

“From Cyberspace to Public Space? The Emergent Blogosphere and Cuban Civil Society”

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Chapter 7, pp. 196-209, in
A Contemporary Cuba Reader: The Revolution under Raúl Castro
(Second Edition)

Edited by Philip Brenner; Marguerite Rose Jiménez; John M. Kirk and William M. LeoGrande
Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers
Forthcoming, July 2014

Today, with the development of information technologies, . . . social networks, . . . computers and the Internet, to prohibit something is nearly an impossible chimera. It makes no sense.
—Miguel Díaz-Canel, first vice president of Cuba, closing speech of the National Preparatory Seminar, May 6, 2013 (Ravsborg 2013b)

While there are hundreds, perhaps more than a thousand individual Cuban blogs, this chapter focuses on the four most active and prominent blogger “collectives” to have formed on the island over the past six years (2008–2013): *Voces Cubanas*, *Havana Times*, *Bloggers Cuba*, and *La Joven Cuba*.¹ We seek to examine the extent to which they have both influenced and become an important part of Cuba’s expanding public sphere. Although distinct from one another, they share a common four-front battle to: (1) establish their legitimacy and authenticity, (2) maintain a degree of independence while preserving their access to the Internet, (3) increase their visibility and accessibility to the national and international public, and (4) reach out to dialogue, debate, and collaborate with one another. These efforts take place in a polarized political context where pioneering users of social media are routinely dismissed as either “*oficialistas*” (Cuban government propagandists) or “*mercenarios*” (U.S. government lackeys).

We seek to understand Cuban bloggers’ strategies dealing with the following challenges:

- How do they resolve the conflict between self-preservation and self-censorship—that is, how do they deal with the dilemma of the *doble moral* (duplicity)?
- How do they preserve an independent and critical posture toward Cuban reality in a context where the mass media are under government control and where nearly all Internet access points are mediated (and likely monitored) by institutions, by money, or by some other kind of influence or control?
- How do they access the Internet, who can revoke that access, and under what conditions?
- Who is their audience, and how do they maintain an interactive relationship with them in such a disconnected environment?
- What have been the biggest obstacles to engaging in dialogue, debate, and collaboration with other bloggers both within and outside Cuba?

In meeting the challenges of legitimacy, independence, access, and visibility, Cuba's bloggers have gradually pushed the limits of critical debate beyond relatively safe private and cyberspaces into more risky public spaces. By taking advantage of the less mediated space that is the Internet, they have challenged the unwritten rule that has long regulated critical expression in Cuba: "*bajo techo, todo; en la calle, nada*" (under the roof [i.e., in private], everything; in the street [i.e., in public], nothing) (Hoffmann 2011). In other words, the use of cyberspace has allowed them to test the silent understanding that criticisms "should be voiced inside state institutions and directly to the authorities in charge, . . . not . . . voiced publicly" (Geoffray 2013, 11).

Cuban Civil Society and the Public Sphere in the Internet Age

The weakening of political hegemony in Cuba since the turn of the century has allowed elements of civil society to gradually occupy new spheres as the state draws back from various economic and social spaces that it previously monopolized. Cuba's many religious institutions, together with the various publications they sponsor, are also an important and increasingly dynamic element of Cuban civil society. This is especially true of the Catholic Church and its semi-independent publications *Espacio Laical* and *Palabra Nueva*. One might also include Cuba's many state-sanctioned mass organizations themselves, given their embeddedness in many people's lives. However, their limited autonomy prevents them from resisting subordination to the state except in rare instances. In practice, they normally function as mere consultation and "transmission belts" for top-down state policies.

Haroldo Dilla and Phillip Oxhorn (2002, 11) define civil society in Cuba as "the social fabric formed by a multiplicity of self-constituted, territorially based units which peacefully coexist and collectively *resist subordination* to the state, at the same time that they *demand inclusion* into national political structures" (emphasis in the original). By this definition, institutions of civil society need not be absolutely independent from the state or have an antistate agenda. However, they must exercise significant autonomy from the state; have some organic, sui generis base; appeal to or derive from elements within the national territory; seek to impact national issues; and accept nonviolent coexistence with other civil and political organizations.

