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**Civil Society 2.0?:  
How the Internet Changes State-Society Relations  
in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Cuba**

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## **Civil Society 2.0? – How the Internet Changes State-Society Relations in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Cuba**

### **Abstract**

In the debate over the role of civil society under authoritarian regimes, the spread of transnational web-based media obliges us to rethink the arenas in which the societal voice can be raised—and heard. Taking the case of state-socialist Cuba, a diachronic comparison analyzes civil society dynamics prior to the Internet—in the early to mid-1990s, and a decade later, after digital and web-based media made their way onto the island. The study finds that in the pre-Internet period, the focus was on behind-the-scenes struggles for associational autonomy within the state-socialist framework. A decade later, web-based communication technologies have supported the emergence of a new type of public sphere in which the civil society debate is marked by autonomous citizen action. While this defies the socialist regime's design of state-society relations, its effect on democratization depends on the extent to which a web-based voice connects with off-line public debate and social action.

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## **Zusammenfassung**

### **Zivilgesellschaft 2.0? – Der Einfluss des Internet auf die Beziehungen zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft in autoritären Regimen: Der Fall Kuba**

In der Debatte über die Rolle von Zivilgesellschaft unter autoritären Regimen zwingt die Ausweitung transnationaler, Internet-basierter Medien dazu, die Arenen zu überdenken, in denen die gesellschaftliche „Voice“ erhoben – und gehört – werden kann. Für den Fall des staatssozialistischen Regimes in Kuba analysiert dieser Artikel in einem diachronen Vergleich die zivilgesellschaftliche Dynamik vor der Einführung des Internet – in der ersten Hälfte der 1990er Jahre – und ein Jahrzehnt später, nachdem digitale, Internet-basierte Medien auf der Insel Einzug gehalten haben. Die Untersuchung zeigt, dass in der Prä-Internet-Periode der Fokus auf einem ohne Öffentlichkeit ausgetragenen Ringen um die Autonomie von Vereinigungen innerhalb des staatssozialistischen Rahmens lag. In dem Maße jedoch, in dem Internet-basierte Kommunikationstechnologien die Ausbreitung eines neuen Typs von Öffentlichkeit ermöglicht haben, markiert die Autonomie des Handelns als Staatsbürger den Kern der zivilgesellschaftlichen Debatte. Dies stellt eine grundlegende Herausforderung für den offiziellen Entwurf der Beziehungen zwischen Staat und Gesellschaft dar. Die Auswirkungen auf eine weitergehende Demokratisierung hängen jedoch davon ab, inwieweit sich Internet-basierte „Voice“ mit der öffentlichen Debatte und sozialer Handlung jenseits des virtuellen Raumes verbindet.

# **Civil Society 2.0? – How the Internet Changes State-Society Relations in Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Cuba**

**Bert Hoffmann**

## **Article Outline**

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## **1. Introduction**

The experiences of democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1980s and early 1990s brought attention to the forces of civil society as key actors in the demise of authoritarian rule (O'Donnell/Schmitter 1986, Cohen/Arato 1992, Linz/Stepan 1996, Bernhard 1993). More recent literature questions the inherently pro-democratic character of civil society activism (Jamal 2007, Warren 2000, Armony 2004). In both lines of argumentation, societal associations or social movements are at the core of the inquiry. However, Hirschman's category of "voice," which encompasses as much articulation of discontent as it does actions of protest (Hirschman 1970), reminds us that for civil society activism to evolve, something fundamental is necessary: an arena in which voices can be raised and heard and in which government and society interact. The question of civil society, thus, is intrinsically linked to

the conditions, contours, limitations and possibilities of communication, media and the public sphere.

This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the Internet's impact on the public sphere and, in consequence, on civil society dynamics in a non-pluralist context. It does so by choosing a case with a particularly thorough form of authoritarian hold over the public sphere: a formal monopoly of the Cuban state on mass media, established in the historic experience of twentieth-century state-socialism and upheld even two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the same time, Cuba is strongly exposed to transnational influences and a transnational articulation of voice, due to a large number of emigrant and diaspora communities that remain highly attached to their country of origin (Fernández 2005).

Authoritarian regimes of whatever brand include in their repertoire mechanisms of control, along with the manipulation, cooptation and restriction of media and the public sphere. Therefore, if we use the concept of the public sphere, it is inevitably distant from the Habermasian ideal type of discourse and deliberation in democratic polities (Habermas 1962). However, a number of studies on Iran (Semati 2008) and China (Calhoun 1994) and on Arab publics (Lynch 2006) have labeled the public sphere concept also relevant for authoritarian political contexts, offering a much lighter definition of the public sphere as "active arguments before an audience about issues of shared concern" (Lynch 2006: 32). In this sense, non-democratic polities can be understood to have public spheres "with adjectives" – restricted, precarious, incipient, weak, etc.

The forms and degree of the limits various authoritarian regimes impose on the public articulation of voice vary, but no matter which regime is in question, the regime's reach is largely limited to the territorial boundaries of the nation-state in which it exercises power. As traditional media, too, were bound to the nation-state, widening the public sphere hence needed to be thought of as an "opening," "thaw," "decompression" or "liberalization" of the regime (e.g. O'Donnell/Schmitter 1986: 26).

The Internet era forces us to rethink this understanding. The inherently trans-border character of web-based communication and media technologies challenges established "filters" to access and patterns of regulation in any state. However, our thesis is that the political impact is all the stronger the more a state is at odds with political pluralism and the more it relies on control over media and the public sphere in the national arena.

Cuba certainly has been such a case ever since the early years after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, when the government of Fidel Castro adopted socialism as the country's political model. While the regime survived the collapse of Soviet-style socialism in Eastern Europe, it was reluctant to take up Internet-based technologies. The island became the last of all Latin American countries to join the Internet, having done so as recently as 1996 (Valdés 1997). Since then, computer use and digital communication technologies have spread, but controlling and limiting access to the Internet and web-based media has been a crucial concern for state authorities.

Its condition as a latecomer to the Internet, combined with the overarching continuity of the political regime, makes Cuba an ideal case for a diachronic empirical comparison, an approach often underestimated in comparative politics. Thus, this paper sets out to compare civil society dynamics in the pre-Internet period—Cuba in the early to mid-1990s, when the Cold War alignment had already become history but web-based technologies did not yet have a major presence on the island—with the dynamics of a decade later, when web-based media entered the island for the first time. Empirically, this study is based on approximately one dozen field trips over the past two decades that included numerous formal and informal interviews both with actors from within Cuba’s political establishment and those outside of it. These interviews are combined with an intensive study of publications and declarations, both in print and on the web.

Following this introduction, I will analyze Cuba’s civil society debate of the 1990s, which focused on the quest for associational autonomy as a means of pluralization within the state-socialist context. Next, I sketch Cuba’s late and reluctant acceptance of the Internet and the state’s efforts to assure itself a maximum amount of control. I then turn to the different ways in which societal actors have since come to use digital and web-based media to raise their voice and claim participation as one of their rights of citizenship. The paper concludes with a discussion about the democratizing potential of these new civil society dynamics.

