Media in Authoritarian Contexts: A Logics Approach to Journalistic Professional Resistance in Cuba and Venezuela

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Introduction

One of the main challenges when talking to media professionals who have worked in authoritarian systems is to understand not only why they left (the system, or the country altogether), but what took them so long. This has been the case of many generations of journalists that have put up with oppressive conditions in Cuba and Venezuela. In both countries, the governments have tried to maintain a communicational hegemony in an impossible scenario in which state-pressure can in fact be challenged. In contemporary hybrid systems, individuals, groups and organizations are able to blend new and old media logics in a way that defies the traditional hegemony of the state (Chadwick 2017. This chapter seeks to understand the logics that allow media professionals to practice journalism in authoritarian regimes[1], defying governmental attempts to subjugate their professional ambitions to ideological goals.

This chapter explores the identity of Cuban and Venezuelan independent media workers from a logics approach, looking at the "grammar" that guides journalistic practices in authoritarian regimes as well as the conditions under which this grammar can be challenged (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The concept of logics enables us to examine the constructed nature of discourses, and the way social practices are maintained and challenged over time. In the case of Cuban and Venezuelan independent journalists, this chapter examines the way in which socio-political regimes obstruct their professional practices (social logics), the ways in which

journalists become aware of their oppressive situation (political logics) and, more interestingly, journalists' strategies to put up with extreme circumstances that threaten both their professional value and their personal wellbeing (fantasmatic logics).[2] The chapter draws from sensitizing concepts from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (1984) discourse theory—mainly discourse, identity, and agency, which are examined through an inductive logics analysis (Glynos and Howarth 2007) of journalists' fantasies.

In this chapter, we unveil a logic of authoritarian societies that constructs a set of subject positions (journalists as soldiers, journalists as mercenaries), objects (wages, technologies, transportation means) and a system of meaning that links subjects and objects to institutional settings (media laws, systems of reward and punishment). Some of the main questions that we address in this chapter are: How can we characterize the regime of practices that regulate the mainstream media in Cuba and Venezuela? How do these practices emerge and what keeps them in place? How can journalists' challenge well-established practices in a way that leads to a political rupture?[3]

The goal of this chapter is to identify leading journalists' accounts of the key fantasies that have shaped their experience while working in oppressive circumstances. It is through the perceptions of a group of prominent journalists that we attempt to understand how authoritarian regimes manage to grip media workers, leading to a final disengagement. While this cannot account for the whole complexity of the social logics that play in Cuba and Venezuela, it sheds light on journalists' discourses about themselves before and after breaking away from the mainstream system—state-owned in Cuba, and privately owned in the Venezuelan case study.

The first part of the chapter offers some contextual background on Cuba and Venezuela, while the second part situates the theoretical and methodological framework. In the third section,

we discuss the results of our analysis, which is based on data of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with Cuban and Venezuelan media professionals who have disengaged themselves from the mainstream media and joined the ranks of independent journalists. Focusing specifically on independent media professionals that have left the mainstream media system enables us to examine the fantasies that explain their compliance with the system, but also their political disengagement. The interviews were conducted between 2017 and 2019 and lasted an hour on average. The 31 interviewees were selected based on professional indicators as well as a snowball technique that privileged a will to openly speak about their transition from the mainstream to the alternative mediasphere.[4]

A Logics Approach to Journalism

This work follows the ontological view of a radical contingency by which discourses are unable to mirror social reality as it is. Instead, discourses help us make sense of the world by attempting to fix meaning (Gaonkar, 2012), that is, by offering simplified and contingent articulations of the world (Howarth, 2000). Discourses are, therefore, "a spatiotemporally distinctive structural arrangement of signifiers" that set both a horizon of intelligibility and boundaries of possibility (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 144). When discourses successfully manage to hide their constructed nature, appearing as natural ways of structuring meaning and, therefore, making sense of social reality, we talk about hegemonic discourses. However, there are always elements that resist signification that cannot be successfully integrated within hegemonic discourses. Therefore, discourses, even those that have attained social dominance and are part of the collective imaginary, are always threatened by competing logics of articulation that can potentially destabilize them.

This work examines the discourses of Cuban and Venezuelan independent media professionals from three logics of articulation: the social, political and fantasmatic logics of journalistic work. From a Laclaudian perspective, logics refer to "the rules or grammar of the practice" and the context that makes that practice, in this case journalism, possible but susceptible to change (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 136, 152).

