

THE INTERNET AND EMERGENT BLOGOSPHERE IN CUBA: DOWNLOADING DEMOCRACY, BOOTING UP DEVELOPMENT, OR PLANTING THE VIRUS OF DISSIDENCE AND DESTABILIZATION?

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On February 24, 2010, Yoani Sánchez, the well-known Cuban blogger and cyber-activist, was briefly detained (together with her sister) by state security agents in order to prevent them from signing a book of condolences at a service for the hunger striker Orlando Zapata Tamayo who had died the previous day. Not one to easily be deterred, following what she claims was an illegal and violent detention, soon after the incident Sánchez presented a formal complaint denouncing her treatment to Cuban authorities, including the Military Prosecutor, the Attorney General, the National Assembly of People's Power, the police station where the incident occurred, the Council of State, and the National Headquarters of the National Revolutionary Police (PNR). At the time, however, the blogger did not make her detention public. Presumably, she did not want to detract attention from Zapata's regrettable death, nor did she want to create an "incident" or be unnecessarily "provocative" before allowing the Cuban authorities to answer her complaint.

However, receiving no response during the 60-day period Cuban law allows officials to answer complaints, Sánchez posted a 19-minute digital recording on her blog that she had made with her cell phone while being detained. The audio clip included not only her detention but also a final section that was recorded after the phone had already been confiscated by security agents, capturing their unguarded words. In a recent interview with Enrique Núñez of

the Chilean tech website *Kilometrozero*, Sánchez described the key role of technology in changing the power dynamic between her and the government during this most recent episode:

El segundo secuestro fue el 24 de febrero de este año, cuando me dirigía a firmar el libro de condolencias de Orlando Zapata Tamayo. Fuimos trasladadas con mi hermana a una estación de policía, nunca hubo pruebas en nuestra contra. Esa vez la tecnología me salvó: antes de que ocurriera (la detención) puse a grabar el audio de mi celular, por lo que tengo todo grabado. Estoy haciendo una demanda judicial dentro de mi propio país, aunque no tengo ninguna esperanza. De todas formas pocas veces el agredido tiene un testimonio, en este caso la informática me lo ha permitido.

Anyone who has read *Generación Y* over the past three and a half years will have noted Sánchez's great faith in the power of a wide and growing variety of information and communication technologies (ICT)—including blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, as well as internet-ready Flipcams and smart phones that can send SMS texts and e-mails and record voice, photos, and video. For her, these technologies have the potential to help "level the playing field" between authoritarian governments and marginalized citizens—whether they be Iranian voters, Chinese dissidents, or Cuban bloggers. She also clearly believes that such ventures into cyberspace can help these citizens begin to create more public

space where they can exercise the full rights and responsibilities of true citizens.

However, there is an ongoing, spirited debate among those who have studied the complex impact of expanding ICT (Best and Wade 2005; MacKinnon 2005; Kelly and Etling 2008; Etling et al 2009; Hernández Busto 2010) on the depth, direction, and civic nature of its political impact. Might Sanchez's dream that Web 2.0 equals Democracy 2.0, just as easily work in the opposite direction, where Web 2.0 equals Authoritarianism 2.0 (Peña Calvo 2008)? In other words, just as citizens can use the web as an "inherently" democratic public plaza of unlimited participation where they can "speak truth to power," so too can governments structure and manipulate the web in order to strengthen their power and control over citizens. The contrasting cases of China (where Internet access is as ubiquitous as it is inexpensive, but also where the government has firm control over it) and Cuba (where residential access is extremely limited, prohibitively expensive, and where suspect sites are routinely censored with impunity) indicate that more and greater connectivity do not automatically lead to "Revolución 2.0."

