

Beyond “Technological Exception”: Emerging Debates in Cuban Independent Journalism





It is our honor here at the center to present CARGC Special Report: Beyond “Technological Exception”: Emerging Debates in Cuban Independent Journalism by Sara Garcia Santamaria. Sara is an Associate Professor at Universitat Jaume I and Universitat Blanquerna - Ramon Llull in Spain. She holds a Doctorate in Journalism Studies from the University of Sheffield (UK), where her research explored how the Cuban state-run media constructs the role of the people in public debate. The project draws on extensive ethnographic work in Cuba, including interviews with leading journalists, editors, and academics and a critical discourse analysis of national newspapers over twenty years. Having completed her Ph.D., Dr. Garcia Santamaria became a research fellow at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, in 2018, leading a Joint Digital Rights and Internet Freedom Research & Advocacy Project. Her doctoral and postdoctoral work emphasizes the importance of overcoming binary discourses and accounting for the social complexity of a changing media environment in Cuba. This report represents a continuation of that work, particularly in light of the shifting and volatile media environment that Cubans and Cuban journalists are currently experiencing.

This CARGC Special Report makes a crucial and timely contribution to current understandings of Cuba’s mediasphere, its mythologized technological exceptionalism, and the impact of digital technologies on the practice of independent journalism at a critical moment for the Caribbean nation. The protests of July 11, 2021 – organized online, spanning more than 40 different cities, and broadcasted live

through Facebook until the government shut the Internet down that afternoon–represents an unprecedented activation of civil society’s organizational power through digital technologies. Independent journalists have been crucial in the covering of the protests as well as their aftermath. Because the state media did not cover the protests while they were happening, most of the reconstructions of the events have been done by independent journalists working on the island or abroad. This report uncovers how and why independent journalism grows on the island within a hostile environment.

The massive protests and the subsequent governmental and military crackdown have elicited the predictable responses from the West that go from interventionist and hostile discourses nursed on cold-war logics to extractive apologies of Cuba’s state violence and condescending dismissal of everyday Cubans’ sovereignty. The entanglements embodied in Cuba’s July protests have been – too soon- leveled to the common binaries of ideological tribalisms. Tribalisms that –needs to be said- are ingrained even in everyday Cubans but represent geopolitical conflicts that largely ignores them.

Sara’s report serves as an antidote to such dangerous faciles and a conduit to understanding the myriad of complex circumstances influencing the practice of independent journalism and the use of digital technologies in contemporary Cuba. This work painstakingly traces and complicates the impact of digital technologies on citizens and independent journalists. It examines how journalists and civil society negotiate internet affordances and legitimacy and legality with the state. The last section of the report

explores the consequences that a lack of “official” legitimacy and legality have on journalists’ careers and how they reassert their right to exist. Methodologically, this report’s analysis derives from 22 in-depth interviews with Cuban experts, academics, and independent journalists working across eight independent media outlets. It also includes a rigorous genealogy of the latest regulations on freedom of speech and creation, the practice of journalism, and online speech passed by the Cuban government.

The report lays bare how social actors position themselves politically rejecting the traditional revolutionary vs. antirevolutionary divide—these reclamations of other ways of existing challenge the Revolution ontologies and those derived from the West. As Sara puts it: “The need to go beyond simplistic accounts of Cuba is a matter of analytical precision” (Garcia Santamaria, 2021). Yet, the need to rid ourselves from canons and modes of inquiry aimed at rendering “the other” legible is far from being overcome. Indeed, it is far from a problem exclusively to those seeking to study or speak of Cuba—whether inside or outside the island. This summer, as we were completing final reviews of the report, Cubans took to the

streets in large numbers. Simultaneously the president of Haiti was assassinated, an earthquake hit the island, long-drawn-out crisis and food shortages loomed over Lebanon, fires raged from Turkey to Greece, and the Taliban took power in Afghanistan in record time.

Much more needs to be done as an academic community to center and learn from those for whom such events are not novelties or a turn on global geopolitics but a fact of their daily lives and ways of being. This special report is CARGC’s latest and modest contribution to that life-long endeavor that constitutes empowering and complicating the global south. Here at the center, fellows, post-docs, leadership, and staff at CARGC commit our resolute efforts to the need for expanding deep regional expertise and interdisciplinary inquiry within the field of Global Communication. The hope is that we can come out the other end of this historical moment in which political tribalism, global warming, police and state violence, racism and other forms of discrimination, and geopolitical imperialisms have sequestered the future. In that case, the adequate question no longer seems to be: can the “other” speak? But is there a future if they don’t?



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INTRODUCTION

This report examines the latest developments in the emergent wave of Cuban independent journalism, taking a special look at the impact of both digital technologies and recent regulation. As access to the Internet and digital technologies has increased, it has changed what it means to be a citizen and a journalist, on the Island. More precisely, it has given visibility to a range of social identities that go beyond the traditional journalist as a soldier or a mercenary of the United States.¹ The need for complex accounts of ongoing transformations in Cuba is visible both in academic and journalistic publications, which are used as secondary sources for this report. In order to offer more contextualized and detailed data, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews with Cuban experts and independent journalists² working for eight independent media outlets: *AND Cuba*, *Árbol Invertido*, *Cibercuba*, *Diario de Cuba*, *El Estornudo*, *El Toque*, *Periodismo de Barrio*, and *Tremenda Nota*. While this report focuses on emergent media outlets, I have interviewed journalists working for the state-run media in previous works, including my 2018 report (García Santamaría 2018a, 2018b), and most of the interviewees have worked for the state-run media before disengaging themselves from it.

1 The idea of the journalist as a soldier comes from José Martí, 19th century Cuban intellectual and independence leader that is considered a national hero. This idea was reframed after the Revolution within the 1965 reorganization of media outlets in terms of property and editorial teams. It is worth noting that many organizational aspects of the Soviet media model were incorporated in the mid-1960s in a context of Cold War in which Cuba felt globally isolated and in a permanent war with the United States (Oller Alonso and Olivera 2016; García Santamaría 2018c). After the reforms, mass media became a useful channel for spreading Che Guevara’s idea of a “new man,” and help rebuilding the economic and ideological bases of the state. In this context, journalists were given a collective political task, rather than an individual and professionally oriented one (Marrero 2006; García Luis 2013).

2 The interviews were conducted online between March 2019 and July 2020. Five of the initial interviews were updated for this report. All the interviews but two have taken place online. For ethical reasons, I have decided to anonymize independent journalists, who appear identified by a code composed of two letters, R (respondent) and J (journalist), as well as an assigned number. The experts, however, are identified by their name and their academic affiliation since they are all doctors or doctoral students in the field of Media and Communication. All the interviewees are Cuban, and only one of the experts identifies as Cuban American. The idea was to select young interviewees in their 20s and 30s because they are the ones that have created emergent independent media outlets over the last seven years or so and constitute their main workforce (Díaz 2018). Regarding experts, I consider that young Cuban scholars are often a missing voice when we analyze Cuba even if they are often those studying the newest phenomena in the Island.

I have spent a great deal of time trying to understand how Cuban journalists working for the state-run media make sense of their professional work and their ideological commitment to the Revolution (Garcia Santamaria 2018b). Through this work, I have sat with some of the best Cuban journalists, regardless of whether they work for independent or state-run media outlets, beginning between 2013 and 2017, a period that was key for identifying young journalists’ hope of changing Cuban journalism from within the system, as well as the progressive erosion of their dreams. Crucially, in October 2011, the Cuban Communist Party issued a document that set as a priority getting “rid of self-censorship, mediocrity, bureaucratic and sugar-coated language, idleness, rhetoric, triumphalism, and banality” in the media (PCC, 2011). This was formulated in light of the “Updating of the Economic and Social Model” (*Actualización del Modelo Económico y Social*), which was announced in the VI Congress of the Cuban Communist Party (2011) and extended until 2021 during the VII Congress. Just as in other authoritarian contexts, such as soviet Russia or current China (Repnikova 2017; Roudakova 2017), Cuban journalists have found themselves caught between the regime’s calls to exercise a “responsible criticism” and their fear to do so legally unprotected.