Although many conditions for the development of a civil society and a singular yet pluralistic public sphere are present in Cuba, what existed until the mid-2000s were multiple, parallel, but largely segmented spheres of debate (Chaguaceda 2011a, 2011b; Chaguaceda and Cilano 2009; Geoffray 2013)—most of them not truly "public" given their limited visibility and accessibility. Some of these are clearly captured and controlled by the political leadership, others are defiantly independent (sometimes with outside support), and still others strive to maintain a modicum of independence without being considered outside of and thus opposed to the Revolution. Geoffray (2013) argues that by the mid-2000s, a variety of small, closed spaces, or "micro-arenas" had developed, including (1) a *dissident* arena, (2) a *critical* arena (often inside state institutions and elite intellectual publications, such as the journals *Temas* and *Criterios*), (3) a *contentious* arena (led by self-educated artists and marginalized intellectuals), and (4) a *diasporic* arena that consciously engaged with island publics (best exemplified by the now defunct literary journal *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana*).

Since 2007, many of these formerly isolated contentious voices² have begun to make critical use of new information and communication technologies in order to overcome these obstacles and begin to stitch together a more intricate and integrated public sphere (Díaz 2013;

Geoffray 2013). While nearly all the Cuban bloggers who make up the collectives that we profile here are “territorially based” in Cuba, they simultaneously inhabit a complex transnational space, often relying on hosting, servers, administrators, webmasters, translators, and even some financing from outside of Cuba, not to mention drawing the bulk of their readers, commentators, and critics from abroad as well.

From *Nada* to “*Nauta*”: Internet Penetration and Access in Cuba

The most recent official Cuban statistics indicate that 23.2 percent of the island’s population has access to the Internet (*Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas* 2012). However, this refers only to people with access to e-mail and the island’s limited domestic *Red Cuba*, or national “*intra-net*.” Estimates are that only 5 percent of the population has access to the Internet proper, some at their workplaces and schools, others at hotels, and still others via the black market (Freedom House 2012). Although some professionals and government officials are provided legal household access, it remains impossible for the Cuban public to legally contract a home-based connection. In spite of the recent legalization of the sale of mobile phones, it remains virtually impossible to access the Web via a smart phone in Cuba as Wi-Fi “hot spots” are exceedingly rare and costly, intended mainly for foreign tourists.

Because of the U.S. embargo, since the mid-1990s when Cuba came online, its Internet connection was exclusively via satellite. However, after years of delays, a fiber-optic cable from Venezuela reached Cuba in February 2011, a development that was expected to increase the connection speed by a factor of 3,000. However, more than two years passed before the cable became operational in early 2013. Ongoing financial and infrastructural obstacles, as well as a lack of political will, have so far prevented major improvement in public access to the Web—effectively making the cable a “strong link in a weak chain” (Miroff 2013; Press 2012). Most recently, 118 cybercafés finally began providing Internet service to the public across the island on June 4, 2013 (Del Valle 2013).

While a positive step toward greater access, the new service remains a monopoly of the Cuban state telecom company ETECSA and is available only to those able to pay in hard currency. Current prices remain far out of reach for most Cubans. The \$5 (4.50 CUC) cost for one hour of “full” access to international Internet at one of these cybercafés is equal to a full week’s average Cuban salary (Díaz Moreno 2013). Additionally, there will be only 334 of these public access computers in the country’s 118 cybercafés (Ravsberg 2013a). Furthermore, Internet access will be provided through a tightly controlled “walled garden” format via ETECSA’s local server, “*Nauta*,” allowing the government the ability to engage in surveillance and filtering of all content. For example, all “inter-nauts” are required to sign a contract that all but declares that they will be under surveillance, stating that the government reserves the right to block those who engage in activities that “undermine public safety or the country’s integrity, economy, independence and sovereignty” (*Café Fuerte* 2013; Sánchez 2013).