## **2. Civil Society in the 1990s: The Quest for Associational Autonomy—Along with its Limits**

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 redefined state–society relations. Most existing civil society organizations were either disbanded or transformed (and new ones created) according to a mold in which loyalty and subordination to the revolutionary leadership were a *conditio sine qua non*.<sup>1</sup> With the so-called “process of institutionalization” in the 1970s, state–society relations were formally modeled in Marxist-Leninist fashion: the Constitution of 1976 defined the Communist Party as the “highest leading force of society and of the state, which organizes and guides the common effort” (República de Cuba 1992 §5) and declared as mission of “the social and mass organizations [...] the edification, consolidation and defense of the socialist society” (ibid. 7). Freedom of speech and of press were limited, by constitutional prescription, “in keeping with the objectives of socialist society” (República de Cuba 1992). To this end, Article 52 of the Cuban Constitution effectively establishes a monopoly on mass media: “Material conditions for the exercise of that right are provided by the fact that the press, radio, television, cinema, and other mass media are state or social property and can never be private property” (ibid. § 52,1).

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<sup>1</sup> For Cuban civil society prior to 1959 see Armony/Crahan 2007; on trade unions and the women’s federation see Mariféli Pérez-Stable 1994.

Organizational activities that remained (at least partially) outside of these parameters were few and narrowly restricted; arguably, the most important one being the Catholic church, which maintained a nationwide and legally recognized institutional infrastructure that included media for internal circulation (Armony/Crahan 2007).<sup>2</sup>

In the charismatic brand of socialism that characterized post-1959 Cuba and which set it apart from the standard Eastern European model (Hoffmann 2008), formal prescriptions like the constitutional provisions on the media were complemented with declarations by the charismatic leader, Fidel Castro, which carried no less practical weight. The key statement on the margins for voice were his so-called “words to the intellectuals” from 1961, which provided the following maxim: “Within the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing.”<sup>3</sup> This sentence, repeated *ad infinitum* ever since, acquired law-like status and left ample discretion for the power-holders to define at every instance what was “within” and what was “against” the revolution. Aside from media, a central and related concern was on public space. In the dualism of Cuba’s charismatic brand of socialism, formal restrictions on the freedom of assembly also found their informal equivalent in the slogan “The street is Fidel’s!”<sup>4</sup> a code the state invoked to justify the prohibition or repression of protesting voices in public. The severe limits imposed on public voices contrasted with an often surprising level of tolerance towards criticism voiced in private—an ambivalence which led Cubans to paraphrase Fidel’s 1961 words as “Under the roof, everything. In the street, nothing.”<sup>5</sup>

After the regime collapses in Eastern Europe and the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, a profound economic, social and ideological crisis in Cuba ensued, one that called into question the viability of state–society relations as they had developed in the three decades since 1959. Internationally, civil society had gone from a buzzword in academia to a resounding career path in international and development politics. Particularly the role ascribed to civil society in bringing down state-socialism in Eastern Europe (Arato/Cohen 1992, Havel 1978) provided the background for the concept being taken up by U.S. policy towards Cuba, which in the early 1990s, publicly adopted “the fostering of Cuba’s civil society” as a “second track” next to economic sanctions to bring about regime change in Havana.

These political overtones notwithstanding, it was within the official intellectual institutions on the island that in the mid-1990s, the term “civil society” became the focus of a key debate about the country’s course (Gray/Kapcia 2008). As the concept of civil society stresses some degree of autonomy from the “political society” (state, parties, parliaments, etc.) (e.g. Fernández 1993: 99), in a state-socialist country this conception invariably raises the question

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<sup>2</sup> While the Afro-Cuban religions are more popular and encompass wide nets of social relations, their weak institutionalization gives them a much less visible role in the national public arena.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations in this article taken from Spanish-language sources were translated by the present author[0]. Orig. “Dentro de la Revolución, todo. Contra la Revolución, nada.”

<sup>4</sup> Orig. “La calle es de Fidel!”

<sup>5</sup> Orig.: “Bajo techo, todo. En la calle, nada.”



about the role of state and party and the margins of associational autonomy within such a framework. This debate about civil society within state-socialism marked a new discussion not only for Cuba, but also internationally.

An article by Rafael Hernández from Havana's Center for American Studies (CEA) initiated the Cuban civil society debate in 1994. In it, he underscored the Marxist ideological credentials of the term claiming its tradition in the writings of Hegel, Marx and Gramsci and argued for "the necessity and usefulness [of applying] the concept to the analysis of current problems in Cuba" (Hernández 1994: 30).<sup>6</sup> Hernández argued that both civil society and the socialist state are "organic segments of the socialist system," which are interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Hernández 1994: 31). Moreover, the distinction between civil society and the state should be of great practical importance for Cuba because "the dynamics of civil society have been overshadowed by a strong politicization of social relations and institutions in Cuba" (ibid.: 30). This indirect call for a de-politicization of social relations provides the signpost for the ensuing debate: reclaiming greater autonomy of the social sphere and its organizations and institutions from the state.

The background of this argument is the deep economic crisis that has plagued Cuba since the demise of its socialist allies overseas in 1989/90 and the consequences of that crisis for Cuban society—above all, the bitter divide between the depressed *peso* economy and the emergent enclaves of "dollarized" sectors in tourism and joint ventures, and the rapidly growing role of illegal and legal market mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> On this, Hernández (ibid.: 30) writes:

The problems the Cuban society is facing cannot be contained within the limits of an economic analysis. Both the causes and the consequences of the crisis transcend this dimension. However, even within this narrow framework it is obvious that 'the realm of economic relations' in Cuba has changed [...]. It now comprises phenomena such as the informal economy, which is characterized by the growth of independent work and the black market, as well as the rise of new forms of labor in the mixed sector of the new, markedly differentiated, economy.

The concept of civil society suggested by Hernández is thus framed as primarily a response to the increasing differentiation of Cuban society, resulting from the economic crisis. Other contributions pushed the Cuban civil society debate further. Most importantly, Hugo Azcuay, one of Hernández's colleagues at the CEA, wrote of the "necessity for more plural *expressions* in Cuban society," (Azcuay 1995: 105, emphasis in original) for which the concept of civil society "should not only be used as an instrument of analysis, but also as a *project*" (ibid., emphasis in

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<sup>6</sup> Even at this early point, political resistance against the use of the term became evident. When published in the journal of the official Cuban writers' association, UNEAC, it was prefaced by a "Letter to the Editor" in which a member of the association reprimands Hernández for his "imprecise" use of the term which he identified with the counter-revolutionary strategy of the U.S. government.

<sup>7</sup> Parallel to the debate on civil society, a similar debate evolved about increased autonomy for economic actors and resulting reform steps (see Carranza/Gutiérrez/Monreal 1995; for an overview see Hoffmann 1995; 1997).

original). This idea of civil society as a project of socialist renewal hence became a leitmotif of Cuba's intellectual reform discourse in the mid-1990s. Azcuy (1995: 108) posits "the strengthening of Cuban civil society and its necessary autonomy within the framework of the revolutionary project of which it understands itself to be a part" as its frame of reference.<sup>8</sup>

If state authorities feared civil society as a potential loss of power, in the following text contribution Hernández is explicit in reverting this logic. The activation of civil society is meant precisely to come to the rescue of a socialist state whose needs for "new forms of legitimacy" in order to secure regime stability are acknowledged:

As the sphere in which the tensions and conflicts facing the state are enacted, it is in the interest of and the responsibility of the state to search within civil society for new forms of legitimacy and arenas of consensus. [...] Without the consensus of civil society, not only will the legitimacy of the government suffer damage, but also the stability of the system itself.

