saborit Alfonso 2015).

The inauguration of the 35 public Wi-Fi zones was advertised by the government in the national daily newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*, which dedicated an entire page to the

subject, giving information about the location of the zones and how to connect to the Internet there (Guevara 2015). In subsequent weeks, more articles emerged reporting on the rapid spread of public Wi-Fi zones. Within a year of the original inauguration of public Wi-Fi zones, the amount of zones in Havana alone had gone up by 35 and most municipalities in the city had at least one public area where people could connect to the Internet (NorfiPC 2016). Most of these were concentrated in the mentioned neighbourhood of Vedado in the Plaza de la Revolución municipality, particularly around *La Rampa* (See Appendix A). In just over a year, by September 2016, there were said to be an additional 165 public Wi-Fi zones in the country, bringing the overall total to 200 (Guevara 2016). As of March 2018, the number of public Wi-Fi zones in Havana totalled 119 (up from 40 at the time of my 2016 fieldwork), and the national total stood at 684 zones (ETECSA 2018b).

The increase in public Wi-Fi zones has evidently translated into greater connectivity for the average public across Cuba and is reflected in the increased creation of Internet accounts. One *Granma* article reported that the number of newly opened Internet accounts in Camagüey almost tripled in the three-week period following the opening of public Wi-Fi zones in July of 2015. Whereas in the six-month period leading up to the opening of the Wi-Fi zones 1,307 new accounts were opened, an impressive 3,183 were opened in the first three weeks of July (Granma 2015). This increase in new accounts, which is obviously linked to greater access to the Internet via public Wi-Fi, was replicated in other areas of the country (Saborit Alfonso 2015a).

Despite the government's stated goals and efforts to ensure equitable access to the Internet, the rapid spread of public Wi-Fi zones and of Internet accounts cannot be readily equated with equal access. While everyone in theory can use public Wi-Fi zones, not every Cuban has the knowledge of the technology or the money to pay for the necessary equipment and connection fees. As acknowledged by government officials, the associated costs of connecting are still too high for average citizens (Rodríguez Guerrero and Saborit Alfonso 2015).

2.3   The Cost of Being Connected: A Not-So-Universal Access

This morning, as I had done many other times, I was sitting just outside of Hotel Presidente along with others, connecting to the Internet when a set of dark clouds started coming our way and with it, wind that brushed up the dust from the streets. The hotel's guests retreated indoors while those on the street fled to take cover before the rain began to fall. I stayed around a little longer than most and noticed that the Internet came to a near standstill as the weather worsened. Eventually, I too left running as the wind picked up and rain started to fall. None of us wanted our phones or laptops to be ruined by a tropical rainfall (personal field notes, July 2016).

In order to connect at a public Wi-Fi zone, the first step is to acquire a mobile device such as a smartphone, tablet, or laptop – objects that are precious in Cuba because of their novelty (they have only been available for purchase by the general public since 2008)[28] and high price. One can buy a mobile phone with Wi-Fi capabilities through ETECSA, which offers a selection of brands (iPhones not included) whose prices vary considerably, depending on the brand (ETECSA 2018a). Prices range from 45 convertible pesos (CUC) for a Chinese Huawei, which is more than the average Cuban's monthly salary of 30 CUC, to a more expensive Samsung Galaxy J7 with a price tag of 295 CUC (almost 10 times the average salary).

Because of the high costs and relative lack of variety at official venues, most people tend to purchase this technology through the black market (*por la izquierda*), where the prices for the same products offered at state stores are lower and the selection is more diverse. Buying in the black market also offers an added advantage since the purchase is not monitored as it is in state stores, where customers using CUC denominations of 50 and

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[28] Computers and mobile phones legally became available for purchase by private citizens in Cuba in March 2008 (Frank 2013, 115). Before 2008, only certain people who worked for the government (e.g. doctors and other professionals) were supplied this kind of technology for ""work-related purposes" (Pertierra 2012, 404). Otherwise, digital technologies could be acquired via relatives, foreigners, or the black market (Pertierra 2012, 404).

above are required to present their identity cards so the store teller can record the unique number on each bill alongside the customer's ID number. This not only allows for the tracking of counterfeit money but also can be used to track illegally obtained income, something some customers may wish to avoid.

A website called Revolico – a Cuban version of Kijiji or Craigslist which is available via the Internet and through a USB package known as *el paquete semanal*[29] – is a resource commonly used by those wishing to purchase communication and information technologies.[30] Like the "Classifieds" section of a newspaper, the Revolico webpage is organized into various categories of goods and services (Figure 4). The first item listed is "Cell Phones/Phone Lines/Accessories," which also includes tablets. In 2018, the site listed cell phone prices starting as low as 90 CUC and as high as 500 CUC for the most recent iPhone or Samsung (ranging from 3-16 times higher than the average monthly salary). The prices of laptops on Revolico range from approximately 250 CUC to over 1000 CUC, which is 8-33 times the average monthly income.

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[29] I will be expanding on the subject of *el paquete semanal* (the weekly package) in the following chapter. For the purposes of this discussion, it is important to note that it refers to a bundle of various types of entertainment media and websites retrieved from the Internet and it is sold weekly through the black market.

[30] According to Hiram Centelles, the Cuban co-founder of Revolico, since it launched in 2007, the site would often get blocked by Cuban authorities, which he dealt with by "using a pirated VPN router to scramble Revolico's IP address 'several times per hour'" (Popescu 2015). By late 2008, Centelles obtained a Spanish work visa with the help of his Spanish co-founder, Carlos Peña, and continued to run the website from Spain, with greater ease.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Revolico webpage. Source: revolico.com

Black market purchases of technology also rely on word-of-mouth and trusted social networks. In 2013, while working at a hotel in Varadero, my husband, Harold, was introduced by a co-worker to a young man who was selling a laptop he had bought from a relative living in the United States. Harold ended up buying this laptop for 350 CUC. He explained to me how people in the tourism industry are often contacted because it is known that they have easier access to convertible pesos. He elaborated: "You work in that industry, so people come to you to sell you their technology."[31] I also learned from

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[31] People who work in the tourism industry include hotel employees, taxi drivers, sole proprietors (*cuentapropistas*) who rent rooms to foreigners, and *jineteros* or *jineteras*. These individuals can earn in a

Harold and others that cell phone repair workshops (*talleres*) or stores selling specializing in electronics and media entertainment buy and resell mobile phones, laptops, or computer parts in a "backroom"-type operation.

After obtaining the necessary hardware, there are two ways to connect to the Internet at a public Wi-Fi zone. One is by purchasing a temporary account card from ETECSA and the other is by making a permanent account for navigation, known as the Nauta account, with the same state company. In 2015, temporary account cards offered one hour of Internet connection for 2 CUC (Figure 5). Attesting to the government's goal of making the Internet more accessible over time, this price has gone down by 1 CUC since 2017. Even so, the government recognizes that this price is still too high for average citizens (Rodríguez Guerrero and Saborit Alfonso 2015).

Figure 5: Temporary access card (1 hour), front (left) and back (right).
Source: varaderoguide.net

A Nauta account offers more flexibility than a temporary access card. Anyone can open one, so long as they pay 2 CUC for a starting balance (ETECSA 2018c). Once ETECSA creates the permanent account, which is a login and password for accessing the Internet, the account holder is able to connect at any public Wi-Fi zone, as long as they have credit

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day what an average Cuban working for the state earns in a month (30 CUC). For instance, a taxi ride to and from Havana airport costs 30 CUC and private room rentals for foreigners start as low as 10 CUC per night and go as high as 100 CUC per night. Being in frequent contact with foreigners means that these individuals are more likely to receive gifts and tips from foreigners, which in the case of bartenders can add up to 50 CUC a night.

in their account. Contrasting with the temporary cards which always have to be paid in cash, Nauta accounts can be conveniently refilled by someone abroad who pays for the refill via a partner website.[32] Alternatively, people can purchase a refill coupon (*cupón*) directly at ETECSA offices or at private homes throughout the city which have been authorized to sell them. There is no markup for these privately sold coupons and, in fact, ETECSA takes a loss on these sales, showing its commitment to extending service to a wider sector of the population.[33] Refill coupons are valued at 2.00, 5.00, 10.00, and 20.00 CUC and allow connection for the same rate as temporary account cards.

Once the person has the required hardware and an account for accessing the Internet, they still need to take an additional step that involves downloading applications for navigating the Internet, such as Facebook, Messenger, Whatsapp, IMO (a video chat application similar to Skype that is used widely in Cuba because Skype does not work there) and Revolico. Cell phone repair workshops install these applications for a price of up to 5 CUC, depending on how many applications one wishes to install. People usually opt to pay for this service because downloading applications on their own while connected at a Wi-Fi zone would take more time and would be more expensive.

Given the costs associated with connecting at public Wi-Fi zones, one may wonder who uses the Internet there and why. The next section gives the reader a sense of the kind of individuals who participate in this activity and their motivations.

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[32] The official partners of ETECSA for online refilling of Nauta accounts include: www.ding.com, www.intopup.com, moviles.compra-dtodo.com, www.globalsd.com, www.kddiglobal.com, www.transferto.com, www.bossrevolution.com, cubacel.etopuponline.com (ETECSA 2018d). I have used ding.com, which offers the option of refilling prepaid phone balances as well as permanent Nauta accounts.

[33] In this arrangement, the affiliates purchase coupons for a lower price from ETECSA. For example, if an affiliate sells a coupon for 2 CUC, they buy it from ETECSA for 1.50 CUC and after reselling the coupon, they earn 0.50 CUC for each 2 CUC coupon sold. With the affiliates, ETECSA can reach more customers throughout the city, which is also convenient for customers because the affiliates' hours of operation are more flexible (people can drop by at any hour of the day and they also work on Sundays when ETECSA is closed).

2.4 Generational and Wealth Gaps in the Use of Public Wi-Fi Zones

One afternoon, I went for a walk with Joaquín, a 50-year-old fisherman from the eastern provinces who lives in Havana's El Cerro municipality, and we passed the Wi-Fi zone at the Estadio Latinoamericano. The zone was pretty busy and I noticed he shrugged this scene off as "a sort of thing that young people are doing these days." Joaquín did not get remittances from his relatives in the US nor did he earn enough money to be able to take on the expenses associated with connecting to the Internet at a public Wi-Fi zone. As many people of his generation in Cuba and elsewhere, he also lacked the knowledge to use the required communication technology.

In my usual walks through the city, I passed by several parks with public Wi-Fi connections and sat down in some of them to use the Internet. There were always other people engaging in the same activity. Although there were older people among them, a younger generation, ranging from teenagers to middle-aged adults, seemed to dominate the scene. Even when I found entire families encompassing multiple generations huddled around their cell phones, it was the young people that appeared to take the lead in operating the mobile devices. My observations on this generational gap in the use of new communication technologies in Cuba coincide with the findings of other researchers working in this area (Hoffmann 2004; Van Volkom et al. 2014) and with anecdotal accounts reported in the international media (Wagenstein 2016; Berdini 2016).[34]

In general, people who use the Internet at public Wi-Fi zones seem to come from a segment of the population with access to dollars. This access is reflected in their willingness to pay for unauthorized temporary cards that are resold at these places at prices that are considerably higher than the official price (in 2015, when the official price

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[34] Hoffmann (2004, 21) also suggests "a considerable gender bias" in users of new information and communications technologies. Though I did not specifically focus on the gendered dimensions of digital technologies as they relate to the use of Internet in my fieldwork, I can say from my observations at that time and during other trips to Cuba that I observed no noticeable gender divide in the kinds of people connecting to the Internet at public Wi-Fi zones.

was 2 CUC per hour of connection, these cards were being resold for 3 CUC and, in 2017, when the official price dropped to 1 CUC, the resale price of cards dropped to 2 CUC). Still, some people were, until 2017, willing (and able) to pay 3 CUC for a temporary card from unauthorized resellers that hung around at public Wi-Fi zones.[35]

This population's greater access to wealth seems evident not just by their ability to cover the required costs of connecting, but by their clothes and accessories. At the time of my fieldwork, in-style looks that appeared most common for men and women alike included ripped jeans, gold jewelry, t-shirts with bright colours and English words or phrases, trendy bags or backpacks with designer logos (some real, some fake), expensive shoes such as Nike or Converse, and sunglasses. It was most often young people that I encountered in public Wi-Fi zones who tended to sport a combination of these goods (Figure 6). Some of them might have gotten access to this material wealth through remittances, official employment in the tourism industry, or illegal activities ranging from black market sales to prostitution associated with the tourist sector. In a society where material scarcity seems to be the norm and where, until recently, socioeconomic inequalities were generally less pronounced, such items are intertwined with social distinction and the practice of *especulación* (showing off one's wealth).

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[35] Another black market activity that occurs at public Wi-Fi zones is the sharing of one's connection with other users via a software called Connectify (an alternative and unofficial way to connect to the Internet). One user connects to the Internet using their temporary or permanent account for 2 CUC per hour and, using the Connectify software installed on their mobile device, creates a Wi-Fi hotspot and charges other users 1 CUC per hour to connect to this hotspot. By accessing the Internet via the Wi-Fi hotspot, those users do not need a temporary or permanent account. In my discussions and experiences with public Wi-Fi users, Connectify is well-known amongst those who access the Internet at these zones and one is most likely to find someone offering this service at large and central Wi-Fi zones like those at *La Rampa*.

Figure 6: People at a Wi-Fi zone wearing eye-catching clothes and shoes.
Source: Author, August 2016.

