Digital Media and the Promotion of Deliberative Debate in Cuba

Sara Garcia Santamaria

May 31, 2018

A Report by the Internet Policy Observatory at the Annenberg School, University of Pennsylvania
About the Report

This report aims to examine digital independent media projects in Cuba within the broader media ecosystem in which they operate. More specifically, it looks at the context in which some journalists become disengaged from the Cuban institutional media system and decide to create independent spaces for debate and deliberation online. However, this research complicates the commonly believed notion that these alternative digital publications naturally catalyze debate that is both critical and oppositional. The report draws on previous literature, digital debates on political ‘centrism’ in Cuba and in-depth interviews with Cuban journalists in order to assess the way in which an intellectual elite claims a disenfranchisement of politics from the state. The report has been conducted thanks to a fellowship from the Internet Policy Observatory at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, and is part of a broader project. On the academic side, it will expand into an academic paper that examines the impact of the Internet and digital technologies on (1) journalistic discourses, (2) journalist’s in-group and out-group interactions and (3) larger media structures in Cuba. On the journalistic side, it is published in parallel to the dossier The Internet in Cuba, produced by the independent magazine Periodismo de Barrio. For more details about this work, please email garcias.sara@gmail.com

About the Author

Sara Garcia is a journalist and a research fellow at the Internet Policy Observatory, Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. She holds a BA in Journalism Studies from Universitat de Valencia (Spain) and an MA in Global Journalism from University of Sheffield, which she completed with a postgraduate scholarship from La Caixa Foundation. She completed her PhD at the same institution, looking at the historical construction of the Cuban people in the institutional media. Over the last four years, she has worked as a Teaching Assistant, leading lectures and seminars on a wide range of modules regarding civic media and global journalism. Sara has written several papers and journalistic reportages on media and polarization in Latin America (see Zielonka, 2016, Oxford University Press) and is a founding organizer of the conference Media and Governance in Latin America (University of Leeds). Sara’s research has benefited from grants from the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS), the Society of Latin American Studies (SLAS), and the David Nicholls Foundation (University of Oxford). Thanks to these grants, she has conducted fieldwork at the Faculty of Communication, University of Havana (Cuba) between 2013 and 2017. Over the past few years, Sara’s research goes beyond the state-run press and is increasingly focused on the negotiation of power relations between new and old media actors (and discourses) in Cuba. She is also involved in different projects that situate the case of Cuba in a comparative perspective, examining it in the light of recent developments in other Latin American and (post)soviet countries.

About the Internet Policy Observatory

The Internet Policy Observatory (IPO) is a project at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The overarching goal of the program is to deepen the reservoir of researchers and advocates in regions where Internet freedom is threatened or curtailed and to support the production of innovative, high-quality, and impactful Internet policy research. The IPO facilitates collaboration between research and advocacy communities, builds research mentorships between emerging and established scholars, and engages in trainings to build capacity for more impactful digital rights research and advocacy.

Through the IPO’s three-pronged approach, the program seeks to educate a network of advocates and researchers, produce high-impact, locally-relevant research in furtherance of Internet freedom objectives, and help connect researchers and mentors to foster collaboration, mobilization, and increase research impact.
Over the last decade or so, independent digital media projects in Cuba have been slowly eroding state hegemony over information and communication channels. Although change has come more slowly to nations where governments have closer control of media and communication systems, journalists and activists are increasingly able to circumvent these strictures in order to access and produce information unencumbered by governments. Currently, Cuban journalists are able—although not officially entitled—to collaborate with independent media outlets, or to create independent and for-profit digital publications. Online spaces of debate facilitate the coverage of new social phenomena and articulate a plurality of opinions. The Internet has improved journalists’ and intellectuals’ sense of agency, giving visibility to non-institutional, counter-hegemonic discourses and narratives. However, while these technological developments and increased Internet access on the Island have enabled new spaces for independent media, the potential enabling functionalities of the Internet for deliberation and democratization is constrained by the culturally and socially defined limits around debate, criticism, deliberation, and professional journalism standards.

The goal of this report is to examine the Cuban media ecosystem from a historical perspective, analyzing sources of change and resistance both within institutional and independent digital media projects. Following Voltmer (2013), I argue that the Internet and digital platforms can only become a democratizing force when all civil society actors are willing to accept dissenting voices and to recognize the honesty and rationality of different arguments. Therefore, this project argues that digital media projects can potentially challenge the polarizing narratives circulated through the state-owned media, fostering potential for increased deliberative debate.

Previous research has highlighted the importance of an independent mediasphere in articulating and disseminating counter-hegemonic political projects (Castells, 2007). A great deal of research on Cuban independent digital media has focused on oppositional digital media projects, assuming that information and communication technologies can facilitate the circulation of information and amplify dissenting voices and could thus eventually lead to regime change. However, mere access to the Internet and digital media does not ensure that online spaces will become inherently democratic, or democratizing (Voltmer, 2013; Venegas, 1999). The use of new technologies is structured by cultural and political norms as well as the cognitive paradigms that are established in a particular society. In this report, I describe the counter-hegemonic digital space in Cuba as not necessarily oppositional. While some civic media projects use digital spaces to disseminate oppositional messages, others work within the limits of revolutionary belonging.