Navigating between Sirens: *Voces Cubanas*, *Havana Times*, *Bloggers Cuba*, and *La Joven Cuba*³

Government policies of the United States and Cuba transform the Cuban Internet into a rough and inaccessible space where it is nearly impossible to navigate without being co-opted by the Scylla of state capture or beholden to the Charibdis of foreign support. Indeed, both governments employ tactics that treat the Internet as a tool for achieving their strategic and geopolitical goals,

creating an atmosphere of extreme suspicion and polarization. This means that anyone who wishes to join the Cuban blogosphere while maintaining a degree of independence from the designs and dogmatism of these two camps must go to great lengths to establish and defend their legitimacy as part of a nascent Cuban civil society.

What is now known as *Voces Cubanas* began in December 2004 as a digital magazine named *Consenso desde Cuba*. It then had the format of a traditional magazine and was hosted at the portal *Desdecuba.com*. It was jointly run by Reinaldo Escobar, Yoani Sánchez, Miriam Celaya, Dimas Castellanos, Marta Cortizas, and Eugenio Leal, who made up its editorial board. Since its inception, *Consenso* was established as a virtual space for the development of “citizen journalism” and gave visibility to points of view not found in Cuba’s official media or in other publications “conditioned by political requirements.” In its first editorial in December 2004, the magazine declared its intention to maintain a moderate tone, distinguishing itself from the intransigence of both the right and the left.

In early 2007, after a little more than two years of existence, *Consenso* was renamed *Contodos* and took on a profile more resembling a blog than that of a traditional magazine. In fact, it included a space for various “portfolios” where a growing number of personal blogs began to appear, starting with Sanchez’s own blog, *Generación Y*, in April 2007. The spark that set fire to Sánchez as a blogger was her frustrating participation in the previously described e-mail debate in January and February 2007 known as the *polémica intelectual*. Since then, Sánchez and her husband Escobar, along with a growing group of more than sixty independent cyberactivists, have gone beyond the limited world of e-mail by taking advantage of the interactive social networks that define Web 2.0. Focusing initially on the use of blogs and Twitter, their aim has been to use citizen journalism to expand the space for serious, respectful, and pluralistic debate within Cuba.

Founded in October 2008, *Havana Times* is an independent media experiment begun by the American expatriate Circles Robinson. Invited to work in Cuba in 2001 after seventeen years of residence in Nicaragua, Robinson began working in Cuba as a translator-corrector first for *Prensa Latina* and later for the state translation agency, ESTI, translating articles for the official Cuban media. However, Robinson felt a growing sense of frustration with the poor quality of the work he had to translate. In response, he began to look for a medium that could reflect the many Cuban voices that he was hearing around him every day but that never seemed to be included in the official press. His answer was *Havana Times*, which he launched in October 2008 with the help of a Cuban residing in Spain, a handful of U.S.-based translators, and a small group of young Cuban writers on the island who provided most of the content.

From the beginning, the project was intended to be an alternative to the official media while avoiding falling into the twin traps of implacable criticism or uncritical praise. The site proudly declares itself “An independent source of news and opinion about and from Cuba.” When asked the meaning of the word “independent,” Robinson replied, “Independent of both the Cuban government and the U.S. government and Cuban exile groups in Miami and all programs that they fund directly or indirectly. Independent of any political party, organization, or movement.” Maintaining this independence has been a challenge given that Robinson has had to recruit writers “in a country where working for an independent digital medium is considered taboo by the government and most citizens.” He explained that all those interested in participating had to be “willing to take the risk of possible persecution in their personal and

professional lives.” Robinson insists that he never asked anyone’s permission to start *Havana Times* and that no one from the Communist Party or the government has censored it directly.