The increasing use of cell phones and the Internet among Cubans, however, signals more than a rise in material inequality. It also hints at a "digital divide" that, as illustrated by the comments of Joaquín, cited at the beginning of this section, separates different generations. While Cubans in general seem to have a thirst for knowledge and a desire to learn about new things in the world, in Cuba, as elsewhere, young people seem to be more eager to learn about technological innovations and show their worldliness by being tech-savvy. The Internet and related technologies require user know-how which acts as a marker of cosmopolitanism that can be a source of great pride. One of my acquaintances whose pride stood out to me was Eduardo, a 40-year old cook that works at a small private restaurant, who was always eager to share his knowledge. For instance, one afternoon, Eduardo, his wife Tania, and I went to a public Wi-Fi zone with a co-worker of Tania's, a 24 year-old single mother who lived in the municipality of 10 de Octubre and had never used the Internet before. As Eduardo enthusiastically helped her set up an

email and Facebook account, Tania smiled and told me, "He is crazy about the Internet! He loves using it whenever he can." Eduardo's tech-savviness sets him apart as knowledgeable amongst his friends and family and, judging by Tania's comments, it mattered to him a great deal to be connected.

In the following section, I explore the multiple reasons that move young people (in particular, those who came of age during the Special Period or later) to engage with new technologies associated with public Wi-Fi connections.

2.5 Connecting With People In and Beyond Cuba

This afternoon, as I was connected to the Internet at the Hotel Presidente. I took a look around and noticed the other people on the sidewalk who were also using the Wi-Fi connection there. Beside me was a group of teenagers huddled around a cell phone, each connecting for a brief moment to look at their Facebook accounts, laughing together at photos that their friends had shared online. Behind me, leaning against the hotel balcony, was an older man having a quiet conversation while he intermittently paced up and down the street. A little further away, a young woman in tears seemed to be having an argument with her partner living abroad. All of this was happening within a few meters of where I was telling my Cuban boyfriend, now living in Turkey, about how the Latin American TV network, Telesur, had just reported a coup attempt in that country (Personal field notes, July 2016).

Spending any time at a Wi-Fi zone, it is easy to see how important these venues are for maintaining ties with relatives, acquaintances, or lovers. Cubans spend most of their time at public Wi-Fi zones talking with people overseas using the video chat application called IMO. When they are not chatting with people abroad, they are posting photos and scanning Facebook to find out what is new in the lives of their Facebook friends, foreign and local. As I have found by looking at Facebook postings of Cubans who live on the island, postings of a political nature are rare.[36] Cubans often use the social media site to

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[36] There are exceptional cases of blogs run by political dissidents like Yoani Sánchez.

post photos of themselves and their activities (e.g. at-home get-togethers with loved ones, vacations or trips they make either locally or abroad, etc.) and to comment on their postings (Figure 7). They also use Facebook to share sentimental or inspirational messages and benign humourous content. Some news reports even highlight that Cubans in Havana use dating applications like Tinder and Grindr to make new acquaintances locally (Morgan 2016; Gallo 2017; Hernández 2017). Although Cubans use the Internet to foster local relationships, the technology is most valued for its ability to facilitate transnational connections.
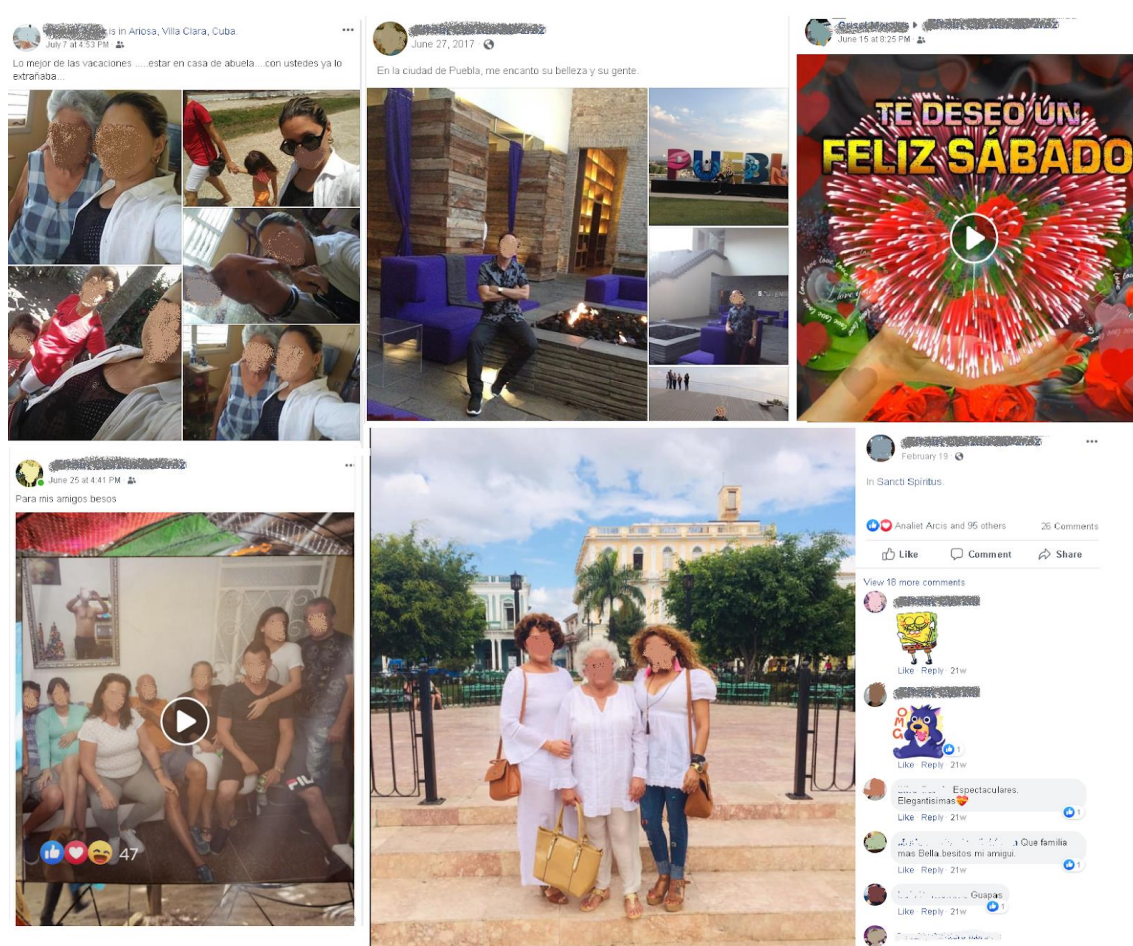

Figure 7: Examples of Cubans' Facebook postings. Source: Facebook.

In Cuba, as in other places around the world, the Internet has facilitated a faster way for many to stay in contact, re-establish a connection, or make new acquaintances with people in distant places. While a 2 CUC per hour of Internet connection is expensive for

average Cubans, long distance telephone calls, until recently the most common way of staying in touch, are even more expensive starting at 1 CUC per minute (ETECSA 2018e).

While in Havana, I had ample opportunity to see how the Internet facilitated ties with people overseas. This was even reflected in a cartoon that appeared in the youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde* that depicted a man sitting at a park bench talking to a friend or loved one overseas, telling them to take care of themselves (Figure 8). During my fieldwork, I met several people who keep in touch with their relatives via public Wi-Fi zones. Margarí, a woman in her late 50s who lives in one of Havana's western municipalities called La Lisa,[37] has several relatives in the United States. Margarí told me that before public Wi-Fi zones became available, contact with her family members in the US was much less frequent. She told me that roughly once a year someone from the family abroad would come to visit them in Cuba and they would always leave money and gifts. Now, Margarí's nephew, a young man in his mid-20s, regularly goes to a nearby Wi-Fi zone to talk to his relatives. Using his smartphone, which was likely acquired with help from his family overseas, Margarí's nephew and his relatives in the US exchange photos and news about each other's lives. He then shares the photos and news with Margarí and other relatives in Cuba who, with the help of the Internet, now feel more connected with each other.

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[37] According to the couple with whom I was staying, La Lisa is primarily a residential area for workers.

Figure 8: Comic of a man at a public Wi-Fi zone. Source: *Juventud Rebelde*, June 26, 2016.

Tania and Eduardo, the couple mentioned earlier, live in Vedado and connect to the Internet at public Wi-Fi zones on La Rampa at least once a week to talk to their relatives who live in the United States and Spain. When I asked Tania about her experience of staying in touch with her friends and family who live abroad, she said to me, "Fortunately, now we have the Wi-Fi, which makes communication much easier. […] It is the best! […] When I connect, I try to use the time I have [on my online account to talk] with my family" (Interview, 2016). On a few occasions, I went with Tania and Eduardo to La Rampa where they would connect to the Internet using a shared smartphone and Eduardo would spend more time than Tania talking to his relatives and friends in the US.

Public Wi-Fi zones have not just helped people to keep in touch with relatives but are important when it comes to keeping in touch with other acquaintances overseas who

could be friends, boyfriends, girlfriends, or business contacts.[38] Luis, a young man in his mid-20s, works at a hotel and has been using the Internet since 2014. After the emergence of public Wi-Fi zones in 2015, he started connecting at a park near his home in 10 de Octubre and used it to talk to friends and acquaintances abroad, including former colleagues who had left Cuba, foreigners he had met through his work, and others he met online with whom he formed "cyber friendships" (*amistades cibernéticas*). In his online exchanges with friends and acquaintances, he would chat and gossip (*chismear*) about life in Cuba, share pictures, and learn about various things that interested him such as technology, arts, and world news. When I asked Luis about how important the opening of public Wi-Fi zones was to him, he replied: "It was a very important step forward for Cuban society so citizens like me would not be blindfolded because it allowed me […] to expand my world, my horizons, to do and learn about things I had only seen or heard of in movies" (Informal conversation, July 2016). He told me that the more he learned about using the Internet, the more he would connect – even up to two or three times a day during the summer of 2016 because he was trying to secure a contract to work abroad and needed to be up-to-date on any opportunities he hoped would come his way.

Staying in touch over the Internet allows Cubans to cultivate ties with relatives or friends who may at some point visit, send gifts and remittances, or arrange for them to travel overseas.[39] These communications are likewise important for those overseas who also derive pleasure from remaining in contact with loved ones in Cuba and also use these connections to arrange or plan trips to the island, plan religious ceremonies, etc. Whereas before 2015 the main way for many Cubans to stay in touch with people overseas was via telephone (landline or mobile), public Wi-Fi zones have provided them with a cheaper

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[38] In the 1990s, the government opened up the tourism industry as a measure to resolve Cuba's severe economic crisis. This measure increased Cubans' chances of meeting foreigners and establishing relationships with them (Berg 2004; de Sousa e Santos 2009).

[39] The existing literature on transnational ties points to both social and economic benefits of maintaining relations with those abroad (Eckstein 2009; Eckstein 2010; Andaya 2013), arguing that in the exchange between Cuban residents and their emigrant relatives, those in Cuba are able to maintain social ties by offering support of an emotional or spiritual kind and, in return, they can count on their relatives abroad for favours and economic support.

alternative, moving many to have their international conversations at these specific public areas. As shown in the initial section of this chapter, this new practice has reconfigured the meaning of sociality in public spaces.

2.6   Conclusion

As highlighted in this chapter, Cuba's political and economic context has limited the pace at which Internet connectivity has grown as well as the places where it has first become available. Despite the government-endorsed goal of universal Internet access, the cost of connectivity is still prohibitive for many Cubans and reproduces wealth and generational gaps that have been growing since the start of the Special Period. For those who can afford to use the Internet and mobile devices like smartphones, these new communication technologies have greatly facilitated communication (and relationships) across national boundaries and have been implicated in the performance of cosmopolitanism.

The creation of public Wi-Fi zones and the use of the Internet has changed the feel of the city and generated new entrepreneurial activity. As explained, public plazas, parks, recreation fields and sidewalks have become hubs for a new kind of sociality. Moreover, new income opportunities have arisen as needed services and resources are sold in both legal and illegal markets.

Whereas the practices discussed in this chapter have focused on the use of new digital technologies in Cuba's public spaces, as we shall see in the next chapter, these technologies are also present in the private space of the home. The following chapter looks at the ways some digital technologies are being used to generate accessible alternative sources of information and entertainment and are also reconfiguring the way that Cubans socialize, use their spare time, and exercise their "worldliness."

Chapter 3

3   Catering to Cubans' Desires for Alternatives: Cuba's Version of Netflix

Over the course of my fieldwork, I found that most Cubans I met had a great interest in learning about the world through various kinds of media and entertainment (including news reports, music, sports events, TV shows, movies and documentaries, books, etc.). They also, as illustrated in the previous chapter, have a thirst for staying up-to-date with technology, information and global trends. In this chapter, I discuss access to information, education and culture in revolutionary Cuba and the official and unofficial channels that Cubans use to fulfill their desires to be informed and entertained. As part of this discussion, I also consider the question of censorship and try to place it in its proper political context.

3.1   Not Just a Plain Old USB Drive

Early on in my fieldwork, I visited my friend, Ana, a retired woman in her 80s who used to work as a secretary in international relations and lives in Havana's 10 de Octubre municipality. My first impression when I walked into Ana's home was one of a relatively typical Cuban household: she invited me to sit in one of the wooden rocking chairs in her living room, next to a table with that day's copy of the Communist youth daily newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*, and across from the TV set. I noticed that the TV was a modern flat screen, but what I did not see immediately was the little USB flash drive plugged into the side of the TV – a key piece of technology that ended up inspiring this chapter. The TV was already turned on and Ana had just paused an episode of an American TV show called *Saving Hope* she was watching before I arrived. She talked to me about "this awesome service called the weekly package (*el paquete semanal*) [she] gets from a young man who comes to [her] home every week to update [her] USB with the latest TV shows, movies, and documentaries." She told me that she especially enjoys watching *Saving Hope* and *Grey's Anatomy*, the latter of which I also liked, so we bonded over that. I was surprised that this retired Cuban woman not only followed American shows, but was watching the most recent episodes!