Attempts to convince journalists that a change from within the system is not only possible, but also more stable for the country, have been pervasive since the mid-1970s and have managed to deter journalists from looking for change outside the institutional channels, at least temporarily. It is by following the trajectory of some of those first interviewees that my research has evolved. How have they made sense of their disengagement from the state-owned media? How do they understand their re-engagement in new academic or independent media projects? (Garcia Santamaria forthcoming).

The need to go beyond simplistic accounts of Cuba is a matter of analytical precision. Leaving behind narratives of “binary socialism” (Yurchak 2003, 6), recent ethnographic research has highlighted citizens’ complex processes of (dis)identification with the system as the “digital revolution” unfolds (Henken and Garcia Santamaria 2021).³ Rather than clear-cut positions, Muñoz (1999) has suggested that there are many ways in which individuals negotiate their identity beyond pure support or opposition to their culture. In the Cuban context, we often find what Holbraad (2014, 1) has named Cubans’ “visceral allegiance to their Revolution,” paradoxically combined with a “deep disaffection” with the revolutionary project. Applying this to the field of Cuban journalism, this report considers that it is essential to go beyond binary positions and to acknowledge that, growing up within the system, it is not straightforward for young journalists to break away from it. Furthermore, the process is not linear but irregular and even paradoxical. Therefore, this report does not aim at being another “state of the art” or summary of the latest developments in Cuban journalism, but the goal is to stress the levels of complexity that traverse current transformations in the Cuban mediasphere—a complexity that needs to be taken into account if we want to go beyond binary and simplistic narratives.

3 See for instance the work conducted by Jennifer Cearns, Paloma Duong, or Anne Natvig, among others, collected in an upcoming volume (Henken and Garcia Santamaria 2021).

Context is essential for understanding the dynamics that influence independent journalists’ legitimacy and legality in Cuba. Several factors intertwine and influence the state’s response. A few ideas stand out from the interviews. The first is the geopolitical context, the fact that Cuba has lost support in Latin America due to the weakening of left-wing governments and the crisis in Venezuela. This has taken place parallel to Donald Trump’s legacy of restrictive measures against the Island (Chokshi and Robles 2019), including against remittances and non-family visits, which have contributed to weakening the Cuban economy and dashing people’s hopes for a better future. In fact, the Island is facing a serious food, basic goods, and energy shortage, the so-called “*coyuntura*” (Mesa-Lago 2019), which was officially announced in September 2019 and has only worsened amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Curbelo 2019).

Additionally, the few last years have seen a reactivation of civil society that is still unfolding, as we have seen in the latest July 2021 protests. Some experts see 2019 as the year in which vulnerable civil society communities started mobilizing themselves (Padrón Cueto 2020a). A legal march in defense of animal rights, organized to a great extent online, inspired other initiatives, such as a non-authorized LGTBIQ march on March 11, 2019 that gathered around 300 people and was met with strong repression. Other civil society communities have also asked for the recognition of their cause. This includes SNet connections (a protest on August 17, 2019 was deterred by the police), asking for marriage equality (Article 68 that granted was removed from the new constitution), laws against gender violence (with a group of forty intellectuals signing a petition in December 2019), as well as campaigns to free arrested journalists.⁴ However, it is important to consider that many social practices require people to position themselves politically, yet do not necessarily place them within the traditional revolutionary versus antirevolutionary divide. For instance, the two main debates that have gained resonance online and reached massive audiences have been about animal protection and sexual diversity rights (Rodríguez).⁵ While both are in line with the official discourse, they have been somehow forgotten and then reappropriated by “alternative” voices.

The report is organized in two main blocs, composed of four parts each. The first bloc contextualizes the impact of digital technologies on citizens’ life (sections 1.1. and 1.2.) and on independent journalism (sections 1.3 and 1.4). The second bloc of the report examines the intersection between legitimacy and legality in Cuban independent journalism. The two first sections (2.1 and 2.2.) contextualize the perceived legitimacy of the emergent mediasphere, as well as recent regulations that have threatened its legality. Then, the report goes on to examine the consequences that a lack of “official” legitimacy and legality have on journalists’ careers, and the ways they have found to reassert their right to exist (sections 2.3. and 2.4).

4 The SNetS are clandestine networks of Wi-Fi antennas and broadband cables connected to each other through rooftops through an intranet, offering access to social media, video sharing and online videogames.

5 Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez, Universidad de La Habana. Online interview conducted 07/10/2020.

PART I: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AND INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IN CUBA

1.1. The new “post-socialist” citizen

According to Rancière (2010), politics and aesthetics are forms of dissensus that not only alter existing power relations but introduce new subjects and objects into our range of perception. That is, politics and aesthetics reorder our perceptions and space, unchaining bodies from an officially assigned place and disrupting existing logics of belonging. Following this notion, we could say that digital practices have helped queer the Cuban space. The underlying idea is that they enable the movement, mobility, and mobilization of new conflicting identities (Munthe-Kaas 2015). The concept of queerness is useful for analyzing “deviating” identities (Perez-Torres 2006, xvii): the liminal processes of transgression of those who are perceived as different, as bizarre, as non-binary and non-normative, as emancipated, as punk, as the oppressed “other.” For instance, Cuban scholar Darién Sánchez Nicolás considers that the development of digital practices in Cuba challenges the well-educated, white, and heterosexual image of journalists dominant in the West.⁶ In fact, many Cuban influencers identify themselves as being queer, racialized and coming from working class backgrounds.

Over the last decade or so, Cubans have been using digital technologies in ways that give visibility to and create new types of Cuban subjects whose values, fantasies, affective ties and goals differ from those prioritized by the government. For instance, growing Internet access, especially through cell phones, has facilitated a wave of sociopolitical mobilizations organized online, facilitating a sort of #hashtag activism. Some of the campaigns have been addressed at political processes, such as voting for the 2019 constitution, while others have dealt with human rights issues (freeing artists or journalists, defending LGTBIQ rights or animal rights), or Internet access. This has been the case of the SNet and the #LowerInternetPrices (#BajenLosPreciosDeInternet) campaign. It is important to note that, while Cubans are increasingly expressing their grievances on social media, these movements had not reach ordinary people until July 11th, 2021, and even then we cannot speak of a widespread social unrest. Other civil society groups, such as feminist movements, the LGTBIQ community or animal rights activists, have been active on social networks, and even claiming new regulations.