Social, political and fantasmatic logics come together to elucidate processes of stabilization and social change within a general theory of hegemony, which presupposes the existence of a social field crisscrossed by social antagonisms. Since social practices always exceed our ability to make sense of them, there is always a range of possibilities and context that escapes our efforts to understand them. This means that logics are always constituting themselves in a setting in which they compete among themselves, bringing a degree of potential instability into the game. In the case study of Cuban and Venezuelan journalists, the instability of logics is essential for understanding both the temporary success and the eventual failure of hegemonic discourses when attempting to grip journalists' fantasies.

In this work, we define social logics as those investigating the rules that govern social practices and their characteristics. Political logics look at the way in which social practices constitute (or disintegrate) themselves, while fantasmatic logics explain the way in which practices manage to grip subjects (to then lose them). What is important to note is that all three logics confer identity to individuals through processes of (dis)identification with hegemonic discourses.

While social logics take a synchronic characterization of social practices within a given context, political logics focus on "how social practices are instituted, contested, and defended" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 133; Clarke, 2012). Therefore, political logics can explain the

disintegration of hegemonic frontiers of antagonism, freeing new ways of imagining the role of journalists, and the nature of journalism. Therefore, political logics can free a plurality of voices by emphasizing the importance of difference, rather than hegemonic unity.

Fantasmatic fantasies allow us to go on with our daily lives despite fully engaging with pressures, failures and inconsistencies, that is, by overlooking the partially fixed and contingent nature of the social. According to this view, by freeing our imagination from daily struggles, by providing a scapegoat, fantasies make us more resilient to oppressive situations. When we talk about fantasmatic logics, we do so through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. From this perspective, fantasy is a mechanism that allows subjects to stay in the realm of the presymbolic, in a state of "jouissance" and harmonic fullness that is lost when we enter the rational, symbolic order (Clarke, 2012). Glynos & Howarth (2007: 130) identify two ways in which fantasmatic logics operate. While beatific narratives cover up the lack of subject's experience by bringing promises of harmony and salvation, horrific narratives conjure the obstacles that threaten one's enjoyment—rather than concealing them. The downside, a cruel one maybe, is that both types of fantasies appeal to well-rooted emotions, whether joy or fear, in a way that makes us less likely to break up with oppression (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). Fantasmatic logics help explaining why certain hegemonic practices "grip" journalists, investing them in a sort of sweet inertia. However, fantasies only work temporarily (Glynos & Howarth, 2007: 145).

Fantasies can mediate between incompatible narratives and practices, acting as a patch that fills the gaps in situations that seem irreconcilable. For instance, Cuban-independent journalists claim to be the only true professionals despite being dispossessed of what usually confers identity to journalism (a valid degree, a legal framework, steady funding, a newsroom, access to news technologies, access to sources …). In the case of Venezuela, this fantasmatic

patch might explain why media workers emphasize their professional values and integrity while working within a system of structural censorship.

Fantasies can be associated with both social and political logics. When fantasies are combined with social logics, they work in a way that strengthens the system. However, when combined with political logics, fantasies create the kind of political awareness that can foster a rupture with the status quo (Stavrakakis, 2005). This latest dimension can help us understand the complex process by which Venezuelan and Cuban journalists decide to disengage themselves from the mainstream media system and to become independent journalists.

In the following paragraphs, we identify the main social, political and fantasmatic logics that emerge from the interviews. First, we identify the assemblage of social logics, the context that journalists encountered in their mainstream media jobs. Then, we go on to analyze *why* and *how* these social practices came into being but were, at some point, challenged. In order to do so, we turn toward the analysis of political fantasmatic logics, which help us explain the way in which the Venezuelan and the Cuban regimes managed to grip the interviewees' journalistic identities—even if indirectly, but not forever.

Social Logics in Authoritarian Media Contexts

The following lines offer a characterization of the media context in which Cuban and Venezuelan journalists have developed their profession. Identifying the social logics that structure journalists' work allows us to examine the set of discourse and practices that shape their daily practices. Venezuela is a politically, economically and affectively polarized society (McCoy et al. 2018) led by an increasingly authoritarian president, Nicolás Maduro (2013–present) (García-Guardilla & Mallen, 2019). Political polarization has extended strongly to the media field, which was largely divided between two poles during the presidency of Hugo Chávez

(1999–2013): the state media, which supported the government, and private media, which opposed the government. In addition to state and private media outlets, the government aimed at promoting a third sector led by community media.[5] In a legal reorganization of the media system, Chávez's government changed the country's media system: from private media dominance to state media dominance. However, this was done without attempting to rescue the media system from political and economic pressures (Cañizalez, 2012; Lugo-Ocando & Garcia Santamaria, 2015; Salojärvi, 2016). Among *Chavistas*, their will to align the media with governmental interests was no secret. For instance, Minister Andrés Izarra stated in 2007 that "our socialism needs communicational hegemony" and "all the media must depend on the state as a public commodity" (Bisbal, 2009: 43). This situation worsened throughout the last years of Chávez's presidency, when different media professionals started feeling overwhelmed by unseen pressures from the state, which were channeled through their employers: increasing self-censorship, restricted access to information or even lack of printing paper (Salojärvi, 2016).[6] Chávez's hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro (2013–2019), further polarized an already tense media context leading to an increase in the number of physical attacks and arrests against journalists, which were combined with widespread Internet blackouts.