Upon further investigation, I learned that *el paquete semanal*[40] is a fairly recent phenomenon in Cuba and it has become a major – if not the most important – alternative source of media and entertainment there (Fazekas and Marshall 2016; Garcia Martínez 2017; Dye et al. 2018). Its popularity points to Cubans' thirst for alternative sources of information and entertainment and the way digital technologies are shaping their everyday lives. In order to appreciate why *el paquete* is so valued by Cubans across the country, one must first have a sense of the media and entertainment options that are officially available. This entails understanding the roles of education, culture and mass media in the Cuban government's plan to forge a new society.

3.2   Access to Education and Culture in the Cuban Revolution

After the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, the Cuban government was intent on breaking from its past of subordination to more powerful countries like the United States and modernizing the country by overcoming its legacy of economic and social inequality. Before the Revolution, the majority of Cubans, particularly the lower classes and those who lived in rural areas, did not have access to basic human rights such as food, health care, and education. Providing universal access to these and other human rights was considered key to building a just and prosperous Cuba.

Education in particular was viewed as the foundation to Cuba's future progress. To advance the population in this respect, the government opened new schools, libraries, museums, and galleries in rural areas, and provided night schooling for adults (Saney 2004, 16). In a country where only 60 to 76 percent of the population was said to be literate,[41] ensuring that everyone could read and write was a fundamental component of Cuba's educational strategy, so a national literacy campaign was carried out in 1961. This

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[40] Referred to as "*el paquete*" from here on out.

[41] This figure varies depending on sources (Bey 2016; Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 9). The national literacy rate, as an average, does not illustrate the disparity between Cuba's urban and rural places. Gordon-Nesbitt (2015, 9) clarifies: "whereas only 7.5 percent of people in Havana were illiterate, an estimated 43 percent of the rural population could not read or write and 44 percent had never attended school."

campaign involved brigades of volunteer teachers going to rural areas where education had previously been less accessible.[42] Within a year, 707,212 Cubans were taught to read and write and Cuba's literacy rate rose to 96% (Prieto 1981, 221; Bey 2016). Equipped with the essential skills to study, more Cubans could thus take advantage of the other learning opportunities that were made available by the Revolution. In a speech Fidel Castro gave at the 1962 National Congress of Municipal Councils of Education, he commented that investing in education was key to the nation's improvement, stating: "As the technical capacity of our people develops, their material progress will also develop; as our country's culture develops, so will the general well-being of all our people" (Castro 1962). In the same speech, Fidel (1962) enthusiastically highlighted that, in just four years:

> Illiteracy was virtually erased, and hundreds of thousands of adults learned to read and write […] The number of people who study in Cuba since the triumph of the Revolution has been raised from 750,000 to 2 million. […] An extraordinary spirit of collective improvement has been produced, a true interest in learning.

Fidel's mention of "a true interest in learning" and "an extraordinary spirit of collective improvement" referenced education that went beyond pragmatic training for the workforce. A well-rounded education was seen as key to the revolutionary objective of liberating Cubans from exploitation and ignorance, encouraging them to develop their full human potential and talents. In keeping with these goals, the government made diverse educational options available to all Cubans, regardless of their economic or social background. The arts were not excluded from this plan as the government opened a national arts school (*Escuela Nacional de Arte)* in Havana where talented students from all of Cuba could live and study for free.

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[42] Chomsky (2011, 108) explains why the campaign was an important learning experience not only for those students who were taught to read and write, but also the teachers who were sent from Cuba's urban centers to its rural zones. By living and teaching in the countryside, they gained an appreciation of life in rural Cuba, witnessing and experiencing the social and economic realities of those who lived there and, in turn, they became conscious of why the Revolution emphasized rural development and creating equal access to education, food, healthcare, housing, etc.

Tremendous resources were dedicated to democratizing the consumption of cultural products. The new government wanted to cultivate a citizenry able to appreciate and consume culture, no matter their circumstances. Before the Revolution, artistic exhibits, performances, and other forms of "high-end" entertainment were luxuries inaccessible to the majority of Cubans who could not afford the price of entry and generally did not have the knowledge to appreciate and participate in these activities. In the revolutionary government's vision for advancement, there was a recognition that improving Cubans' overall well-being entailed more than just ensuring universal access to basic necessities – they needed access to a vibrant cultural sphere as well (including visual arts, music, dance, theatre, film, literature, etc.). Cultural activities that were previously concentrated in urban centres, such as watching a live concert or going to the ballet, became possible and more affordable for average Cubans to attend.[43] As Fidel Castro (1961) explained, rural inhabitants were particularly targeted in these efforts:

> With regard to the peasants of the cooperatives and of the farms, there arose the idea of bringing culture to the [countryside]. How? […] How can we awaken in the peasant a love of theatre, for example? […] it is positive, and above all to commence the discovery of the Cuban people's talents and also convert the people into authors and creators, because in the end the people are the great creators. We must not forget this and we must not forget the thousands and thousands of talents that have been lost in our countryside and in our cities due to the lack of conditions and opportunities to develop.

That the democratizing spirit implicit in Fidel's words continues to the present is attested by the fact that many free and low-cost events are still available to Cubans throughout the country. In the case of Havana, one can attend many concerts, art exhibits, fairs, festivals, and public lectures by prominent artists for free (Figure 9) or for an entrance price that ranges anywhere from 2 MN to 5 CUC (0.08 to 5.00 USD).[44] Admission tickets to a

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[43] In addition to opening new museums, galleries, and cinemas in the provinces, brigades of artists travelled and performed in the country's rural areas (Campoy 2005, 99). Also, a mobile cinema program was initiated in April 1962 by the Communist Youth Organization (*La Union de Jovenes Comunistas*, or UJC) to screen national and international productions using projectors in agricultural areas, where there was a high concentration of voluntary workers (Balaisis 2010; Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 53). In the program's first year, more than 2 million Cubans accessed the mobile theatres (Fernandes 2006, 51).

[44] These prices should be considered relative to the average Cuban monthly salary of 740 MN (*moneda nacional* or Cuban Pesos), equal to 30.83 USD (Cubadebate 2017). The famous exhibition centre El

movie theatre that feature Cuban and international productions have remained at the very affordable price of 2 MN for decades (0.08 USD). This is remarkable in a world where such entertainment is a luxury. [45]

Figure 9: A free concert in front of the University of Havana. Source: Author, August 2016.

While the revolutionary government succeeded in expanding access to education and culture, it has also received harsh criticism for the limits it has imposed on freedom of expression. When discussing the culture and entertainment industries in Cuba**,** therefore, it is necessary to address the subject of censorship.

Pabellon in Vedado (which hosts art exhibits, concerts, technology expositions, the annual book fair, and the annual arts and culture fair) sometimes charges an entrance fee of 2 MN (0.08 USD). Watching a play costs 10 MN (0.40 USD), while tickets for the ballet and large concerts range from 20 to 40 MN (0.80 to 1.60 USD), and students usually only have to pay half price. Some concerts (including those by foreigners) can get more expensive and are paid for in Convertible Cuban Pesos (CUC), such as the one I attended for 5 CUC (5 USD) at the Casa de la Música in Havana's Playa municipality, which featured the Cuban group, El Niño y La Verdad.

[45] In comparison, the average price of a movie ticket in Canada and the US rose more than $3 between 2001 and 2017 (Statista 2019).

3.3   Cultural Production and Mass Media in the Revolution

The culture and mass media industries had an important role to play in persuading citizens to embrace the projects and values endorsed by the revolutionary government.[46] A key piece in this plan was the Cuban Film Institute (*Instituto Cubano del Arte e Industria Cinematográficos*, or ICAIC), founded just months after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959.[47] As specified in the law that created it, the ICAIC was to be:

> […] 'an instrument of opinion and of the formation of individual and collective consciousness, capable of contributing to the creation of a more profound and clearer revolutionary spirit and to sustaining its creative breath' (cited in Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 50). [48]

Along with film, other media forms were used by the Cuban government to communicate with the public and shape opinion and collective consciousness. The most effective routes for reaching the widest audience at the start of the Revolution, when at least a quarter of the population was illiterate, were radio and television.[49] Unlike film, these forms of mass media, while not universally accessible, had been well-developed prior to 1959 in

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[46] The new government was tasked with persuading Cubans to take on revolutionary values because not everyone had these from the outset, as evidenced by those who left the country after the triumph of the Revolution. While the redistribution of access to basic rights and cultural opportunities significantly improved life for the lower classes, many wealthy Cubans who had benefited from the inequality of pre-Revolutionary Cuba fled to the United States in protest (Arboleya Cervera 2013, 29).

[47] Before the Revolution, Cuba's film industry was miniscule and national productions "constitute[ed] less than one percent of films watched on the island, with imports dominated by US productions" (Wood 2009, 515). Of the few films that were created in Cuba, the majority "were perceived as market-driven, artistically vulgar and ethically questionable by virtue of their tendency to reduce the island to its erotico-tropical elements" (Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 48).

[48] After 1959, the Cuban film industry became part of the Latin American movement of cultural decolonization known as Third Cinema, which rejected the dominant Hollywood model that subjected (and still subjects) passive consumers to idealized bourgeois values through spectacle and individual characters (Solanas and Getino 2000). Cuban revolutionary cinema focused on national issues with the goal of "bind[ing] the nation together in a common national experience" as active viewers, as opposed to passive ones - in other words, these films raised consciousness by provoking the audience to discuss and reflect on what was happening in Cuba (Wood 2009, 515). Films produced by ICAIC that fit into the Third Cinema category include *Memorias del Subdesarrollo* (Memories of Underdevelopment), *Soy Cuba* (I Am Cuba), and *Esta Tierra Nuestra* (This Land of Ours).

[49] Fidel Castro spoke on radio and television almost daily "in his early years of rule [...] to explain revolutionary goals and encourage popular participation" (Eckstein 1994, 24).

part due to Cuba's close cultural and commercial ties with the US.[50] By the 1950s, the US had pushed Cuba into the material and technological forefront of Latin America,[51] with over one million radios in daily use and a per capita rate of television ownership that was "second only to the United States" (Pérez 1999, 334).[52] In the 1950s, Havana also had "the most competitive broadcasting [and print media] market[s] of any city in the world," with thirty-two commercial radio stations, five private TV stations, and twenty-one daily newspapers (Alisky 1981, 157). After the triumph of the Revolution, in 1960, the new government took over the famous magazine *Bohemia*[53] and in subsequent years pre-existing print media were shut down and new ones took their place. Among them was *Granma*, the national daily newspaper and official voice of the Communist Party, which was launched in 1965.[54] By May 1962, the revolutionary government had taken full control of radio and TV, founding the Cuban Radio and Television Institute (*Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión,* or ICRT).[55] With its control of the media and the culture industry, the Cuban government was in a perfect position to determine the messages being put out by journalists, radio broadcasters, writers, cartoonists, artists, and cultural producers in general.

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[50] Pérez (1999) recounts the unequal political, economic, and cultural exchanges between Cuba and the US from the 19th century up to the Revolution.

[51] Cuba was the first Latin American country to broadcast TV programs and was one of the first countries in the world that transmitted color broadcasts (Pérez 1999, 333).

[52] By 1959, the officially-reported amount of TV sets in use was 400,000 for a population of 6,824,524 (Pérez 1999, 333; Alfonso Fraga 2009, 10). However, Pérez (1999, 334) argues that the data on TV imports does not (1) account for TVs purchased on the black market, which was estimated to be 30% of all TVs in use, and (2) accurately reflect the amount of people who watched TV, as it was common practice for friends and relatives to gather and watch together.

[53] Founded in 1908, *Bohemia* was the first magazine in Cuba and in Latin America (Bohemia 2019).

[54] Other newspapers that were founded following the Revolution include national papers like the Communist Youth daily, *Juventud Rebelde*, the weekly Workers Union paper, *Trabajadores*, and weekly provincial papers. Several magazines were also launched, such as the army's *Verde Olivo*, the Federation of Cuban Women's *Mujeres*, and youth-oriented magazines like *Somos Jovenes* and *Pa'lante*.

[55] This organization was known as *el Instituto Cubano de Radiodifusión* from its creation in 1962 until 1975, when it was changed to *el Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión* (Radio Cubana 2008).

In 1961, Fidel Castro outlined what the government expected from cultural producers in one of his most debated speeches, "*Palabras a los intelectuales*" ("Words to the Intellectuals"). According to Hernández-Reguant (2004, 14), in this speech, Castro:

> […] proclaimed the social role of art under the Revolution, rejecting its commercialization and announcing that the state would replace private parties – regarded as corrupt intermediaries – in the distribution and dissemination of artwork. In return, cultural producers would have a responsibility as 'organic artists' to raise social consciousness and support the regime.

Regarding the freedom of expression of artists and writers, in the same speech, Fidel pronounced his famous phrase: "Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing." With this phrase, he made it clear that anything that was perceived to work against the revolutionary project and, by extension, against the socialist government, would not be tolerated since it would undermine the lofty revolutionary goals of bringing freedom and progress to the Cuban people. Only constructive criticism that would help strengthen the Revolution, rather than attack it, would be permissible. *Palabras a los Intelectuales* came to be known as the speech that marked the beginning of censorship in Cuba, a censorship which cannot be understood without considering the broader political context that framed it.

