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Abstract

This article applies power-law degree distribution and network theory as a conceptual framework for assessing the effectiveness of Cuban cyberactivism based on an analysis of previous scholarly work on the topic. While Cuban cyberactivism indicates the potential for a more accessible, just, and transparent media environment, the movement continues to face serious obstacles due to extensive controls put in place by the Communist Party of Cuba.

Since the tumultuous beginnings of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuban society has been controlled in all aspects and sentiments by the Castro regime until 2018, a situation and climate that have continued under the leadership of current president Miguel Díaz-Canel. This consolidation of control by the Communist Party of Cuba (CPC) over Cuban citizenry has affected the circulation of diverse and unbiased information, freedom of expression, and open dialogue and discussion of political and cultural differences outside of the ideology of the only political party of Cuba. Throughout the last decade, an increasing amount of outspoken dissidence and critique against the State has aimed to publicize the lack of access to information and its respective resources, the internet, and social, cultural, and political liberties in the form of published and shared cyberactivism circulated in blogs both in Cuba and outside of the island's borders by citizens and exiled Cubans alike.

Thus, this article investigates both the public and private successes and challenges of the Cuban cyberactivism movement as seen through the works of several important literary scholars and cyberactivists. Taking into consideration the creation of a new Cuban identity independent of the confines of Castro's socialist regime, this work analyzes how internet use has helped make public the conditions of both ordinary Cuban citizens and the most vocal activists opposed to the socialist government of Cuba, with particular attention given to the challenges of cyberactivists in the development of a Cuban cyberactivism movement.

As a rather recent manifestation of advocacy beginning in the 1990s, cyberactivism has grown significantly with the emergence of mobile resources and social media (Shani & Leiser, 2017, pp. 157-158). The internet has not only accelerated the extent and rate at which information is shared globally, but has also served as a virtual platform to share the voices and perspectives of those who would not have otherwise had the opportunity or ability within a sociopolitical context, ultimately "chang[ing] the face of social and political dynamics affecting the ways

in which hegemonic discourse is constructed and reconstructed" (Timberlake, 2010, p. 14). Within the Cuban context, cyberactivism has taken on a prominent role in combating the societal restraints established by the CPC, with the goals of opening the constrictive political regime, implementing socioeconomic and institutional changes for the betterment of Cuban society, and fighting for human rights, including access to unbiased media and information, assembly, and internet.

In reviewing the existing literature on cyberactivism in Cuba, there is little attention given to issues such as the lack of access to information and internet connectivity within the context of generating hubs, or centers of networks through blogs. As a result, these blogs intrinsically monopolize the traffic of publicity and recognition not only nationally, but also worldwide. The theoretical perspective of power-law degree distribution (i.e., the probability of connections or exposure a blog can achieve as the relationship between accessibility and the respective popularity of the blog as it changes over time) (Hernandez-Lopez, 2010) can be determined as political reforms regarding internet and information accessibility advance or decline within Cuban society. Additionally, a blog's degree distribution can be affected by the visibility and resources that bloggers have access to both on the island and abroad. These concepts and trends also pertain to a larger theoretical foundation known as network theory, which looks to understand the hierarchy of connections and the spread of information within networks (Gladwell, 2000). The application of these perspectives and framework from the fields of computer and network science highlights this article's unique approach to analyzing and understanding the cyberactivism movement within the social, cultural, and political contexts of Cuban society.

Each blog and cyberactivist represents a node, or source of information, that over time expands with the addition of new nodes, creating networks, small nuclei or hubs of information and resources within the context of Cuban sphere of media. Therefore, networks are not static (Barabási, 2016, p. 6); the distribution and connectivity of the independent media in Cuba directly affect their respective growth both on the island and abroad. As the more established nodes create stronger networks of links, or hubs of information, the newer nodes will gravitate towards the more connected nodes, a process called preferential attachment (Barabási, 2016, p. 6). By understanding the role of these networks and nodes in a community over time, the growth and dissemination of blogs and independent resources within the context of Cuban society can be better understood and analyzed as the fight for a just democracy in Cuba continues.

This work will contextualize its analysis within the long-lasting effects of the Cuban revolution, specifically on the ability of the citizens of the island to adequately mobilize themselves and circulate information politically and socially independent from the socialist state. Additionally, this investigation will analyze how the challenges to obtain access to information in Cuba has created concentrated nuclei of knowledge and resources that not only have affected the distribution of lesser-known Cuban blogs, but also demonstrated the difficulties that Cuban citizens and bloggers have ultimately faced to access independent blogs and information on the island in general.