(Hernández 1996: 88)

In terms of audience, the reach of this debate was limited. It mostly moved within academic or intellectual institutions, with the Center for American Studies (CEA) as the epicenter,<sup>9</sup> and journals, including *Temas* magazine, directed by Hernández, became the key forums of the debate. The civil society discourse hardly ever found reflections in the state-controlled mass media. However, there was an empirical side to this debate which was played out in the tug-of-war about the redefinition of the nature of societal associations and their relation to the state. The economic crisis had not only led to a heterogenization of society, but had also left established institutions in cultural, social or academic fields cash-strapped, as the money from the state coffers dried up. As a consequence, a search for new funding possibilities began. While also playing well to members' aspirations of more autonomy from the state, the label "non-governmental organization" (NGO) promised to be the key for access to donor money from international development actors, both private and public.

In the early 1990s, this label gradually began to encompass associations with remarkable differences. At least two types must be discerned: for one, institutions and organizations that had been created by the socialist state in past decades and that now were "re-labeled" NGOs. This encompasses professional associations like the writers' union UNEAC, which posed as an NGO even though its president was a member of the Politburo, and research centers that had been founded by the Communist Party's Central Committee. Even official "mass organi-

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<sup>8</sup> This plea for greater autonomy of the social sphere also is the leitmotif of the volume edited by Haroldo Dilla (1996), whose articles cover such diverse topics as agrarian cooperatives, the participation of women, and the generation gap in Cuba.

<sup>9</sup> Aside from the cited Hernández and Azcuy, other CEA scholars that were key exponents in the debate were Haroldo Dilla and Juan Valdés Paz, and Julio Carranza and Pedro Monreal in the economic field.

zations"<sup>10</sup> into which nearly every Cuban is organized began to pass themselves off as NGOs, a process that reached its climax with the participation of the women's organization FMC, led by Raúl Castro's wife Vilma Espín, as an NGO at the United Nations Women's Summit in Beijing in 1995.

Given their origin and institutional subordination to the Party and the state, there is much reason to see these re-labeled NGOs as *neo-* rather than as *non-*governmental organizations.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, also within many of these organizations, this semantic shift of emphasis came as part of an unspoken tug-of-war about the relative degrees of autonomy from the central state apparatus.

The quest for associational autonomy was even more visible in the second category of new organizations that sprung up as NGOs in the 1990s within a broad spectrum of cultural, social and ecological activities. None of these, however, was awarded official recognition without safeguarding mechanisms for state control. These safeguarding mechanisms had an institutional and a personal side: all registered NGOs were formally "assigned" to a state institution, and they were usually led by persons who were judged to have given sufficient proof of their political loyalty. At times, they overlapped. For example, the ecological NGO "ProNaturaleza" was founded in 1993 mainly by senior bureaucrats and scientists from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment; it was assigned to the ministry, and at the beginning also had its offices in the very same building as the ministry.

Also, to a much lesser extent, new grassroots organizations sprung up. By and large, the more distance they kept from the political establishment, the more informal they remained. A case in point was the Action Group for the Free Choice of Sexual Orientation (GALEES), which attracted international attention when in 1995 it unfolded a huge rainbow flag, the symbol of the gay movement, in front of the state leadership during the May 1 Parade. GALEES was never officially recognized; after few years of existence, it was dissolved.

Whether the initiatives were top-down or bottom-up, or something in between, these struggles about autonomy and recognition were played out behind the scenes. They became public only by accident, or through cases of individuals breaking with the established discipline and offering insights into processes otherwise shielded from public view or debate.

The latter was the case in what had arguably become the most prominent of the new Cuban NGOs, the "Foundation Pablo Milanés," founded by the Cuban singer of that name in 1993. This NGO was largely meant to formalize and expand activities in support of young

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<sup>10</sup> This includes the Unity Trade Union (CTC), the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), the small farmers' association ANAP, the women's organization FMC, the students' organization FEU, and the pupils' organization FEEM, and for the youngest, the organization of the Young Pioneers.

<sup>11</sup> This certainly is not an invention of Cuban socialism alone, but can be found in different forms in many countries, particularly throughout the so-called "Third World." In the jargon of the international development community the ironic term "GONGO" (Government-Organized Non-governmental Organization) has been coined (see Koschützke 1994: 39).

Cuban artists, which Pablo Milanés had already been sponsoring individually with the foreign-exchange earnings from his international music contracts. While Milanés had a conflictive trajectory under the revolution, including suffering ugly sanctions in the 1970s, he more than once affirmed his unconditional loyalty to Fidel and the revolutionary process, and was regarded as a reliable showcase artist for the government's international projection. But despite its impressive success in the acquisition of international funds, Milanés' foundation was short-lived, disbanding only two years after its creation. In 1995, Milanés, in an unusual act of civil disobedience, publicly lamented the constant curtailment of the foundation's autonomy by the state body to which it was assigned, the Ministry of Culture, and declared the project closed. The time and place of Milanés' protest, however, underscores how much this going public was the exception in a context that demanded keeping conflicts behind closed doors: Milanés called international press to the Havana airport, making his statements minutes before boarding a plane for a prolonged stay outside of the country. Cuban media did not echo any of it, and the news was left to spread through word-of-mouth communication.

This inability to communicate struggles for associational autonomy to a wider audience left the concept of civil society as a project for pluralization within Cuban socialism defenseless, when in 1996 the state leadership decided to cut it short. The medium was a Politburo report read by Raúl Castro (1996), Fidel's brother and then head of Cuba's Armed Forces, at the V. Plenum of the CP Central Committee, which was broadly covered as front-page news in all Cuban media. In it, the state leadership decries the notion of "civil society" as part of the "ideological subversion" to which some in Cuba had presumably fallen victim. The charges were worded harshly, as the civil society debate was described as a "Trojan Horse [that] intends to promote the division and subversion of the country" (R. Castro 1996: 6 ff.) and its proponents as a "fifth column of the enemy" (ibid.).<sup>12</sup> The report explicitly referred to the "bitter experience with the Center for American Studies." In its wake, the CEA's director was dismissed, and after a painful investigation process, all senior researchers were transferred to other institutions (cf. Hoffmann 1997).

Given the government's firm grip on the public sphere, no public voice of protest on the island against the Politburo's heavy-handed measure was able to reach a broader audience.<sup>13</sup> While *Temas* magazine managed to survive, neither it nor any other publication could continue the debate on associational autonomy as frankly as before. On the level of associations, many continued to work in their respective fields, albeit within narrowed margins of action. While the term "NGO" has not been banned entirely, it is disliked. Many of the "re-labeled

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<sup>12</sup> Preceding the Politburo report, the party newspaper *Granma* had published a devastating article against the civil society concept by the director of the PCC's party academy, Valdés Vivó (1996). See also Hart (1996).

<sup>13</sup> The Politburo-mandated, half-year-long process of intervention in the Center for American Studies, led by veteran hardliner José Ramón Balaguer, was entirely shielded from public view. Through undisclosed channels the internal documents of these proceedings were eventually leaked after the case was closed, and published in the U.S. (Giuliani 1998).

NGOs" were oriented to switch into reverse and to proudly emphasize, rather than hide, their association to the Party and to state institutions.