The “new Cuban subjectivities” make visible “other” identities that go from the explicitly political to the defense of social causes and personal identifications, or the rights of the *cuentapropista*, to participate in the private economic sector. For instance, Cuban scholar Darien Sánchez studies the way in which Cubans and their diaspora use digital technologies in order to reconstruct precarious domestic spaces in Cuba and, in doing so, develop new types of (dis)identifications: “The fact that people invest in or try to use domestic spaces as centers of economic practice, even if discreet, is a way of subverting, or disregarding, or separating themselves from the social and economic

⁶ Darién Sánchez Nicolás, Concordia University. Online interview conducted 07/09/2020.

systems established in Cuba. They are pretty radical political practices in themselves, practices that allow people to have agency, to develop themselves in the face of a negligence or the lack of governmental capacity to face social needs in Cuba.”⁷

An interesting aspect is that Cubans on the Island can, nowadays, follow the same “media diet” as their relatives abroad, highlights Miranda García.⁸ For instance, some journalists who left Cuba recently consider that they are still “mentally there” (RJ12).⁹ Through the visibility of Cuban problems and scarcity in Cubans’ “shared media diet,” care and affect networks are extending beyond the family circle, according to Darién Sánchez’s research.¹⁰

Digital technologies and growing Internet access have consolidated the mainstream capacity of transnational affective communities, some of which had already started using technological innovations for community-building purposes well before the turn of the century (Beliso-De Jesús 2015). Paloma Duong (2021) has called “mobile postsocialisms” those forms of new media practices that defy the ontological view of the Revolution, as well as its ways of organizing political, economic, social and affective life. This type of postsocialist subjects inhabit a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013) and a hybrid type of “cultural capitalism” (Jelača et al. 2017), and claim a place within global economic and communication flows. What “Paparazzi Cubano” (Alain Lambert Rodríguez, allegedly the first Cuban to retransmit on Facebook live from the Island) and other YouTubers and influencers are doing is “to rescue the visual archaeology of what we consider the essence of Cubanness,” something that unites people beyond ideological affiliations and politics because “Cubans who might not share the same ideology still share the same cultural heritage” (Darién Sánchez).¹¹ In other words, digital technologies are enabling business, cultural and affective practices that transcend any political ideology. This, of course, has an impact on people’s daily habits that goes well beyond their media consumption.

1.2. Overcoming the Cuban “Technological Exception”

There have been many accounts of Cuba being “the Island of the disconnected” (Ogden 2021), or as having yet to join 21st century connectivity (Davis 2016). Outside depictions of Cuba as technologically lacking, as the “technological other” because of its low levels of Internet access, have been widespread in international media, filling our imaginaries with narrow and limited accounts (Davis 2016). While Internet access has indeed been low and has yet to reach regional standards, “there are many ways of understanding technological modernity,” explains Darién Sánchez.¹²

7 Darién Sánchez Nicolás, Concordia University. Online interview conducted 07/09/2020.

8 Miranda García, Michigan University. Online interview conducted 07/03/2020.

9 Interview number RJ12 to independent journalist. Online interview conducted 07/04/2020.

10 Darién Sánchez Nicolás, Concordia University. Online interview conducted 09/07/2020.

11 Darién Sánchez Nicolás, Concordia University. Online interview conducted 07/09/2020.

12 Darién Sánchez Nicolás, Concordia University. Online interview conducted 07/09/2020.

Western ways of assessing the development of digital technologies in Cuba are often reductionist. Despite the slow and expensive process of connecting to the Internet, as well as purchasing personal computers or mobile phones, Cubans have relied on their imagination, or “*inventos*,” in order to stay connected. Therefore, the idea of a “Cuban exception” should be understood both as the Island’s challenging access to the Internet and to citizens’ ability to develop “homemade” innovations that allowed them to exchange information both online and offline. Whether living on the Island or abroad, Cubans have created a myriad of open code software, creating apps and websites for services that replicate international ones, such as *CubaMessenger* or *Bajanda*, or massive off-line systems of content distribution in ways that few other countries have seen. Some of these apps focus on locating and distributing food and allow citizens [those who can afford them] “to keep reproducing Cuban eating habits” in the midst of the economic crisis (Marsh 2020).

Cuban millennials who, as a generation, are more technologically literate than their predecessors, have used this as a way of developing new business opportunities and connecting customers (the new bourgeoisie) with new private businesses. The use of digital technologies has improved citizens’ agency, allowing the creation of peer-to-peer networks that go from access and distribution of information and entertainment, services opportunities, transnational care networks between Cubans on the Island and those abroad, crowdsourcing or international creative collaborations. One of the most known “Cuban *inventos*” is *el “paquete seminal,”* or weekly package, which consists of a large nationwide network that distributes one terabyte of data (including national and international press, the latest films and shows, trendy music, software, games, buying and selling services...) once a week. The *paquete* can be purchased for up to \$3, depending on the amount of content, who is your messenger, or the day of the week; it is purported to be Cuba’s largest private employer (Press 2015). The new ways of digital entrepreneurship also include the development of “indymedia” projects, such as *Vistar* (visual culture) or *Garbos* (lifestyle) led by digital millennials that have created independent yet non-dissident and often apolitical magazines and benefited from the 2014 US-Cuban thaw, which gave them an opportunity to fully unfold and reach larger audiences (Henken 2017). In parallel, there has been a development of “alternative” or “hipster” businesses, movements and aesthetics that can be considered not just countercultural, but also counterrevolutionary or counter-Cuban (Cearns 2021).

Foreign attempts to use digital technologies in order to mobilize citizens against the government (García Santamaría 2018c), and the historical US-Cuba confrontation, have influenced politicians’ suspicion of the Internet in Cuba (Rodríguez Brito 2018). However, in 2012 a submarine optic fiber cable linked Cuba with Venezuela and Jamaica. Internet access in Cuba has been improving ever since, and in 2013 the Cuban government opened the first Internet public centers (called “*salas de navegación*”). One year later, Cubans gained access to a government-run email service on mobile phones and in 2015 it opened 35 public Wi-Fi hotspots, reaching 1072 in 2020 according to official data (ETECSA, 2020). In 2017, Cubans started getting [household Internet access](#) (before it was reserved to academics, artists and some professionals) and in late 2018 people started getting full 3G access on [mobile phones](#). According to recent data, 63 percent of Cubans have Internet access (7.1 million users), out of which 55% are social media users (Kemp 2020). Furthermore, 3.4

million connect to the Internet from their phones (Kemp 2020), with 4G reaching over 650,000 lines (EFE 2020). However, it is important to take into account that this information draws on Cuban official data, which some experts have put into question (Flores 2020).

New measures put in place in May 2019 allow citizens to connect to the Internet with their routers and share their signals (not for profit), which could legalize “some existing networks that have been secretly operated using smuggled or homemade equipment” (Semple and Cohen 2019). The new policy, however, regulates wireless transmission power and outdoor cables (Press 2019) and allows the state telecommunications company, ETECSA, to absorb existing self-managed initiatives such as SNETs (Street Network). SNETs are a clandestine network of Wi-Fi antennas and broadband cables (either handmade or purchased in the black market) linked through rooftops. Initially used to play videogames through an intranet, they expanded to other services, such as accessing *el paquete*, using social media or video sharing. They are thought to connect around twenty thousand people to the Internet (CIDH 2020). Some scholars consider that the SNETs have been an example of Cuba’s technologically savvy population and a model of citizen self-management and technological appropriation that transformed Cuban society, especially among the young living in Havana (Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez).¹³

One of the main recent technological changes has been people’s access to the Internet from their mobile phones. Digital technologies have allowed the creation of online communities around independent media outlets on social networks and messaging apps, expanding to civil society. For instance, they have created informal groups around issues of public concern, such as the LGTBI protest, the Young Filmmakers Festival or the debates around the 2019 Constitution, all of which are discussed below. Cuban scholar Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez considers that digital technologies have fostered “associationism, self-representation, spontaneous articulations, intensive and extensive circulation of information, cooperation, participation, deliberation,” but also forms of “confrontation, dissent, or the revision of [official] media and political discourses.”¹⁴

1.3. Disentangling the Cuban Mediasphere

The takeoff of a new wave of emergent independent media projects has its roots in the context of the US-Cuba thaw that started in December 2014, towards the end of Barack Obama’s term. This event was important both in terms of expanding investment in telecommunications on the Island, as well as putting Cuba in the spotlight. A new era of what seemed a progressive depolarization demanded fresh accounts and a new generation of critical bloggers and journalists gained worldwide attention.¹⁵ The new Cuba was in fashion and someone needed to narrate it;

13 Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez, Universidad de La Habana. Online interview conducted 07/10/2020.

14 Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez, Universidad de La Habana. Online interview conducted 07/10/2020.