Bloggers Cuba was born in fits and starts between June and September 2008. Its original Web presence lasted until December 2009, when it inexplicably went offline. After a year and a half in the dark, the *Bloggers Cuba* community reappeared on July 8, 2011, back at its original domain <http://www.bloggerscuba.com>.⁴ This time around, the group made more explicit its purpose by including a declaration of principles on its renovated site. The most interesting aspect of this new statement is its criticism not only of Cuba’s “national media” for its failure to reflect Cuban reality but also of the foreign media for presenting a distorted image of that reality. Likewise, the group is at pains to clarify that it believes in pluralism, diversity, and inclusiveness on the one hand and “the right to self determination and sovereignty, social justice and equality” on the other. That is, *Bloggers Cuba* attempts to establish its independence and credibility by taking both the domestic state media and the foreign corporate media to task and by trying to simultaneously reconcile the goals of democracy, nationalism, and socialism.

The group’s best-known blogger is Elaine Díaz, University of Havana professor of communications, whose blog is titled *La Polémica Digital*. Also active are the race and gender activists Sandra Álvarez (whose personal blog carries the provocative name *Negra cubana tenía que ser*—“It must’ve been a black Cuban woman”) and Yasmín Portales as well as Portales’s husband, Rogelio Díaz Moreno. The majority of the members of *Bloggers Cuba* work as educators, researchers, or writers in the state sector and enjoy institutional access to the Internet, a reason for them to moderate their critical language. Still, they have been sharply critical of various aspects of Cuba’s current social and political reality and especially dismissive of certain officials and journalists whom they see as decidedly opportunistic or demagogic. At the same time, in their criticisms they always attempt to remain clearly “within the Revolution,” justifying their arguments with references to socialist principles and the various reform-minded statements from government leaders starting with President Raúl Castro. Most members of *Bloggers Cuba* share a profound belief in the ideals of socialism, mixed with a growing frustration over the often insurmountable state bureaucracy, the opportunism of many party and government officials, and the limited means available for open, honest debate.

In essence, *La Joven Cuba* is a project that defends socialism and Cuba’s national sovereignty while roundly criticizing many self-described “independent bloggers,” such as Yoani Sánchez and Miriam Celaya (of *Voces Cubanas*) based on their supposed lack of independence. The site’s creators are three graduate students and professors at the University of Matanzas (Harold Cárdenas, Roberto Peralo, and Osmany Sánchez). Founded in April 2010 with the conscious purpose of not only “defending the Revolution but also [of facilitating] an internal debate about its present and future,” the site aims to push back against what its creators saw as the “unjust manipulation of the facts about the Internet in Cuba” both in the international press and on dissident blogs.

La Joven Cuba’s blog roll references a group of the most staunchly official, proregime blogs and news sources. In contrast, one of the richest sections of *La Joven Cuba* is the normally diverse and extensive chain of comments that quickly appears after each of their posts. Often growing to more than fifty entries, these exchanges sometimes become real debates that extend far beyond the content of the original post and include a group of quite faithful visitors. Indeed, many of their visitors are Cuban exiles. For example, statistics published on the portal indicate that of the 107,000 total unique visitors to the site in its first eighteen months of existence,

almost 95 percent are from outside Cuba with the largest number being from the United States (23,533, or 22 percent of the total). Thus, while both *Generación Y* and *Voces Cubanas* are often criticized for having no following in Cuba and catering to an exclusively international audience, *La Joven Cuba*—like *Havana Times* and *Bloggers Cuba*—also has far more international than domestic readers. The majority of these visitors clearly do not share the progovernment orientation of the blog’s administrators, often openly and eloquently critiquing their arguments. However, they engage with the authors of each post in a respectful tone and a spirit of free debate. Still, as we will chronicle below, it was likely their tolerance of frank debate, combined with the sharp, critical tone of some of their most popular posts from the early summer of 2012, that led to the blog’s being temporarily blocked (Ulloa 2013).