The *Palabras* speech came at a time when tensions were rising between Cuba and the US, in the aftermath of the April 1961 Bay of Pigs Invasion and after Fidel had declared the socialist nature of the Revolution. Prior to these events, the revolutionary government's decisions, from nationalizing US oil companies to eliminating real estate speculation, had seriously impinged on US interests in Cuba,[56] resulting in an "undeclared war"[57] that consisted of major diplomatic and economic sanctions.[58]

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[56] Before the Revolution, "forty percent of the farms and 55 percent of the mills were in the hands of US companies. US investors also controlled 90 percent of Cuba's telecommunications and electrical services and half of the country's railroads, as well as significant portions of the banking, cattle, mining, petroleum, and tourist industries" (Chomsky 2011, 46).

[57] Saney (2004, 162)

[58] The US cut diplomatic ties with Cuba in 1961 and finalized the economic embargo by 1962 - with the exception of some medicine and medical supplies, which were banned two years later (Saney 2004:167).

Against this backdrop of attacks from the US, the government was understandably on guard and became intolerant of anything it felt would undermine the revolutionary project and its image. This was the case with a short movie on Havana nightlife called *P.M.* which was broadcasted on Cuban television in May 1961. The movie showed "the seedier side of Havana - the drinking, dancing and sex" at a time when the government wanted to extol the virtues of the Cuban people (Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 153). The ICAIC banned the film, stating that it presented a biased and "'partial picture of Havana nightlife which impoverishes, disfigures and diverts the attitude maintained by the Cuban people against the cunning attacks of counterrevolutionaries and the dictates of Yankee imperialism'" (Gordon-Nesbitt 2015, 154). The banning of the film set into motion a series of debates to discuss the future of cultural production within the Revolution. Three meetings were held at the National Library in Havana between Cuban intellectuals, artists, writers, and government officials, including Fidel Castro. The result was the *Palabras* speech mentioned above.

The message for the mass media and cultural producers was that critical representations of Cuba, Cubans, the Revolution and its leadership would not be tolerated. Thus, as I found during my fieldwork, the "yellow press" and tabloid journalism, so common in places like the United States, do not exist in Cuba where there is no sensationalized reporting on petty crime and where incidents involving murders or suicides are not publicized by state media. Similarly, TV shows like the popular US Dr. Phil or Judge Judy that make a spectacle of interpersonal violence and arguments among family members or couples are not to be found on Cuban state television which tends to focus on positive human traits or actions to be emulated. This is in line with the official mission of the ICRT which aims "to offer the Cuban public radio and TV quality programming that is informative, recreational, and educational," and in line with the politics of the government (ICRT 2018). In general, official Cuban mass media and cultural institutions aim to educate the population by putting forth the best of Cuban art, sports, entertainment, and news. In this respect, Cuba is no different from other countries where state-run media works to bolster national morale and foster feelings of belonging to a national "imagined community" (Anderson 2006; Abu-Lughod 2005; Pace and Hinote

2013). Where Cuban media and other cultural institutions differ from similar ones in other countries is in their selective, uncritical stance.

This is not to say that Cuban media has been free of critiques of the Revolution. The ICAIC, for instance, has been known for producing a number of films through the years that have been critical of policies and practices of the socialist state. The film *Muerte de un Burocrata* (1966) reflected the way ordinary Cubans were inconvenienced by bureaucratic red tape. In the 1980s and early 1990s films like *Se Permuta* (1984), *Alicia en el Pueblo de Maravillas* (1991), *Guantanamera* (1995), and the internationally acclaimed *Fresa y Chocolate* (1993) continued the critique of state bureaucracy while addressing touchy topics like economic scarcity, state inefficiencies, intolerance towards homosexuality and the myriad clandestine ways in which Cubans attempt to overcome the obstacles created by "the system." Even though many of these films presented their critiques in a humorous manner described by Chanan (2004, 9-10) as "sociocritical comedy," their impact was no less powerful. According to Fernandes (2006, 47), throughout its history, the ICAIC has fought for and generally enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy from the state than other cultural producers. However, critiques of the state have not been absent from other media. In the field of fiction writing, Leonardo Padura Fuentes has used detective stories like *Pasado Perfecto*, *Vientos de Cuaresma*, and *Máscaras* to discuss taboo topics that include corruption within the revolutionary army, drug use, and the repression of intellectuals and homosexuals (Anderson 2013). There are also examples in the field of music like the underground rappers Los Aldeanos who have had public performances and even appeared on radio and television despite their critical stance on the Cuban government (Baker 2011).[59]

Even though one could argue that since the Special Period government-sanctioned media and cultural production have become more open to critical debate, Cubans remain

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[59] There are numerous authors who have speculated as to the reasons why these dissenting voices have been allowed. There are those who argue that critical film, for example, acts as a pressure valve for the population without changing anything (Balaisis 2010). Other authors, like Baker (2011), focus on how the multifaceted nature of the state allows artists to circumvent potential censorship.

unsatisfied and often point to the omissions, biases and limitations of information circulated through official channels, particularly in print and television media. As mentioned before, the news does not emphasize failures or inefficiencies of the Revolution, and Cubans are often dismayed with reports that do not always reflect what is going on in their country, as they see it. For example, an elderly couple with whom I lived during my fieldwork would watch the news on TV while eating lunch and on multiple occasions were upset by reports on rising food production. They would sarcastically complain back at the TV that production is "always on the rise every year," despite food scarcity having been a constant problem in revolutionary times (Benjamin et al 1984; Premat 2012; Wilson 2014). A Cuban study done by the Centre for Psychological and Sociological Research (*Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas,* or CIPS) on how young people view official TV and print media found that youth feel these sources are too ideologically-driven in content: "[Young Cubans] identify the traditionally informative function that [these forms of mass media have] had as solely political-ideological" and "[there is] a demand for a more critical analysis of our reality [in Cuba] by mass communications media" (Domínguez García et al. 2014, 70, 87). The same study also found that youth are unsatisfied with the limited selection of entertainment options on TV, as well as the repetition of movies,[60] serial episodes, and political news programs like the *Mesa Redonda* (Round Table) which they find unengaging (Domínguez García et al. 2014, 71). This lack of engagement was reflected in the 2009 national study on cultural consumption which found that of young Cubans aged 12-14, only 18.4% read newspapers and 33.7% read magazines and, although 97.9% watch TV, less than 10% of these say they like the news and educational documentaries (Linares et al. 2009, 76-80). As suggested by the comments I heard from older Cubans during my fieldwork, however, it would seem that youth are not the only ones who feel official media is lacking - a situation which suggests that Cubans of all ages might look elsewhere for alternative sources of information and entertainment.

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[60] Furthermore, Cuban journalist and film critic, Rolando Pérez Betancourt, has highlighted that Cuban television transmits on a weekly basis "'around 50 movies between all its channels, but the good movies are poorly programed, playing at times that are very inconvenient for viewers, including after midnight'" (Concepción Llanes 2015b, 83).

3.4   Unofficial Channels of Entertainment and Information

As in other socialist contexts characterized by scarcity and restrictions in the circulation of all sorts of goods, over the course of the Revolution, Cubans have developed a thriving black market that includes anything from basic necessities like food to relative luxuries like recently released Hollywood movies and foreign-produced music. When rock music was banned from Cuban radio and television in the 1960s because it was seen as "the epitome of mindless, vulgar consumerism" associated with Western culture, Cubans sought out black market vinyl records and smuggled tapes of famous groups like The Beatles (Eckstein 1994, 25; Morton 2014; Volkert 2016).[61] In the 1990s, Cubans were able to gain access to movies, TV shows, and music not available through official channels by using illegal satellite antennas (that caught channels like HBO, ESPN, Discovery, and Disney) and by unofficially trading VHS cassettes and, later, DVDs (Concepción Llanes 2015b, 77-79). Similarly, in recent years, underground Cuban music like rap and reggaeton has circulated and grown in popularity through the "hand-to-hand distribution and sale of" CDs (Fernandes 2006, 86; Baker 2011, 22). Since 2008, when buying and owning personal computers and mobile phones was legalized for the general population (Frank 2013, 115), Cubans have found yet another way to gain access to desired alternative sources of entertainment through *el paquete semanal* (the weekly package),[62] mentioned earlier in this chapter. In a few short years, *el paquete*, a black market digital bundle that includes entertainment media, news, and a range of applications stored on external hard drives, has become a social phenomenon with regular subscribers of all ages across the country. Compared to predecessors like CDs and DVDs, the new technology *el paquete* relies on (external hard drives, USB sticks, computers and

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[61] The ban on rock music was lifted in the early 1970s, however, "pushback" from the government continued against the values associated with rock culture (Volkert 2016).

[62] I should mention that there is another offline data-sharing system that exists in Cuba called SNet (short for Street Network) that started in 2001 in Havana (Dye et al. 2018, 2). SNet consists of a system of routers and ethernet wires woven throughout the capital, that allows its users to play video games, share files, and message each other through forums and "clones" of Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit (Brito Chávez 2015, 45; Falls 2018; García Martínez 2017).

mobile phones) has a much greater storage capability and thus can offer consumers significantly more choices.

3.4.1   Content of *El Paquete*

When *el paquete* started out, its size and composition was very different from today. Based on her research in Cuba between 2005 and 2010, Australian scholar Anna Cristina Pertierra (2012, 405) described this alternative media bundle in its early years as being primarily composed of films and TV shows that had been recently broadcast in Mexico and the United States. Back then, the bundle consisted of 50 to 100 gigabytes of pirated audiovisuals (Luis Reyes 2016). Today, it is over ten times bigger, ranging from 1,000 to 2,000 gigabytes,[63] and holds a variety of the latest domestic and foreign content (e.g. from Latin America, the US, Europe, and Asia). I got an in-depth sense of what *el paquete* contains from a website launched in early 2017 that regularly publishes lists of its latest contents.[64] Using this site, as well as other available sources on the subject (Brito Chavez 2015; Concepcion Llanes 2015a-c; Pertierra 2012; Dye et al. 2016; Luis Reyes 2016; Henken 2017), I have summarized in Table 1 the various types of media that can be found in the multimedia bundle. It should be noted that pornography and anything deemed explicitly anti-revolutionary, anti-government, or anti-Castro are not included (Luis Reyes 2016).

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[63] One thousand gigabytes, or one terabyte (TB), is equivalent to over 250 high-definition movies.

[64] www.paquetedecuba.com

Content Category	Examples
1. Audiovisual	- TV series - Reality shows - Movies - Documentaries - Japanese animé - Cartoon shows - Sports - Competition shows (e.g. *La Voz Kids,* Miss Universe) - Soap operas (e.g. Latin American novelas, Asian doramas) - Music videos and concerts - Awards shows (e.g. Grammys, Oscars) - YouTube videos (on technology, sports reports, exercise routines, cooking, fashion trends, foreign languages, Cuban celebrities and gossip)
2. Audio	Music
3. Websites and Print	- PDF copies of magazines, newspapers, articles, and books (from 50 Shades of Grey to works by Paulo Coelho, Gabriel García Márquez) - Small business advertisements *Revolico* and other classifieds
4. Software	- Videogames (from computers as well as game consoles like XBOX, PlayStation) - Cell phone applications (Android and iOS) - Computer programs (including antivirus)

Table 1: Summary of content that can be found in *el paquete*.

Even though *el paquete* began as an alternative for accessing international sources of media, nationally-produced content has gained an important place in this black-market product. Sometimes it includes PDFs of official texts like the Constitution and other new laws, copies of the newspaper and the official voice of the Communist Party, *Granma*, and articles that serve as useful study resources for students (González, M 2014; Henken 2017, 433; García 2018). Cuban novelas and TV shows like *Vivir del Cuento*, a comedy that pokes fun at everyday life in the country, also appear in the bundle. Shortly after the death of Fidel Castro, the weekly package's offerings even included documentaries about Fidel's life (Farrell, public lecture, 2017).

This diversified selection of entertainment and educational content is one of the reasons why *el paquete* has become so popular, as I found through informal conversations I had with people I met in Havana. As Yessica, a 20-year-old university student, put it, "There is something for everyone." Yessica is a self-proclaimed *serie adicta* (a TV show addict)

and she buys *el paquete* every week to get the latest episodes of her favourite shows like *The Vampire Diaries*[65] and HBO's *Game of Thrones*. She also uses it to watch the newest movies (including ones that are still being shown in theatres), read magazines like *People*, and browse through the Cuban classifieds. She even shares it with an ex-boyfriend of hers who is "obsessed" with a sports car magazine. Luis, a young man in his mid-20s who works at a hotel, uses the weekly package to listen to the newest songs by emerging Cuban reggaeton artists and to watch YouTube videos about the latest technology (e.g. cell phones, tablets). Tania, a woman in her mid-30s that works at a small private restaurant, loves to watch Brazilian novelas on her days off and her 12-year-old son enjoys cartoons and Japanese animé after school. Ana, my 80-year-old friend who likes TV shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Saving Hope*, also watches concerts by Celine Dion, "quality movies with talented actors," and documentaries on history, science, and politics (Personal correspondence, 2017). It is telling that only the oldest person in my group of acquaintances mentioned educational content like documentaries, though their availability suggests that there must be an audience for them.