Cuban cyberactivists are not only opposed to the restrictive consolidation of media accessibility in Cuba, but they are also concerned with educating citizens and vocalizing public condemnation against the political and social conditions in Cuba that have essentially created an elite affiliation of bloggers who form networks, both ideological and technological hubs, that serve to further exclude the participation of ordinary Cuban citizens. While cyberactivist spaces are crucial for bringing awareness to the egregious violations committed by the Cuban government in order to engage both Cuban citizens and the international human rights community in the fight to end the long-lasting cycles of oppression, the fundamental lack of internet access ultimately segregates Cuban society into those that have and do not have with a large percentage of the population only able to obtain information censored and controlled by the CPC, and with a privileged minority who have the ability to work around the technological restrictions, accessing a larger database of unbiased and freely published content and information untouched by the censorship protocols set firmly in place.

In Cuba, these divisions have created at least three different types of communities and spaces that provide various levels of resources, affecting how Cubans both within and outside of the island experience their realities: ordinary Cuban citizens with restricted access to neutral and just information, wealthier Cuban citizens and established cyberactivists with greater access to unbiased resources uncensored by the government (and at times with foreign assistance and resources due to the complications of censorship in the country), and the socialist government of Cuba, which has actively worked to limit freedom of expression, press, information, and assembly. Even with changes in leadership, as the country went from Fidel Castro, to his brother Raúl, and now to Miguel Díaz-Canel as of October 2019, Cuban citizenry has continued to face the overwhelming repression and violations at the hands of its government (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

These communities have served distinct roles within Cuban society that have either aided or failed to aid the maintenance of the sociopolitical system of the Castro regime. Due to the severe restrictions and limitations perpetuated over decades, the ordinary citizen is largely unable to escape the biases and propaganda shared by the Cuban government; without a viable internet connection and access to other digital and technological resources, the average Cuban cannot break free from the informational barriers set in place. In contrast, those with considerably more resources, visibility, and economic mobility, mostly the wealthier members of Cuban society and cyberactivists, have the opportunity to step outside of the informational restraints imposed by the government, and can ultimately demand the dismantling of the enduring corrupt system. Of course, as the third entity, the Cuban government has maintained its multifaceted stronghold over its people, with the intention of preventing citizen dissent that has further escalated as freedoms continue to disappear, and as more changes are made to the country's Constitution, with the CPC's interests taking precedence over those of the people.

Just over a year before the transitional government came into effect, the Decree-Law 370, passed on July 4, 2018, not only continued to consolidate the regime's control over the media, but also further enabled its censorship practices against independent and alternative media sources found on the island and abroad.

According to a joint statement released by Freedom House (2020a), the statute "subordinates the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) to the needs of the state and imposes restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights involved in the use of ICT, such as political participation, freedom of expression, privacy, and association" (para. 2). Evidently, ICT is a crucial tool for independent journalists and cyberactivists that allows them to both promote direct actions and interact with the State in an effective and constructive manner (Rubio, 2010, p. 31). By preventing the development of ICT, the government may affect the visibility of most Cuban independent blogs and news sources, which are purposely maintained abroad in order to work around the censorship methods of the regime. Ultimately, the statute serves as a legal protection for the Cuban government and its repressive and violent practices committed against the country's independent media, withholding any liability for its actions against those who seek to bring an end to the oppressive policies of the Communist regime.

In addition, as if it is not already hard enough for cyberactivists to maintain viable connectivity and accessibility to the internet under the repressive censorship and digital practices of the Cuban State, the average citizen further struggles with engaging with non-governmental virtual media and information. With internet access limited and restricted for much of the population, millions of Cubans have interacted with digital content with the use of *El Paquete Semanal*, or "The Weekly Package:"

> Every week, a new version of El Paquete (EP) becomes available, and includes a one terabyte (TB) collection of digital content that is distributed across Cuba on external hard drives, USBs, and CDs. This collection includes a variety of television, music, movies, apps, educational programs, YouTube videos, magazines, and news .... (Dye et al., 2018, p. 1)

Throughout the last decade, *paquetes* have served as an accessible alternative on the island to the expensive internet industry, providing citizens with media content outside of the confines of both the internet and State-owned media resources. While the Cuban government has increased its investments in order to supply greater internet accessibility to the overall population, direct internet access continues as a rather expensive and scarce resource across the island (Dye et al., 2018). On July 29, 2019, Cuba legalized private wireless connectivity in homes and businesses with the obtainment of a permit; still, the State's telecommunications company ETECSA (Telecommunications Company of Cuba) continues to maintain a monopoly on the island's commercial internet access, restricting other network owners from selling connectivity services (Marsh, 2019).

This article will examine the work of three scholars as it looks at how these three groups have aided or opposed the maintenance of a repressive system, even after the generational transition of regime and political leadership between 2018 and 2019 with the election of Díaz-Canel and a new constitution. Their works appear in the books *Online Activism in Latin America* and *A Contemporary Cuba*

Reader: The Revolution under Raúl Castro. This article will also analyze the importance of the book *Buena Vista Social Blog: Internet y libertad de expresión en Cuba* as an effective and captivating collection of critical pieces and blogs surrounding the theme of Internet accessibility and blogging in Cuba over the last decade.