Following Coleman and Moss (2012), I see deliberative citizenship, that is, the normative ideal of having democratically reflective citizens, as something that is constructed within particular societies and by particular historical experiences. This construction is mediated by power and depends on institutional structures as well as naturalized social relations that work within the availability of hegemonic discourses that are enabled by a particular social setting. This notion of deliberation assumes a normative preference for a certain type of debate, while restricting others. The deliberative citizen is associated with well-informed, thoughtful individuals that are open to sharing their point of view with others and are willing to dedicate time and effort to listen to and engage in debates with those holding opposing views, looking for compromise and consensus (Coleman and Moss, 2012). The concept of deliberation assumes that power relations are inevitable yet can be managed through rational consensus. Therefore, it downplays or overlooks the deliberative potential of forms of expression that are perceived as extreme, partisan, impassioned, emotional, uncivil or polarizing. In this report, deliberation is not confined to a particular form of expression, but instead is used as a standard that
indicates the agonistic potential for debate.

People become democrats by slowly sharpening their negotiating skills through debates with others who disagree, often in fundamental ways and over truly important issues (Schouls, 2002). The role of digital media in authoritarian societies raises many questions: To what extent can digital media foster a culture of debate by exposing citizens to alternative viewpoints and new channels for debate? To what extent are independent digital media projects truly independent from political, market or religious influences? What are the underlying goals of these projects? Do they reproduce broader polarized structures? Are journalists, especially journalists working in digital spaces, committed to systemic institutional change and involved to some extent in pushing in this direction?

Some scholars have called non-institutional journalists the ‘visible challengers’ of the hegemonic informational system (Geoffray and Chaguaceda, 2014). Digital technologies have enabled the amplification of voices that do not fit the structure of the institutional media. By operating outside of traditional media structures, which are state owned, digital journalists in Cuba have freed alternative discourses from structural coercion. Independent media projects have decided not to negotiate their legal, economic and symbolic space with the state, but to instead operate outside of these formal frameworks. In doing so, they have challenged the institutionalized forms of journalistic practice, mediated debate, emancipated information, and pushed the frontiers of legitimacy established by the state.

This report argues that independent digital media projects in Cuba are external to the revolutionary institutional system and, therefore, have a dislocative potential. In this way, independent media projects can be seen as potential sources of transformation of media structures and political subjectivities. For instance, digital media is playing an increasingly important role in advocating for freedom of speech, political participation and media policy debates in the Island. However, it remains unclear to what extent such changes are having an impact on mainstream Cuban debate. Further, the relationship of this debate to Cuban revolutionary ideals and to the framing of journalistic identity in this context is developing.

This report contributes to a wider scholarly debate on the role of digital media and the Internet beyond western democracies. Within the literature, there are many scholars and experts with opposing views who either see the Internet as either a clear democratizing force or, on the other hand, view it as simply a tool that can work at the service of authoritarian governments. This is also an extension of a longer debate on the role of the media within democratization and political change. While some academic research positions the media at the heart of democratic transitions, especially within research focused on the so-called third wave of democratization (Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015), other studies have questioned the importance and role of the media in transitional societies. While the rapid growth of technology has brought with it promises of greater democratization, new media technologies have proved insufficient to counterbalance older structural problems with media and political systems in Latin America (Márquez-Ramírez and Guerrero, 2014), Eastern and Central Europe (Voltmer, 2013; Zielonka, 2015; Štětka, 2015; Jebri, Stetka and Loveless, 2015) and China (Repnikova, 2015; Hassid and Repnikova, 2016). Indeed, some studies go as far as to see independent media projects as reinforcing the resilience of authoritarian regimes, giving them a façade of tolerance, serving as an escape valve for citizens’ and journalists’ frustrations, and channeling bottom-up demands towards the edges of public debate and policy-making.

In order to better understand the current landscape of digital media participation, the project first describes the history of Cuban journalism, framing the current situation in terms of the development of journalistic identity and the culture of political speech. Next, it places the emergence of digital technology within the context of recent political and social changes in Cuba. Finally, it begins the process of examining the impact of digital media on the destabilization of hegemonic discourses and structures. While
this report seeks to better understand what kind of positive impact this destabilization can have (for example, by encouraging challenges to existing power relations and serving as a catalyst for the consolidation of a new culture of deliberation), it remains unclear how and to what extent digital media will impact political discourse in the country. I argue that digital technologies are having an impact on (1) media discourses, (2) journalists’ and citizens’ interactions with existing power structures and (3) media structures. I further explore how these digital spaces are also reconfiguring professional identity for journalists and reshaping the idea of a ‘Cuban’ media system that no longer identifies with clear-cut national borders.

This report is part of a wider project that examines the impact of the Internet and digital technologies on the Cuban media system in terms of structure, content and interaction. Drawing on scholarship about Cuban journalism, as well as in-depth interviews with Cuban academics and practitioners, the project attempts to contextualize the media structures and the journalistic culture in which independent digital projects are emerging and trying to assert their professional value. From 2013 to 2017, I have conducted several research stays at the Faculty of Communication, University of Havana. There, I have interviewed over thirty Cuban scholars, as well as journalists working for both institutional and independent media projects. While the non-official media landscape is diverse (Henken, 2017), the goal of this research was to understand the experience, thoughts and hopes of those working in the Island (rather than abroad) for the official media or for non-official media projects that are not necessarily confrontational. These cases are particularly interesting for understanding how boundaries of ideological commitment and professional independence are negotiated and the way technologies and online spaces change norms and institutional structures for these journalists. The interviews were not thought of as being representative of the opinion of all Cuban journalists, but rather to shed light on the personal struggles of journalists when dealing with often conflicting personal, professional and ideological interests. The interviewees were selected through a combination of theoretical (a review of graduate and postgraduate theses conducted at the Faculty of Communication, University of Havana) and snowball sampling techniques.