Other folders are dedicated to the sale and promotion of goods and services within Cuba, revealing *el paquete*'s growing commercial side. For example, a classifieds folder is dedicated to websites for buying, selling and trading, such as Revolico, the Cuban version of Craigslist or Kijiji mentioned in Chapter 1. A database of restaurants across the country is also available to *el paquete* subscribers by downloading a cell phone application called *A La Mesa* (To the Table) (Figure 10). Along with restaurants, other small private businesses advertise themselves through *el paquete*, including beauty salons, barber shops, cell phone repair shops, and taxi drivers (Figure 11).[66] Promotions such as these have been appearing more and more since at least 2013 (Sir and Weist

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[65] Shows mentioned here were current at the time of my fieldwork. Since then, some of them have ended production.

[66] The number of private sector activities approved by the government rose significantly in 2010 during the time of Raúl Castro's presidency (Díaz Fernández and Barrerio Pousa 2019).

2017).[67] These ads are reflective of a burgeoning publicity industry as well as a growing small business sector.

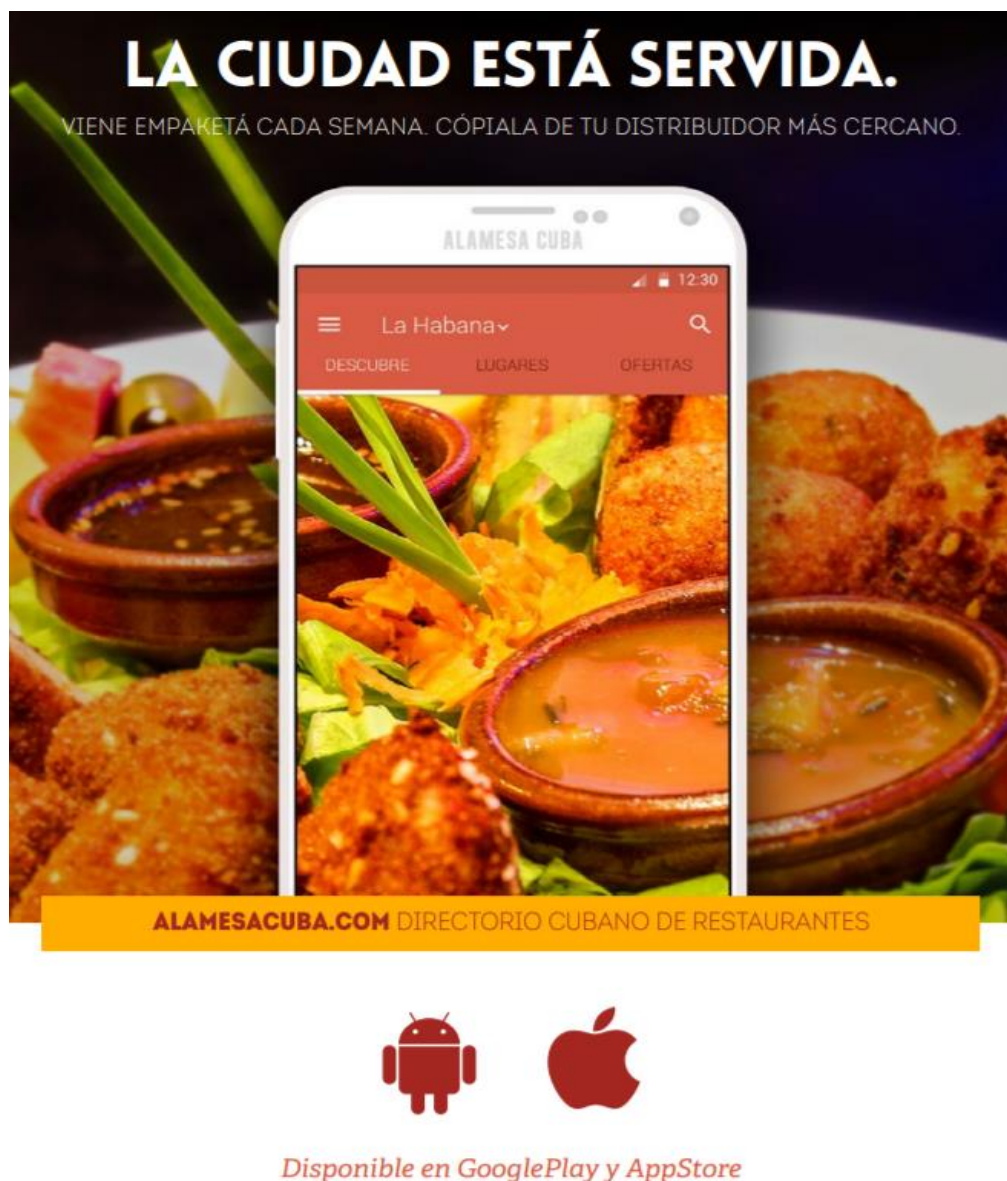**Figure 10: Advertisement for cell phone application and Cuban restaurant directory, *A La Mesa*. Source: *Vistar* Magazine.**

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[67] According to Sir and Weist (2017), A Havana-based company called "ETRES, founded in 2013, was the agency to develop a methodology for leveraging the national reach of the *paquete* to circulate ads and they remain the most significant promotional agency in Cuba."

Figure 11: Screenshots from a *paquete* video advertising a hair salon.

El paquete has also diversified the selection of domestic cultural productions that Cubans can conveniently access. As a type of offline "mobile media device," *el paquete* provides a way for Cuban cultural producers to work outside of the rules and restrictions of official channels, giving them an alternative space to promote themselves and their work (Pertierra 2012, 404). For example, although print media is under the state's control, *el paquete* features digital copies of independent domestically-produced magazines like *Vistar*.[68] Founded in March 2014, *Vistar* is a monthly arts and culture publication that is

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[68] Other digital magazines produced in Cuba that appear in *el paquete* include the beauty magazine, *Venus*, a fashion magazine called *Garbos*, and a sports magazine called *Play-Off* (Brito Chávez 2015, 68; Henken 2017, 437)

distributed in digital format only (online and through *el paquete*). Its independence does not equate an anti-establishment stance however, as many of the magazine's covers feature Cuban cultural icons like the children's cartoon character, Elpidio Valdés,[69] ballet dancer Carlos Acosta,[70] and actor Jorge Perugorría[71] whose careers and achievements have been fostered and publicized by official institutions (Figure 12). The inside of *Vistar* magazine features stories and advertisements that are as design-savvy and colourful as the covers shown here, which appeals to young Cubans who complain about the aesthetic blandness of certain official print media that is in black and white (Domínguez García et al. 2014, 87). The weekly package also offers publicity for Cuban artists who work outside of official channels, such as up-and-coming reggaeton musicians and amateur filmmakers. One of the most popular compilers of *el paquete*'s music content, Abdel La Esencia, has claimed that "practically all musical groups in Cuba want to be in *el paquete* because promoting themselves there, for example if they have a new video clip, means all of Cuba will see it within a week" (González, O 2014).[72] The weekly package offers these musicians a way to circumvent official channels and queues that would get their work shown on national television. It is important to remember that the growing presence of new digital technologies in Cuba has facilitated the independent productions of writers and artists - particularly since 2008, when it became legal for private individuals to buy

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[69] The children's cartoon, *Elpidio Valdes*, created by cartoonist and filmmaker Juan Padrón in 1970, received praise in 2010 from the ex-minister of culture, Abel Prieto, for his "decolonizing capacity upon converting himself into an alternative personality in the face of Disney['s international dominance]" (Gonzalez, L 2010). Elpidio, a mambí colonel who teaches children about the Cuban independence wars and portrays positive character traits associated with Cuban nationality (e.g. valiance, working together, etc.), is a "person of reference" in Cuban culture as the TV show continues to be broadcasted today.

[70] Born in 1973, Acosta grew up in a marginal Havana neighbourhood with 10 siblings. Thanks to the Revolution's democratization of access to education, he got the chance to study ballet for free. He went on to dance in the National Ballet of Cuba under Alicia Alonso and perform with other companies around the world. He now directs the Birmingham Royal Ballet in England and fosters the talent of Cuban dance students of through his Havana-based company, Acosta Danza (BBC News 2019).

[71] Lead actor in movies like *Fresa y Chocolate* (1993), *Guantanamera* (1995), *Se Vende* (2012), and the 2016 Netflix series *Four Seasons in Havana* (based on Cuban author Leonardo Padura's famous quartet).

[72] Luis tells me Abdel has gained popular recognition in Cuba as "the king of audiovisual and musical promotion" ("*Existe un personaje que le han llamado el rey de la promoción audiovisual y musical en Cuba. Se llama Abdel la Escencia.*") (Informal conversation, August 2016).

and own computers and cell phones (Frank 2013, 115).[73] The opportunities for national exposure offered to cultural producers through *el paquete* demonstrates how much digital technology has changed the production and circulation of entertainment, news, and information in Cuba.
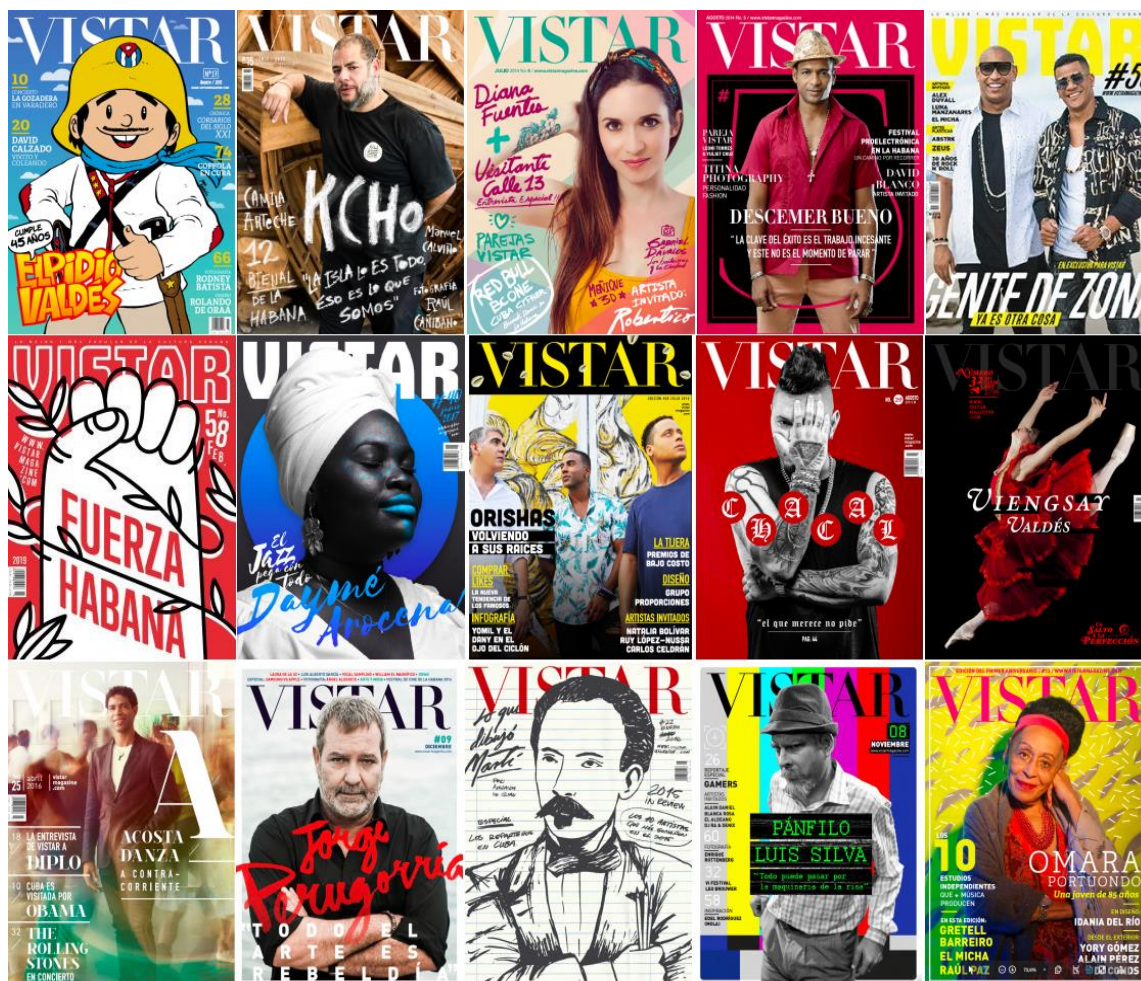
Figure 12: Compilation of *Vistar* magazine's covers.

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[73] In 1969, Julio García Espinosa (2003), one of the biggest Cuban filmmakers and the writer of Cuba's Third Cinema Manifesto, envisioned a future in which technological advances would make producing artworks much easier and filmmaking technology would evolve to no longer be "the privilege of a small few." Baker (2011, 22) gives an example with "Underground musicians [who] have benefited enormously from the expanded availability of technology and the development of a network of home studios alongside the state-owned and private-but-officially-sanctioned studios that have traditionally controlled music production in Havana."