In a recent study aimed at "mapping" the Arabic blogosphere, Bruce Etling and his colleagues (2009) sought to discover whether the Internet is necessarily a breeding/recruiting ground for Islamic radicals and, more importantly for Cuba, whether there is any necessary and direct connection between greater *Internet* connectivity/access and greater (Western style) *democracy*. On both counts, the study cautions against affirmative assumptions, as the research shows the links between the Internet and radicalization on the one hand and the Internet and democratization on the other to be tenuous at best. Moreover, similar studies of other national (China, Russia, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam) and linguistic (Spanish, Russian, Chinese, and Persian) "blogospheres" have yielded mixed results in terms of the connection between an expanded Internet and political liberalization (Best and Wade 2005; Kelly and Etling 2008). In sum, these reports seem to argue that while the Internet does indeed lay a good foundation for the "battle of ideas," it does not necessarily

choose sides. In their report on the Arabic blogosphere, Etling and his colleagues (2009) concisely summarize the two sides of this dilemma:

[There is] the hope that the Internet will empower political movements that can move Arab societies toward democratic values and governance. This study supports some aspects of the view that the Internet can empower political movements in the region, since it provides an infrastructure for expressing minority points of view, breaking gatekeeper monopolies on public voice, lowering barriers to political mobilization (even if symbolic), and building capacity for bottom-up contributions to the public agenda.

But we caution against the idea that these functionally "democratic" characteristics necessarily travel in the company of classically liberal, historically Western, values regarding individual liberties, freedom of belief and expression, and, ultimately, secular foundations of political rights. The Internet lays a good foundation for a battle of ideas, but it does not necessarily favor a winner.

Expanded access to the Internet does not move societies in a single direction, partly because different constituencies within any country view the potential of the web in different ways. Is the web a place to download democracy, boot up development, or plant the virus of dissidence and destabilization?

For many governments, especially those like the Cuban government that struggle against underdevelopment and the "digital divide" that continues to separate wealthy from poor countries in terms of Internet cost and connectivity, new ICT has the potential to be harnessed as a veritable "economic miracle" allowing a country to "leapfrog" into the modern era. At the same time, citizen journalists and blogger-activists often understand the web (and especially the potentialities offered in many web 2.0 applications and the cutting edge mobile technologies made widely accessible by the new generation of smart phones) as a kind of revolutionary "Roman senate" where they can open up a closed system carrying out a "net roots" reform movement they like to call "blogostroika."

Meanwhile, governments around the world have become wary of the security risks posed by increased

and nearly universal connectivity with financial, military, and other secrets potentially exposed to malicious hackers often working at the service of their foreign adversaries. For them, the same web that could be embraced to boot up development, should also be feared as a potential “Trojan horse” where its enemies, real or perceived, can unleash the “virus” of dissidence and destabilization.

The case of Cuba clearly illustrates each of these potentialities. For example, the Cuban government has recently expanded cell phone access (wireless accounts surged from just 200,000 in 2008 to more than 800,000 by early 2010) and drastically reduced prices (activation fees have been cut from \$150 to \$25) even if the regime is aware that its critics see such phones as a potentially destabilizing medium that could provide Cuban citizens with access to unfiltered information. “We’re going to keep working to provide the benefits of telecommunications to a greater number of Cubans,” declared Cuban telecom official Máximo Lafuente recently. “There’s no doubt that cell phones are an important foundation to the country’s development.” However, when the U.S. exempted American wireless companies from sections of the embargo in mid-2009, the move was justified as a different kind of “development.” Increased communications with Cuba is “our best tool for helping to foster the beginnings of grassroots democracy on the island,” argued an Obama administration official at the time (Miroff 2010).

Nelson Valdés, a scholar sympathetic to the revolution who has published extensively on Cuban Internet connectivity and who assisted Cuba in its initial attempts to develop its own Intranet in the 1990s, has argued that as long as the U.S. government continues to see the Internet in Cuba as its “Trojan horse,” the Cuban government will understandably prioritize security and control over connectivity and access—especially if that access comes via the U.S. (1997; 2001; 2009). At the same time, given the island’s socialist socioeconomic system and a national context of underdevelopment, Valdés argues that Cuba will follow an alternate model in its allocation of wireless service to citizens. Instead of the individual user/household access model common in the Unit-

ed States and most of the rest of the developed capitalist world, Cuba follows a model of social access and inclusion whereby the limited resource of rapid, high-speed connectivity will be allocated through institutions that can prioritize uses deemed socioeconomically beneficial to the nation’s development. He summarizes these issues as follows:

Poverty and the absence of sufficient technical infrastructure hinder connectivity and use. Cuba’s limited access has to be understood in that secular context. Moreover, U.S. policy has sought to hinder Cuba’s progress in that arena. We have noted that the United States limited Cuban access to email and Bitnet before 1994. Thereafter the U.S. government permitted inefficient connectivity but always stressed the necessity of using e-mail and the Internet in order to subvert the Cuban regime. Those critical of the Cuban Internet situation seldom take these conditions into account.