Blogazo por Cuba and the Click Festival: From Cyberspace to Public Space

On November 8, 2011, Cuba’s Twittosphere welcomed a new user with the handle @CastroEspinM. Mariela Castro Espín, the daughter of Cuban President Raúl Castro, and his late wife Vilma Espín, longtime president of the Federation of Cuban Women, had joined Twitter. Apart from her illustrious revolutionary pedigree, Mariela Castro’s entry into Cuban cyberspace was notable given her role as a trailblazer directing Cuba’s National Center for Sexual Education, an organization that has fought for equal rights for sexual minorities on the island. Castro subsequently used Twitter to announce her plans to participate in Cuba’s first official gathering of self-described “revolutionary” bloggers organized at the University of Matanzas by *La Joven Cuba* at the end of April 2012, calling the event “an opportunity to socialize with protagonists of the Cuban blogosphere.”

She followed up this initial mention of the planned *Blogazo*, more properly named “*Encuentro de Blogueros Cubanos en Revolución*” (Gathering of Cuban Bloggers in Revolution), with a series of messages that clearly communicated her belief in the “revolutionary” power of social media. “New technologies can be vehicles of revolutionary methods of social participation,” she wrote. “The blogosphere [provides] spaces of revolutionary debate.” Finally, while attending the event itself at the end of April, Castro engaged in a bit of public criticism of the Cuban press, just as her father Raúl himself had already done in a series of speeches. “The best journalism in Cuba today,” she claimed, “is in the blogosphere, as Cuban as the palm trees.”

Mariela Castro’s and Yoani Sánchez’s competing use of social media has laid bare two competing notions of Cuban civil society. On the one hand, Sánchez celebrates Twitter and other similar technologies because she believes that they enable Cuba’s citizen journalists like her to challenge the state monopoly over mass media. One need not obtain the permission of a gatekeeping institution of Cuba’s socialist civil society in order to “*demand inclusion* into national political structures,” in the words of Dilla and Oxhorn (2002, 11). On the other hand, Castro believes that there is no legitimate participation in Cuban civil society outside of socialism or the Revolution. She considers those who attempt to do so illegitimate since they are supposedly supported and controlled by extraterritorial entities. At the same time, however, she clearly believes that blogs, Twitter, and other forms of social media can be harnessed by revolutionaries not only to defend socialism but also to strengthen the Revolution and make it more inclusive.

This was exactly the goal of the late April *Blogazo*: to convene a group of critical yet revolutionary bloggers to use their blogs to “defend and perfect socialism.” However, while they

intended to celebrate diversity and respect the individuality of and differences among the more than fifty bloggers invited to the event, the bloggers explicitly acknowledged that they write “within” or in support of the Cuban Revolution (Biddle 2012; Ravensberg 2012). At the conclusion of the event, the bloggers even pledged to improve the collaboration of bloggers “in Revolution” and to blog in the spirit of Cuban leaders of the past, such as Che Guevara. In fact, their declaration invoked Fidel Castro’s own 1961 “Words to the Intellectuals,” when he addressed the censorship fears of a group of Cuban intellectuals at the dawn of the Revolution. “We respect and promote critical thinking,” they wrote, “which is necessary . . . in preserving our revolutionary condition, based on the premise that it is not possible to be revolutionary outside of the Revolution” (Biddle 2012; *Blogazo por Cuba* 2012).

This prompted *Bloggers Cuba* member Yasmín Portales, who was not invited to the event, to ask, “And who conducts the ‘revolutionary’ exam in order to access the Internet in Cuba?” (Portales 2012). Indeed, following the meeting, bitter controversy unfolded around this new iteration of a decades-old question: does the expression of criticism automatically put one “outside” the Revolution, especially when the criticism is happening online? *Bloggers Cuba* blogger Elaine Díaz declined an invitation to the meeting and later criticized it, noting the limited value in convening a group of bloggers who “basically think the same way.” She pointed out that bloggers from *Observatorio Crítico* and *Havana Times*, both sites whose authors favor the socialist model (but are often directly critical of the government), were not invited at all. She then added pointedly, “The heterogeneous, diverse, irreverent, highly participatory, generous, and controversial space . . . has been cruelly caricatured [by this meeting]” (Díaz 2012).