3.4.2   Production and Distribution of *El Paquete*

Outlining *el paquete*'s country-wide distribution process provides insight into the origins of its files and how it is circulated so that Cubans can access this alternative source of information and media. Figure 13 serves as a roadmap of *el paquete*'s production and distribution system.
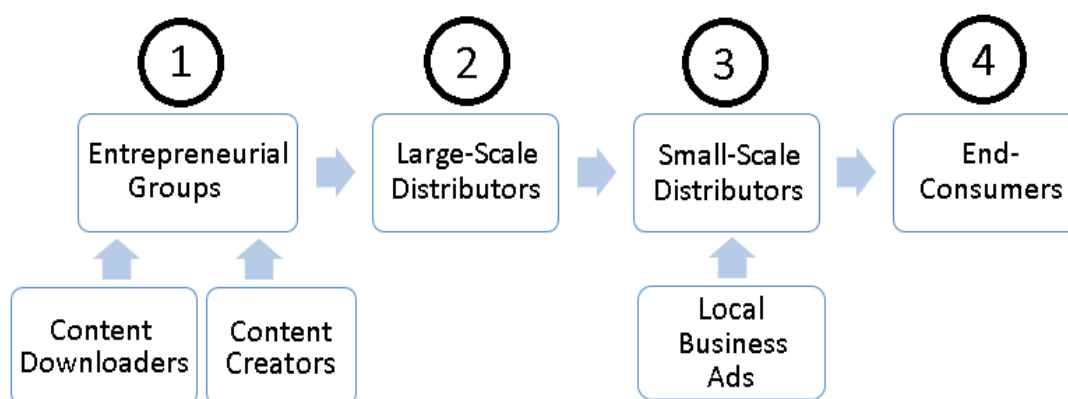

Figure 13: *El paquete's* distribution chain.

There are (at least) four Havana-based *paquete* enterprises that compete with each other. These enterprises are called Omega, Crazyboy, Odisea, and Deltavisión and they are each run by groups of independent Cuban entrepreneurs like "*Abdel la Esencia*" ("Abdel The Essence") who is in charge of the music content at Odisea.[74] These entrepreneurs conduct their business officially using licenses for selling CDs and DVDs (*vendedor-comprador de discos*) (Henken 2017; Concepción Llanes 2015b, 90). The entrepreneurs pay content downloaders to get international content that comes from two sources: Internet connections at public Wi-Fi zones and state institutions[75] as well as recordings from

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[74] Luis tells me Abdel La Esencia promotes himself through every musician's work he inserts in *el paquete*, sharing his logo and contact information so others can reach him by phone or Facebook (Informal conversation, August 2016). I also noticed contact information on the website that publishes the list of each new *paquete*'s content (www.paquetedecuba.com) - the website provides an email with the message: "You can contact me here if you want to promote yourself through *el paquete*."

[75] It is uncertain how many content downloaders exist and how much each person downloads, but those who have written about *el paquete*'s operations explain that such mass amount of data being downloaded on a regular basis at state institutions with higher bandwidths would have to be noticed. Larry Press (2016), a US-based professor of Information Systems who has done extensive work on the Internet in Cuba and has

illegal satellite antennas (Dye et al. 2016, 4; Pertierra 2012, 408). Cuban content creators (e.g. independent magazines and musicians) contact the *paquete* enterprises and pay them a fee to have their productions included in the alternative media bundle (Cabo 2018).[76] In theory, the *paquete* entrepreneurs review all content to make sure it does not contain anything prohibited like pornography or anti-government messages (Luis Reyes 2016). They also modify audiovisuals when needed by cutting out commercials and adding subtitles to foreign language content (Harris 2015). Finally, they organize the content into folders and upload everything to external hard drives that are distributed to the rest of the country.

As the alternative media bundle has grown in popularity, so has the competition between the four existing *paquete* enterprises. According to Danys Cabrera, founder of Deltavisión, in order to stay competitive, these enterprises are forced to renew their content daily and increase the frequency of deliveries. Cabrera explains:

> At present, *el paquete* is distributed every day to almost all of the provinces via buses that leave from the capital's omnibus terminal. In the case of the eastern provinces and the Isle of Youth [*Isla de la Juventud*], we send it by plane. We used to only send it out on Mondays, but the information got too old too fast (Luis Reyes 2016)

In this way, the original name of "weekly package" has been rendered obsolete and only applies to consumers who buy it on a weekly basis.

El paquete is delivered to Cubans across the country through a distribution system that is made up of large-scale and small-scale distributors. The large-scale distributors retrieve *el paquete* from one of the Havana-based enterprises and take it by bus or plane to the

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made several blog posts about *el paquete*, has speculated that the government tolerates the alternative media bundle because "it generates revenue, provides jobs and acts as an 'opiate for the masses.'" Another theory about the sourcing of *el paquete*'s content suggests that it may be delivered by hand from Miami (Concepción Llanes 2015b, 90).

[76] Billboard magazine interviewed the founder of *Vistar* magazine, Robin Pedraja, who pays approximately 150 CUC (150 USD) per month to have the magazine appear in *el paquete* while Abdel La Esencia says new musicians pay around 20 CUC to be promoted (Cabo 2018).

small-scale distributors (Concepción Llanes 2015a).[77] Small-scale distributors, of which there are two kinds, then can add local content such as advertisements for restaurants or beauty salons. The first kind of small-scale distributor is called a *paquetero*. The *paquetero* delivers the multimedia bundle to their clients' homes and copies the files using the customer's laptop or desktop computer.[78] This is how my retired friend, Ana, receives her weekly package. It is unclear whether *paqueteros* operate informally or have official licenses to do their work and I could not find any reliable information about this. For the majority of Cubans who do not have computers at their home and thus cannot be served by *paqueteros,* there is a second kind of small-scale distributor who operates from small private businesses that offer officially-authorized goods and services like cell phone repair and sell *el paquete* to customers "on the side" (*por la izquierda*) (Concepción Llanes 2015b, 96). Alberto, a dancer in his mid-20s and a "big fan" of *el paquete*, gave me more details about buying his weekly package through businesses like DVD renting shops. He explained that because such businesses already deal with technology and the transferring of media files, it makes sense for them to also sell *el paquete*. In fact, their business signs often allude to the fact that *paquete* content can be purchased there (Figure 14). Alberto said that people go to these shops not only to get the latest content but also if they want more content than what is available in a single package which, for instance, might contain only the latest episodes of a series instead of the full series. Alberto explained:

> Sometimes people want to watch multiple seasons of a TV show they really like, download a large amount of music from a specific artist or genre, or install several applications on their new cell phone, so they go to these businesses that have saved these most popular things from *el paquete* onto multiple external hard drives. (Informal conversation, August 2016).

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[77] I was unable to find out whether large-scale distributors have formal licenses to do their work, however it is probable that they have licenses similar to those of the Havana-based *paquete* entrepreneurs.

[78] As I explained in Chapter 2, most often, Cubans acquire such expensive technology either as gifts from foreign relatives or by purchasing them on the black market. The demand for desktops and laptops is evident on the website, Revolico, which dedicates an entire section to computers and related technology (e.g. monitors, motherboards, RAM drives, internal/external hard drives, CD/DVD burners, modems, printers, etc.). According to Coté (2005, 166), many tech-savvy Cubans purchase individual parts in the black market and construct computers piece by piece.

In comparison to the distributors that do home deliveries, distributors that work out of small private businesses have a greater amount of technology to store the latest version of the weekly package as well as the most popular content from the past, allowing them to provide a greater selection to their clients. Figure 15 shows a typical set up of multiple hard drives in a small business that sells *el paquete* content.

Figure 14: Signage of stores selling *el paquete* content. Source: Author, August 2016.
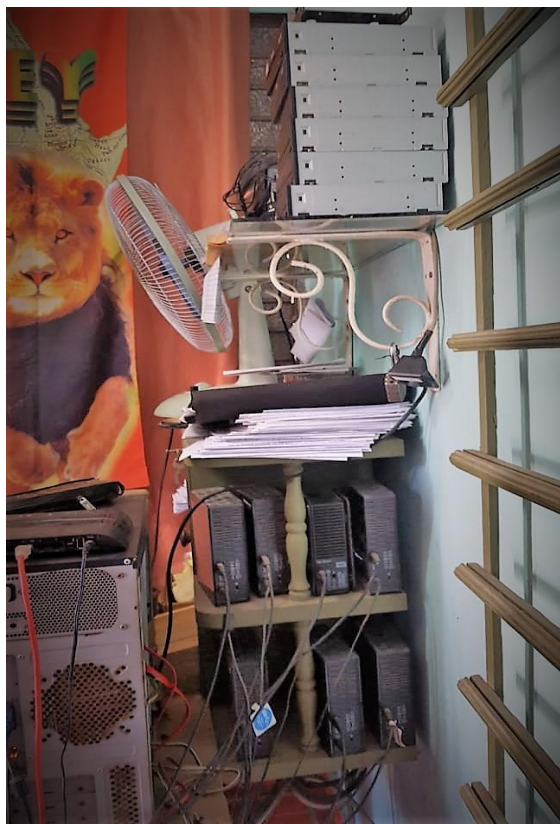
Figure 15: Hard drives on display at a *paquete*-selling business. Source: Author, August 2016.

In the final stage of the distribution chain, end-consumers of *el paquete* pay for its contents according to how much of it they want. Price varies by the amount of gigabytes (GB) one purchases: 4 GB[79] cost 5 MN, 8 GB cost 10 MN, 16 GB cost 15 MN, and 32 GB cost 20 MN (Alberto, informal conversation, August 2016). Copying the entire package, which contains 1,000 GB or more, costs 50 MN or 2 CUC,[80] however most Cubans do not buy the whole thing, opting only for the content that meets their individual preferences. Most acquaintances of mine said they usually buy between 8 and 32 GB

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[79] Equal to approximately two dozen 45-minute TV episodes.

[80] Cuban Convertible Pesos, whose exchange rate is pegged to the US Dollar.

every week.[81] To put these price points into perspective, in Havana, a pizza costs approximately 15 MN (the equivalent of 16 GB) which means that buying a few gigabytes of *el paquete* once a week is a very affordable activity. This affordability, along with the fact that the multimedia bundle offers Cubans access to a much wider selection of media and entertainment options than those available through official channels, explains the popularity and success of *el paquete*.[82] A 2015 study conducted by ICRT's Centre for Social Research (*Centro de Investigaciones Sociales*, or CIS) reported that in Havana alone approximately 40 percent of its roughly 2 million inhabitants consume *el paquete* and this is a conservative estimate according to Concepción Llanes (2015b, 86) since not everyone might report buying a black market product.

Pricing aside, not everyone who uses the alternative media bundle pays for it. As Brito Chávez (2015, 50) explains, Cubans share the cost between friends, relatives, or neighbours who sometimes even give it to them for free. This is confirmed by the 2015 CIS study which found that only 30 percent of *el paquete*'s consumers actually pay for it (Concepción Llanes 2015b, 114).

As an affordable alternative for accessing information and entertainment, *el paquete* has become a social phenomenon in Cuba, partially fulfilling Cubans' desire to be knowledgeable and up-to-date with news and media from around the world. For example, Yessica, the "series addict," told me *el paquete* "[…] is among the top resources because it is the best way for someone in Cuba to find out what the rest of the world is watching [week by week...]. It makes it feel like you are connected with what everyone else is watching [elsewhere in the world]." Yessica tells me that after she watches her *el paquete* shows, they become a topic of conversation between her and her friends who thus confirm their membership in a community of well-informed people. Being up-to-date

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[81] Not only is the content cheaper in smaller quantities, but so is the technology used for storing the data. On Revolico, prices for a small capacity USB flash drive (e.g. 8 GB, 16 GB) range from 5 to 10 CUC while a 1 TB external hard drive starts at 40 CUC.

[82] Through *el paquete,* Cubans can access a large amount of alternative information and entertainment media in a much faster and cheaper way than downloading the content themselves via a public Wi-Fi connection, where just one hour of Internet access costs 2 CUC.

(*estar actualizado*) and "worldly" is also important to Luis, the lover of technology. When I asked him how often he purchases *el paquete*, he responded, "Weekly. Every week. We cannot go without it. We can go without water, but not without *el paquete* (he laughs)." Based on my discussions with friends and acquaintances in Cuba, it seems the majority of Cubans are at least familiar with *el paquete*'s existence, if not consumers of its contents.

El paquete has achieved a significant national audience in a relatively short amount of time, getting the attention of foreign actors, like the US government and the US media which caters to the Cuban emigré community. These actors celebrate the existence of *el paquete*, seeing it as a sign of desired change.

3.4.3   *El Paquete* as a Sign of the Inevitable Capitalism to Come

For decades, US government organizations, in part pressured by the exiled Cuban community, have made a continuous effort to undermine the revolutionary project through the use of force (e.g. attempted military invasions, plots to assassinate Fidel Castro, [83] biological warfare,[84] and terrorizing supporters of the Revolution[85]), sanctions, and a range of propaganda initiatives that spread counter-revolutionary messages and have tried to encourage dissent in Cuba. The latter have included dropping anti-revolutionary leaflets on Cuban soil by plane (Darling 1996), supporting "independent" libraries on the island in association with political dissidents,[86] installing a digital

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[83] The former head of Cuba's Department of State Security, Fabian Escalante (2006), counts 167 plots and 467 conspiracies by the US to kill Fidel.

[84] In 1971, the US introduced African swine fever in Cuba and over 500,000 pigs were destroyed to prevent the disease from spreading. Another attack was carried out in 1996, when "potato, corn, beans, squash, cucumbers and other crops were infected and devastated by the *thrips palmi* insect, after a US crop-duster, en route to Colombia, released a liquid substance over Cuba. [...] Up to that point, this particular insect had never been detected on the island" (Saney 2004, 165).

[85] Saney (2004, 164) refers to attacks in the US on Cuban diplomats, the Cuban United Nations Mission, and Cuba solidarity groups.