Under Maduro's leadership, the Venezuelan media had to adapt even more to governmental designs, both in terms of content and ownership. The excess of politization left private media outlets with few options: to shut down, to reduce their coverage significantly, to change their editorial line or to change their ownership model. In addition, societal and affective polarization divided the citizens between supporters and opposers of the government. In this binary context, critical journalists started facing personal threats and repression. All this has

affected journalistic practices, pushing some media workers to quit their jobs in the mainstream media and to move toward digital platforms.

In Venezuela, social logics help us understand how the media situation worsened little by little since the early years of Hugo Chávez's presidency. As control and repression reached new levels, the space for journalistic development decreased. Even though there were some incidents of physical violence against journalists during Chávez's presidency, open censorship, violence and other extreme forms of control became more common during Maduro's regime. As one interviewee puts it: "Definitely, when I was there [in Venezuela] it was possible to do much more than nowadays. Now there are direct threats, there's a hate speech law that is directed specifically against journalists" (E1). This can also be seen in the recent reports of several freedom of expression organizations which highlight how Venezuela's situation has worsened.z

There have been specific moments of escalating conflict that have pushed the relationship between the government and the media to asphyxiating levels. Some of the early moments were the oil industry's strike in 2002–2003 and the shutting down of *Radio Caracas Televisión* in 2007. Another significant turning point was the diagnosis of Chávez's cancer, followed by Maduro's presidency. Specifically, these events contributed to increasing journalists' experienced censorship and repression, and in 2014 journalists' arrests became more common (E8). This phenomenon affected society as a whole. For instance, it restricted the ways in which journalists were able to cover stories, since they started feeling unwelcome in low-income neighborhoods and Chávez's supporters started treating them as representatives of the private media and, therefore, as their enemies. This did not only change *where* the journalists were able to report from, but also *how* they managed to do it:

> *We were the first generation of journalists that used bulletproof vests and gas masks. My generation was the first that had to use them in order to protect ourselves in pro-Chávez demonstrations.* (E9)

One of the issues that affected journalistic identities most was the many forms in which censorship manifested itself. The self-censorship of Chávez's era changed to a more open censorship during Maduro's regime. And orders not to publish came "from above," for example, in the form of a phone call to the media outlet or to the head of the editorial staff. However, this was not the only form of censorship because the government created a shared feeling of fear that fostered journalists' self-censorship. This fear responded to different measures, such as public politicians naming critical journalists in public, threatening them on the streets, arrests, physical aggressions by government supporters or stealing equipment or Internet cables, which made reporting difficult. All this shaped the every-day practices of the interviewees. Many of the threatening mechanisms were more subtle than direct physical threats and manifested themselves through daily, indirect violence. For example, one interviewee said that "the (new) *Chavista* owners put a member of the National Assembly to sit at the editorial table with us, there was a lot of pressure for you to say your opinion" (E3).

In the Cuban case, the state holds a monopoly of the mass media and has a primacy over artistic and intellectual matters, as stated in the 349 decree on cultural policies or the 370 decree on the informatization of society (Granma 2019). Furthermore, the 2019 Constitution forbids the existence of private media outlets and recent regulation denounces private digital outlets, which would be allegedly funded by the enemies of the state, and of the people (PCC 2018). Often seen as the 'Island of the disconnected' (Henken 2017), increasing access to the Internet and digital technologies has promoted a proliferation of illegal independent—from the state—digital

projects that challenge not only the discourses but also the structure of the state-run media system.

The increasing access to the Internet and digital technologies in the early 2010s went hand in hand with a moment of discursive opening in the official political sphere. In fact, former president Raúl Castro and other leaders called for an "updating" of the Cuban economic and social model and for a more critical press. Collective investment in hope and change were further strengthened by the reopening of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States in December 2014. It is easy to see how fantasies of internal renewal, combined with a lack of real alternatives, worked in a way that kept young journalists working within the state-run media system, which they hoped to change.