Historical Contextualization

The institutional media of Cuba have constructed ‘the Cuban people’ using a populist logic that presents ‘the people’ as united for the achievement of shared goals (Garcia Santamaria, 2017). With the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the official discourse articulated the ‘revolutionary people’ as equivalent to the 19th-century guerrilla fighters in the quest for national sovereignty. This national unity was opposed to the construction of an external enemy –US imperialism– that constrained the fulfilment of historical, revolutionary, and popular demands for dignity, independence, and social justice. Therefore, ‘the enemy’, rather than the failures of the revolutionary system itself, distorted the fulfilment of people’s will.

While the Cuban leadership has historically maintained a communicational and informational hegemony, which ensured the dissemination of the official discourse in the media, recent changes in the media and technological landscape have enabled the appearance of digital spaces of debate, ending the Communist Party of Cuba’s (Partido Comunista de Cuba, PCC) hegemonic control of the entire media system. In this new communicational setting, people’s unmet demands are not just seen as the systematic result of a Revolution led astray from its democratic principles by an external enemy. Instead, a look at independent digital publications indicates a discursive move from the externalization to the internalization of ‘the enemy’, presented as bureaucratic resistance to a people-led change (Garcia Santamaria, 2017).

Previous research suggests that the state-owned media have discursively constructed an opposition between a united people, represented by the Party-state, in permanent conflict with an external enemy
(García Luis, 2013; Garcés, 2013; Oller Alonso and Olivera Pérez, 2016; Garcia Santamaria, 2017). For the revolutionary government, the configuration of the new society had to be done simultaneously with the defense of the country against the external forces that threatened its existence. The early polarization between threat and defense became part of the collective imaginary, maintaining a strong symbolic legitimizing power until the advent of the Internet. According to Bobes (2008), the two original enemies became both ‘US imperialism’ and individuals and groups opposed or indifferent to the revolutionary project. The discursive construction of an external enemy, which was closely connected to any internal resistance, was used as a way of transforming internal economic and ideological crises into a David versus Goliath fight and calling for a People-Party unity so to face enemy-induced challenges.

Past US and Cuban government policies have transformed the Cuban Internet into a highly contested space where alternative voices online were continually at risk of being co-opted or associated with “the enemy”. In her work on Cuban civil society, Sujatha Fernandes (2006) describes the ways that the Torricelli Act (1992), the Helms Burton Act (1996), and the establishment of the USAID mission (1996) pushed Cuban hardliners to continue to emphasize national security concerns in the media. These efforts reinforced an already deep-rooted fear of foreign attacks and subversion, the so-called mentality of siege.

Media censorship and Internet access restrictions in Cuba have been motivated by this besieged society paradigm (Venegas, 2007; Henken, 2011; Hoffmann, 2011; Rubira and Gil-Egui, 2013). The Cuban government has a deep-seated mistrust of foreign organizations and abhors foreign interference—a fear that also stems from the country’s colonial and neo-colonial past. Therefore, it has historically been suspicious of the use of new technologies, as they are seen as potential threats to the Cuban regime. In recent decades, several governmental sponsored projects in the United States have supported blogs and Cuban microblogging as a means of sparking oppositional movements (Henken and Ritter, 2014). For instance, USAID programs to promote digital technologies and communication on the Island, such as Zunzuneo, are seen as subversive covert operations by Cuban authorities (even if the US government frames them as a way of deploying ‘development assistance’) (Baron and Hall, 2015). Therefore, initiatives aimed at granting Internet access and digital rights to the population have been presented as not only threatening to the communicational hegemony of the Cuban government, but also as facilitating a US-backed subversion of the state.

Over the last few years, Cuba has experienced a series of major changes that will require a rearticulation of what it means to be a revolutionary, and of the Revolution itself. The founding father of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, died on 25 November 2016, leaving his 85-year-old brother Raúl full responsibility in the maintenance and renewal of the revolutionary project until his step down from power in April 2018. The main state-led campaign of internal renewal has been the ‘Updating’ of the Cuban economic and social model, which has the ambitious task of setting the path for the survival of a post-Castro Revolution. Fidel’s death occurred approximately 2 years after the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, on 17 December 2014, which initiated a period of ‘normalization’ and negotiation on issues of mutual concern.

The Cuban Revolution has endured periods of crises before. The main difference is that current changes are being played out in a different communicational setting characterized by the rise of online spaces and independent media actors that give visibility to alternative discourses and structures, threatening the Party-state hegemony. The Cuban media ecosystem is no longer limited to institutional channels and publications and there are currently a range of non-institutional projects that are independent from Party structures and, therefore, are able to give voice to a plurality of opinions.
The Cuban Mediasphere: Understanding Institutional Journalism

With few exceptions (Pérez González, 2012; Rivero, 2015; Oller Alonso and Olivera Pérez, 2016) the Cuban official media has remained widely understudied outside Cuba. Even if graduate and postgraduate research on Cuban media is now common in the Island’s six journalism schools, scholarly work is relatively recent and remains mostly unpublished and limited in circulation to academic circles (García Luis, 2013). This section reviews the history of Cuban media, analyzing the evolution of the Cuban institutional media system as well as the role of journalists within this media structure. It then goes on to analyze how the mismatch between journalists’ normative values and the limitations of professional practice has been essential for the creation of digital media projects that are independent from the state.