Omar Granados: Cuban Cyberactivism and the Evolution of *Cubanía*

As a quite recent source about the theme of the independent movement of Cuban cyberactivism, the chapter "Voces Cubanas: Cyberactivism, Civic Engagement, and the Making of Cubanía in Contemporary Cuba," written by Omar Granados in 2018, from the book *Online Activism in Latin America*, draws attention to the growing use of the digital blog as a prevalent and popular medium of communication by Cuban cyberactivists throughout the last decade. Granados presents the two most evident and evocative characteristics of Cuban cyberactivism. First, the movement has utilized cultural and artistic expressions to remodel the discourses about freedom of expression on the island and to make blogs more accessible and relevant for both the politically well-informed Cuban citizens interested in a democratic transition of power and to engage with the political indifference of the youngest generations born during the post-Castro era as they grow up during the transitional government of Díaz-Canel. Second, the cyberactivists and bloggers have used these cultural expressions to confront the intimidation and repression of citizens utilized by the Cuban government, to reconnect with the Cuban communities in exile, and to obtain a more visible status within the public Cuban sphere, where ordinary citizens have begun to mobilize and involve themselves in growing numbers both in Cuba and abroad (Granados, 2018, pg. 193). The perspective of the author addresses one of the most relevant and incredibly pertinent matters to the conversation about the movement of Cuban cyberactivism: the desired change of the normalized definition of *cubanía* and the use of the Cuban identity as the ideological tool and socialist policy both throughout the revolution of Fidel Castro and his 60-year regime, as well as the subsequent government of his brother Raúl Castro. The digital movement questions the oppressive homogeneity of Cuban society in order to create a cultural environment and ultimately a national Cuban identity that appeals and speaks to a new dialogue of inclusion and a participatory democracy in which the Cuban citizenry takes part towards a progressive future. Within this movement, the blogger virtually advocates with the need and responsibility to inform the world of "the truth" of the Cuban reality, serving as an "exception" to the State-enforced propaganda of the Castro regime (de Ugarte, 2010, p. 13).

In order to properly analyze this work, it is crucial to understand the connection between the various aforementioned communities in Cuban society and the evolution of the blog within the Cuban cyberactivism movement. Granados rightfully addresses the lack of diversity in the unbiased sources of information available to the general Cuban public, as the State-mandated Cuban media fails to share their realities, preventing the use of information as a weapon to spark unwanted dissidence amongst the general population. Additionally, Granados highlights and links the evolving nature of the Cuban identity with the use of the

digital blog, as cyberactivists continue to fight for the widespread accessibility of internet connectivity and unbiased independent media, even as they are able to work around the limitations established by the government. The author further connects the repressive nature of the State against its citizenry with the importance of the cyberactivism movement in sharing the atrocities and violations enforced not just since its beginnings, but throughout the regime's existence.

Granado's investigation connects the objectives of Cuban cyberactivism with the manifestation of powerful, creative, and informative publications and blogs, such as *Voces Cubanas*, in addition to the widely persecuted and prohibited works of Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo and Yoani Sánchez since the movement's beginnings in 2006; the Cuban blogosphere emerged as a direct response to the implemented measures and regulations by Raúl Castro, which ultimately failed to uphold his promises for substantial changes made to the sociopolitical system in place since the long-lasting regime of his brother, Fidel Castro. While some of the approved provisions extended access to resources such as internet connectivity and cell phones, citizens were expected to pay outrageous prices for these services and their respective limited development (Alba, 2010, p. 111).

Ultimately, both the evolution of cyberactivism in Cuba and the political obstacles preventing access to crucial resources and rights have demonstrated both the need to disseminate and share the true experience of Cuban citizens and the challenges that cyberactivists confront in the face of the oppressive nature of the invasive media restrictions of the State, including organizing and documenting acts of civil disobedience and at the cost of the inhumane retaliations by the government. According to Granados (2018), the vocal disapproval found on the Internet has manifested itself as a social movement of hope and empowerment amongst a new generation of young Cuban citizens who desire to bring an era of prosperity and liberty to the island instead of a troubled and repressive society in limbo between a revolutionary past and the promise of a just and democratic future.

Thea Pitman: The Case Study of Yoani Sánchez and *Generation Y*

As an additional source discussing the theme of the independent movement of Cuban cyberactivism, the chapter "Revolución.com?: Resemanticising the Discourse of Revolution in Yoani Sánchez *Generación Y* Blog," written by Thea Pitman in 2018, from the book *Online Activism in Latin America*, serves as a case study of the widespread and international success of Cuban philologist Yoani Sánchez and her blog *Generación Y* since its launch in 2007. Pitman confirms the informative and pertinent analysis of Granados in her piece as a respected and accepted perspective that covers the use of blogging within the cyberactivist community in Cuba in order to give alternative and independent opinions apart from the official sources of the State. Pitman (2018) underscores how Granados's work serves as a theoretical framework and infrastructure for understanding not only the use of media methods for Cuban cyberactivists in general over the last decade, but also how Sánchez has utilized her blog as a form of resistance to express the political and social experience of Cuban citizenry under the socialist system of Cuba to both a Cuban and global audience.