The conception of civil society as a project of pluralization from within the state-socialist order failed in part because it was unable to access a sufficiently wide public sphere. According to Hirschman, who distinguishes between "vertical voice" (expressions of protest against superiors) and "horizontal voice" (communication among peers), "horizontal voice is a necessary precondition for the mobilization of vertical voice" (Hirschman 1986: 82). In Cuba, aside from the structural obstacles on horizontal communication, such as poor telecommunications or fear of being surveilled, it was the non-public character of the struggles for associational autonomy that impeded horizontal voice to develop in a way that would have allowed for the mobilization of vertical voice when the state decided to rein in the incipient civil society project.

### 3. Enter the Internet: The Public Sphere in Transnational Times

As the Cuban state's approach to the public sphere is based on the state monopoly over mass media, any media beyond the reach of the nation-state's authority signify a political challenge. The classic forms of cross-border media outreach by radio and TV, of which the U.S.-funded Radio and TV Martí programs sent from Florida are typical exponents, have long been a political battlefield. The Cuban government has dispensed considerable energy and resources to jam transmissions to the island.

The case of the Internet is different, however, since it is transnational by its very structure. It does not require special outreach efforts by the sender to reach a cross-border audience; quite to the contrary, once connected to the network, it requires filtering or censorship efforts to keep undesired information out.

The Cuban government has been all too aware of the political challenges the new media imply. However, in a protracted process, the island finally joined the Internet in 1996, as the last country in the American hemisphere to do so. It is often overlooked that joining the Internet was almost simultaneous to the Politburo's crackdown on the civil society debate. The decision-making process was thorny as important segments of Cuba's ruling circles saw the Internet primarily as a political threat and as "a weapon of war" of the United States (Sánchez Villaverde 1995). Fidel Castro himself warned at a public rally on August 5, 1995, that the United States government "speak[s] of 'information highways' [...] which they want to impose on the world, through propaganda and the manipulation of human mentality" (cited in Sánchez Villaverde 1995: 39).

Connecting to the Internet, hence, was an eminently political decision.<sup>14</sup> Of crucial importance was the example of China, which had joined the Internet with a full IP connection three years earlier. The Chinese experience showed that Internet access was (at least in the short or

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<sup>14</sup> This process is described in detail in Valdés 1997, and Hoffmann 2004; 199-208.

medium term) compatible with communist party rule (Press/Foster/Goodman 1999; Shanti/Taylor 2001). Moreover, the Beijing government was also willing to share with Cuba its technological and administrative know-how for minimizing the Internet's potentially destabilizing effects.

Nevertheless, Cuba's leadership opted for a hard-handed domestic political move to show that Internet connection would not lead Cuba down the perilous path of eventual regime change. Washington's Cuba strategy, as encoded in the so-called "Torricelli Law"<sup>15</sup> of 1992, combined tightening the economic embargo with a "track two" strategy of increasing communication—notably, exempting telecommunications and Internet access from the trade sanctions. The declared motive was thus to foster pluralist civil society structures as seeds of democratization. If Havana was to accept the challenge of increased communication, it did so only after crushing the incipient debate about civil society as a project of reform. Cuban authorities announced the decision to join the Internet only a month after Raúl Castro read the crushing Politburo report.<sup>16</sup>

Law decree 209 of 1996, "Access from the Republic of Cuba to Information Networks of Global Reach,"<sup>17</sup> sets out the government's basic approach in dealing with the new information and communication technologies: introduce them in controlled form in order to minimize their negative effects. To achieve this, Internet access will, according to the decree, be employed "according to the interests of Cuba, giving priority to juridical persons or institutions that are of greater relevance to the life and development of the country." In other words, Internet access is principally for official institutions and state companies, not for individual users.

On this premise, the state has expanded the development and diffusion of the digital technologies on the island. Access in official institutions is limited and controlled. Many institutions' computers have access only to domestic Cuban networks, but not to the World Wide Web. International e-mail communication, however, has become widely permitted. Moreover, all legitimate users have to sign declarations not to "misuse" the technology for accessing "anti-Cuban" content—interpretation of this is of course left to the discretion of the authorities. Cuban users are well aware that Internet use at institutional access points can be monitored. Finally, as the state maintains a monopoly on Internet service providers, it can use different technological means to block or sabotage specific sites. As Kalathil/Boas (2001) concluded in their study in 2001, the Cuban government was able to exert considerable control over the political impact of the Internet through reactive and proactive measures.

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<sup>15</sup> Named after its author in the U.S. Congress, Robert Torricelli; the law's official name is: Cuban Democracy Act.

<sup>16</sup> In fact, Cuba's first IP connection was not from Cuba to Canada, as initially announced, but a direct link from Cuba to the U.S. provided by the U.S. company Sprint—a deal made possible only under the provisions of the Torricelli law.

<sup>17</sup> Official title: *Decreto No. 209: Del acceso desde la República de Cuba a redes informáticas de alcance global*; published in: *Gazeta Oficial No. 27*, September 13, 1996. Cf. also Valdés/Rivera (1999:147f.), Press (1998).

However, this did not resolve the key contradiction between the inherently transnational character of web-based media and a nation-state-based media monopoly, nor could it prevent the spread and use of such media. Despite a restrictive context, a decade later the new web-based media have become a firm presence in Cuba and an ever more important channel of information, communication and articulation.

Before we turn to this, a brief word should be said regarding the political context: In July 2006, Fidel Castro fell so seriously ill that he delegated—temporarily, as was stressed initially—his positions at the helm of the state, the Party, and the armed forces to his younger brother Raúl Castro, who had been his deputy in all these offices over the past decades (Hoffmann 2009). In February 2008, Raúl also formally became Fidel's successor as Cuban head of state. While this gradual succession process became a display of political stability, it remained fraught with ambiguity. By all available evidence, Fidel Castro continues to retain an important informal role with considerable veto power, and Raúl Castro's initial promise to transform the regime into a more institution-based type of socialism so far remains largely unfulfilled.

#### **4. Asserting Citizenship: The Public Sphere and Civil Society in the Internet Era**

While the new digital, web-based media share common characteristics, at this point we need to break down the analysis into different, albeit interconnected, types of media use based on the Internet. To this end, I will single out three different ways in which societal actors have come to use the digital and web-based media to raise voices and claim public space and citizenship rights: first, the use of digital recordings posted on the World Wide Web to reach an audience for cultural activities that are not promoted by the state's official institutions, as well as to provide global transparency for events that occur behind closed doors; second, e-mail as perhaps the most widely used of the web-based media in Cuba, which in particular facilitates horizontal voice and the decentralized circulation of information; and third, the growing number of blogs by Cuban citizens, a phenomenon which in recent years has become a key political battlefield about the possibilities and limitations of Cuba's public sphere.

##### **The Web as Audience: Bypassing Institutions, Creating Transparency**

Aside from e-mail communication and the medium of blogs, two more elements shall be discussed to analyze the impact of the digital technologies on Cuba's public sphere and civil society action: the web's function as a provider of

- 1) an audience for cultural activities that bypasses the filter of the established cultural production modes and distribution outlets, and
- 2) an audience and transparency for what otherwise would have remained behind closed doors or within the confines of those physically present.

For both, aside from the Internet itself, the diffusion of low-cost, small-sized technologies for digital audio and video recording has been crucial.