An apt postscript to the *Blogazo* appeared in a post by an anonymous *Observatorio Crítico* author, envisioning a world “where public space is the patrimony of all people, not a minority in power.” It also pushed back against the idea that either the cyberspace of the emerging Cuban blogosphere or the country’s public space should be the exclusive province of revolutionaries, adding, “One must not fear the participation of a person who thinks differently. . . . Indeed, the stimulation of diversity and alternative approaches to the problems and action is what leads to opportunities for the creative enrichment of reality.” Finally, responding to those who would claim a right for themselves while denying it to others, the post concluded with a pointed quote from the revolutionary socialist Rosa Luxemburg. “Freedom only for supporters of the government, only for members of one party—no matter how large its membership—is not freedom at all. Freedom is only freedom if it applies to the one who thinks differently” (*Observatorio Crítico* 2012).

Two months after the *Blogazo* event in Matanzas, Havana saw its own public and equally controversial gathering of cyberactivists. This meet-up, however, which called itself the “Click Festival,” was distinguished by being open to all comers and co-organized by three independent, nongovernmental entities: *Voces Cubanas*’s Blogger Academy, EBE (a Spanish blogging collective), and *Estado de SATS*. Since none of these groups had access to a large public space in which to hold such an event (a total estimated 300 people attended during the three-day, June 21–23 event), *SATS* founder Antonio Rodiles converted his Miramar home into the event’s headquarters. Festival organizers were careful to highlight its independent, pluralistic, and nonideological character. For example, Yoani Sánchez underlined the fact that there would be no “political segregation” or “ideological screen” in the selection of participants, adding pointedly that “the Click Festival will not have a final declaration insulting anyone or engaging in

character assassination, much less will it consider the web to be a battlefield against any other group, event or tendency” (Sánchez 2012).

Sánchez also anticipated the obligatory attacks in the state media and tried to preempt the tired claim that such independent civil society activities are illegitimate since they are supposedly paid for by Cuba’s foreign enemies, categorically stating, “The resources . . . will come from the organizers and the participants themselves. No party, government, or institution has funded the event, participated in the design of the program, or influenced the initial idea of holding it” (Sánchez 2012). Nevertheless, the day before the festival was to kick off, the hard-line Cuban state media website *Cubadebate* included an unsigned editorial titled “The Impossible Innocence of the Click Festival.” To drive the point home, the bombastic headline carried the capitalized initials “CIA” as part of the Spanish word for innocence, “*inocenCIA*” (*Cubadebate* 2012). The editorial did not mince words in openly linking the supposedly “counterrevolutionary” meeting with the organizers’ “unconcealed intention of turning this scenario into a spearhead for their much yearned for construction of a Cuban ‘civil society’ in the service of Washington” (*Cubadebate* 2012).

In his own commentary on the festival and *Cubadebate*’s response to it, Haroldo Dilla refers to the mortal danger that the creation of an independent public sphere and horizontal social networks represent for a state predicated on a vertical, command-and-control relationship with society. “The problem is a matter of unauthorized social contacts,” writes Dilla (2012), “of people who have decided not to ask for permission, of several dozen people who are looking to the sides and not up.” In other words, *Cubadebate*’s vociferous reaction to the festival arises from the event’s conscious and unapologetic attempt to develop independent, unauthorized social networks that are the building blocks of civil society. Thus, the demagogic message from the official media following the Click Festival was unmistakable. Either you are a blogger “*en revolución*” or you are mercenary (Chaguaceda 2012; ; Prieto 2012; Robinson 2012). However, even the revolutionary bloggers who hosted the *Blogazo* and trumpeted their loyalty decidedly *within* the parameters set by Fidel Castro’s “Words to the Intellectuals” were not immune to suspicion.

The Cuban Blogosphere: ¿Tan Cubana Como las Palmas?