The Cuban state-run media is institutionally linked to the Cuban Communist Party and other mass organizations (Londoño, 2016). Therefore, it is an inherent part of the political system and is indeed both dependent on and subordinate to the Ideological Department of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. This structural dependency means members of the media lack the agency that would allow them to foster professionally-led changes (García Luis, 2013). After its creation in 1965, the Communist Party of Cuba assumed full responsibility for ‘all matters of ideology’, appointing editors and taking control over media content and organizational structures (Castro Ruz, 1965).

As the Cuban media is contingent on the political system, there is little autonomy for journalists to determine their own professional practices. The Cuban 1976 Constitution recognizes freedom of speech within socialism in article 53 and determines the ‘state or social ownership’ of media outlets. This state ownership was constructed to ensure the automatic service of the media in the interest of the people. However, freedom of speech is limited to those who operate ‘inside the Revolution’ (following Fidel Castro’s ‘Words to the Intellectuals’) and ‘within socialism’, as stated in article 53 of the 1992 Constitution (PCC, 1992). The Constitution establishes that the media has a ‘state or social property’ which, while still unclear in its precise meaning, bans the creation of privately owned media projects. The ambiguity that lies at the heart of this claim illustrates the official articulation of state and popular interests as equivalent. The following section will discuss the way in which Cuban journalists challenge the articulation of the Party as a natural representative of a single collective will.

Cuban Journalists and Challenges to the Party

The early goal of the revolutionary media was to contribute to the transformation of ‘the people’ into Che Guevara’s idea of ‘the new revolutionary man’ (Guevara and Castro, 1989). The Cuban media were put at the service of ‘the Revolution’- something that came at the cost of ‘external regulation’ (regulación externa) –the term used by Cuban scholar Julio García Luis (2013) to politely refer to political control and censorship. In the literature, the external control of the media is attributed to three main motives: (1) the fear of losing the communicational hegemony, (2) the need for protecting the Revolution from foreign propaganda, and (3) newsrooms’ adoption of Soviet-like bureaucratic structures. In fact, some leading researchers argue that the media remains the most ‘Soviet’ institution in Cuba (Guanche, 2008; García Luis, 2013).

Defying the United States provided the Revolution with the necessary enemy that is always of service to nation building efforts (Kapcia, 2014) and active political mobilization (González, 1974). According to García Luis (2013: 23), ‘the definition of the press model in the 60s presupposed a united society, a united and strong Party and a press that would not give any space to the US and counter-revolutionaries’.
Therefore, the unwritten rule to deal with foreign aggression was to not publish anything that could be used against Cuba. However, the controversy appeared when deciding what 'Cuba' stood for, and what could endanger national security. According to García Luis, the defense against an external threat has often been hyperbolized and magnified in political discourse and in the media, which have manipulated discourse in order to hide the miseries and the problems of the country.

Contrary to common assumptions, Cuban journalists have long been aware of the impact that their ideological and moral commitment to the Revolution had on their work (Garcia Santamaria, 2017). The journalistic community to a large extent understands that this revolutionary obligation did come at a price in terms of personal and professional goals. Therefore, acceptance of the realities of being a journalist in Cuba and associated political obligations coexisted with professional strategies to resist external Party control and creatively develop personal voice. Some efforts led to the development of the literary journalism that emerged in the 1980s (Pérez González, 2012). Other strategies included using humor and cynicism as ways to cope with external control over journalistic content and practices. For instance, journalists used to joke in newsrooms about ‘playing the lyrical violin’ and doing ‘poetic sorcery’ in order to dress upon reporting on highly bureaucratic and uninteresting news. The ‘lyrical violin’ was often played when covering agricultural stories with the ideological aim to portray a highly productive country as means of boosting people’s optimism. The unwritten rule that guided journalistic writing was the promotion of an optimistic, moralistic, and triumphalist view of Cuban achievements. While these early strategies of professional resistance were not aimed at changing the power structures that sustained Party oversight over the media, they were a way of reasserting journalists’ professional value and, therefore, developing journalism as a professional body.

Transformative Forces within the System

Ernesto Londoño, editorialist from the New York Times, has urged Cuban journalists to align themselves with citizens’ rather than state interests. Taking risks, he argues, is essential for shaping the future of a Cuban media:

“If journalists employed by the state press began seeing themselves as representatives of the people, rather than the Communist Party, these vital questions would become unavoidable. I suggest this while recognizing the substantial risks that come with challenging authority in a police state. Yet, transformational journalism always requires taking risks. For the sake of their country’s future, I hope that more Cuban journalists decide to join those who have already crossed red lines.” (Londoño, 2016)

The following pages will discuss the contradiction between Cuban journalists’ demands for professionalization and the failure to translate their claims into empirical change. Journalists have traditionally adapted to the pressure of the Party and have channelled their creativity —and their cynicism— through the use of rhetorical devices. However, interviews with Cuban journalists and media academics for this research reveal a progressive change of strategy, influenced by the so-called ‘Updating of the Economic and Social Model’ and the erosion of old media hegemonies.