In the past, Cuban artists had a fundamental dependence on the state's infrastructure for the production and circulation of their work. While Cuba's cultural institutions offered varying degrees of flexibility and tolerance over time, the limits of what was possible were constantly negotiated. Artists who failed or refused to adapt to the exigencies of the state found themselves cut off from most artistic circuits, and a continuous stream of intellectuals opted to go into exile.

Dependence on the state's material infrastructure was probably greatest in film-making, as much in the resources needed to produce films as in access to cinemas or television to show them. Even though the film institute, ICAIC, is considered a bastion of the liberal tendencies within Cuba's cultural scene, in the 1990s, the taboo-breaking film *Alicia en el pueblo de Maravillas*, while filmed with the ICAIC's support, was banned from cinema screens after only three showings.

A decade later, new forms of film-making emerged. Based on digital cameras and personal computers, a series of shorts and documentaries have been filmed entirely outside the official structures of production. No less important was the distribution side: while the films were not shown by Cuban cinemas or TV, they were passed around on CDs (where they reached at least part of their domestic audience), and they made their way onto YouTube, where they instantly were accessible to a global audience. The most emblematic films became a series of shorts by Eduardo del Llano, one of the authors of the *Alicia* film a decade earlier. Del Llano's ten-minute *Monte Rouge*, for instance, is a biting satire in which state security officials promote a more "participatory" form of eavesdropping, by asking the citizens themselves to choose the place to install microphones in their home. Del Llano submitted this film to the national film festival, where it was rejected. This, however, did not prevent the artist from reaching his audience: thousands on the island have seen the ten-minute movie on digital copies on their computers or DVD players, and on YouTube, the movie shows more than 50,000 viewers in one year.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, in music, alternative diffusion via the web has become a standard feature for critical rap singers, such as "Los Aldeanos" or "Hermanos de Causa," or for iconoclastic rock bands such as "Porno para Ricardo."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_type=&search\\_query=monte+rouge&aq=f](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=&search_query=monte+rouge&aq=f) (access: April 1, 2009). For an in-depth study of recent Cuban "street filmmaking" see Stock 2009.

<sup>19</sup> "Porno para Ricardo," whose hard-hitting lyrics are more than explicit, to put it mildly. The group is banned from public performance and radio, but video clips and recordings from concerts in private settings are circulating on the island and on the web, with YouTube showing scores of ten thousands of viewers [http://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_type=&search\\_query=porno+para+ricardo&aq=f](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=&search_query=porno+para+ricardo&aq=f) (access: April 1, 2009). When band leader Gorki Águila was arrested in 2008 on charges of "social dangerousness," this, too, became a public issue on the web as the band as well as bloggers like Yoani Sánchez posted their "Free Gorki!" protests,



In this type of web-based outreach to a global audience, the contrast to the 1990s is clearly visible. Artists are not as inevitably focused on the struggle to stretch the limits of the permissible within their respective institutional affiliation as before, as the new digital media allow them to circumvent—at least to a considerable degree—the state institutions' filters and censorship and find alternative outlets.

A key feature of the tug-of-war over associational autonomy in the 1990s was the fact that it was largely played out behind the scenes, “under roof” and shielded from public view. The opposite phenomenon has emerged in the 2000s: Time and again, non-public debates in closed circuits have been given public exposure through unauthorized audio or video recordings, often made with cell-phone technologies. Such was the case when, in early 2008, National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón held a meeting with students at the Cuban Informatics University, a prestige project of the government. Meant to be a closed-door meeting, a video recording was leaked to BBC and put on YouTube, showing students confronting the veteran Cuban leader with highly critical questions.<sup>20</sup> As a result, it received worldwide attention. This in turn had repercussions in Cuba, and—despite the restrictions on Internet access—USB sticks and word-of-mouth propaganda made the civic courage of the questioning students rapidly known.

Similarly, recordings brought to public knowledge a tumultuous meeting of Party leaders with dissatisfied employees in the hard-currency sector of the economy, and student protests at the Cuban Arts Institute, which otherwise few but those physically present would have heard about. In all these cases, while the digital technologies provided the physical means, it was civic voice in the non-virtual world that was filmed and given public exposure, as much as it required citizens' action to record the proceedings and see to their distribution.

### **E-mails as “Non-institutional Press”: From Horizontal to Vertical Voice**

E-mail has made a broad entry into Cuban society. There has been no recent official data on the number of e-mail accounts on the island. The Ministry of Informatics and Communications officially gives the figure of 1,450,000 Cubans, or 12.7 percent, as “Internet users” (ONE 2009)<sup>21</sup> without specifying the precise uses this number includes. The figure certainly should not be mistaken for access to the World Wide Web, which remains severely restricted. Instead, the figure most certainly results from including all Cubans with some kind of (even if only sporadic) access to closed domestic networks or with access to e-mail services (though not necessarily a proper individual account).

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mobilizing international solidarity. Gorki Águila was eventually ordered to pay a mere 30 USD fine for the lesser offense of public disorder.

<sup>20</sup> Ravensberg 2008; for the video see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X\\_nMQD2xwJs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_nMQD2xwJs)

<sup>21</sup> These figures are also those reproduced by the International Telecommunications Union (ITU 2009).

Beyond the formal data, e-mail has become a standard feature for urban professionals in Cuba, and it is also a common, although infrequently used, item for wide sectors of the population for whom the ties to emigrated relatives are a major driver for e-mail communication needs (even if access to computers is far from quotidian). Hence, e-mail has greatly increased horizontal communication among Cubans, as well as between Cubans and citizens of other countries.

Recalling Hirschman's distinction, the use of e-mail in Cuba provides excellent evidence of how horizontal voice can lead to the mobilization of vertical voice. In Cuba, the groundbreaking case was the so-called "*polémica intelectual*" (debate of the intellectuals) or, as others call it, "*la guerrita de los correos electrónicos*" ("little e-mail war") at the beginning of 2007. This brought a medium into the spotlight of Cuban public life that enabled a dynamic of horizontal voice hitherto unknown in a media regime of vertical communication. The dividing line between mass and individual media blurred just as much as the accustomed division between one-to-many media (radio, TV, newspapers, etc.) in the public sphere and one-to-one communication (telephone, letters, etc.), traditionally thought of as pertaining to the private sphere.

The initial impulse that triggered the *polémica* was a program on state TV featuring Luis Pavón, the most notorious figure of Cuba's dogmatic and intolerant cultural policy of the 1970s, known as the "*quinquenio gris*" (the "gray five years"). While the state never allowed an open debate about this period, its eventual end had been sealed by the dismissal of its leading exponents by the end of the 1970s. The experience of the 1970s, however, had been so traumatic that the sudden reappearance of its figurehead cadres on state television in 2007 sent shockwaves through the intellectual community. However, now this shock was no longer absorbed individually or discussed only in closed-door meetings, but became a collective, e-mail based articulation of protest.

When a young writer, Jorge Ángel Pérez, sent an e-mail expressing his disgust about the TV appearance to a number of colleagues, he kicked off a flood of e-mails, written and received mostly by intellectuals residing in Cuba. Participants in this e-mail debate were senior writers and artists as well as little-known students or cadres of state institutions—including Mariela Castro, the daughter of Raúl Castro. It is important to note that all these interventions were made not in the name of some institution or organization, but individually—"a título personal." As a consequence, beyond the issue at stake, the *polémica* was also about something more general: the legitimacy of individual participation in a public debate of public affairs—not resulting from an institutional position or organizational mandate, but as a citizen's right.