Despite the fact that Mariela Castro had celebrated the Cuban blogosphere on her Twitter feed in April 2012 as “the best journalism in Cuba today,” calling it “as Cuban as the palm trees,” one of the most significant developments in Cuban cyberspace during 2012–2013 was the ten-month “blockade” (July 2012–April 2013) imposed by the University of Matanzas on the proudly revolutionary but also staunchly independent blog of *La Joven Cuba*. In fact, after their original claims that they were only taking a summer “rest” proved spurious, in December 2012, after months of silent frustration, they resorted to posting a bold denunciation on the masthead of the blog that read,

BLOCKADED: The blog continues blockaded for its administrators and we cannot access it to comment or read its contents, but we will continue publishing thanks to the solidarity of our friends. We are confident that common sense will break the virtual barrier and that we will be able to return to normal in the near future. (Ulloa 2013)

This statement was combined with a chorus of frustrated posts published on other blogs with self-explanatory titles, such as “Am I a counterrevolutionary?” (Cruz 2012b), “Will history absolve them?” (Cruz 2012a), “While Raúl Castro calls for criticism, there are those who stop it” (Manzaneda 2012), and “Blockade of *La Joven Cuba*: Why don’t they show their faces?” (Padilla 2013). A few exasperated bloggers even fumed at the supreme irony that the *La Joven Cuba* blog was inaccessible at the University of Matanzas while Yoani Sánchez’s much more critical blog was just a click away (Alfonzo 2013; Pérez 2013).

What is new here, of course, is not that a state institution blocked the independent blog of a group of its students but that the blog being blocked turns out to be the very same one administered by the young people who had convened the prorevolutionary *Blogazo* not three months earlier. While the reasons for the closure have never been clarified, it seems that the problems began during May and June 2012 when *La Joven Cuba* published a series of openly critical posts tilting against the mediocrity of the Party newspaper *Granma* and complaining about the slow implementation of the accords agreed to at the January 2012 Party Conference (*Café Fuerte* 2012; Peralo 2012a, 2012b). In fact, in a sign of things to come, their post criticizing the government for not implementing the Party accords quickly enough actually disappeared from the blog a few days after it had been posted, along with the more than 250 comments it had already generated. Then, at the beginning of July, just two days after reaching the 1-million-visitor milestone (Ulloa 2013), an elliptical entry appeared on the blog under the title “*La Joven Cuba* takes a rest,” followed by the brief declaration “For many reasons it is very difficult for us to maintain a blog as complex as *La Joven Cuba*. We will take a rest. We hope to be able to continue in the future” (*La Joven Cuba* 2012).

In the case of the closure of *La Joven Cuba*, a key lesson is that even the most revolutionary voices—and blogs—can be silenced if they insist on editorial independence, if they lodge criticisms that cross over the invisible line separating what is considered “within” from what is “against” the revolution, and if they depend on a state institution for Internet access. Nevertheless, at the end of April 2013, following an unprecedented personal meeting between the blog’s young administrators and Cuba’s new, fifty-three-year old first Vice President Miguel Díaz-Canel, “common sense” prevailed (*La Joven Cuba* 2013). In fact, instead of detailing the reasons behind the forced closure or offering an explanation for their reversal of fortune, *La Joven Cuba* came back online by simply posting a smiling group photo with Díaz-Canel (flanked by large portraits of both Fidel and Raúl Castro in the background) under the title “Common sense.” As if to drive the point home that the Revolution was now under new, more tolerant and intelligent management, less than two weeks later, on May 6, Díaz-Canel delivered the speech quoted in the opening epigraph, stating in part that, “to prohibit something is nearly an impossible chimera. It makes no sense” (Basile 2013; Ravsberg 2013b).

Discussion: “The Medium Is the Message”

Despite the limited reach of the Internet in Cuba, social media’s disruptive potential arises there from the same “leveling” process that it exhibits in other contexts. It blurs the traditional distinction between the public and the private, the real and the virtual, the professional and the amateur, and formal one-to-many broadcasting and informal one-to-one communication. It can also undermine the authority and hegemony of dominant telecom institutions by placing inexpensive broadcast technology in the hands of “the people formerly known as the audience.” Furthermore, it allows for greater independent and horizontal communication, sharing of

information, convening of publics, crowd-sourcing, “peer production,” and creative nonproprietary collaboration through harnessing Cuba’s collective surplus time and energy, all abilities that can undermine the power of traditional media (Mandiberg 2012).