Specifically, Pitman's work analyzes the linguistic and cultural relationship between both the socialist sentiment and meaning of the word *revolución*, as well as the evolution of the word and its respective meaning in the context of the Cuban cyberactivism movement as a method to oppose the oppressions and restrictions implemented by the communist Castro regime. Pitman emphasizes the evident change of trope as a linguistic and semantic weapon of resistance against the leading socialist government of the last 60 years in order to recover and normalize the democratic significance of what constitutes a revolution and the actions that are considered to be truly revolutionary. Interestingly, the experience of Fidel Castro during the Cuban Revolution could be directly juxtaposed with that of the Cuban cyberactivists demanding an end to the repressive nature of the long-lasting regime.

Perhaps the Cuban State should entertain the possibility that these bloggers, rather,

> than being a threat to the established order are a product of an ideology that preaches justice and a history of revolutionaries. They may then see that while Castro and his vanguard used violence to overthrow a violent, repressive regime, these Cuban revolutionaries are using words and ideas to overthrow a regime that maintains its hold through the use of words and ideas. (Timberlake, 2010, p. 83)

This notion of the semantic use of words as a figurative weapon against the Cuban government further emphasizes how the meanings of what signifies a "revolution" and what actions are deemed "revolutionary" have evolved over time, accommodating for the societal and cultural changes that Cuba has endured both since the start of the Cuban revolution and throughout the fruition and evolution of the regime itself.

Pitman's well-focused perspective asks the question of how Cuban bloggers work under and manipulate the compulsory system of the socialist "revolution," and how they have applied the respective concept and "revolutionary" dialogue within the rebellious Cuban cyberactivism movement as it seeks to represent a newly independent discourse for Cuban citizens and voices. In conjunction with the investigation that Pitman offers about this theme, her analysis concentrates on the importance, influence, and global impact of the online work of Yoani Sánchez in the context of contemporary Cuba. According to the author, *Generación Y* clarifies the governmental consolidation of the media and the political and social discourse since the Cuban revolution, as well as the use of blogging and other alternative forms of online communication as a revolutionary response in its own right to standardized state restrictions.

Pitman's investigation also keeps in mind the direct and immediate effects of the obligatory censorship of Yoani Sánchez's blog imposed by the State during the initial years of its launch. According to the author, the forum's early blog posts were a collaboration between the pieces, photography, and videos of other Cuban activists such as Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo. These varied artistic works served as visual aids used in conjunction with their respective written texts in order to offer a holistic representation of the current experiences and realities of Cuban citizens and

artists. Sánchez largely utilized these figurative methods not only to give a visual meaning to her words, but to also provide evidence of the various physical and technological abuses committed by the State on vocal protestors or dissidents. The blogger's post titled "Ambulantes o caminantes," published on November 16, 2011, presents an evocative example of *Generación Y*'s collaborative criticism, as she addresses the difficulties and limitations of being self-employed in Cuba, such as the bureaucracy surrounding maintaining a license. For example, while sharing the poignant and all-too-common story of Tony, a neighborhood candy street vendor, she includes a photo taken by fellow activist Lazo of self-employed landlords offering their rooms to tourists in order to convey a multifaceted critique of the State-mandated conditions of self-employed Cubans. The consequences of the systematic censorship implemented against *Generación Y* the following year were evident in the sudden change of the blog posts themselves, as they became shorter and were presented with less visual aids, as well as the evolution of the direction of the posts towards both a Cuban and international audience, which was originally solely Cuban. The quite detailed focus of Pitman's analysis links with the amplified problems of internet connectivity felt across the island and with the necessity on Sánchez's part to revise the methods in which she has shared the posts of her constantly changing blog within a growing movement.

With a focus on the linguistic evolution of the Cuban cyberactivism movement and the relationship between bloggers and the government, the author does not directly speak to the struggles of the ordinary Cuban citizen in engaging with unbiased independent sources of information. She does, however, directly correlate the difficulties of accessibility and visibility of cyberactivists such as Yoani Sánchez with the well-established barriers of censorship and repression set in place over the last sixty years, providing a connected representation of the steady progression of the digital revolution in Cuba, as bloggers and activists navigate the recently-changing political landscape.