Interviews with Cuban journalists working both for state-run and independent media outlets indicate a clear awareness of the need to go beyond rhetoric and to transform media structures and journalistic practices in Cuba (Geoffray and Chaguaceda, 2014). This demand stems not only from journalists and academics, but also from the highest levels of power,
who see the media as a strategic tool for renewing and maintaining their hegemony. Professional journalism could be a useful tool for the Party, as it could be used to identify social problems and to channel social discontent (Elizalde, 2013). The ‘Updating’ of the Cuban model, although explicitly claiming to be non-political, has put reforms under the spotlight and produced a rich and robust debate in all spheres of society, including the news media (Cubadebate, 2017). This debate, however, has failed to change power structures within newsrooms and the mainstream media thus remains stubbornly ‘official’. This point is essential, as many decision-makers still conceptualize journalism as an ideological tool at the service of the Revolution, dismissing liberal values as bourgeois.

Cuban researcher Julio César Guanche (2008: 207) conceives of the main problem of the Cuban media as conceptual and structural, rather than professional or technological. For the Cuban researcher, ‘it is not a question of getting people to talk, but of getting the ideopolitical models that guide these people’s behaviour to talk’. In a letter responding to a journalist who blamed corruption for eradicating the ideals of socialism, Fidel Castro addressed journalists’ responsibility for the problems not just in journalism, but in Cuban society. Fidel’s answer is an example of the way in which structural problems are rearticulated as personal responsibility:

“You [the journalist] asserted with honesty that you are not interested in a grey, short-sighted, and boring socialism. The degree to which it becomes boring, short-sighted and grey will depend, among others, on the use that our journalists make of the mass media that the Revolution has put in their hands.” (Castro, 2008)

This definition of the problems that socialism faces are echoed in the words that Raúl Castro chose a few years later when describing the Cuban media as ‘boring, improvised, and superficial’ (Castro, 2011). The above quote is also an example of the government’s ability to acknowledge Cuban journalists’ complaints and to coopt them in the official speech.

The ‘Updating’ of the system has been accompanied by a campaign against secrecy, promoted by political leaders, as well as the institutional media. The 2007 resolution of the ‘Politburo of the Central Committee’ (‘Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba’) to increase informational efficacy states that, except for state and military secrets, nobody has the right to deny information to journalists. August’s (2013) ethnographic research reveals that journalists perceive access to sources as one of their main obstacles. The anti-secrecy battle has also been promoted by the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC), which has a section on their website named ‘Sin Secretismo’ (or ‘Without Secrets’), and which publishes journalists’ experiences with administrative workers and public organizations who deny them information (Marrero, 2013). Cuban newspapers have occasionally denounced the sources’ refusal to talk to the media (Siberia García, 2009). However, this campaign only addresses the work of journalists working for the institutional media and does not protect the rights of those who belong to independent media outlets.

The Union of Journalists’ Code of Ethics (UPEC, 2013) recognizes journalists’ right to access public information, and to confront those organisms that obstruct this access (arts. 3 and 4). However, journalists cannot use the media in order to discredit or slander people and institutions (art. 7). There is an explicit reference to the denigration of other journalists or media outlets, which is forbidden (art. 11). Similarly, journalists cannot use the media to ‘undeservedly’ exalt non-revolutionary projects (art. 7). While triumphalism is considered unethical, so is hypercriticism and the manipulation of information. Furthermore, the ability of journalists to influence the media agenda is dependent on the fulfilment of the editorial line and informational policies of their institution (although they can participate in its production, and assessment) (art. 14).

The interviews with journalists for this research reveal that scholars and practitioners are pressing for extending the ‘Updating’ of the Revolution to the
ideological field, allowing for a structural change in the media and the political system in line with the ongoing socio-economic and technological changes (Garcés, 2013). Yet, current debates are still quite contradictory. Interviews with Cuban journalists and media scholars reveal the double contradiction that lies at the heart of the Cuban media system, which fails the standards of high quality western journalism as well as official discourses within Cuba of “openness” (Cubadebate, 2017). This contradiction lies at the heart of a political discourse that calls for open debate, yet prioritizes national unity over plurality, and unanimity above dissent.

The contradiction between calls for openness and systemic immobility can have both positive and negative repercussions. Calls to openness give hope to practitioners and legitimize attempts to promote changes from within. However, there are still too many people with decision-making power who are personally afraid of change and do not allow journalists to dig deeper. At the same time, journalists are often materially deprived. The doctoral research of Elizalde (2013) has found a correlation between the material hardship of journalists, external political control, and deprofessionalization. Her research indicates that it is not the absence of journalists’ professional skills what leads to external control and poor remuneration, but instead limitations in media coverage that lead to both deprofessionalization and the material hardships that journalists have to endure in newsrooms. This situation contributes to attitudes of professional acomodamiento and cynicism. This project’s interviews with journalists indicate that if they had material stimuli or a promise for professional advancement, or other promising job prospects, many consider that it would be easier and more desirable to push for more ideal changes in the institutional media system.

Finally, I argue that journalists who choose to work with the institutional media system are conditioned by four main factors: (1) the deprofessionalization of journalism –understood as material hardship, lack of professional authority and generational discontinuity–; (2) the naturalization of external control—whether administrative, political, ideological or economic–; (3) journalists’ multiple and often contradicting identification with the Revolution—as well as other signifiers attached to it: nationalism, socialism or social justice, among others (4) and the internalization of certain roles and values that are presented not just as helping the Revolution, but also as providing professional rewards within the state-run media—such as compliance, faith or optimism (Bobes, 2008).