The state leadership eventually declared the TV appearances to have been mere accidents, and withdrew the notorious cadres from television. However, by that time, the e-mail *polémica* had already evolved well beyond the event that triggered it and called for a critical public discussion of Cuba's "gray years." After weeks in which e-mail communication had been the principal media, the official writers' union, UNEAC, opened some semi-public space

for a controlled discussion within the “under roof” circuits of the institution, while restricting spill-overs into a broader public debate. The by-invitation-only debate at the UNEAC head offices on January 30, 2007, became emblematic of the official containment strategy, as a group of mostly younger intellectuals gathered outside the building, demanding, unsuccessfully, entry into and participation in the discussions. Among those left outside, this experience underscored the need for an open debate without official institutions being the gate-keepers authorizing or excluding speakers and audience.

In the months after the initial assembly, the UNEAC organized a series of topical debates on the cultural policy of the 1970s. While these were marked by rather frank discussion, participation was limited to a small audience of intellectuals, without Cuba’s mass media providing significant echoes of it or taking the issues to a broader audience. However, the closed-door meeting unintentionally gave birth to an independent blogger movement in Cuba that since has risen to great public prominence. In the wake of the UNEAC meeting, one of those left outside, then little-known 32-year-old philologist Yoani Sánchez, circulated an e-mail, concluding: “We need many more debates than this, and we will not continue to wait until they invite us to participate” (Sánchez 2007). She went from words to deeds by pioneering the first independent blog written from within Cuba, called “Generation Y” ([www.desdecuba.com/generaciony](http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony)).<sup>22</sup>

As to e-mail, the impact of the *polémica* was so strong that e-mail received official recognition as a new medium in what seemed to signal a new approach in the state’s media policy. When Raúl Castro took over from Fidel in 2006, he issued a call for debate and self-criticism (R. Castro 2006a, b). Eliades Acosta, who in 2007, was promoted to the important position of director of the cultural department of the Communist Party’s Central Committee, took up this call in an interview in which he strongly criticized the inertia of the official press. But while this had happened before, Acosta entered new territory when he explicitly spoke of “this great non-institutional press—e-mails, which have come to stay.” Moreover, he not only acknowledged the existence of this “non-institutional press” but also praised them as proof of “a healthy activation of the civic spirit of the Cubans” (Cubarte 2007).

The explicit emphasis on “civic spirit” is in line with the reassertion of citizenship displayed by the authors of the e-mail debate; but it is remarkable for an interpretation emanating from the Communist Party leadership, which over the past five decades stressed collective rather than individual political articulation, and which associated “civic virtues” with the bourgeois past that needed to be overcome rather than with the socialist future that needed to be constructed. However, Acosta’s novel take did not carry the day in the upper echelons of Cuba’s government. The interview, which had been published exclusively on the

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<sup>22</sup> I will address the phenomenon of blogging in the following section.

Cuban Ministry of Culture's website,<sup>23</sup> was taken down the very next day. Half a year later, Acosta had to resign his position altogether.

E-mail communication however, did indeed come to stay as part of Cuba's public sphere. There have been numerous examples since, where e-mail has been used to spread voices of dissatisfaction to peers. On different occasions, intellectuals such as literary critic Desiderio Navarro and actors Luis Alberto García and Armando Tomey, have circulated letters critical of official policies, primarily via e-mail.<sup>24</sup> For instance, Armando Tomey's "open letter" starts out protesting a specific deterioration of his conditions to eventually address broader political issues and to call "to give participation to everybody!" (Tomey 2009). Again, the recourse to the condition of citizen becomes explicit, as he continues that he "like[s] so much the expression by [Ecuador's left-wing President Rafael] Correa, who called his revolution a 'Citizens' Revolution'" (ibid.). In the circulation of this letter, horizontal voice and vertical voice work in tandem, creating a public space of civic critique and debate beyond the narrow constraints of the state monopoly over mass media.

### **New Kids on the Blog: Citizen Journalism to Activate Citizenship Rights**

If blogs—that is, websites run by individuals with diary-like entries of information and personal comment—have experienced a worldwide boom, this is largely due to their ability to empower individuals as "senders" in a global media world. Blogs do not require great technological or financial resources, and they have a unique capacity to circumvent the traditional gatekeeper function of established media (Neuberger 2006). In a country where this gatekeeper function takes the form of a state monopoly by a single-party regime, such an ability to circumvent media filters challenges the state's grip on the public sphere.

In Cuba, blogging was, as we have seen above, directly born out of the constraints on public debate in the physical world. Moreover, it had to overcome the constraints on access to the web, and of the Cuban state's monopoly on Internet provider services (Hoffmann 2004: 215–219). So, pioneering blogger Yoani Sánchez had her blog set up on a server outside of the island. Because she (as most everybody on the island) is not legally able to have domestic Internet access, she needs to post from public-access sites, such as in international hotels, by uploading her writings from USB sticks. In fact, Sánchez speaks of herself as a "blind blogger," as she often publishes on the web without actually being able to access her blog on the Internet.

Initially, Yoani's blog passed below the radar of state censors not familiar with the medium and underestimating its potential impact. Even the author herself did not anticipate the

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<sup>23</sup> www.cubarte.cu, November 22, 2009. However, copies of it circulated on the Internet on a number of sites (e.g. [http://www.pacocol.org/es/Inicio/Archivo\\_de\\_noticias/Diciembre07/24.html](http://www.pacocol.org/es/Inicio/Archivo_de_noticias/Diciembre07/24.html))

<sup>24</sup> In her blog "Generación Y", Yoani Sánchez (2009) lists these letters (and links to them), describing the phenomenon as a new "cartismo"—in a play of words, as the Spanish "*carta*" means as much "letter" as it does "charter."

attention it would draw; for her, the blog was originally somewhat of a “personal exorcism, a therapy to fight the apathy and frustration, to reflect things that were part of my reality but were not acknowledged in the press, or on the radio or on TV.”<sup>25</sup> However, it is precisely the Cuban state’s tight control over the media which serves as a political magnifying glass when even seemingly minor articulations of voice escape its control. From a personal exorcism by a young unknown, Yoani Sánchez’s blog was propelled to international fame in no time. In April 2008, one year after the blog’s launch, Sánchez was awarded the prestigious Ortega y Gasset prize in the category of digital journalism, an award soon followed by many others. This international recognition, combined with the state’s outspoken hostility against her, made her a prominent public figure within Cuba. Even though few on the island can regularly access her blog, Sánchez’s initiative was contagious, and a growing number of independent bloggers identifying themselves as “citizen journalists” (Celaya González 2009a) have sprung up.<sup>26</sup>

The state’s reaction to the emerging independent “blogosphere” was twofold: On the repressive side, Sánchez and other unauthorized bloggers have been portrayed as mercenaries of the revolution’s enemies—access from within the island to a number of blogs’ websites has been technically blocked and Sánchez has been repeatedly denied permission to leave the island to receive awards or speak at conferences. Another blogger reports that, after unveiling her pseudonym, she was informed that her husband would be dismissed from his workplace if she continued her blog (Celaya González 2009b).