American observers typically project onto the Cuban regime self-serving political or ideological reasons as to why the Internet or email has not progressed in Cuba as quickly as in highly developed countries. Basically, it is asserted that the Cuban government is afraid of the Internet because the latter has a “democratizing effect” which could cut short the regime’s power. (Valdés 2001)

Of course, government critics and independent bloggers like Yoani Sánchez would interpret Valdés’ reasoning as an embarrassing apologia, a mere smoke-screen for continued state censorship and control. Indeed, this was exactly Sánchez’s point when she “crashed” a *Temas* magazine debate on the Internet in Cuba on October 29, 2009. Taking the floor at the close of the debate, she removed the blond wig she had worn in order to gain access to the supposedly public event and demanded to know:

What relationship exists between bandwidth, the trumpeted bandwidth that every now and then they bring up to explain why we Cuban citizens cannot access the Internet en masse and the censored sites? [...] Why in the virtual Cuba, is censorship being repeated, intimidation, stigmatization of people because they think differently?

For their part, many of Cuba’s other independent bloggers have echoed Sanchez’s sentiment. For example, blogger Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo recently published an article in the U.S. magazine *In These Times* with the exclamatory title: “Guerrilla Blogging: A

Virtual Democracy Against All Odds” (December, 2009). In that article, he clearly sides with those who see Cuba’s bloggers as a kind of “guerrilla underground” who use their blogs to force the state to modify its “realpolitik” with a dose of “blogostroika.” He writes:

With Internet access in Cuba restricted to the very few, the nation’s bloggers function as a kind of guerrilla underground. They work as independent agents whose existence heralds a civic reactivation that will modulate the Revolution’s *Realpolitik*—or is that *Raúlpolitik*?

It is still too early to determine the depth of the impact of the Cuban blogging phenomenon. The fact that the government has blocked Cuba’s most influential independent blog, Yoani Sánchez’s *Generación Y*, now for more than two years, has repeatedly denied Sánchez permission to travel abroad, and has gradually augmented its media and physical attacks against her, all indicate that it is concerned about her growing influence. Her growing international profile and ability to sway global public opinion about the Cuban regime along with her increasingly audacious public activism for freedom of expression within the island make her simultaneously impossible to ignore and dangerous to repress. At the same time, given the extremely low level of Internet connectivity in Cuba and the fact that the government continues to control the totality of the island’s mass media, we are still far away from any so-called “blogostroika,” where the Internet and independent blogs can effectively challenge the state’s monopoly on information.

For their part, neither Sánchez nor the rapidly expanding group of independent cyber-activists who work alongside her, show the least indication of ceasing to provoke the regime by living as full citizens with all the rights and duties the term implies. Sánchez openly admits that what began for her as an individual project of personal catharsis has been transformed over time into a collaborative international media project that seeks to go beyond the constraints of *cyberspace* in order create more free and independent *public space* within the island for open debate about Cuba’s many difficult challenges. Openly skeptical, Sánchez rejects “verbal violence,” cynicism, personal attacks, and the disqualification of those who think differently—all unfortunate characteristics with deep roots in Cuban political culture and commonplace on both sides of the Straits of Florida. Her goal is to create a pluralistic, respectful, and serious civil dialogue in her beloved *patria*. She intends to accomplish this goal through the transparent exercise of her particular brand of citizen cyber-journalism. She writes:

Generación Y is the fruit of my talent, my energy, the collaboration of thousands of citizens in many parts of the world, the support of my friends, years of reading and study, listening to others, the solidarity of many bloggers and commentators both inside Cuba and abroad, but it is especially the direct result of my interaction with a reality that can be hidden neither by triumphalism nor by the same old stereotyped military mantras. (“Generación Y: el making of” (*Penúltimos Días*, January 19, 2010)

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