The emergent character of social media in Cuba combined with at least an initial hubris on the part of the government has allowed its denizens to begin to share spontaneous critical commentary in what is still an unchartered, ambiguous space, granting them a modicum of safety. That is, while “the street” may still belong to Fidel (“*la calle es de Fidel*” being a typical revolutionary slogan), it is much less clear who Cuban cyberspace belongs to, if anyone (Gámez 2013). Moreover, Cuba’s cyberactivists have not been content to remain “in the cloud,” forever isolated from one another. Instead, they have sought to turn their visibility—long understood as a dangerous liability—into an asset (Geoffray 2013, 14–16), harnessing their transnational digital presence (as “the whole world watches”) to serve as a protective shield when they dare to occupy the public sphere.

The heated but revelatory debates in the Cuban blogosphere have resulted in opening cracks in the wall of separation (Rojas 2013) that had kept bloggers largely isolated, suspicious, and ignorant of one another. In fact, bloggers from different groups have begun to interview, profile, and debate one another, even if those interactions have so far been restricted largely to cyberspace (Calzadilla 2013; Sautié 2013; Rodríguez 2012a, 2012b, 2013). Moreover, the very fact that the members of these various blogging collectives have turned to social media as the platform where they seek to establish their legitimacy, preserve their independence, and engage in a dialogue both with the public and with one another is noteworthy. The horizontal, many-to-many architecture of social media is inherently at odds with the top-down architectural logic of traditional, vertical, one-to-many broadcast media. Indeed, while Cuba’s bloggers are diverse, we would do well to remember Marshall McLuhan’s now famous dictum that “the medium is the message” (Hoffmann 2011).

While early blogger debates have been largely restricted to cyberspace—making them all but invisible to the Cuban public, we have chronicled a number of increasingly bold and confident attempts on the part of some of Cuba’s bloggers to claim a *public space* for their debates. “These virtual and real activities,” writes Geoffray (2013, 28) perceptively, “have played a crucial role for the convergence of micro-arenas that used to be segmented from one another.” The convergence of these “allies of convenience” does not necessarily make them political allies. In fact, their lack of any political alliance makes these contentious interactions all the more important in establishing “a more plural and connected public arena” where “protagonists [can] recognize one another as legitimate opponents” (Geoffray (2013, 28). Indeed, in her November 2012 post “Something in common,” *Voces Cubanas* blogger Regina Coyula lamented the closure of her sometime nemesis *La Joven Cuba*, with which she had sustained a series of vigorous online debates. “In the country that I envision,” she reasoned, “diverse antagonistic ideological currents will coexist, but not as enemies” (Coyula 2012).

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¹ Cuban researcher and blogger Elaine Díaz (2013) has identified three other blogging groups, including *Cuba Blogs Club*, *Blogcip*, and *Observatorio Crítico*. To this we add the site *Cubano1erPlano* run by Alejandro Cruz, which aggregates posts from a variety of Cuban bloggers, journalists, and intellectuals.

² Apart from the blogger collectives we profile here, three other prominent civil society groups to have emerged since 2007 are *Omni Zona-Franca*, a communitarian poetry and performance group based in Alamar in eastern Havana; *Observatorio Crítico*, a progressive group of young critical socialists who jointly host a blog and periodically carry out independent public activities; and *Estado de Sats*, a forum for civic dialogue with videos posted on the Web founded by Antonio Rodiles.

³ This section is a condensed and slightly updated version of articles that previously appeared in *Cuba in Transition* (Henken 2008, 2011a), *Buena Vista Social Blog* (Henken 2010), and *Nueva Sociedad* (Henken 2011b).

⁴ In the fall of 2012, however, *Bloggers Cuba* went dark again because of the inability to pay for the hosting cost on a foreign server. Still, many former members of the collective continue to blog, including Elaine Díaz, Sandra Alvarez, Yasmín Portales, and Rogelio Díaz Moreno.