[86] Starting in 1998, dozens of small libraries opened across Cuba, housing books that included anti-Communist messages. Most of these libraries were run by political dissidents, many of whom "openly receive[d] money from Miami-based exile groups to support their dissident activities, as well as help in coordinating book donations" (Lloyd 2001).

message board on the front of the US Interests Section building in Havana,[87] and creating a radio and TV station which broadcast daily to the island from Florida.[88] Such US-based efforts to subvert the Cuban government by conquering people's minds have expanded to the online world with the advent of the Internet. For example, Radio and TV Martí now have an online presence with their website, Facebook, and Twitter pages. Other Internet-related propaganda initiatives supported by US government through organizations like the CIA and USAID include: supporting dissidents active in the Cuban blogging community, sponsoring social media applications intended to fuel dissidence amongst thousands of subscribers in Cuba via text messages,[89] and attempting to set up illegal independent Internet connections in the country.[90]

For those who wish to see the end of the Cuban revolutionary project, economic crises in the Caribbean country have always been celebrated as an opportunity for change. This was the case in the late 1980s with the start of the Special Period, which not only allowed the US to exercise more pressure over Cuba by magnifying the impact of its economic sanctions[91] but also forced the Cuban government to implement changes (e.g. the

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[87] This happened in 2006 during the Bush administration (Frank 2006). The Cuban leadership responded by installing 148 flag posts in front of the building in an attempt to block the messages (Roig-Franzia 2006).

[88] Radio and TV Martí, named after the Cuban independence hero José Martí, began operations in 1985 and 1990, respectively, with the purpose of broadcasting news and political critiques to Cuba from Florida. However, the Cuban government jams the signals of both (Johnson 2010, 295-296).

[89] From 2009 to 2012, USAID supported an application called ZunZuneo. Another application called Piramideo was launched in 2013 and continues to exist, receiving aid from the US Office of Cuba Broadcasting, the same body that oversees Radio and TV Marti (Erlich 2014). It has also been reported that the US Office of Cuba Broadcasting has been involved with "creating fake social media accounts to inspire dissent and to spread right-wing pro-US, pro-capitalist propaganda in Cuba" by "establishing on island digital teams to create non-branded local Facebook accounts to disseminate information" (Norton 2018).

[90] The Cuban national newspaper *Granma* reported on CIA's Operation Surf (2007-2008), which involved painting satellite antennas to make them look like surfboards and then sneaking them into the country (Mexidor et al. 2011). In 2009, USAID's contractor Alan Gross was arrested for "smuggling in computer and telecommunications equipment" that was intended for setting up an illegal Internet connection (Holpuch 2014).

[91] Taking advantage of Cuba's state of crisis, the US government tightened the grip of its economic embargo against the country in an attempt to further suffocate the socialist system. The US expanded the embargo during the 1990s economic crisis that was triggered by the end of the Cold War (a crisis from which Cuba is still recovering). First, the 1992 Torricelli Act banned foreign subsidiaries of US companies from trading with Cuba, then the 1996 Helms-Burton Act banned international financial institutions from

introduction and expansion of private businesses). Given the centrality of private enterprise in capitalist ideology, these changes were interpreted as a move in the right direction for many critics of the Cuban socialist Revolution. This interpretation of the Special Period was reflected in academic papers but has also been registered in popular US media coverage on Cuba, particularly since the 2014 rapprochement with the US, which has been represented as a watershed moment marking the beginning of irreversible change.[92] Interestingly, this change has been tied in media accounts to the rise in entrepreneurial activity as well as the rise in access to communication technologies like the Internet and cell phones (Scola 2014; Helft 2015; Kwong 2016). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that *el paquete* has been given considerable attention by foreign media which has celebrated the entrepreneurialism and defiance it represents. Thus, an ABC news video enthusiastically underscores how *el paquete* is "Cuba's number one private employer, generating $4 million a month or more" (Fazekas and Marshall 2016).[93] Along the same lines, the US business magazine Forbes praises *el paquete*'s part in promoting the growth of "Cuba's Tech Revolution" and encouraging private businesses by giving them a place to advertise (Helft 2015).

The idea that *el paquete* not only offers variety to the Cuban people but does so by circumventing official state channels is particularly celebrated in these media reports. For example, a popular Youtube video on *el paquete* produced by US-based VOX News focuses on censorship in the country and how, through *el paquete* and its "underground media traffickers, [...] Cubans found a way around this media [and information] blockade" (VOX 2015). Descriptors like "working outside the government," "clandestine," "circumventing the state," and "alternative way to access information and

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lending to Cuba and "further established that the US government will provide financial and other means by which to assist individuals and groups opposed to the Cuban Revolution" (Saney 2004, 168-169).

[92] This shift in relations truly ignited the attention of people from all over the world (myself included). While in Havana, I crossed paths with a significant amount of tourists who claimed to be visiting Cuba "before it changes."

[93] This claim is difficult to prove as there are no officially available statistics on *el paquete*'s income or the amount of people who are subscribers (also remember that it is possible that a significant number of *paquete* consumers access it for free).

entertainment" abound in reports on *el paquete* (Helft 2015; Kwong 2016; García Martínez 2017). While US-based media has celebrated this bundle of alternative media, the Cuban government has expressed concerns about it, particularly for the shortcomings it suggests regarding the Cuban culture and education industries. I will explain in the next chapter the Cuban government's concerns regarding the kind of ideas and values that are entering the country through this alternative source of media as well as what its popularity signifies.

3.5   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how digital technology is being used to meet Cubans' desire for new knowledge and entertainment. I have contextualized this desire by commenting on how the Revolution's emphasis on universal access to education and culture has fostered learning, creating a citizenry that likes to be well-informed. I have outlined how the state monopoly over education and mass communication has made people hungry for alternatives and have further described the way in which *el paquete semanal*'s affordability and diversity of content has made it a popular option among Cubans. Beyond discussing what *el paquete* has to offer to Cuban consumers, I have pointed out how its production and distribution reflects the grey areas between the formal and informal economies, serving to exemplify the nature and challenges of rising private entrepreneurial activity in contemporary Cuba-- an activity that has been celebrated by those who wish to read recent changes in Cuba as a transition to capitalism.

In a portion of the final chapter, which highlights key findings of my research, I take a closer look at average Cubans' perspectives on official media and reflect on how the government views, and tries to emulate, alternatives like *el paquete*. As shall be seen, while *el paquete* is widely popular, it has not replaced state-produced programming but rather supplemented it. In this respect, one can say it does not necessarily contradict the revolutionary project.

Chapter 4

4   Caught Between Digital and Analog Worlds?

A typical day in the house of María and Fernando, the elderly couple with whom I stayed for months, would start with the official voice of the Communist Party and national daily newspaper, *Granma*, being delivered to their door. Breakfast would usually be served as we watched the news on the Venezuela-based channel *Telesur* that presents a left-leaning analysis of current world news. Lunch would almost always be eaten while watching the Cuban news on national state television which, as I was told, I needed to watch to stay informed about what was going on in the country and to be able to follow everyday conversations among Cubans. In the afternoon, María and Fernando would often sit on their balcony rocking chairs to read the day's paper, a common activity particularly for older Cubans. At the end of the day, the bustling of the city streets would die down as many Havana residents went inside to sit with their families and watch the Cuban soap operas on state television. In María and Fernando's home, this was a sacred time when no interruptions would be tolerated so they could dedicate all of their attention to the storyline. Soap operas shown on national state television have engaging plots that are often a popular subject of conversation among friends and neighbours.

The situation I just described may appear to contradict the analysis I presented in the previous chapters where I might have left the reader with the impression that Cubans are most interested in connecting to the outside world and have a preference for entertainment and information that circulates outside of official state channels. The reality is that, as suggested in the preceding paragraph, Cubans continue to follow government-sanctioned media and state-produced content. Over ninety percent of Cubans surveyed in the study I cited in Chapter 3 reported watching television regularly (Linares et al. 2009, 76, 125) and according to my observations, people spend on average at least three hours a day engaged in this activity. In fact, in many households I visited, the TV set was always on if there was someone at home.

When it comes to program preferences though, there are important generational differences. Young people are less interested than adults in watching the news and

political debate programs (as mentioned in the previous chapter, they are unengaged by such content because they find it to be "overtly political" inasmuch as they express the Communist Party line). The 2009 national study on cultural consumption found that only 8.3% of Cuban youth aged 12-14 like to watch the news while 80% said they enjoy movies and musical programming (Linares et al. 2009, 80). Some young acquaintances of mine seemed to be cynical about Cuban news programs and told me that *el paquete* was their sole source of information, however, upon further questioning, they admitted to occasionally watching local news and regularly following the soap opera on Cuban television.[94] Almost half of the older Cubans included in the mentioned study (42.4%) reported enjoying the news and just over 69% say they like movies and musical programming (Linares et al. 2009, 134) but, as I found out through my research, this same generation also enjoys similar programs available through *el paquete*. Evidently, generational differences do not mean that older Cubans do not consume alternative sources of entertainment and information or that younger Cubans exclusively draw on these sources.

As pointed out by Katherine Verdery (1996), forms of consumption that simultaneously draw on the formal and informal economies to meet citizens' desires and needs are characteristic of socialist systems where goods and services provided through official channels are not always abundant or satisfactory. Sean Brotherton (2012) has commented on Cubans' hybrid mode of consumption as it pertains to health services and Benjamin et al. (1984) made a similar point regarding Cubans' food procurement methods. Cubans' sourcing of entertainment and information follows this pattern, as consumers mix and match state and non-state sources to meet individual preferences. Thus, while María and Fernando religiously read the *Granma* and enjoy watching Cuban state news (even when they are critical of some of the reports), they also watch thrillers and nature documentaries, which are not available on state TV, through *el paquete*. Ana, who avidly

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[94] Soap operas, whether on Cuban state television or the privately-circulated *el paquete*, are widely enjoyed by Cubans of all ages. The mentioned 2009 study found that 63.5% of adolescents aged 12-14 and 67.3% of adults over the age of 15 like watching soap operas on Cuban state television (Linares et al. 2009, 80, 134).

follows *Grey's Anatomy* through *el paquete*, also enjoys following Cuban news through state publications like *Bohemia* and reads books published in Cuba, such as the biography of Che Guevara by the Mexican-Spanish writer Paco Ignacio Taibo II, which she was reading at the time of my research. In this respect, while *el paquete* represents an unofficial media bundle that Cubans use to access information and entertainment sourced from the Internet, it has not rendered irrelevant government-sanctioned media in their everyday lives. Moreover, inasmuch as consuming products from the alternative media bundle has become a regular part of many Cubans' weekly routine, one could say that *el paquete* is reaffirming feelings of belonging to a community of consumption defined along national lines. In this regard, my findings in Cuba contradict the predictions made by anthropologists (Appadurai 1990; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Gupta 1995) at the turn of the last century who argued that new communication technologies, such as the Internet, would undermine sentiments of belonging to a territorially-bounded national community. Contrary to commercial media bundles like Netflix, *el paquete*, after all, has a very Cuban flavour inasmuch as its content is largely composed of pirated material that breaks copyright laws (which has been very common in socialist Cuba) and its production and distribution operates in a grey zone between the legal and illegal sectors.

The popularity of *el paquete* and social media in recent years might make one wonder about the impact these phenomena are having on state power and the Cuban government's ability to control the circulation of information which is destined, among other things, to raise the educational standard of the population and contribute to the creation of a socialist consciousness most vividly embodied in Che Guevara's notion of *el hombre nuevo*.[95] In some ways, *el paquete* could be said to work against these goals by introducing foreign content that may not meet the educational or ideological standards set

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[95] Ernesto "Che" Guevara's notion of the ideal socialist citizen, which he referred to as *El Hombre Nuevo* (The New Man), stipulated that it was the role of the revolutionary leadership to change people's mindsets or "consciousness" to view themselves as part of a society and part of *la revolución*. Che defined the ideal socialist citizen as a selfless and non-materialistic individual who is motivated to contribute to the well-being of the nation through hard work, volunteering, and cooperation. In his discussion of *El Hombre Nuevo*, Che also defined the capitalist "Other" as alienated, blind individuals, divided by class and motivated only by personal gains without caring for the well-being of others (Guevara 1973, 25-26).

by the Cuban government. In April 2014, at the Congress of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (*Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba*, UNEAC), the former Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, expressed his concerns regarding the quality of foreign programming offered through the unofficial media bundle. Using the example of reality TV shows, Prieto said that those raised in revolutionary Cuba should find the commercialization and exposure of personal and family dramas for the amusement of the TV-viewing public distasteful (OnCubaNews 2014). However, he acknowledged that these shows, which he called the "jewels" of *el paquete,* are loved by Cubans. Just as Abu-Lughod (2005) found that foreign-produced soap operas entering Egypt in the 1990s were moving people away from non-materialistic lifestyles and a communitarian ethos and instead were fomenting consumerism and individuality, the "jewels" of *el paquete* programming might be having the same effect on Cubans. Entertainment programs like the beauty competition show *Nuestra Belleza Latina* (Our Latin Beauty) and the Hispanic version of Judge Judy *Caso Cerrado* (Case Closed) that are most popular among Cubans place a high value on social division, competition, selfishness, physical beauty and materialism. Such programs imperceptibly disseminate and reproduce a "commonsense" that runs counter to the Cuban government's decades long work to produce citizens who embrace values that emphasize solidarity, cooperation, the collective good, and the primacy of the moral over the material. The expressed concerns of the Cuban government regarding how new communication technologies and goods such as *el paquete* may be eroding the power of the nation-state to set the cultural and political agenda, seem to corroborate the predictions made by the anthropologists (Appadurai 1990; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Gupta 1995) mentioned in the previous paragraph.