Ted Henken & Sjamme van de Voort: The Change of a Virtual Cyberactivism to a Public Sphere

Likewise, as a key investigation regarding the theme of the independent movement of Cuban cyberactivism, the chapter "From Cyberspace to Public Space? The Emergent Blogosphere and Cuban Civil Society," written by Ted Henken and Sjamme van de Voort in 2014, from the book *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: The Revolution under Raúl Castro*, addresses the evolved representation of the movement from one found in large part on the internet in a digital context to one with more tangible and physical opportunities of involvement in public spheres with the objective to obtain more visibility both in Cuba as well as internationally. Recently, various activists within the movement have left the confines of the connected blogosphere community and have openly displayed their ideologies through public forums and meetings in order to share their opposing narratives and ideas on the prevalent socialist hegemony in Cuba.

In order to give context to the movement's evolution from a private and clandestine digital space to one that is more publicly vocal and physically present, Henken and van de Voort (2014) analyze the four most renowned and active

cooperatives of blogs on the island between 2008 and 2013, *Voces Cubanas*, *Havana Times*, *Bloggers Cuba*, and *La Joven Cuba*, and how even with the various differences between them as virtual forums, the cooperatives share the same four goals: to establish their own legitimacy and authenticity among the invasive and biased media sources of the State, to maintain a level of independence with the preservation of access to internet connectivity, to increase their visibility and accessibility both within the national and international space, and to create environments that engage in dialogue, debate, and collaboration amongst each other in order to amplify the scope and extent of democratic and free discussions and discourses in Cuba (Henken & van de Voort, 2014, p. 196). The authors' investigation serves as a complete prologue to the pieces of Granados and Pitman in regard to both the public and private challenges that the movement has encountered. The specific examples of key media cooperatives relate perfectly with the essay of Granados, particularly with the ways in which the movement has created a dialogue between Cuban citizenry, the socialist government, and the evolving meaning and prevalence of *cubanía* within Cuban society. Additionally, the concerns and goals that the authors analyze concretely correlate with Pitman's ideas in regards to how the linguistic representation of the movement has not only impacted its physical manifestation within the Cuban societal space, but also how these shifts have further developed the progression of the advanced revolutionary rhetoric of Yoani Sánchez and her groundbreaking blog.

In addition, Henken and van de Voort's work directly addresses the immediate challenges that Cuban cyberactivists have confronted, and ultimately, the strategies that they have implemented in order to combat them. Fundamentally, one of the principal issues of the cooperatives and activists has been maintaining the independent and just representation of the true Cuban experience within the context of the complete consolidation of the media and methods of communication. Furthermore, with the controlled and monitored access to the internet influenced by external factors in Cuba, including the U.S. economic embargo and the necessary support of other socialist countries in the region, such as Venezuela, the movement concerns itself with the importance of the continued presence of an involved and interactive audience in the midst of this lack of access to a reliable and strong internet connection. Along with the other previously mentioned concerns, the ability to work and collaborate with other bloggers and activists both within Cuba and outside the island's borders demonstrates only a few of the foci of these cooperatives and other activists that have aspired to change the long-lasting social and political infrastructure of Cuba, shifting the multifaceted control of discourse from the government to the people. By testing the limits of not only what could be accessed online in Cuba, but also what could be published and expressed both on cyberspace and in public spaces and forums, the independent movement of Cuban cyberactivism demonstrates the undeniable and inevitable direction of the media environment to one that is more accessible, just, and transparent for the first time since the beginning of the Cuban revolution over 60 years ago.

Evidently, the evolution of the movement from a more digital context to the public sphere has allowed for an interesting intersection between the ordinary citizen and the cyberactivist community, as bloggers are engaging with the general

population more directly in order to build on growing dissidence within Cuban society. As the movement aims to work outside of the digital confines of activism, the government has continued to stay connected with and aware of its mobilization, maintaining the consolidation of its control over the media and the spread of independent information.

Buena Vista Social Blog: a Conversation about Blogging and Internet Accessibility

As a key resource for the intertwined themes of internet accessibility and blogging within the independent Cuban media sphere, the book *Buena Vista Social Blog: Internet y libertad de expresión en Cuba*, compiled by Beatriz Calvo-Peña in 2010, addresses the consistent struggles bloggers have faced against the State-controlled media apparatus since the internet was introduced on the island roughly three decades ago. Calvo Peña et al. (2010) provide an in-depth assessment of the connectivity of the Cuban blogging community both on the island and abroad, as well as the strengths of participatory democracy and its manifestation within the independent media as a digital response to the repressive practices of the government.