15 This was of course before Donald Trump won the 2016 US elections and started a new repressive wave against the Island.

this task was assumed by a select group of young and talented journalists who had lost the hope of changing the system from within, and who had increasing access to the Internet and digital technologies.

One of the challenges when studying the Cuban independent mediasphere is the tendency to consider it as a whole when it is in fact a conglomerate of multiple digital media outlets that follow different logics and interests. In broad terms, the Cuban media system is composed of the official media, religious media, oppositional media, foreign media, and emergent media outlets. Regarding the latter, Ted Henken (2017) differentiates between (1) digital dissidents (clearly oppositional projects like *14yMedio*); (2) digital millennials (such as *Vistar*, with a cultural emphasis); (3) digital ecumenics (projects associated with the Catholic Church, such as the former *Cuba Posible*); (4) critical revolutionaries (led by young progressive Cubans who created non-oppositional projects aimed at improving society through contained criticism, such as *Periodismo de Barrio*); and (5) the digital diaspora (Spain-based project *CiberCuba*, for instance).

Put simply, the term “emergent digital media” refers to those projects that are independent from the Cuban Communist Party’s (CCP) media structure and were created around 2014, in light of a US-Cuba distension.¹⁶ Cuban independent journalist Elaine Díaz (2018) has published a list of emergent journalistic media outlets. She counted fourteen in 2018, although the list has changed.¹⁷ She highlights that most of them are composed by small, young teams living in Cuba and abroad, who collaborate with other national and international media outlets in the publication of issues that are either silenced or taboo. For Cuban scholar Abel Somohano, independent media could be grouped according to different criteria: (1) the degree of thematic specialization (from generalist to specialized outlets); (2) the type of journalism being developed (informational, narrative, investigative, data journalism, etc); (3) funding (advertisement, users, third sector); (4) the main actors’ location (how disperse and transnational they are); or (5) their distribution (website only, *el paquete* apps, Facebook Instant Articles or Google AMP).¹⁸

The independent Cuban mediasphere has developed simultaneously with heated debates about the need to professionalize Cuban journalism. This does not mean that all journalism produced by the state-run media is essentially unprofessional. Instead, it means that the excess of external influences (such as Party censorship) and the exodus of experienced journalists fleeing an impoverished media system during the *Periodo Especial* have slowly led to progressive deprofessionalization. Efforts to reverse this trend are further examined in the following section.

16 There seems to be an agreement on the use of the term “independent media outlets” for referring to those that were created online over the last decade or so. For instance, this is the term they use in journalists’ joint declarations. However, other people prefer to call them “non-state-owned” (no estatales), alternative or emergent media outlets.

17 *Periodismo de Barrio* (2015), *Cachivache Media* (2016-2017), *14ymedio* (2014), *Cibercuba* (2014), *El Estornudo* (2016), *Diario de Cuba* (2009), *El Toque* (2014), *Hypermedia Magazine* (2016), *La Joven Cuba* (2010), *Negolultion* (2016), *OnCuba* (2012), *PlayOff* (2015), *Postdata* (2016) and *Progreso Semanal* (2001).

18 Abel Somohano, Universidad Iberoamericana. Online interview conducted 07/03/2020.

1.4. From Polarization to Professionalization

Cuban political culture has been shaped by certain values since the nineteenth century Independence Wars, such as intransigence, intolerance, or the criminalization of dissent (Bobes 2007).¹⁹ The alleged unity between the Party and the people is at the base of all intellectual debates in Cuba (Garcia Santamaria 2021). If, as Fidel Castro told intellectuals in 1961, “the Revolution includes the interests of all people, and the Revolution means the interests of the whole nation,” those who situate themselves outside it can be easily de-ontologized: denied the right to legitimately reflect upon Cuba (Garcia Santamaria 2019).

While some emergent media outlets try to be “conciliatory” and escape polarization, they often receive a similar treatment to oppositional ones. In this scenario, it seems that not even the most moderate voices manage to escape a polarized political context: “Even when you try to construct a discourse beyond that crossfire, the bullets are redirected against you,” says Cuban scholar and former journalist Alexei Padilla.²⁰ Similarly, an independent journalist adds that it is hard to keep journalistic balance in “a climate of flying slaps” (RJ16).²¹ It is a common perception that “the government is constantly treating you as an enemy, even when you do not want to be an enemy” (RJ13).²² The pervasive use of terms such as “mercenaries” (those who oppose the regime) against independent journalists, “cyberclarias” (used for attacking those who defend the official discourse by any means) or “centrists” (those who reject extreme positions) are only examples of the magnitude of political polarization in Cuba.²³

Once journalists leave the official media system, there is not much room for them in independent media outlets, nor are they very well paid if they have to make a living abroad. Therefore, some journalists work for media outlets that do not correspond with their journalistic ideas because they are seen as “too politicized.” However, their experience allows us to gain unique access to the ways in which polarization hinders professionalization in Cuba. One of the main obstacles faced by oppositional media outlets, particularly those that existed before the emergent wave, is their “bad reputation,” which means that many people see them as hypercritical and do not want to give statements to them. One of the journalists I interviewed acknowledges trying to get information

19 Alexei Padilla, Doctor by Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Online interview conducted 07/03/2020.

20 Alexei Padilla, Federal University of Minas Gerais. Online interview conducted 07/03/2020.

21 Interview number RJ16 to independent Cuban journalist. Online interview conducted 03/12/2019, updated 07/16/2020.

22 Interview number RJ13 to independent journalist. Online interview conducted 05/15/2019.

23 The term “cyberclarias” refers to “cyber fighters” who use fake social media accounts in order to defend the Cuban regime, even at the cost of attacking critical voices and becoming “an army of trolls” (González 2019; Jiménez Enoa 2017). Some reporters have defended that many of them are trained at the UCI (Computer Science University) and receive Internet connection advantages in exchange.

from moderate academics and intellectuals, often without success. “Then, the only people who end up giving you testimonies are those who are more burnt out, who have nothing to fear” (RJ12).²⁴ In fact, there is the impression that Cuba is often narrated from a position of (contained or not) fear, rage, and pain (RJ2, RJ10, RJ16).²⁵ According to Cuban scholar José Raúl Gallego, the reason for this emotional coverage is that “the state tries to polarize you as much as possible in order to tag you as an extremist, as resented and all that, and then take you out of the debate.”²⁶

Previous research shows that young Cuban independent journalists have a tendency to politicize their emotional self (Garcia Santamaria 2021). This means that, in a highly polarized system, they reject being pushed towards the edges of the political and emotional spectrum: the soldier or the mercenary; the love for the project and the fear from it. While it is true that some currents of narrative journalism, such as *El Estornudo*, and many opinion pieces in magazines such as *El Toque* or *La Joven Cuba* embrace a marked emotional style. This emotionalization of everyday experiences is seen as substantially different from the polarized emotionalization of the Revolutionary experience and, therefore, as a form of overcoming it. While the interviewees see expressing their emotions as something personally liberating, they should not permeate their journalistic practice because they might blind their capacity to think rationally, and to write from an impartial standpoint (in line with western normative ideals). This is an important detail that “professional” journalists use to differentiate themselves from “activists,” who are seen as emotionally taken by their political ideals and, therefore, less able to account for both the complexity and the paradoxes of late socialism.²⁷

Mellado et al. have concluded that Cuban journalists working in official media outlets have a loyal-facilitator role; that is, they tend to cooperate with the political elites and frame them, and praise both the government and the nation state. However, it seems that journalists working for the state also have the normative ideal of playing a watchdog role (Mellado et al. 2016). While this can seem contradictory, it reflects the tension between young journalists’ normative ideals learned at university, often in line with western conceptions of journalism, and journalistic practice in the state-run media. This has been repeatedly found by scholars who have conducted ethnographic research in Cuba (Garcia Santamaria 2018a; Oller and Olivera 2016; Mellado et al. 2016). This idea is also prevalent in some independent media outlets, which explicitly state their will to hold the government accountable (Periodismo de Barrio 2018; Proyecto Inventario 2018), as well as the trend of data journalism (*Proyecto Inventario, Postdata*) and fact-checking projects. For

24 Interview number RJ12 to independent Cuban journalist. Online interview conducted 07/04/2020

25 Interviews RJ2, RJ10, RJ16 to independent Cuban journalists. Online interview RJ2 conducted 06/17/2019, updated the 14/07/2020; RJ10 conducted the 12/07/2019 and RJ16 conducted 03/12/2019, updated 07/16/2020.