While my research did not involve an in-depth exploration of how alternative information and entertainment media may be shifting Cubans' values, identity, and behaviours, I found that Cubans are far from passive receptors of all media messages, regardless of their sourcing. Specifically, they are critical viewers who scrutinize the offerings of *el paquete* and are well aware that its foreign-produced contents are inflected with different

values and ideals.[96] My elderly friend Ana, who used to work as a secretary in international relations, commented on her awareness that the majority of *el paquete*'s programs are "banal and superficial" (Email correspondence, April 2017). My friend Milagro, a thirty-two-year-old lawyer, shared with me her brutally honest thoughts on *Caso Cerrado*, which is produced in the US. As well as criticizing the fakeness of the program, she told me she dislikes the divisiveness that is often highlighted in such popular reality TV shows. She further pointed out, in a judgemental tone, how this kind of production exploits personal dramas and the worst kinds of human flaws in order to draw a large viewership and make money (Informal conversation, June 2016). Although she had once checked out the show, she chose not to follow it for these reasons. Young Cubans like Milagro who express their critical interpretations of the selfishness and competition that are highlighted in unofficial entertainment media suggest that the values that have been promoted by the Revolution run deep and are not necessarily challenged by the influx of new media and technology.[97] This was also nicely illustrated by KCHO's graffiti I mentioned in Chapter 2 which blends revolutionary iconography some might associate with a dying past with new technological innovations like Wi-Fi. Drawing inspiration from KCHO's graffiti, the title for this chapter, which juxtaposes analog with digital technology, is not intended to be taken literally but rather to evoke the presumed contrast between "the old" and "the new."

Evidently, the introduction of digital technologies in Cuba does not necessarily run counter to revolutionary values and teachings but, as mentioned earlier, it does open the door for non-sanctioned ideas and content that is either considered substandard or undesirable by the government. As in other fields of activity, the government has moved quickly to "compete" with services like *el paquete* that have grown in the interstices

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[96] As illustrated by María and Fernando's story in Chapter 3, they are equally critical of the content on Cuban state television.

[97] In future research, it would be very interesting to explore how the different kinds of programming found in *el paquete* may be shaping peoples' minds and behaviours. This would require a more in-depth study on how Cuban people watch and experience alternative information and entertainment media, an inquiry I could not engage in given the time limitations of my study.

between the formal and informal economies. At the 2014 Congress mentioned earlier, the former Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, commented that *el paquete*'s popularity amongst Cubans reflects a failure on the government's part to produce captivating entertainment media[98] and how this made it imperative for the government to adapt by working harder to disseminate content that better caters to Cubans' desires for a greater variety of entertainment options while maintaining educational standards and promoting revolutionary ideals.[99] A couple of months following Prieto's pronouncement, the Youth Clubs for Computation and Electronics (*Joven Clubs de Computación y Electrónica,* JCCE) launched an official multimedia bundle called *Mi Mochila* (My Backpack) that provides a broad selection of national and international content, including soap operas, movies and music. Attesting to the government's continued dedication to ensure universal access to education and culture, *Mi Mochila* can be downloaded for free at the JCCEs and can also be delivered to homes for just 10 pesos per week (Valdés Machín 2018). Four years from its launching, *Mi Mochila* has been purchased by more than one million Cubans (Valdés Machín 2018) but it cannot compete with *el paquete*. Cubans complain about inconvenient wait times they have experienced while trying to download *Mi Mochila* at the JCCEs and many agree that *el paquete* offers a wider and more up-to-date selection (Diario de Cuba 2017).[100]

Putting aside the question of how digital technologies in Cuba have challenged or complemented the revolutionary government's power, it is interesting to reflect on the extent to which they have reconfigured sociality, community, and public space in ways

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[98] Prieto comments on the fact that even Cubans he knows who are dedicated to the Revolution and are highly-educated enjoy *el paquete*'s reality TV shows for their entertainment value, with some even saying that state television programming is not entertaining (OnCubaNews 2014). In 2017, Cubanet (a US-based digital news channel) interviewed several average Cubans on the streets of Havana who said they prefer *el paquete* to national state television because it offers a more diverse selection of entertainment media and better satisfies their desires.

[99] In December 2014, at the 9th Concourse and Theoretical Event for Journalism, the former Vice President of the ICRT, Omar Olzabal, said that "*el paquete* is filling the niches that we [the ICRT] as an institution should not be occupied with in the defense of our cultural policy," using the example of "red press" or sensationalist news that focuses on violence (Recio 2014).

[100] While *el paquete* holds over 1,000 gigabytes of data, *Mi Mochila* contains just under 500 (Valdés Machín 2018).

that mimic what has been noted in other countries. Given the expense involved and the limited availability of Wi-Fi connection, Cubans generally do not use the Internet to communicate with neighbours or people they see every day. Contrary to the Toronto case described by Smart and Smart (2003), neighbourhood organizations such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (*Comité de Defensa de la Revolución,* or CDR) continue to hold regular face-to-face meetings, making it unnecessary to rely on digital communication. As I explain in the previous chapters, some Cubans do rely on social network applications to meet potential partners online and they use sites like Revolico to connect with people who are selling or buying goods and services. Still, social life mostly transpires offline in neighbourhoods and workplaces that form close-knit communities with stable membership (it is uncommon for people residing in Cuba to change jobs or homes, with some exceptions such as students on scholarships who move to go to school).

As Smart and Smart (2003) and Postill (2014) have noted in reference to Canada and Spain, respectively, the mere availability of the Internet does not erase place-based solidarity and identification which may even be strengthened by new technology. The Internet and cell phones have made it easier (though still expensive) for Cubans to maintain ties with people in distant places but this technology has also become an excuse for people in close proximity to come together and share their knowledge and technological know-how with each other. This is illustrated by Eduardo showing his friend how to use social media on La Rampa and by groups of youth huddled around a cell phone in front of the Estadio Latinoamericano. The fact that the most popular way of accessing the Internet is through public Wi-Fi zones located in parks and streets also means that Internet use has a particularly social quality in Cuba.[101] My findings corroborate the existing literature that argues that, far from rendering irrelevant place-based communities, technologies like the Internet can act to support them.

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[101] Given the centrality that soap operas have had in structuring the days of most Cubans, it will be interesting to see the extent to which soap opera offerings through *el paquete* and *Mi Mochila* might change this habitual, shared practice (week-by-week following vs. watching a whole season in one sitting).

The Internet, as outlined in Chapter 2, has reconfigured public spaces in a number of ways. Neighbourhood public squares or open spaces away from the center of the city, which had been minimally used in recent years, have been reinvigorated by the creation of public Wi-Fi zones that bring people into them. These spaces are now used for activities, such as talking with people overseas, which would have previously been solely relegated to the private space of the home. Popular spaces in Havana, like the intersection of 23 and L that had been traditional hangouts of a particular segment of the population (e.g. gay Cubans) are now well-attended by a cross-section of the population who go there with their laptops and phones to connect to public Wi-Fi.

The proliferation of public Wi-Fi zones in Havana, and elsewhere in Cuba, speaks to the Cuban government's continued commitment to ensuring equal access to services such as the Internet, however, one cannot forget that these services are not equally used by all, as they require expensive equipment and additional costs that make them prohibitive to some Cubans. Inasmuch as individuals with the means "to connect" are taking over public spaces, they are reconfiguring the feel of these spaces, and even gentrifying them. As expressed by the man from Pinar del Rio I cited in Chapter 2, "... finding an empty bench has become quite difficult, in a place where, until recently, there was more than enough space for couples in love and small groups of sports fans who held their gatherings." These words not only emphasize the new function of these spaces but suggest a significant displacement of some members of the public who, as in other areas associated with new consumption practices, feel increasingly excluded from partaking in the supposed advancements made in post-Special Period Cuba.

Above I have outlined how Cubans use both state and non-state sources to obtain information and entertainment and how their preferences for content vary by age. I have also summarized the government's concerns for unofficial, alternative sources of information and how they may impact its power and its educational and ideological goals. I have further elaborated on the government's to-date relatively unsuccessful attempt to compete with available alternatives and Cubans' own critiques of them. I have finished this discussion by pointing out how digital communication technologies have reconfigured public space and the extent to which they have altered (or not) the kind of

sociality that previously characterized life in places like Havana. To close this discussion, I would like to focus not so much on how digital technologies and modes of communication have been received by and impacted on Cuban society, but the ways in which these phenomena reflect the changes that have transpired in Cuba since the Special Period. In particular, I will discuss the rise of entrepreneurship, the ambivalence of the government regarding its endorsement, and the rise in social inequality.

The businesses that have arisen around digital communications, from cell phones to the Internet, speak to the expansion of private activity in contemporary Cuba and the fine line between legal and illegal practices. As explained in the previous chapters, in its effort to expand Cubans' employment opportunities and bring already existing illegal activities under control, the government has endorsed the growth of self-employment and small private enterprises. Far from expanding the power of the government, however, these developments have resulted in the growth of illegal or unauthorized commercial arrangements, best illustrated in *el paquete* and public Wi-Fi connection, which have both legal and illegal dimensions inasmuch as those involved draw on state resources and siphon them towards private profit. Thus, for instance, those involved in the popular *el paquete* make unauthorized use of Wi-Fi connections at public institutions to download programming that will eventually be sold for private profit. The revolutionary leadership has understandably been concerned about this kind of activity that siphons off state resources and, as explained above, may work to undermine the government's goals. In this respect, the use of new technology in Cuba also reflects the state's ambivalence about its own reforms regarding the organization of labour and the decentralization of employment opportunities. Adding to this ambivalence is the reality of rising inequality. Although far from the government's intention, many of the Special Period economic reforms have resulted in income gaps that did not previously exist among Cubans. While, as outlined in previous chapters, the government has attempted to expand the access to technology and digital communication, the fact remains that not every Cuban can afford the price of entry into Cuba's digital "revolution." The government's effort to address this inequality via initiatives such as the JCCE-sponsored *Mi Mochila* have, thus far, been insufficient.

In this thesis, I have tried to outline what I have learned about the significance of digital communications in today's Cuba. As should be apparent from the preceding discussion, this research has opened up more questions than I can answer based on four months of fieldwork. These limitations aside, this study points to fruitful avenues for future research in a field of practice that has been largely ignored by Cuba specialists even though it occupies a central place in Cubans' lives.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

List of Havana Wi-Fi zones, Summer 2016.
Source: Norfipc (2016)

MUNICIPALITY	NUMBER OF WI-FI ZONES (TOTAL: 40)	LOCATION
Plaza de la Revolucion	6	- "La Rampa" on Street 23 (four zones from the Malecón up to street L), Vedado - Park at intersection of Línea and L, Vedado - Park at intersection of 15 and 14, Vedado
Habana del Este	5	- Paseo de la Villa Panamericana, between 5th C and 5th D - Parque Hanoi, Alamar - Centro Cultural, Alamar - Parque Campo Florido - Parque Guanabo (Street 5 between 474 and 476)
Playa	4	- Parque Coyula, intersection of 30 and 19 - Balneario Universitario, intersection of 1 and 42 - Park at intersection of 13 and 76 - Recinto Ferial Pabexpo
Arroyo Naranjo	3	- Parque Santa Amalia - Parque Pizarro - Parque Caballero y Pizarro
Boyeros	3	- Parque Calabazar - Pabellones Central and 14 in ExpoCuba - Parque José Martí
La Lisa	3	- Avenue 51 between 202 and 204 (beside the Frank Pais Hospital) - Parque 5 - Parque Punta Brava
San Miguel del Padrón	3	- Parque José Martí - Parque Monterrey - Parque La Curva
10 de Octubre	2	- Parque Mónaco, intersection of Acosta and Mayía Rodríguez - Parque Cordoba
Centro Habana	2	- Parque Fe del Valle, intersection of Galiano and San Rafael - Parque Trillo

Cotorro	2	- Parque 9 de Abril - Parque Santa María del Rosario
El Cerro	2	- Park at El Estadio Latinoamericano - Parque Palatino
Guanabacoa	2	- Parque Viondi - Parque Mártires de la Jata
Marianao	2	- Park at intersection of 51 and 76 - Street 49 between 120 and 122, beside the Amphitheatre of Marianao
Regla	1	- Parque Las Madres

Note: Habana Vieja had no public Wi-Fi zones at this time.

APPENDIX B

Ethics Approval

Western Research

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Adriana Premat
Department & Institution: Social Science\Anthropology,Western University

NMREB File Number: 107936
Study Title: Discourses and Experiences of Renewed Cuba-US Relations: The Perspective of Cuban Residents

NMREB Initial Approval Date: June 07, 2016
NMREB Expiry Date: June 07, 2017

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol	Received May 18, 2016	
Instruments	Received May 18, 2016	
Other	Verbal Consent Script - Spanish - Received May 18, 2016	
Other	Verbal Consent Script - English - Received May 18, 2016	
Letter of Information & Consent	Spanish - Received May 18, 2016	
Other	English Version of Photographic Release Form - Received April 6, 2016	
Other	Spanish Version of Photographic Release Form - Received April 6, 2016	
Letter of Information & Consent	Received May 18, 2016	

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is ███████ tment of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Ethics Officer, ███████ NMREB Chair or delegated Board member

Ethics Officer: ███████ Grace Kelly ___ Katelyn Harris___ Vikki Tran ___ Karen Gopaul ___

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Post-secondary Education and Degrees: The University of Western Ontario
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