While the book primarily presents academic papers as a resource to the topic of the Cuban blogosphere, the author includes personal testimonies in order to reflect on both the personal and communal aspects of the Cuban blogosphere while providing a certain level of intimacy for the respective bloggers to share their experiences and stories. Lastly, the text utilizes blog posts themselves as the authentic protagonists of the Cuban blogosphere, not only to provide a realistic dimension to the representation of the Cuban blogosphere, but also to demonstrate the medium's use as the key structure of the blogging movement (Calvo Peña, 2010, pp. 19-20). According to Lamazares (2011),

> The book is divided into three parts: Part 1 focuses on the principal characteristics of blogging in Cuba, such as the tools that influence the creation of a personal and/or community based identity in blogging; Part 2 gives a brief introduction of some of the most representative blogs inside Cuba, and abroad; and Part 3 is an analysis of a virtual community online as well as those that create a — virtual island vis-à-vis blogging. (p. 6)

By addressing these key components of the Cuban blogosphere, the book provides a cohesive resource into understanding the particular levels of not only the movement and its participants, but of the socioeconomic challenges limiting the voices of cyberactivists and the rest of the Cuban population, including lack of internet accessibility, the State media apparatus, the implications of citizen journalism, and the politics surrounding not only information and digital resources, but also who gets to share and utilize them both within Cuba and abroad.

Furthermore, the variety of bloggers and scholars sharing their lived and studied experiences and perspectives regarding the connections between the Cuban blogosphere and the multifaceted sociopolitical conditions of Cuban society enforced by the government only add to the authenticity and reality of the digital

conditions in Cuba. For instance, in her blog post "El próximo Frankenstein," published on May 15, 2009, Yoani Sánchez describes her experience building her own computer, a technological Frankenstein, composed of various pieces she acquired from different people and places, as that was the only way to construct a computer under such constrictive measures. When it was later announced that Raúl Castro would permit the sales of computers to Cuban citizens, she was relieved knowing that it would not be long before her Frankenstein would be complete; nevertheless, her computer would only be missing the most important component, the spark of connectivity that would give Sánchez the ability to engage on the web (Sánchez, 2010, pp. 54-55). This story directly connects all three communities within Cuban society, as she collects computer pieces from ordinary citizens, while struggling as a cyberactivist to work around the repressive challenges and obstacles imposed by the State; it accurately speaks to the complexities of producing informational networks on the island amidst digital barriers that ultimately aim to prevent the creation of links of independent information within the Cuban media sphere.

Ultimately, *Buena Vista Social Blog* (2010) establishes the closeness of the virtual blogging community amidst the repressive practices of the Cuban government both inside and outside the island, while addressing the core of the cyberactivism movement: the ability to disseminate and access independent information through democratic digital and virtual technologies. For many of the bloggers represented in this text, who must share their perspectives and experiences from afar, "it is shown how the Internet, more than any other medium before, allows the 'portability' of the nationalist context" (de Ugarte, 2010, p. 15). As shown not only throughout this compilation, but in the other analyzed works as well, Cuban cyberactivists are looking to change not only the discourse surrounding what and how the Cuban identity appears as within the island and diaspora, but also what a free and just Cuba looks like outside of the constraints of the State.

The Disparities Between the Movement and Society: the Theoretical and Technical Impact

Apart from the repressive governmental factors that have affected both the cyberactivist community and Cuban citizenry, which the previous works have addressed in great detail, it is necessary to understand the reality of the Cuban experience through a theoretical method and perspective, as well as how the aforementioned network theory and power-law degree distribution interact in conjunction with the independent cyberactivist movement, as well as with Cuban society as a whole. In Cuba, bloggers, cyberactivists, and citizens that have access to the internet, independent and unbiased information, and varied forms of foreign assistance such as internet servers and platforms that are used in order to share and publish blog posts, all greatly benefit from network theory and the power-law degree distribution, which has caused a great disparity within the afflicted Cuban society through social, informational, and technological inequalities that have remained prevalent from the beginning of the Cuban revolution until present-day.

In his book *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcom Gladwell (2000) explains that within both the physical and technological

networks that link a society, there will always be individuals that serve as the nuclei or hubs of connection based on the information that they present within a network. Furthermore, it is necessary to study how this information connects individuals with others, in this case how the Cuban population, bloggers, and cyberactivists relate to the government in Cuban society. According to Gladwell's (2000) network theory, these different individuals function as nodes within a community, the social equivalent of centers of network connection found in computers. The nodes of a society know a variety of people through a spectrum of social, cultural, professional, and economic spheres that ultimately create a clear connection between these distinct groups, or larger networks of people.