The State of the Internet in Cuba

While Cuba still has the lowest Internet connectivity in the western hemisphere, the country is now witnessing the improvement of infrastructures and associated increases in connectivity— including, email access through mobile phones, the proliferation of public Wi-Fi spots, home Internet access, and reduced prices for Internet cards. As part of the Cuba-US negotiations that followed the ‘normalization’ of diplomatic relations in 2014, the Island authorized the export of communication devices and the investment of telecommunications companies. However, there has not been a regulatory framework that guarantees a free and safe Internet, citizens’ digital rights or the protection of freedom of speech and freedom of the press online.

In the midst of outdated policies and a virtual legal vacuum, some civil society actors have voiced reservations about the implementation of a regulatory framework for online spaces and speech. According to these groups, new media and Internet regulations could endanger Internet access, ban independent media projects or establish restrictive laws for their creation and functioning. While there is a need for protecting the rights of independent journalists and projects, the fear of censorship and retaliation prevails.

On global rankings, Cuba often appears as one of the countries with the greatest number of Internet access restrictions (Freedom House, 2018). A study conducted by the Open Observatory of
Network Interference (OONI) examined a sample of 1,458 Cuban and international URLs in 2017 and concluded that there are 41 websites blocked in the Island (Xynou et al., 2017). Among these, there were 14 websites classified as news media, and 11 that contain some sort of political criticism. While there is a great degree of tolerance for digital media projects that are critical of the government, some digital media outlets and blogs have been blocked (such as 14yMedio or El Estornudo). Nevertheless, these websites are available to Cubans over HTTPS, and their social media accounts can also be accessed from Cuba.

The OONI report identified a ‘lack of sophistication’ in both Internet surveillance and censorship in Cuba (Xynou et al., 2017). Other works have also highlighted the difficulty of justifying open censorship (Geoffray and Chaguaceda, 2014; Garcia Santamaria, 2017). The task of reacting to critical opinions online includes uncivil comments and verbal personal attacks, attempts at defamation, online harassment and even threats (Cárdenas Lema, 2018). This task is delegated, either directly or indirectly, to those who organize acts of repudiation in person, or to those online that defend the official position, either on their blogs or under ‘fake’ social media accounts (Díaz Rodríguez, 2018). Therefore, limited access, both in terms of cost and availability, has been the main strategy for managing critical opinions.

Cuba is a particularly interesting case, since it illustrates citizens’ ability to exploit the informational and communicational possibilities of digital technologies through a combination of online and offline networks, thanks to an Internet-savvy population. Since 2014, and as part of the US-Cuba bilateral agreements, Internet access indicators have improved. According to official data, there are 684 public Wi-Fi hotspots in the Island (ETECSA, 2018a), around 10% of Cubans own a computer and over 40 per cent has Internet access -although this does not differentiate between national access to the Intranet and international access to the Internet (ONE, 2017a). In December 2016, the state telecommunications company ETECSA announced a 25% reduction of Internet connection prices, and household Internet access has been available since March 2017 (it is expected that 38,000 households will have home access this year). The Internet is accessible in certain areas connected to public Wi-Fi, ETECSA and Joven Club Internet cafes (ETECSA, 2018b), and home access in designated areas across the country (ETECSA, 2018c).

In order to connect to public Wi-Fi spots, citizens can buy temporary cards that are valid for a period of 30 days from the first connection. ETECSA cards offer from 30 minutes to 5 hours of Internet access, and there is a limit of 3 cards per purchase, a potential mechanism for managing the illegal selling of Internet cards on the black market. Presenting an ID is required when purchasing temporary Internet cards, although it is not clear whether the ID is linked to the accounts that are issued with the temporary Internet cards. Prices range from 0.10 CUC per hour for accessing the national web (Intranet) and 1 CUC per hour for accessing the Internet (ETECSA, 2018a).

Tech-savvy communities have also created informal Wi-Fi networks that, while illegal, have often been tolerated by authorities. They operate through repeaters that magnify Wi-Fi signals. Those StreetNets, or SNets, a hidden network of Wi-Fi antennas and broadband cables (either handmade or purchased in the black market) are linked through rooftops and have been mostly used to play videogames online (Díaz Rodríguez, 2014). While it is hard to determine how many people use these networks, Cuban researcher Fidel Alejandro Rodríguez (2016) points out that, as of 2016, one of the main sites had over 25,000 registered users.

Despite limitations on Internet access on the Island, Cubans have developed ways of distributing digital files offline. Cubans have been using the Internet and digital technologies in unanticipated ways through online and offline digital platforms of access, such as USB sticks, SMS and email chains, CDs and DVDs, illegal TV antennas, and the ‘weekly information package’ (‘el paquete semanal’) that are periodically updated and include both news and entertainment. These channels have created opportunities for interpersonal communication, amusement, and sharing of blog posts or magazines in PDF.
Recent changes in the media and technological landscape have enabled the creation of online media projects, ending the state's hegemonic control of the media system and enabling a public debate about the revolutionary discourse and current issues. Internet regulation and the control of information online are still at a relatively early stage. This has left room for the proliferation of independent media projects online, taking advantage of the legal vacuum. While most non-institutional publications are tolerated insomuch they avoid political comments, having personal initiative and starting independent media projects without waiting for a state license can be considered an act of political resistance on its own. Given the structure of the Cuban media system, independent projects are forced to operate in a transnational space by relying on a collaboration between Cuba-based reporters and editors and those who live abroad, either on a permanent or a temporary basis (Geoffray, 2013). Reporting, opinion-writing, financing, web hosting, maintenance, translation and even the registration of the media projects as legal entities go beyond national borders. To a large extent, the readership and those who make comments online are also audiences who transcend borders (Henken, 2017; Díaz Rodríguez, 2018).