26 José Raúl Gallego, Universidad Iberoamericana. Online interview conducted 07/03/2020.

27 Some of the clearest indicators of an (at least partial) professionalization of Cuban journalism has been the award of international prizes, such as the Gabriel García Márquez (Mónica Baró, Jorge Carrasco) or the Online Journalism Awards (El Toque).

instance, *El Toque* and *Periodismo de Barrio* offer, on Telegram and WhatsApp, a bot connected to the [LatamCheque](#) data base in order to verify information. The bot also allows users to request the editorial team to check certain information if this mechanism is not able to do so.

The monitoring of politicians’ Twitter accounts is one way used to keep power accountable. Some media outlets have followed the personal Twitter account of President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez, [@DiazCanelB](#) since its creation October 10, 2018 (Gallego Ramos 2019; Proyecto Inventario 2019a). Thanks to these analyses, we know that he shares mostly news from official media outlets (mostly *Granma*, followed by *Cubadebate*) and rarely replies to ordinary citizens. Over the first three months of the account, the most common messages of the president were slogans, such as #SomosCuba, #SomosContinuidad and #YoVotoSí (in reference to the new Constitution).²⁸ The most quoted people were Fidel and Raúl Castro (Proyecto Inventario 2019b), stressing the historical legitimacy and authority of his mandate.

Despite international recognition and attempts to hold leaders accountable, some interviewees consider that autonomy in journalism does not always lead to professionalization. Growing Internet access has facilitated the emergence of a variety of media outlets, some of which have journalistic goals, while others are more focused on becoming profitable businesses through clickbait journalism, a focus on entertainment, or simply low standards. Even those that have a clear quality media vocation find problems accessing a variety of sources, struggle to find funding and to reach Cuban readers beyond the intellectual elite. In fact, some interviewees consider that it would be easier to speak about an increase in “quality journalism,” which appears here and there in different media outlets. That is the opinion of Dasniel Olivera, Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez, and some of the journalists that I have interviewed for this report (RJ16, RJ7).²⁹

PART 2: NAVIGATING LEGITIMACY AND LEGALITY

2.1. The Legitimacy of Cuban Independent Journalism

Since its creation in 1965, the Cuban Communist Party assumed full responsibility in ideological matters and the restructuring of the media system, subordinating them to the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Party. Journalistic practices are constrained by the structural conditions created by a soviet model of party press, excessively bureaucratized and creating restrictive conditions that limit journalists’ autonomy, creativity and agency (García Luis 2013; Garcia Santamaria 2018b).

28 WeAreCuba, #WeAareContinuity and #IVoteYes

29 Dasniel Olivera, Universidad Iberoamericana. Online interview conducted 07/02/2020/ Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez, Universidad de la Habana. Online interview conducted 07/10/2020/ Interview numbers RJ16 and RJ7 to independent journalists. Online interview RJ16 conducted 03/12/2019, updated 07/16/2020 and online interview RJ7 conducted 07/03/2020.

The historical conflict between the US and Cuba has also had an influence on the way the political elites have attempted to create unity around the Revolution, socialism and the fatherland in the face of a permanent war against the enemy. This context has favored a way of seeing independent media outlets as a threat. For instance, in the IX Congress of the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC), Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez (2013) included independent media outlets as part of a US-led “political and ideological subversion” against Cuba, tagging journalists who collaborated with them as counterrevolutionary.

The official view has sparked heated debates about the legitimacy and legality of independent media outlets. The main strategy for delegitimizing independent media projects has targeted the source of their funding, which comes from outside Cuba (mainly NGOs, readers’ donations, foundations, universities) since they are not officially recognized, are not legal entities, and cannot legally use advertisement. Funding is seen as a form of “foreign interference” even if this has been repeatedly denied by all independent media outlets. Some of them, such as *Periodismo de Barrio*, *Cibercuba* or *El Estornudo*, have made their sources of funding public. Abel Somohano, one of the Cuban scholars interviewed for this report, considers that “the legitimacy of journalism rests in the professionalization of its practices, in the depth and seriousness in which messages are constructed, rather than funding.”³⁰

There is another way of looking at legitimacy: can state-run media outlets exercise journalism in a legitimate manner given their subordination to the Cuban Communist Party? All the interviewees consider that there are legitimate journalistic practices in official media, although they are not common due to the limitation of journalists’ autonomy. However, these seem to be more common in state-owned regional media outlets, which attract less national attention and depend on lower-rank party officers, some of whom are known to be more open-minded. Despite working in a climate of confrontation and polarization, the interviewees show a great deal of respect towards fellow journalists who play more of an activist role, whether on the state or the opposition side. While they acknowledge important disagreements, the idea is that they contribute to diversifying our views about Cuba: “they are generating a diversity of views and this is important for constructing a historical memory with the highest possible number of versions” (RJ2).³¹

One of the most significant changes that has taken place recently has been the increasing mutual acceptance and understanding among journalists working for different independent media outlets. Many interviewees, and especially those who graduated before 2016, report a gradual but radical change in the way they see both the “independent media” and oppositional media outlets. José Raúl Gallego remembers that when he was at college “naming independent journalism was like naming the devil.” Similarly, an independent journalist considers that “two years ago it would have been unthinkable to sit at the same table as *CubaNet* or *Diario de Cuba’s* directors,” and adds: “I was

30 Abel Somohano, Universidad Iberoamericana. Online interview conducted the 07/03/2020.

31 Interview number RJ2 to independent journalist. Online interview RJ2 conducted 06/17/2019, updated 07/14/2020.

terrorized by those media outlets: all the propaganda in my head told me that they were simply very bad people who did not do good journalism and who wanted to destroy Cuba” (RJ13).³² However, there is a generational change taking place and most of journalists are overcoming such fear and rejection.

The relationship among independent journalists has improved as they get to know each other and understand each other’s experiences. The interviews reveal that they started getting to know oppositional media outlets through personal ties, interacting with colleagues who worked there, and deciding that, above all, they remained friends. Another factor has been that journalists working for different independent media outlets have had chances to meet in person at conferences and training courses abroad, such as those organized by the IWPR (Institute of War and Peace Reporting). This, according to the interviewees, has been essential for overcoming prejudices and many of them have started finding shared causes and collective ways of mobilizing themselves as a group.

2.2. The Legality of Cuban Independent Journalism

Over the last decade, Cuba has gone through a period of power decentralization and legal reorganization that were announced at the I Conference of Cuban Communist Party, in 2012, and which go hand in hand with the “Updating” of the socioeconomic model that started one year before. Recently, these changes have materialized in the approval of a new constitution, which reestablished the figure of a Prime Minister in December 2019 (absent since 1976, when Fidel Castro became the President of the Councils of State and Ministers).³³ The Constitution was approved by referendum and entered into force in April 2019.³⁴

Article 54 of the Constitution “recognizes, respects, and guarantees people freedom of thought, conscience, and expression,” while Article 55 recognizes freedom of the press “according to the law and for the good of society” (Granma 2019). This type of wording, acknowledging a right and then conditioning it to certain revolutionary values, is common. In fact, both the 2019 Constitution and the “New Communication Policy for the State and Government” assert that the state leads the media and social communication in Cuba and the latter has the explicit goal of guaranteeing “national consensus and unity around the Fatherland, the Socialist Revolution, and the Party” (Cubadebate 2019).