This notion directly pertains to the Cuban cyberactivism movement, specifically with the nodes of the represented movement of Yoani Sánchez and her blog *Generación Y*, along with the four cooperatives *Voces Cubanas*, *Havana Times*, *Bloggers Cuba*, and *La Joven Cuba*, analyzed by Henken and van de Voort in their investigation. In the case of Sánchez, with the extensive scope of her public image over the last decade, the philologist has served as a public and famed representative at the forefront of Cuban dissent against the socialist regime of Cuba. On one hand, this publicity has generated considerable and needed traffic to *Generación Y*, an impressive feat in the virtual fight to raise awareness about the true situations and realities in Cuba; on the other hand, this recognition has taken away from the lesser-known abilities and voices within this global space. For instance, journalist Elaine Díaz's blog *La Polémica Digital* (Díaz, 2015) has received outspoken support and recognition from Cuban society, but internationally, it does not maintain the same levels of publicity and informational relevance. Sánchez's blog and the four cooperatives, which one could say have monopolized or have become the face of the independent movement of Cuban cyberactivism over the last decade, have ultimately prolonged their undeniable influence but they may also have unintentionally restricted the success of thousands of lesser-known Cuban blogs. It is important to note that while within the context of network theory, the rather well-established Cuban bloggers and cyberactivists may take away from lesser-known blogging forums that lack accessibility to connectivity and visibility. Nonetheless, it is evident that any form and manifestation of independent Cuban cyberactivism is relevant and necessary in the larger fight for human rights in its many forms in Cuba; without these direct and digital establishments, not only would the international community fail to understand the true realities of Cubans in the repressed country, but Cuban citizens both in the island and abroad would fail to have a legitimate and independent media representation to call their own.

In addition, in the chapter "The Seventh Link: Rich Get Richer" of his book *Linked: The New Science of Networks*, physicist Albert-László Barabási (2002) clarifies the power-law degree distribution, specifically the hypotheses of growth and preferential attachment, which demonstrate how each network begins from a small nucleus or hub, and over time, how each one expands with the addition of new nodes, in this case, of information and resources. The first hypothesis addresses the concept that throughout each period of time, a new node is added to the initial network; evidently, as the network expands, the earlier more recognized and

familiar nodes acquire links more readily than the newer nodes, creating richer networks of links and therefore providing less chances for the newer nodes to establish a more extensive network (Barabási, 2002, p. 87). This explains the probability of the respective selection of nodes, and the relevance of the numbers of links throughout the process of this selection; naturally, new nodes would prefer to link with the more connected nodes in order to expand the network at a faster pace. As Barabási (2002) explains, as more nodes attach and link to the well-connected nodes, the earlier nodes will eventually separate from the others, creating hubs with a disproportionately large number of links at the expense of the newer nodes; he describes this theoretical network concept as the *rich-get-richer* phenomenon, which leads to the power-law degree distribution found in real applications of networks (p. 87).

Consequently, these power-law degree distributions relate directly with the movement of Cuban cyberactivism. On one hand, the complete consolidation of access to independent information outside of the State's repressive control has actively aimed to prevent the ability of cyberactivists to circulate their blogs on the island, creating a hub of networks linked by the prejudiced and biased governmental sources of information that Cuban citizenry has had access to over the last decades. On the other hand, the bloggers and cyberactivists that have had the opportunity to publish their blogs and content both within and outside of Cuba with financial and technological aid from foreigners and clandestine internet servers have gained access to information and publicity that the ordinary Cuban citizen has been unable to obtain. This has been in large part due to the financial and social restrictions implemented by the State, which has created an unfavorably large portion of the Cuban population that unfortunately has been left outside of the select group of cyberactivists and bloggers that have access to the privilege of the previously mentioned foreign assistance. These discrepancies demonstrate how due to the perpetuated lack of accessibility to the internet, Cuban citizens are unable to access the respective information shared by cyberactivists. Despite these serious obstacles, these cyberactivists ultimately serve with the intention of educating the population and creating an increasingly democratic dissidence that can create a legitimate impact within Cuban society as an alternative to the brutality and limitations imposed by the Castro regime.

In this real-world application, the key players can assume different roles within the larger network. The well-established and better-known blogs and cyberactivists represent the earlier nodes that are stronger and better-connected, creating hubs of information and resources only accessed by a select portion of Cuban society, while those that lack accessibility to internet connectivity and visibility demonstrate the newer nodes that are unable to maintain strong links, ultimately failing to secure network hubs. The distribution of information within the Cuban population thus apply to network theory and power-law degree distribution, as the underserved and repressed Cuban citizenry, whether ordinary citizens or cyberactivists, continue to lack access to nongovernmental and unbiased information and internet connectivity. These disparities portray the newer nodes that often fail to create a strong network of links, ultimately failing to develop into a well-connected hub within Cuban society. With its strict control and censorship over information and accessibility,

the CPC continues to accumulate its respective links as the sole hub within Cuban society, ultimately preventing the creation of new hubs by its own citizens who are yearning for the chance to attach to a democratic and just network within their community. However, the hypotheses of growth and preferential attachment of nodes found in networks of information within the independent movement of Cuban cyberactivism ultimately do not address nor resolve the biggest issues of connectivity to the internet in the island that have affected the Cuban population daily, as this must be carried out and achieved at the political level.