Over the last few years, Cubans have developed an array of non-institutional (and, therefore, institutionally independent) digital media projects. Journalist Elaine Díaz (2018) considers that there are 14 digital projects that qualify as media organizations: 14yMedio (2014), Cachivache Media (2016-2017, now disappeared), Cibercuba (2014), Diario de Cuba (2009), El Estornudo (2016), El Toque (2014), Hypermedia Magazine (2016), La Joven Cuba (2010), Negolution (2016), OnCuba (2012), Periodismo de Barrio (2015), PlayOff (2015), Postdata (2016) and Progreso Semanal (2001). Some of these projects have evolved from blogs (such as Periodismo de Barrio and La Joven Cuba) and other are registered as foreign media organizations (OnCuba or Progreso Semanal).

US researcher, Ted Henken (2017) differentiates between different types of digital media projects, depending on their distance from the official media: (1) digital dissidents (clearly oppositional projects like 14yMedio), (2) digital millennials (projects like Cachivache Media with cultural emphasis), (3) digital ecumenics (projects associated to the catholic church, such as Cuba Posible), (4) critical revolutionaries (in which I include Periodismo de Barrio) and (5) the digital diaspora (projects that operate from Havana although registered as foreign media, such as OnCuba). There could be yet another another category added to this classification: those projects that have been completely or partially dependent on foreign aid, such as El Toque. These organizations have a transnational structure, with journalists reporting from Havana as well as collaborators and newsrooms in foreign countries (mainly the US, Mexico and Spain).

Digital media projects share some key characteristics: they are new transnational projects led by small teams of young journalists and other professionals who have built innovative ways of gathering, editing and circulating information in a way that circumvents the legal, material and economic restrictions imposed both by the Cuban government and by the US embargo. For instance, the founder of Periodismo de Barrio talks about “Creole” ways of looking for funding opportunities (Díaz Rodríguez, 2018). These projects exist in a terrain of illegality (very few of them are registered) and rely on producing quality journalism as means for gaining readership, visibility and prestige, both in Cuba and abroad. Indeed, some of these projects have been recognized for international awards. The lack of legal rights these organizations have in Cuba means that reporters and the projects themselves are vulnerable, and one of the ways in which this vulnerability is dealt with is through building collaborations with foreign media organizations to publish some of the material produced by the Cuban independent media. While most of these organizations are tolerated, they have suffered online harassment from social media accounts, some of which are linked to fake identities (Díaz Rodríguez, 2018).
Internet governance today is a global challenge, especially with regards to the balance between civil liberties and security. Critical bloggers and journalists have denounced the Cuban government’s actions to curtail freedom of speech, block access to oppositional websites, arbitrarily detain activists and independent journalists, and pressure critical media projects to avoid political and controversial publications. For instance, the newly elected president of Cuba, Miguel Díaz-Canel, has often been perceived as a soft-liner and has on occasions shown public support for critical revolutionary blogs. However, in 2017, a speech by Díaz-Canel’s (then Vice President) at a private meeting of the Cuban Communist Party was leaked. In the video, Díaz-Canel, responding to OnCuba’s harsh criticism of the revolutionary government, denounced the independent media and threatened OnCuba with closure, saying: “We are going to close its digital platform. And let the scandal ensue. Let them say we censure, it’s fine” (Gámez Torres, 2017).

There are several elements that constrain the reach of independent digital media projects in Cuba. The first constraint is ownership, as the state is the only organism that can legally own news organizations. The second constraint relates to the absence of a clear legal framework that guarantees and regulates the rights of independent media outlets. The third problem is the above-mentioned discourse of siege that sees the Internet and digital technologies as tools of subversion by foreign governments, and which is used for justifying censorship and curbing freedom of speech (Lauria, 2017). Foreign investment including international projects to develop the Internet, the telecommunications infrastructure and digital technologies, are seen with suspicion, as foreign-led efforts to overthrow the government, the Revolution and national independence - which are presented as synonyms (Garcia Santamaria, 2017). Therefore, independent journalist and media organizations are often accused of receiving funding from foreign countries with the goals of destabilizing the country and promoting a regime change. The fourth challenge for these outlets is that few Cubans have access to the Internet and digital technologies, limited both by internal and external factors, such as Cuban government restrictions (OnCuba, 2017) or the US trade embargo on certain technologies and equipment (US Department of State, 2018).

Transformative Forces Outside the System: Digital Media and Public Debate

This section examines the influence of the Internet and digital media on the promotion of a culture of debate in Cuba. It is important to consider the factors that push independent media projects to accommodate the limitations of this sphere, and to work within the channels (and vacuums) provided by the system. This adaptively allows them to gain reach, stability, to embrace deeply-rooted shared values such as patriotism, and to promote internal societal change from a non-rupturist, non-oppositional position. However, questions remain: To which degree are criticism and debate online focused on high-level systemic problems? Does this debate challenge the larger political system? What are the differences between within-the-system and oppositional digital media projects? Are all digital medial projects counter-hegemonic?