32 Interview number RJ 13 to independent journalist. Online interview conducted 05/15/2020

33 The Prime Minister, Manuel Marrero Cruz, has an executive function, supporting the President in internal matters.

34 The national referendum that preceded the approval of the 2019 Constitution created a diversity of positions, whether supporting the yes campaign, abstention or opposing it. In a way, we could say that having a campaign with a multiplicity of positions has activated a public sphere of debate on itself, regardless of the overwhelming visibility of the yes campaign on public spaces, and the approval of the constitutional text (Sánchez Somonte, 2019).

The approval of a new communication policy has been formally discussed behind closed doors since 2013 by a group of experts chosen by the Party; eleven people in total, three of whom were journalists. Official reports of these discussions indicate that none of these members formulated any opinions against the text (Gallego Ramos 2018). The policy has some interesting insights, such as questioning whether all state-owned media should be official voices of the Party or mass organizations. In fact, it opens the door to other types of organization and ways of funding official media outlets, including advertisement. Furthermore, the document recognizes information and communication as public goods and, therefore, the media can only be state or social property, forbidding all private practices. The document makes only one reference to independent media outlets. They are defined as precisely being private property (and therefore, illegal in constitutional terms), external to the country, and having “hypercritical” and “demobilizing goals” (Periodismo de Barrio 2018). Therefore, emergent independent media outlets are illegal not only because they are privately owned, but because they break away from the confines of revolutionary consensus.

Besides the 2019 Constitution and Communication Policy, the legal restructuring in Cuba has been accompanied by the approval of several decree-laws, none of which has been publicly debated. Since then, we have seen the approval of three important decree laws that directly affect artistic and intellectual production in Cuba: the decree-laws 349, 370, and 373. The first one is the [decree-law 349](#), in effect since January 2018, which establishes restrictions on artistic production since they require previous approval by the Ministry of Culture. Otherwise, hiring or working without this authorization can lead to fines, event cancellations, or a revocation of working licenses. The restrictive side of the decree-law has in fact sparked heated debates and the social media campaign #NoToThe349Decree (#NoAlDecreto349). The second is the [decree-law 370](#) for the “computerization of Cuban society,” in effect since July 2019, which deals with cybersecurity. There have been two main issues that have raised the alarm among independent journalists. One of them is the illegality of hosting websites on servers outside Cuba (unless it is a replica of a main site on the island). This is necessarily the case of independent media outlets since the national telecommunications company that could host their websites, ETECSA, “discriminates for political reasons” (Periodismo de Barrio 2019a). Although it is not clear whether this resolution can be applied to natural (physical, rather than juridical) persons, it legally could. Another issue has been the 370’s clause 68, which prohibits the dissemination of information “contrary to the common good, morals, decency, and integrity” on social networks (MinCom, 2018: 26).

Clause 68 has already have applied to punish some journalists, who have been summoned and fined in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (Diario de Cuba 2020a; El Estornudo 2020). Independent journalist Claudia Padrón (2020b) has been collecting information from activists, journalists, and influencers who have been sanctioned in the name of the 370 decree-law, which she keeps updated. According to Reporters without Borders, in the light of this decree at least thirty people have been subjected to “interrogation, threats, and seizure of work equipment (especially that of journalists) for broadcasting their opinions on social media,” and twenty people

have received considerable fines (RSF 2020). Not paying those fines can be punished with six-month prison sentences, something that seems to have been applied to several civil society actors (Proyecto Inventario 2020a; RSF 2020).

The ambiguous wording of new laws and decrees, which give discretionary power to those applying them, is reinforced by what some interviewees call the “voluntarism” and “impunity” that characterize the security forces, which are able to impose their will without consequences. This would be particularly serious in the case of decree-laws, since they impose administrative punishments that are faster and easier to apply than the penal code, which requires a long legal procedure. Adding another level of complexity, several decree-laws seem to contradict constitutional rights. That is the case of the Decree-Law 389, which modifies the Penal Code and legalizes electronic surveillance of criminal acts originated abroad, while article 50 of the Constitution guarantees the inviolability of correspondence and other types of communication (e!TOQUE 2019).

To the Decree-Laws 349 and 370, we have to add 373, which regulates independent cinema and audiovisual production, legalizing independent moviemaking—and which was published in the Official Gazette in June 2019. This decree allows non-state-owned film production companies to legalize their status, something they had been demanding since the creation of the Cuban Filmmakers Assembly (g-20) in 2013. Nevertheless, in order to be legal, they need approval by the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Arts and Industry (ICAIC), which also oversees the distribution, promotion, commercialization, and exhibition of the works, and which can continue to censor filmmakers (Boza Ibarra et al. 2019). In fact, the 2020 Young Filmmakers Festival has been cancelled after the ICAIC’s directive board censored the documentary *Sueños al pájaro*, directed by José Luis Aparicio Ferrera y Fernando Fraguela Fosado, due to “political and ideological differences” (e!TOQUE 2020). In solidarity, other filmmakers withdrew their work, leading to the postponement of the event.

Another recent case of censorship has been the 2018 film *Quiero Hacer una Película* (I want to make a movie), directed by Yimit Ramírez. While the film was initially shown in a small theatre, it ended up being cancelled for political reasons. The ICAIC Presidency “had not liked a sentence in the film,” referring to one of the characters’ offensive comment about national liberation hero José Martí, and “rejected any disrespectful expressions towards national symbols and the main figures of [Cuban] history” (El Cine es Cortar 2018). Similarly, Cuban “activist” Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara was arrested in August 2019 for carrying a Cuban flag above his shoulders while walking around the city during carnival.³⁵ A few days later, the Cuban government approved the National

35 Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara was arrested outside his own home on March 1, 2020 and spent 13 days in prison waiting for trial. The arrest took place as he was leaving his home in order to participate in a protest in front of the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television (ICRT), which had censored a gay kiss from their broadcast of the film *Love, Simon* (directed by Greg Berlanti). Among the charges that he accumulates are property damage, desecration of patriotic symbols (he has a performance carrying the Cuban flag in his shoulders during carnival). He was released on March 14, 2020.

Symbols of the Republic of Cuba law, or Law 128, which was published in the Official Gazette of the Republic on September 19, 2019. The law establishes that Cubans should venerate national symbols: “All Cubans have the duty of respecting, taking care of, and paying homage to these symbols, as well as foreigners that are on the national territory” (del Sol González 2020) and can be used for censoring artistic and journalistic production.

While official symbols are reduced in the law to “the flag of the lonely star, the Bayamo anthem and the royal palm tree shield,” there are many unofficial symbols that are sacred in the official discourse, including that of the official press. For instance, on January 1, 2020, some statues of José Martí, national hero and father of Cuban independence in the 19th century, were desecrated with pig’s blood. To this, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel Bermúdez declared that “those who dishonor their deepest roots do not deserve to be called Cuban” (Melo, 2020). The debate, therefore, is not whether it is fair to damage national symbols but whether someone can be less Cuban, or a bad Cuban, for disrespecting them. Who has the power to determine who deserves to be a Cuban journalist, and what happens with those who are denied that honor? Similarly, in Otero Alcántara’s case, the debate is not whether Cuban “artists” deserve being called artists, but whether citizens have the right to oppose the government through intellectual and artistic production. Are Cubans allowed to dissent, to provoke, to disobey? (Viera Cañive and Nieves Cárdenas 2020).