The Cuban political system reproduces itself through education and indoctrination. Journalists, even young ones, are aware of the boundaries of what can be said and have a sort of inoculated fear of breaking the rules, using self-censorship as a protective strategy: "There is no culture of debate in Cuba. Everything they have taught us is that you have to obey to the government, even if they pretend to say otherwise" (R1). A combination of indoctrination and fear, therefore, have worked in a way that has kept the possibility of imagining alternative scenarios away. Therefore, self-censorship has strengthened the hegemonic position of the Cuban and Venezuelan governments by narrowing down the plurality of voices and debates that reach the public sphere, pushing discourses toward the extremes of the political spectrum.

While one might think that journalists' disengagement from the mainstream media puts an end to repression and harassment, the grip of the structure often goes beyond it. When you are an independent journalist in Cuba, the state conducts arbitrary detentions, confiscates phones and computers, and blocks access to independent media outlets. One of the mechanisms with a wider

reach is the use of trolls in order to organize smear campaigns with the goal of discrediting journalists. These trolls, journalists argue, are orchestrated by the Party and the state security forces.[8]

Even if violence against journalists is greater in Venezuela, subtle types of repression work in Cuba in a way that presses journalists to remain within the boundaries of acceptable criticism (Garcia Santamaria 2020). What happens when these practices become part of independent journalists' daily routine? According to one of the interviewees, "you're left with psychological trauma, fear, and paranoia" (R1). Another journalist explains the reach of symbolic violence in Cuba:

> *There are many other sophisticated mechanisms that allow the power not having to reach physical violence and arrest. That doesn't mean that this doesn't happen in Cuba, it happens. What I mean is that there are many other steps before neutralizing a journalist, a citizen. There are many pressures that are exercised from the most conventional doctrine, such as semiotic bombardments, direct psychological pressure, intrafamilial pressure … Those are other categories that are more diffuse but that have an influence when a journalist exposes himself to the exercise of independent journalism. It doesn't mean that they're going to shoot him in the head, but he is going to have to renounce a series of things that conform to the wellbeing and the rights of any citizen in Cuba. And you're going to lose them when you take that step.* (R10)

The ways in which the state attempts at protecting its hegemony pass through the harassment of critical journalists, both while working in the state-run media and once they have reached independence. For instance, while working for the state-run media, many journalists who collaborated with independent media outlets reported having email and social media accounts hacked. The forces of state security, according to them, were looking for information that could compromise their integrity by accusing them of collaborating with the government of

the United States (R3, R7, R10, R16). After quitting or being fired from state-run media outlets, harassment continued in the form of online smear campaigns, but also social isolation.

Fantasies of Conflict Avoidance

In this section, we focus on the way in which social logics are interlinked with fantasmatic ones. We are specifically interested in the fantasies that can contribute to maintaining the practices of the hegemonic media system in Cuba and Venezuela. Even though media professionals eventually disengage themselves from their jobs at the mainstream media, understanding why and how they tried to keep their jobs is of upmost importance.

As we have seen, Venezuelan interviewees emphasize that their situation was difficult already during Chávez's presidency. However, the increased levels of repression during Maduro's leadership might indicate a loss of the governments' communicational hegemony:

> *Chávez was able to sustain the illusion in his own way. Maduro was not. There's no one anymore, there's no one that can keep the corrupted apparatus going at the tip of the populist charisma that the previous one [Chávez] had, and this is a huge disadvantage to these people. That is why recently they have been doing things.* (E4)

In this excerpt, Chávez's charisma becomes a fantasmatic logic that is able to maintain the illusion of a better future, and it is the loss of this hope that leads to the need of harsh repression. Together with charisma, the interviews reveal that the other fantasmatic logic that contributed to sustaining media professionals' illusions of a future stability was incredulity. Many Venezuelan media professionals tolerated the worsening situation by thinking that, in their country, the situation could not get any worse. This contributed to a fantasy of disbelief that, by avoiding rupture, it prolonged the stability of the regime. This was particularly visible during the first years of Chávez's presidency, when the first worrying signs started to appear. Some escalating conflict incidents served as a warning:

> *Shutting down RCTV [Radio Caracas Televisión was one of the oldest, private television channels and it was shut down in 2007] was like a confirmation that Chávez could shut down a medium. Before this, we all believed that the situation would not get to that point. And when it happened, I think many media outlets and their owners noticed that it was possible. From then on, I think self-censorship started.* (E7)

According to the interviewees, the most important fantasmatic logic that helped journalists enduring the worsening media situation in Venezuela was the reinforcement of their professional values and identity. As in Cuba, the interviewees were all trained journalists. The difference is that in Venezuela there are laws to protect journalism (Ley del Ejercicio de Periodismo). This contributes to a strong professional identity and the idea of journalists' duty to inform the people in a democratic society. In fact, some interviewees highlight that they worked in established media outlets as long as they were able to practice their profession according to their journalistic standards, and the moment their professionalism was too compromised, they preferred to leave:

> *Government's pressure on the television channel was so strong that the owners [of the channel] called me and asked me to stop talking about Nicolás Maduro. They told me that it was the only request the government had in order let me broadcast. That I would no longer talk about the president. So I said that I would leave [the channel] since I didn't see any other way I could wake up the day after*. (E4)

Yet, it should be noted that even though the interviewees say that they did not have to compromise (too much) in their work, they all acknowledge that self-censorship was widespread even if they tried to distance themselves from it. Another way in which fantasies of professionalism are present in the interviews is through peer support. There is a strong sense of solidarity among media professionals in both countries. Already before the wave of repression,

Venezuelan journalists had several organizations to protect their interests and they continued their task:

> *Thanks to the Colegio Nacional de Periodistas, Sindicato Nacional de la Prensa, Expresión Libre, Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, associations like Espacio Público that worked to defend freedom of expression, there's no dead journalists, because we put our lives at stake so they could work. But one bullet took one journalist and killed him*. (E8)

This solidarity made itself explicit when journalists decided to leave their established medium because of censorship and joined independent digital media platforms. Even though there are many digital media platforms, they do not think of each other as competitors but they "*intend to develop their own identity*" (E10). As a professional community, everyone knows each other, and the journalists feel that they are confronting the situation together: "One of the most beautiful things of the digital media ecosystem in Venezuela is that most have a journalist in front of them. This means that we all know each other, and this creates solidarity" (E10). As another interviewee noted: "*During the protests, it [the office of a digital media] was like a hub of journalists to meet and to be able to protect ourselves*" (E1).

These fantasmatic logics of professionalism and peer support made it easier for journalists to confront the oppression. These aspects also opened up new possibilities to defy the government through digital news platforms. Of course, the government's control expanded from traditional media to digital platforms, but the latter have been harder to control. That is why digital media sites, such as *Runrun.es* and *Efecto Cocuyo*, have become an important news source for many citizens (Salojärvi, 2017). In addition, journalists' use of instant messaging has offered an opportunity to escape censorship: "We used *Periscope*. Now everyone is using it but when we started to publish, we adapted it as a way to defy censorship in a very, very easy way" (E10).

In addition to fantasmatic logics of professionalism, there is an affective logic of denial that permeates the interviews. This logic becomes apparent when media professionals talk about the way in which they faced dangerous incidents. For instance, those interviewees who had to confront physical threats often lied to themselves about the seriousness of the situation. The denial of the extent of the threats kept them going in otherwise difficult and dangerous circumstances. As one interviewee describes it: "*In that moment, I didn't cry. I didn't cry for what was happening. I had to act. I couldn't cry … I didn't realize the danger we were in*" (E8).

The combination of collective fantasies of fear, yet a denial of immediate danger, has also played an important role in Cuba. In fact, many interviewees avow that they could breathe a collective fear but did not really understand the nature of fear until they felt it in their own skin. Creating a collective sense of fear and vulnerability has been one of the main strategies of the government in order to deter critical journalists from leaving the system. Fantasies of fear have both a personal and collective resonance that reinforce each other conforming a sort of general paranoia. This paranoia is fed through social media and *WhatsApp* groups in which journalists talk to each other when they feel in danger, offering peer support but also feeding both individual and collective fear. In this sense, fear has been a strong deterrent for leaving the system. This fear has multiple ways of expressing itself: fear of being threatened at their job or even at home, of being arbitrarily arrested, of receiving online attacks and intimidation, of being publicly humiliated or feeling marginalized by former colleagues, friends and even relatives (who have in turn received fake information and threats).

Facing fear also brings about fantasies of invincibility that come from the satisfaction of being able to navigate the state repression. This hidden pleasure can be seen in this fragment from the interviews, in which an independent journalist confesses that he does not know what it

is to go on the street to cover the news without feeling fear, yet secretly enjoys the feeling of facing it:

> *I don't know what it is to do that [reporting on the streets] without being scared of what could happen to me. I wish that fear disappeared but, at the same time, that adrenaline also keeps you going, you get certain satisfaction when you get home and nothing happened to you, when you uncovered your hidden camera and took a photograph. Doing things that are forbidden always carries certain pleasure with it.* (R12)

As we have seen in the previous section, fantasies of internal renewal within the state-run media managed to grip several generations of young Cuban journalists. In Cuba, college education is free, but students need to return something to society in exchange through the so-called social work. The service usually lasts two years for men (who also comply with one year of mandatory military service), and three for women. This means that all recently graduated journalists need to work within the state-run system in order to validate their degree. The combination of a beatific fantasy of "paying back a debt" to society, combined with the horrific fantasy of "losing their degree" (not being able to validate it), has served as an efficient way of filling newsrooms with talented, young people at a low cost while attempting to shape their journalistic practice in a way that supports the system.