At the same time, however, the state also embraced the new medium as a means to counter the ideological challenge. In line with the so-called “Operation Truth,” in which Cuba’s Informatics University (UCI) is commissioned with the task to counter “anti-Cuban” content on the Internet, a number of official blogs emerged as top-down initiatives that take on the guise of non-state sites or individualized blogs to gain credibility in its outreach to an international public.<sup>27</sup> This embrace of the Internet goes so far that Fidel Castro’s regular opinion pieces—the so-called “Reflections by Compañero [Comrade] Fidel”—have come to be often first published in the website “CubaDebate” ([www.cubadebate.cu](http://www.cubadebate.cu)), leading some to call Fidel “Cuba’s Supreme Blogger” (Balboa 2009).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cited at <http://cuba.blogspot.com/2008/05/yoani-sanchez-denuncia-que-los.html> (accessed: March 31, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> A good number of them are grouped under the platforms [www.desdecuba.com](http://www.desdecuba.com) and [www.voces Cubananas.com](http://www.voces Cubananas.com).

<sup>27</sup> An example is “Yohandry’s weblog” (<http://yohandry.wordpress.com>), which was created as a state-sponsored response to Yoani Sánchez’ “Generation Y” and which continuously spends much energy and space on denouncing Sánchez’ blog and activities.

<sup>28</sup> While the website describes “CubaDebate” as “a media of alternative information,” it is directed by Randy Alonso, the senior news anchor of Cuba’s state TV and a long-standing confidant of Fidel Castro. Surprisingly enough for a communist party’s lead newspaper, *Granma* has been reproducing some of Fidel’s “reflections” with the note “taken from CubaDebate,” underscoring that the web, not the paper, was the *locus* of first publication of the reflections of the Party’s general secretary (a post Fidel retains even after the handover of state leadership to his brother).

However, blogs have spread and become fashionable to a much wider spectrum of students, professionals and intellectuals within Cuba. Many have started personal blogs with diverse contents and backgrounds. This part of the blogosphere is closest to the debates about autonomy within the state-dependent institutions in the 1990s. While some bloggers declare that they see themselves in the revolutionary trenches against the enemy's propaganda war,<sup>29</sup> others explore the margins for debate. Around Cuban ex-diplomat Pedro Campos, a so-called "*Socialismo Participativo y Democrático*" group emerged, which criticizes the Cuban government "from the left" in the name of a more participative socialist project.<sup>30</sup> But also, numerous other individuals from within Cuba's official institutions have started up personal blogs. According to its own data, no less than 170 members of the official journalists' union, UPEC, run some type of blog ([http://www.upec.cu/blogueros/directorio\\_blogs.html](http://www.upec.cu/blogueros/directorio_blogs.html)).

In the blogosphere, the spaces for pluralism are wider than in Cuba's traditional media, but they remain dependent on the state's goodwill. Time and again, the lines of the politically permissible have been marked by sanctions against those who "went too far." Such was the case when the author of the blog "El Último Swing" ([www.ultimoswing.wordpress.com](http://www.ultimoswing.wordpress.com)), while identifying with the revolutionary project, provided an irreverent account of the for-Party-faithful-only showings of videos explaining the ouster of top Party cadres Carlos Lage and Felipe Pérez Roque in mid-2009 (Salas 2009). The author was called to discipline, relocated from his university workplace, and the blog remained largely discontinued. While the conflict was never an object of public discussion, the solidarity shown in the comments section of his critical blog post reflect the pressures he evidently suffered.

The dilemma of the state's acceptance of the medium of blogs has also been vividly illustrated by the first platform for blogs written with official consent, called "Bloggers Cuba" ([www.bloggerscuba.com](http://www.bloggerscuba.com)). Launched in November 2008, only one year later, the person who had been driving the project left, and while the blog entries remain conspicuously vague about the circumstances, it is again the comments section that gives a lively account of the pressures and tensions that accompanied the experience of a medium inevitably linked to the individual articulation of voice within a political context based on top-down mass media and low levels of tolerance for political dissent.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For example the post titled "If they wage their war by blogs, then by blogs we will win it" in "Vladia's blog" (Si de "blogazos" es la guerra que se nos hace...); November 26, 2009 <http://vladia.blogcip.cu/2009/11/26/si-de-blogazos-es-la-guerra-que-se-nos-hace/>.

<sup>30</sup> <http://cubaspdboletin.blogspot.es/>; see also: <http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/cuba-boletin-socialismo-participativo-democratico-n-49>.

<sup>31</sup> Blog entry by David Chapet from December 24, 2009 communicating his decision to leave "Bloggers Cuba" and subsequent comments at <http://www.bloggerscuba.com/post/felicidades/>, including (December 30, 2009): "Thank you Chapet for opening a window in the wall! And congratulations for leaving, before BC [Bloggers Cuba] disappears or, what would be worse, becomes a caricature of itself." To which Chapet only replies "Thanks, brother."

## 5. From Voice via Web to Civil Society Action?

Cubans from different social backgrounds and divergent political positions have come to use the new media in forms that bypass the filters and controls established in the traditional mass media. While the Cuban state, as typical for authoritarian regimes, continues to construct a polarized foe–friend dichotomy, with the new web-based articulations, the line of distinction between those raising voices “from within” and those “from without” the system has become blurred. This is a direct consequence of the new media’s character as many-to-many media, which is inherently at odds with the top-down logic of the traditional, vertical media so central to the Cuban state’s media monopoly. Although the political content and ultimate aims may vary widely, all those who use e-mail or blogs to voice their personal views are, by the very fact of using these media, advocating a right to participate in the public sphere individually and beyond the state monopoly on mass media, and without their writings having approved by editors-in-chief or program directors. Hence, using citizen media becomes a civic action in itself, a part of a more self-assertive civic attitude vis-à-vis the state—to borrow Holston’s (2008) expression, an “insurgent citizenship” claiming its communication rights. Recalling McLuhan, here, indeed, the medium is the message.

However, in yet other ways the web-empowered voice is translating into what should be conceived of as civil society action in an authoritarian context. One way in which this has occurred has been through its loudspeaker function. The preceding sections have highlighted some of the moments where non-state, web-based media brought to light civic action that otherwise would have passed unnoticed, leading to new social dynamics: an emblematic case is the “*polémica intelectual*” sparked by an individual critical comment sent via e-mail and leading to an institutional response by the official writers’ union and a mobilization for participation around its main office.

A second effect refers to the development of the collective identity of actors empowered by digital media. The mentioned movement of critical rap singers whose increased autonomy vis-à-vis the state relies on the use of digital media can be understood—as Geoffroy (2010) convincingly shows—as a “new modus of non-conventional collective action” within an authoritarian context. Similarly, the bloggers are not only isolated individuals posting their voices on the web, but they have developed an informal sense of collectivity as an “independent blogger movement,” as difficult to ignore as to demarcate precisely.