2.3. Consequences of Official Illegitimacy and Illegality

As we have seen, several elements contribute to the limitation of freedom of the press and expression in Cuba. One of them is the subordination of intellectual and artistic expressions to socialist goals, morals, and values through the Constitution and restrictive decree-laws, added to the state’s monopoly over all legal Cuban outlets and their censorship. More recently, there has been a declaration of all independent (or non-state-owned) media outlets as illegal and illegitimate, even blocking access to some of them. Furthermore, in Cuba, there are still limitations to Internet access (although access has progressively increased since 2013, reach and cost are still a problem), digital surveillance and seemingly state-supported smear campaigns against critical (even if not oppositional) voices.

The last few years have seen an increase in repression, particularly in the light of COVID-19-related special measures, as well as in the public visibility of its denunciations (Diario de Cuba 2020b; Proyecto Inventario 2020b, 2020c; RSF 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, an event had already set all alarms off the weekend of January 18, 2020: the simultaneous blockage of virtually all Cuban independent media outlets (adding *Periodismo de Barrio*, *El Toque*, *La Joven Cuba* and *OnCuba.News* to the usual list). Although those that are not usually blocked were rapidly available, the event has been interpreted as a trial, in case the government considered necessary to do so in the future.

Reporters without Borders classifies Cuba as the worst Latin American country in freedom of the press, number 171 in the world out of 180 countries (RSF, 2021). In June 2020, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR), which is an organ of the Organization of American States (OAS, 2020), published a report on human rights violations against Cuban independent journalists, even those who work for socialist media outlets, such as *Periodismo de Barrio*, or who publish critical yet not oppositional pieces.

It can be challenging to understand why Cuba rates so low in international freedom of expression and freedom of the press indexes when there are no killings of journalists reported. One of the reasons is that violence can be direct, but also indirect. Indirect attacks have been reported in other restrictive countries such as Venezuela (Garcia Santamaria and Salojärvi 2020), China (Repnikova 2017), Eritrea (Jolley 2016), and Turkey (Ataman and Coban 2019). The notion of “anti-press harassment” (Hughes and Márquez-Ramírez 2018) is useful for encompassing a broad range of practices that include less visible ways of undermining freedom of speech, such as threats, harassment, smear, and intimidation campaigns, and structural and symbolic violence (Brambila and Hughes 2019). Some Cuba-specific tactics have been the imposition of travel restrictions, police raids at home or at work, the confiscation of working materials, or arbitrary arrests.

Regarding freedom of the press, all journalists who are not affiliated with the Journalists’ Union (UPEC) are unable to obtain a journalistic accreditation even if they have completed a Journalism degree. If they are caught reporting on the street, they are reminded that they are unauthorized to do so and can be threatened, arrested, and become a target of the security forces. Threats expand, on occasions, to independent journalists’ social circle: colleagues, friends, even relatives (14yMedio 2018; CIDH 2020), something causing great psychological distress (Garcia Santamaria, 2019).

Arbitrary detentions, which some interviewees call “kidnapping” (RJ4, RJ7), take place when there is no previous arrest order against a person, nor is it caught committing a crime.³⁶ There are multiple examples of journalists who were arbitrary detained while reporting or who tried to leave their home and were stopped by policemen who “recommend” them not to go anywhere. That is, simply put, a type of home arrest. Even when they are taken to a police station or put in custody, there is often no official document that proves detention. Formally, they have never been arrested. Recently, three journalists from *El Estornudo* were stopped from leaving their home and their mobile data was taken away. However, it is hard to prove because it leaves no material trace and this sparks suspicion, even among their own colleagues. Repeatedly, in the interviews, journalists noted how they themselves were “a little bit naïve” (RJ9) or “skeptical” (RJ16) until they were arrested themselves.³⁷ The consequence is often an overwhelming feeling of fear, paranoia, and vulnerability and a sense that the government could arrest them, short term or even long term, if

36 Interviews number RJ4 and RJ7 to independent journalists. Online interview RJ4 conducted 06/23/2019 and updated the 02/07/2020. Online interview RJ7 conducted 07/03/2020.

37 Interviews number RJ9 and RJ16 to independent journalists. Online interview RJ9 conducted 07/12/2019 and online interview RJ16 conducted 03/12/2019, updated 07/16/2020.

it wanted to (RJ1, RJ2, RJ6, RJ7, RJ9, RJ12, RJ13, RJ22).³⁸ During detentions, it is usual that the authorities erase all the information from journalists’ devices, or simply confiscate them, which is legal under the recent 349 and 370 decree-laws, creating great professional distress (Viera Cañive 2019).

During our interviews, several journalists noted what they saw as an important generational change in independent journalism: endurance, something that older generations had but that young generations are running out of. For instance, *El Estornudo* (2020) has reported that one of its collaborators, Yoe Suárez, has been interrogated six times in the first half of 2020. He was informed that he is not allowed to leave the country and has received threats to his family. As one independent journalist noted: “There is a new generation of recently graduated young journalists that does not resist repression the same way. When they are arrested two, four times, they say: ‘I don’t want to live my whole life like this, I don’t want this to be my future, I don’t want to have children in this country.’ And they decide to emigrate” (RJ3).³⁹

The journalist giving this statement was arrested twice. The second time, he was obliged to sign a document called “warning agreement” (“*acta de advertencia*”), which stated that he had lost the chance to exercise journalism in the country because he left state-run media and would no longer be able to do so. After that, he became scared of getting arrested at any time and decided to emigrate. When journalists are arrested, some are obliged to sign an “acta” in which they commit to not exercising journalism again, since they are not authorized to do so (Periodismo de Barrio 2019b; Viera Cañive 2019). The warning has the goal of making independent journalists uncomfortable, confused, and scared since they can face criminal trials if they appear as committing subsequent “delinquent” acts.⁴⁰

The most common charges against independent journalists, besides “helping the enemy” (Periodismo de Barrio 2019b), refer to unproved common crimes such as theft (Curbelo 2019) or making purchases on the black market, despite it being an essential part of Cuban’s “*invento*” and a major survival strategy for Cubans faced with scarce food and first necessity products. Other purported crimes include contempt (for instance, when the police ask them to stop recording or to give them their recordings and they refuse to do so) (ICLEP 2020a), usurpation of legal capacities (since they are not legally registered as journalists) (Periodismo de Barrio 2019b), and, in the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, propagation of the pandemic.

38 Interviews number RJ1, RJ2, RJ6, RJ7, RJ9, RJ12, RJ13, RJ22 to independent journalists. Online interview RJ1 conducted 06/10/2019; online interview RJ2 conducted 06/17/2019, updated 07/14/2020; online interview RJ13 conducted 05/15/2020; online interview RJ6 conducted 07/07/2019; online interview RJ7 conducted 07/04/2020; online interview RJ12 conducted 07/04/2020; online interview RJ13 conducted 05/15/2019 and personal interview in Valencia (Spain) RJ22 conducted 07/07/2020.

39 Interview number RJ13 to independent journalist. Online interview conducted 05/15/2019.

40 Currently, *Cubanet* journalist Roberto Quiñones is in prison after he was condemned to a one-year sentence for resistance and disobedience (CIDH, 2020).

Despite the current wave of repression, which interviewees trace back to 2018, they also noted several positive changes. One of them is that the social marginalization and rejection of independent journalists seems to be decreasing. For instance, recent demonstrations and joint petitions have shown a growing solidarity between activists (as well as artists) and independent journalists. A second opportunity is that, while silence, shame, and fear predominated for a long time, nowadays those who are arrested often publish their stories, performing acts of political visibility in the digital age (Viera Cañive 2019). A third change, according to the interviewees, is that independent media outlets have found shared interests and have started making them public through joint declarations.