One of the main threats has been telling students that they need to complete social work. Yet, there are also threats that are harder to explain, as they do not take a clear shape. For instance, the interviewees express an all-encompassing fear that affects especially young journalists. That is the fear of becoming a social outcast and to cause trouble in your family. As a young journalist puts it, "*when you are that young, 23 years old or so, you don't know how to make that move [to quit], if you should disengage yourself completely, your degree, how to deal with your family, with fear*" (R3).

It is at this point of hesitation, of powerlessness, that fantasmatic logics of peer support come into play, usually in ways that make journalists feel more comfortable and safer in the workplace. The interviews reveal a tendency to bear with uncomfortable situations as long as they can escape the realities of daily work spending some spare time with colleagues. These logics of escape seem effective in sustaining journalists' compliance with social work, but often fail at effectively concealing hardship:

> *You always look for mental strategies, defense mechanisms. Our colleagues—we were a group of young people, would go out for coffee and try to forget what happened at the newspaper. And we kept ourselves that way. But the last months were especially a hell. The last months, I felt like I could not reach the end*. (R7)

Some of the interviewees avow that, while at college, students often think that Cuban journalism is not better because journalists do not make it better, assuming that media professionals enjoy full agency over the state structures (R7). While Venezuelan journalists express horrific fantasies of being the first generation put under a life threat, Cuban young journalists had the opposite fantasy: They dreamt of being the first generation to achieve real change. Young journalists fantasized about being "a special generation"; the first generation able to change Cuban journalism from within. Just as in the Venezuelan case, this is closely linked to fantasies that foreground professional goals, rather than politicized interests. Another fantasy that permeates Cuban journalists' discourse is that of being not only a special generation, but also "a special journalist." While working for the state-run media, many journalists saw themselves as talented students that the system would be ready to cherish, granting them some special treatment. This fantasy of personal privilege can be observed in the following quote:

> *My personal and work experience, I am not going to qualify it as terrible. For a recently graduated kid, I have to thank the opportunities that were offered to me. There were no other ones when I started. There were many people who trusted me and opened some doors. And I tried to*

> *change the way in which journalism was practiced on the radio, following my bachelor's thesis recommendations, changing the production routines, the ways of doing*. (R16)

Young Cuban journalists completing their social work felt that they had some leverage over the regime, a leverage that came from the need of the state-run media to keep skilled workers within the system. Several accounts suggest that, to some extent, talented journalists were able to impose some conditions during social work, such as choosing non-reporting jobs, or changing their placement altogether. Of course, this was not free of consequences, and demands were often met with pressure and harassment. But that was a path that many interviewees decided to take: to stay within the system only to the extent that they were able to negotiate some work conditions within the institutional regime. A question that arises is to what extent this fantasy of "leverage" was real, and to what extent it was just a necessary mental resource that helped them bear oppressive conditions.

Fantasies of Political Awareness

In this section, we focus on the way in which fantasmatic logics intertwine with political logics in a way that favors journalists' political rupture with the mainstream Cuban and Venezuelan media system. In Venezuela, different means of repression have had an impact on media professionals, creating a collective feeling of defenselessness: "I was afraid because in my case, like I said, they could invent a hijack or a robbery and do something to me or one of my children" (E3). This feeling has pushed some media professionals to leave the country:

> *Diosdado Cabello [president of the National Assembly] mentioned me at least twice in his television program 'Con el Mazo Dando' and because we saw what was happening in the country, my spouse and I decided, for our tranquility and the tranquility of our child …, to come to this country [the US]*. (E5)

Against what we might think, fear has not always been a major reason for Venezuelan journalists to quit their jobs at established media outlets, nor to leave the country. Instead, fear needs to be understood in combination with a feeling of personal vulnerability that comes from the worsening of the overall safety and economic conditions. An interviewee describes his experience as "*[s]omething pretty heavy, some threats, getting scared, but I think that what made me leave my country the most was the quality of life*" (E1). Leaving the country has always been a clear possibility, which is something the interviewees started to look actively for. However, this option came with a personal and financial tall. For instance, all the Venezuelan interviewees that are placed in Miami required significant paperwork and financial assets.