The Transitional Government: Implications for the Independent Cyberactivism Movement

Over the last few years, even with the seemingly definitive end of the Castro socialist regime as Díaz-Canel took office in 2018, new governmental and policy developments have effectively worsened conditions for Cuban citizens, further eliminating any neutrality and fair access to independent resources and information, and raising questions of how many more undemocratic actions the Cuban population and society can withstand from the government. The independent cyberactivism movement has undoubtedly been affected by these continuous injustices. According to Freedom House (2018), new legislation was approved by the transitioned government that not only legalized the electronic surveillance and censorship of unbiased and independent information shared by Cuban cyberactivists and bloggers, but also banned Cuban citizens from utilizing foreign internet servers in order to share independent digital content meant for the Cuban and international public. These egregious actions committed by the government essentially jeopardize the numerous independent media forums and outlets, further diminishing access to uncensored and nongovernmental information. As a direct response to the obstructive statutes passed, 19 independent Cuban media platforms, specifically *14ymedio*, *ADN Cuba*, *Alas Tensas*, *Árbol Invertido*, Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa, *CiberCuba*, *Convivencia*, *CubaNet*, *Diario de Cuba*, *El Estornudo*, *Havana Times*, *Hypermedia Magazine*, *La Hora de Cuba*, *Play-Off Magazine*, *Proyecto Inventario*, *Puente a la Vista*, *Rialta*, *Tremenda Nota,* and *YucaByte*, not only demanded protection against the rising aggressions towards the independent Cuban journalists and media in order to silence them from the government of Díaz-Canel, but also for the repeal of laws that infringe on the right to freedom of expression and the legalization of independent media in Cuba (*CubaNet*, 2019). These abhorrent practices, including arbitrary detentions, interrogations, house raids, and defamation ultimately continue to widen the gap between the different communities within Cuban society, specifically the ordinary Cuban citizens with little to no access of unbiased information and resources, the cyberactivists fighting to change the status quo of Cuban society, and the government maintaining complete consolidation of the media sphere. As freedom of expression and other rights continue to be stripped from Cuban citizens and independent outlets, they lose their respective hubs and networks of communication and information, which continues to disconnect Cuban citizens from the rest of the world.

The independent press and cyberactivism movement are deemed illegal and presented as "enemy propaganda" by the State, ultimately discrediting their content and digital presence within the Cuban media sphere and repressing the legal access to legitimate information infrastructure on the island. Nonetheless, these independent media outlets continue to demand institutional change while publishing unbiased content in the face of unwavering censorship and aggressions committed by the government. According to Freedom House's (2018) report "Freedom on the Net 2018: Cuba," previously mentioned cyberactivists including Yoani Sánchez of *Generación Y* and *14ymedio* and Elaine Díaz of *La Polémica Digital* and *Periodismo de Barrio* have been targeted repeatedly by the State in order to silence their expressions of political dissidence, an opposition that has only grown both on the island and internationally as the cyberactivism presence continues to fight for representation and access to information.

In addition, while Cuban citizens and cyberactivists have found ways to work around the traditional oppressive system established by the State, such as the previously mentioned foreign internet servers, USBs, or *paquetes* that can store, receive, and share information in Cuba, and other mobile technological methods, they have also taken advantage of access to third-generation (3G) mobile data connection, choosing to criticize current repressive governmental policies through blogs and social media to directly confront officials and demand the implementation of democratic policies within both Cuban society and institutions. However, political dissent remains a punishable offense by the CPC, with dissidents systematically detained, assaulted, harassed, and imprisoned, punishments often committed against Cuban cyberactivists. According to Freedom House (2020), in October 2019, about 20 independent Cuban digital media outlets published an open letter to the State demanding accessibility to information and other resources in order to adhere to "the right of Cuban citizens to information of public interest" (para. C3). The group also demanded that the "government put at the disposition of the citizenry and journalists all the information generated by its diverse branches of power, including data that is open, free, complete, timely, permanent, and primary in order to facilitate citizen oversight" (para. C3). Unsurprisingly, these demands were ignored by the government, further eliminating any form of transparency and unbiased resources available to Cuban citizenry.

Access to legitimate media and communication forums such as the blog provides dissidents not only with a digital platform to express personal criticism and factual evidence, but also a setting to advocate for the democratic right to participate within the public sphere outside the suffocating realm of government-regulated media (van de Voort & Henken, 2013). As Bert Hoffman (2011) states, the citizen representation in the media space demonstrates a civic action in itself, an "insurgent citizenship" claiming its respective communication rights. As such, Cuban bloggers and cyberactivists aim to help their fellow Cubans become more aware of the oppressive restrictions their government has imposed on their freedoms for decades. While these digital warriors try to reach out to a Cuban audience limited in resources, accessibility, and visibility, it is apparent that creating long-lasting and liberating progress in Cuba is their dominant goal

(Timberlake, 2010, p. 83). Network theory and the power-law degree distribution perspectives help highlight the very real challenges faced by cyberactivists in Cuba as it not only situates the movement within the parameters of media oppression imposed by the repressive Cuban government, but provides a very useful analytical approach for understanding the broader, more multifaceted and contextualized issues for cyberactivists in and outside of Cuba.

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