2.4. Restating Legitimacy and Requesting Legality

In a previous section, I have examined the 2018 polemics at the ICAIC’s Young Filmmakers Festival. This event and the lack of news about a cinema law took a group of filmmakers, identified as Cardumen, to sign a joint [declaration](#) on their Facebook page in March of that same year. In the declaration, they denounced the “defamation” of critical filmmakers and producers in the official media and opposed an understanding of cinema that “seeks to put [the audience] to sleep so they mimetically reproduce worn down behaviors, values, and ideologies, disconnected from the complex context” in which Cubans live (Cardumen 2018). This declaration is meaningful because independent filmmakers have inspired independent journalists, who have followed their example.

In the last few years, some independent media outlets have joined forces and published, for the first time, joint declarations asking for freedom of speech and the end of journalists’ harassment. The joint declarations are, according to the interviews, the most relevant change in Cuban independent journalism so far. The first joint declaration was released in October 7, 2019, and gathered nineteen independent media projects (Diario de Cuba 2019).⁴¹ The declaration denounced the increase of attacks against journalists in what it called “a wave of repression against the independent press,” which includes psychological intimidation, verbal attacks, cyber-harassment, and defamation, among others.

In the declaration, independent media outlets stated their legitimacy to exist but also their Cubanness, that is, their right to be Cubans—despite being critical ones. Besides legitimacy, they also claimed legality, asking for the legalization of independent journalism and the repeal of any laws and decrees that tackle freedom of speech and freedom of expression (Diario de Cuba 2019).

41 The independent media outlets that signed this first declaration, and which have continued supporting consecutive ones, are: [14ymedio](#), [ADN Cuba](#), [Alas Tensas](#), [Árbol Invertido](#), [Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa \(APLP\)](#), [CiberCuba](#), [Convivencia](#), [CubaNet](#), [Diario de Cuba](#), [El Estornudo](#), [Havana Times](#), [Hypermedia Magazine](#), [La Hora de Cuba](#), [Play-Off Magazine](#), [Proyecto Inventario](#), [Puente a la Vista](#), [Rialta](#), [Tremenda Nota](#), [YucaByte](#).

In return, they committed to certain ethical and professional values: truthfulness, public interest, fact-checking, objectivity, impartiality, and the differentiation between information, opinion and advertisement.

The second declaration was published on March 10, 2020 (ADN Cuba 2020) and was addressed against the summary trial of visual artist Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, who was released from jail after an international outcry. While these joint declarations are not signed by all independent media outlets, they have served as a way of uniting most of them around a shared cause. A few years ago, it would have been unthinkable to see, in the same declaration, activists, citizen journalists and journalists who have graduated from Cuban public universities. In fact, they saw themselves as belonging to two different worlds. Another reason that explains why these joint declarations are so important is that “they break away with the culture of fear inculcated into Cubans from childhood” (Dafoe 2020), a fear against becoming the internal enemy.

A third joint request took place on June 6, 2020, and was updated in June 15, when around fifty Cuban independent media outlets and international organizations declared the Decree-Law 370 unconstitutional.⁴² All signatory media outlets disseminated the request on their websites denouncing the decree’s clear restriction of freedom of expression, association, and political participation, considering it contrary to Articles 8, 40, 41, 47, 54 and 228 of the 2019 Constitution (Proyecto Inventario 2020a, 2020b). Another joint declaration of Cuban independent media outlets and international organizations was released a month later, on July 3, asking for the liberation of journalist Jorge Enrique Rodríguez, who was arrested for contempt and faced prison charges (ICLEP, 2020b). He was released that same day.

2.5. Escalation of Unrest

Tension between the Government and civil society has been escalating since late 2020. The trigger was the arrest of rapper Denis Solís in late November. Since Solís belonged to the Movimiento San Isidro (MSI), some of its members started a hunger strike in solidarity that lasted ten days, until they were evicted from their premises on November 26. Videos and testimonies of violence sparked a chain reaction. On November 27, about three hundred artists and intellectuals gathered in front of the Ministry of Culture (Havana), asking for greater artistic and intellectual freedom and demanding a meeting with government officials. In an unprecedented move, Vice Minister of Culture Fernando Rojas agreed to meet with thirty representatives that same night and to open new channels for bilateral dialogue.

The demonstration culminated with the creation of the 27N movement. In a formal request, the group designated the head of the MSI, Luis Manuel Otero Alcántara, and some independent journalists, as spokespersons. However, the Ministry did not like this move, and hopes were dashed when it linked Otero Alcántara and other intellectuals to foreign anti-Cuban organizations.

42 The request was presented on June 8 to the National Assembly, the Council of State and the Supreme Court.

This series of events has sparked a new wave of repression against intellectuals, including independent journalists. In fact, several journalists have denounced summons by the police, interrogations, and incarceration threats. Journalists’ consensus is that the state is running out of moves. “They could not silence us, it’s time to discredit us,” wrote *Periodismo de Barrio*’s editor-in-chief Elaine Díaz on Twitter (DDC 2020). This has been accompanied by a smear campaign on national television. One of the most flagrant examples has been TV anchor Humberto López, who has accused independent journalists and artists of supporting a “yanqui” intervention in Cuba, threatening them with prison (Cibercuba 2021). Civil society has responded in turn, by creating a social media campaign that invites citizens to shut their TV down during the evening newscast, using the #NTVmiente (national television lies) and the #YoApagoYoAhorro (I shut [it] down, I save) hashtags.

Two months after the initial demonstration, on January 27, a number of members of the MSI and 27N movement gathered in front of the Ministry of Culture for a second time, unchaining further repression (Cubadebate 2021b). Ever since, the 27N has filed a motion to dismiss the Culture Minister, Alpidio Alonso Grau, who was recorded physically confronting pacific demonstrators.⁴³ In doing so, he violated Article 56 of the Constitution, which ensures citizens’ right to peaceful protests. Furthermore, the petitioners listed seven other laws that would legally support the dismissal.

Amid this surge in confrontation, new regulations have restated the illegality of independent journalistic practice. In February 2021, the Ministry of Work issued an apparently innocuous list of 2000 activities that could be developed by the private sector. However, the list also included 124 that were reserved to the state, including artistic, cultural, and journalistic jobs, as well as education and health workers (Cubadebate 2021a). In this context, the hopes for dialogue that arose in late 2020 have stalled and the polarization between the state and civil society seems greater than ever.

Final Remarks

This report has examined the impact of digital technologies in the life of Cuban citizens creating a new type of “mobile postsocialism” (Duong 2021) that has a political potential, yet manifests itself in the creation of a range of business, professional, and emotional spheres that are increasingly shared by Cubans on the Island and abroad. This is no different in the emergent independent mediasphere, which is composed of media outlets with a clear quality and public service vocation, while others are more business or entertainment oriented. The unfolding of the independent mediasphere has been taking place amid a new wave of governmental repression against independent journalism, dating back to 2018, and which has seen an increase of measures that make its practice both illegitimate and illegal. The levels of polarization in Cuban political culture mean that even journalists who are willing to “moderate” their criticism to enable dialogue are harassed and accused of being US mercenaries who want to discredit the government.

43 <https://www.change.org/p/ministerio-de-cultura-de-cuba-dimisi%C3%B3n-de-alpidio-alonso>

The approval of new legislation increasingly justifying arrests and administrative punishments for ideological reasons, and the traditional impunity and voluntarism of the security forces, together create a climate of fear and vulnerability in which practicing independent journalism becomes an arduous task, often leading to young journalists' migration. Nevertheless, the report highlights positive changes that have allowed Cuban independent journalists to unite around ideals of professionalism and watchdog practices, but also around common interests. In fact, one of the main changes has been the improvement of relations between journalists who are close to activism and those who defend professional impartiality. This has enabled the publication of a series of joint declarations in which many independent media outlets denounce the curtailing of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. These declarations help gather international attention around their causes in an effort to regain legitimacy and publicly request legality.

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