In the case of Cuba, only two interviewees reported leaving the country as a preventive measure. This decision came after the wave of repression that followed the celebration of an unauthorized LGTBI march in April 2019. Others who have left Cuba rationalize their choice as a self-protective measure, based on horrific fantasies of becoming the wrong type of person: too furious, too cynical, and too polarized. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *I felt that, and I am still convinced of it, there is only one way to survive in a state-run media outlet for more than a year. Well, each person has their own limits of tolerance. But I felt that if I stayed, I would become either a very cynical person, or a very mediocre one. And I was scared. God, what am I going to become here!* (R2)

The same journalists who fantasized about being a special generation able to lead an internal renewal within the state-run media eventually reached a point of no return. This is the point of political disengagement that made possible the emergence of an independent mediasphere. Yet, a leap forward toward independence can only be possible through a collective investment in fantasies of renewal. As one of the interviewees puts it:

> *During my last months in OnCuba, I knew I had to take a leap forward. What I didn't know was where, or towards what, not even if that leap was possible. But confrontation had reached a point of no return. All that energy is what gives birth to something new* [a new independent media project]. (R10)

One of the interviewees explains how, at the time he was completing social work, there was a certain collective "energy" floating in the air. It was not the type of energy that is released by explosive gases, but the energy of a slow burning that can purify the atmosphere to a point in which you can breathe, and survive, even if with trouble. The interviewee considers that, after two years, it became obvious to him that working within the margins of the system was "a big fallacy," and continues:

> *That shows a great disappointment that was generational, and very symbolic; very representative of the frustration that generated the fact of being a young journalist who leaves the faculty with big ambitions of transforming journalism, of doing journalism, and encounters a machinery designed for making sure that there's no change; a propaganda machine that doesn't satisfy you professionally.* (R10)

The generational explosion of disappointment that has taken place in Cuba since the "updating" campaign of the early 2010s has put into question the validity of young journalists' fantasies of reaching an equilibrium between professional satisfaction and personal development within the state-led media. This has pushed a transformation of fantasmatic logics in a political direction, that is, in a way that seeks rupture rather than reconciliation with the system.

The moment of awareness, the political moment that came with the failure of fantasmatic logics, reached younger journalists first, since they graduated with an already functioning independent mediasphere ready to absorb their energy. In fact, young interviewees do no longer seem to care about completing social work and validating their diploma because they do not want to work for the state; they have abandoned that fantasy altogether. It was the progressive

collapse of the fantasies that kept journalists' hope going that led to the political moment of disengagement:

> *You negotiate to some extent. Then, you reach a point in which the only possible negotiation is to leave. You have to invest so much effort, you have to justify so much your word choice! They only care about ideologized discussions. Looking at it from now, it's ridiculous to fight for things that are common sense. But we're talking about a context in which the professional or technical skills are not essential, the political ones are*. (R16)

The interviews reveal that Cuban journalists' investment in fantasies of internal renewal became harder to defend over time. For economic and professional reasons, many started collaborating with independent media outlets while still working for the state-run media. While journalists argued that they were not breaking any rules by doing so, pressures at the workplace worsened quickly. In a way, it was as if the regime, faced with a loss of hegemony, opted for an escalation of harassment—just as in Venezuela. This happened to a group of young journalists who worked at the *Vanguardia* newspaper, in the Villa Clara province. Faced with an upcoming UPEC (*Unión de Periodistas de Cuba*, or Cuban Journalists' Union) regional plenary session, they feared going blank if they were publicly attacked. Therefore, they decided to write down a letter they could read in case they needed to defend themselves.

> *They read the provincial report and it criticized us and our collaborations. That was simply counter-revolutionary to them. I think they didn't use that exact word, but they said that it was collaborating with the enemies, the same discourse as always.*` (R7)

It is through the failure of fantasmatic logics that Cuban and Venezuelan journalists faced the hidden contingency of the social world; that they faced the political moment of disengagement from the system. It is also through the lenses of their fantasies that we can understand the ways in which they shaped digital independent projects, and the professional values that they invested in them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have used a logics perspective in order to understand the way in which Cuban and Venezuelan professionals have invested in collective fantasies as a way of enduring an oppressive situations, both at a personal and at a professional level. We have looked at the social logics that guided media professionals' work in an obstructive mainstream media sector—state-owned in the Cuban case, and privately owned in the Venezuelan case. The interviews reveal that state attempts of instilling collective paranoia and self-censorship have worked in a way that helped authoritarian regimes maintaining their hegemony over journalistic practices. An important element is that journalists do not need to reach a point in which they face death or physical threats. In fact, collective fear operates in a way that numbs journalists' reason to a point in which imagined threats can exceed real ones.

While journalists' investment in fantasies has proved an essential tool for disconnecting from daily threats, fantasies are twofold: by granting stability and relief, they perpetuate journalists' compliance with the logics established by authoritarian governments. The interviews suggest that it is the failure of journalists' investment in beatific logics of equilibrium and change from within that foster a final political rupture and a disengagement from authoritarian regimes.