A third aspect is the bloggers’ direct interaction with actors in the physical, non-virtual spaces of Cuban society. Emblematic have been incidents protagonized by, again, Yoani Sánchez. A case in point is her encounter with Mariela Castro, Raúl Castro’s daughter. In a public conference, Mariela Castro, in her function as head of Cuba’s National Center for Sexual Education, presented the state’s new approach of maximum tolerance towards different sexual orientations. In the Q&A session that followed, Sánchez raised the question of when such tolerance would also be granted towards different political orientations. In this encounter the Cuban president’s daughter gave an evasive, yet friendly answer; however, when the

blogger later posted a video of this on the web, Mariela Castro had to retract, writing a highly offensive text decrying Sánchez' intervention as a counter-revolutionary provocation.<sup>32</sup> Other similar actions include the bloggers' public appearance in an arts performance in the Havana Biennial in 2008, and the participation, in spite of officials denying the bloggers entry, at an "último jueves" debate event organized by *Temas* magazine.<sup>33</sup>

A fourth element is organization. Yoani Sánchez has not only become Cuba's most prominent blogger but also the epicenter of its diffusion. While state security intervened against a first bloggers' meeting in October, Sánchez established a home-grown "blogger academy" with regular meetings teaching the necessary skills and providing spaces for debate, and even holding an independent "blogger award" contest called "Isla Virtual."<sup>34</sup> Despite its informal organizational setting, this can be understood as an association in-the-making of civil society.

A fifth element is connecting with other social actors on the island. Beyond organizing with fellow bloggers, Yoani Sánchez and the group of friends around her have developed strong links to critical groups within the Catholic Church such as "Convivencia" led by Dagoberto Valdés, as well as to some imprisoned dissidents and to the "Ladies in White," an organization created by the wives and mothers of political prisoners pressing for their release. When in 2010, forced into action by hunger-striking dissidents, the government negotiated the release of 52 imprisoned dissidents, Yoani Sánchez' blog and Twitter feeds mobilized international attention, and she, herself, became an actor in the negotiated resolution. The moment the Church-mediated agreement with the government was reached Sánchez, she and some of the "Ladies in White" went to the hospital to persuade hunger-striker Guillermo Fariñas—in a highly critical state of health after 134 days without food—to suspend his fast even before the actual release had started.

At the same time, contestatory groups from the margins of Cuba's cultural sphere, such as the critical academics of the Cátedra Haydee Santamaría or the grassroots cultural activists of OMNI Zona Franca,<sup>35</sup> not only became involved in establishing their own articulation through the web, but also turned publicly against the restrictions and repression suffered by themselves and by the bloggers. After Yoani Sánchez suffered a brief kidnapping by plain-clothes security agents, and her husband, journalist Reynaldo Escobar, was rudely harassed

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<sup>32</sup> The video of the encounter was posted at the Generation Y website on December 17, 2008 ([www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?m=200812](http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/?m=200812)); Mariela Castro's text was published on the CENESEX website but is no longer available online (see also <http://www.cubaencuentro.com/es/cuba/noticias/mariela-castro-acusa-a-yoani-sanchez-de-recibir-honorarios-del-exterior-y-la-llama-gallita-e-insignificante-140046>)

<sup>33</sup> See entries in the Generation Y blog on March 30, April 2, and October 30, 2009 ([www.desdecuba.com/generaciony](http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony)).

<sup>34</sup> [http://knol.google.com/k/yoani-s%C3%A1nchez-8-promoci%C3%B3n-de-la-blogosfera-cubana#Academia\\_Blogger](http://knol.google.com/k/yoani-s%C3%A1nchez-8-promoci%C3%B3n-de-la-blogosfera-cubana#Academia_Blogger).

<sup>35</sup> <http://elblogdelacatedra.blogspot.com/> ; <http://omnifestivalpoesiasinfin.blogspot.com/> For an indepth-study of both these groups as non-conventional modi of collective action see Geoffray 2010.



by an organized street mob, on November 6, 2009, the Omni Zona Franca collective staged a public “No more violence!” street demonstration<sup>36</sup>—under the guise of a cultural performance, but unequivocal in its message, and an open challenge to a system which for half a century has been adamant in not allowing independent mobilizations on the streets.

## 6. Conclusions

A precondition for civil society activism to evolve is some degree of public sphere in which it can “breathe.” The state monopoly on mass media, as exercised by the Cuban state, has been a particularly thorough form of authoritarian control over the national public sphere. The comparative empirical analysis of civil society dynamics in the 1990s and in the 2000s has shown the notable impact of the digital, web-based media on the contours of the public sphere and has also demonstrated that this, in turn, impacts the activities, conception and organizational forms of societal actors.

In the pre-Internet period, within a very much restricted public sphere, the civil society debate largely focused on behind-the-scenes struggles for increased autonomy of associational life within the state-socialist framework (e.g. Azcuy 1995). In contrast, a decade later we witness the emergence of a self-assertive “citizenship from below,” which demands, and to some degree *enacts* (empowered by digital and web-based technologies), a widening of the public sphere and a greater degree of citizen autonomy from the state, leading to a different type of civil society activity. While this “insurgent citizenship” —to borrow Holston’s (2008) expression—defies the socialist regime’s traditional design of state–society relations, its effect on democratization depends on the extent to which web-based voice is able to connect with off-line public debate and social action.

However, the initial question—that of whether civil society activism fosters processes of regime change—does not have a clear-cut answer. While regime opponents see the struggles over Internet access, blogs and e-mails as a *pars pro toto* for the civic liberties of liberal democracy, reformists from within the system argue the need for more participation and wider margins of debate, precisely because they are indispensable to regain legitimacy for the socialist project.

As of this writing, the government, it seems, has come to accept the fact that its media monopoly has become porous. The government’s crucial concern is containment: to minimize the domestic impact, to put brakes on the contagion effect, and, most importantly, to keep the pluralism of the web-based voice from spilling over into Cuba’s non-virtual public sphere. This echoes the state’s traditional “under the roof, everything—in the street, nothing” approach towards dissenting voices; on the web, as “under the roof,” much may be tolerated, as long as it doesn’t take to “the street,” that is, combine with social action in the physical world.

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<sup>36</sup> For a video of the demonstration, see <http://omnizonafrancaen.eltinterocolectivo.com/>.

The state's attitude towards leading blogger Yoani Sánchez exemplifies this policy. While her blog is de facto tolerated by the outside world, domestic access to it is blocked. And when the blogger moved to social activism in the physical world in 2009, the regime reacted heavy-handedly, including using physical intimidation and orchestrated mobilizations of "enraged revolutionaries" against her and fellow bloggers. Similarly, those still working within and those dependent on official structures are admonished and told to keep their distance from those branded as "counter-revolutionaries."

However, as the preceding chapter has shown, not only has the state media monopoly become porous, but so have the state's walls of containing web-based voice from spilling over into Cuban society. Some 15 years after Cuba joined the Internet, the web-based media not only represent a leak of voice to a globalized public, but they have led to a limited, yet important transformation of state–society relations. They empower a new reassertion of citizenship rights that challenge established rules and they foster the emergence of new social actors and forms of action.

However, the case also shows that there is no automatism from such trends to a process of gradual reform or even regime change. The crucial fault-line remains the physical space on the island, where the state's grip remains firm and the costs for collective action high. For more large-scale political transformation to occur, a wider combination of conditions must be met, probably including the emergence of competing visions within the political elite or changes in the external constellation of allies and foes. But the expansion of voice, the reassertion of citizenship rights, and the web-based support for civic action in the physical world has already changed the contours of state–society relations. Once conditions arise—be it for a reform movement towards a more pluralist model of socialism or for a democratization process heading for a regime change—these transformations will undoubtedly play a crucial role in shaping any process of broader political change.

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