The main social fantasies that facilitate journalists' survival within oppressive regimes have to do with (1) collective fantasies of fear—yet a cynical denial of direct threat, (2) peer support and (3) the belief in professionalism. All these elements have allowed journalists to bound over shared hopes and frustration, finding mental mechanisms that allow them to endure difficult situations. Another logic that has fostered journalists' compliance with the system is the belief of belonging to a special generation. In the Venezuelan case, this had to do with a

worsening of physical threats to journalists, while in Cuba it was positively related to a perceived leverage of talented journalists over the state.

In the case of Venezuela, the interviewees have highlighted the way in which the situation has worsened in the course of Hugo Chávez's cancer diagnosis and his replacement by Nicolás Maduro. Therefore, there is a shared sense of a narrowing down of the frontiers of possibility. The situation in Venezuela has followed a collective horrific fantasy by which media professionals' worst fantasies, the reinforcement of repression, come into being. This horror is compensated not only by leaving the country, but also by investing in digital technologies of salvation. Digital and social media have enabled journalists to practice their profession according to journalistic principles and a shared will to report on the Venezuelan political and societal situation.

In the case of Cuba, change has come with an expansion of journalists' possibilities beyond the institutional media, thanks to the use of the Internet for hosting new independent media projects. Therefore, Cuban journalists have invested in a collective beatific logic through which the means for escaping the institutional system finally materialize. However, this new option, that of working for the institutional media system while collaborating with independent media outlets, has brought about an increase in censorship and harassment at work. This has led to peer-shared horrific fantasies that generate a climate of paranoia which, in its extreme form, leads to a fear of being declared an enemy of the system and put in prison under any (apparently non-political) excuses, or being banned from leaving the country.

Overall, the same fantasies that have helped media professionals endure personal and professional humiliation have eventually lost their grip, opening up a space of radical investment in a political change. In both cases, this change has come with a disengagement from the media

outlets in which journalists felt oppressed and a professional investment in external media projects. The interviews indicate that the key factors for leaving the country and/or the regime have been desperation, fear of what could happen if they stayed, not just in terms of arrest but also in terms of personal and professional degradation, and a perceived collective energy that finally materialized itself. When the moment of political rupture with the system arrives, the data suggests that journalists' failed fantasies of professionalization and peer-support within the regime can in fact facilitate their reorganization around new projects, creating a vibrating digital mediasphere.

Notes

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[1] When we speak of a regime, we refer to the political regime that has shaped journalistic practices in the mainstream media, that is, the dynamics by which a regime establishes certain narratives and practices that shape the horizons of possibility within which journalists exercise their profession.

[2] For practical reasons, the concept of fantasy will be used indistinctively of fantasmatic logic. In fact, fantasy is used in Lacanian psychoanalysis as a mechanism that allows us to go on with our daily life while covering up frustration and disenchantment and is the main element that guides a fantasmatic logic.

[3] In the case of Cuba, the mainstream media refers to the legally constituted media outlets that are based in the Island, all of which are state-run.

[4] In the Cuban case, we only focused on new independent media outlets founded after 2012 by professional journalists who had previous experience working for the state-run media. The goal was to analyze their strategies for putting up with severe repression and the reasons why they finally decided to disengage themselves from the system. This means that media outlets run by non-professional journalists, or journalists who have not experienced working for the state-run media, were not taken into account in the Cuban case.

[5] In Venezuela, the official aim of the government has been to change the previously private sector-dominated media sphere to a model where each sector, private, state and community media, would have a third of the airwaves (Lugo-Ocando & Garcia Santamaria, 2015; MPPTI, 2007. See also Salojärvi 2008).

[6] This has been reported by many online media outlets, such as espaciopublico.ong or rsf.org.

[7] See rsf.org or freedomhouse.org, for instance.

[8] In Cuba, the existence of "troll factories" has been investigated by independent journalist Abraham Jiménez Enoa (2017), who published an investigative piece in *El Estornudo*. In the story, he explains how the state recruits "cyber warriors" in order to defend the official discourse against critical journalists. The existence of fake social media accounts

aimed at artificially amplifying the official voice while attacking alternative positions came into public debate when the Cuban government denounced a campaign of censorship on Twitter. According to the government, Twitter purposely blocked the account of several government officials and state-run media outlets just as the Cuban president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, was announcing temporary measures for overcoming a lack of fuel that had left Cubans with a severe lack of oil and electricity. This account reflects the fantasy of an external other, both real and constructed, who blocks freedom of speech in Cuba and hinders the right of the government to announce measures to the population. Replying to the Cuban government's accusations, Twitter replied that the blockage was due to the violation of the company's rules through an artificial amplification of messages (Pérez Díaz, 2019).