Contrary to common assumptions, in Cuba there is a tradition of public deliberation within Party structures through citizens’ participation in national debates. These periods of debate have been Party-led and have taken place within the limits of revolutionary belonging. Therefore, while there is a culture of debate, this has been restricted to institutional spaces. Party-led debates foster a sort of internal criticism that does not challenge the power structures that are in place. Therefore, while the leadership has endorsed periodical episodes of debate, those have taken place within the channels provided by the Party-state.

Some of the elements that slow down change in Cuba have to do with the paternalistic role of the state, as well as journalists’ focus on everyday survival and their fear of being stigmatized as ‘problematic’,
As in other communist countries (Repnikova, 2015), the official sense of moral values positions optimism as a way of showing support to internal mechanisms of change and providing stability, while pessimism is seen as inherently destabilizing and a threat to existing power structures. These strategies have polarized Cuban civil society, reducing debate to that which can operate within the limits of this institutionalized moral structure. (Duong, 2013; Henken, 2017).

According to Cuban scholar Rafael Hernández (2003: 22), the problem is that the construction of national unity in the institutional media has created a culture of secrecy, in which reality is expressed through a series of euphemisms, taboos, and silences, whereas the discursive construction of ‘the enemy’ has brought about a ‘phobia of debates’. This phobia is based on the assumption that divergent opinions could divide, create resentment and offer a weak image of the revolutionary consensus.

**Official Journalism versus Independent Journalists**

The boundaries of journalists’ identification with the revolutionary project have always remained complex and fluctuating. Similarly, expressing support for the Revolution does not necessarily entail uncritical support for the government. While there are signs of shared nodal (or essential) values, such as patriotism, social justice, or dignity, journalists are most frustrated with the contradictions that exist in balancing the revolutionary project with their journalistic roles. To which extent do journalists position their values as compatible with those of the Revolution? And with those of the official discourse? The following quote from the editor-in-chief of an independent magazine provides some insights to these questions:

The naturalization of a set of Cuban moral values seems to be at the heart of stable chains of significance. In the case of Cuba, the hegemonic construction of an ‘elliptic historical tale’ (Quiroga, 2005: 10) has contributed to a collective construction of national invincibility, stressing the importance of solving Cuban problems from within. This has provided both historical authenticity and moral authority to the official discourse. According to Perez Jr. (2013), ‘historical narratives drew unabashedly upon sentimental attachments and heartfelt affections. Those sentiments propelled men and women to ‘moral purpose’ and ‘dramatic action’.

As in other communist countries (Repnikova, 2015), the official sense of moral values positions optimism as a way of showing support to internal mechanisms of change and providing stability, while pessimism is seen as inherently destabilizing and a threat to existing power structures. These strategies have polarized Cuban civil society, reducing debate to that which can operate within the limits of this institutionalized moral structure. (Duong, 2013; Henken, 2017).
In the interviews, journalists working for blogs and for non-institutional media outlets seem more vocal about their identity as individuals, and the conditionality of their support. One of these young journalists talks about the limits of one's loyalty in the following excerpt:

"Who should you be loyal to? My loyalty lies with a socialist, left-wing project in Cuba, with a revolutionary project that I call the Revolution. I think that Cubans have fought, suffered, and bled to death for decades for this country. That’s my loyalty. My loyalty to the State is conditional to how well I think it is promoting this socialist project. That’s why I’m going to praise the governmental management when I think it benefits the project, and I’m going to criticize it if it’s damaging it. But my loyalty is towards the project, towards the Revolution. That is where the fork splits. That’s where I establish the difference.” (Young editor working for an independent digital project).

While these messages are more explicit amongst younger interviewees, the disarticulation of journalists’ revolutionary ideals from the official discourse is also present in interviews with more senior journalists and media academics. The following quotes illustrate the way in which a scholar and an editor explain the difference between conscious political compromise, and a forced Party-press unanimity:

"Though the government now allows more people to voice their opinions online, it wants to ensure that the values of the Cuban revolution remain intact. It can be difficult for bloggers to know which subjects remain off-limits and some bloggers have faced sanctions. Yet the government’s increased tolerance of dissent in recent years should not be ignored. Bloggers and the government are learning how to deal with each other, a process that will continue in the coming years.” (Díaz Rodríguez, 2014)

"Who should you be loyal to? My loyalty lies with a socialist, left-wing project in Cuba, with a revolutionary project that I call the Revolution. I think that Cubans have fought, suffered, and bled to death for decades for this country. That’s my loyalty. My loyalty to the State is conditional to how well I think it is promoting this socialist project. That’s why I’m going to praise the governmental management when I think it benefits the project, and I’m going to criticize it if it’s damaging it. But my loyalty is towards the project, towards the Revolution. That is where the fork splits. That’s where I establish the difference.” (Young editor working for an independent digital project).

The excerpt above illustrates the compatibility between being a revolutionary and a journalist critical of the Revolution. This nuance seems clear in the eyes of the interviewees but can create friction when critical reports are branded as a danger to national unity and strength. A young academic, who also writes a blog and collaborates with a non-institutional digital project, states that the limits of belonging are so blurry that people feel the need to reassert their revolutionary commitment before making any criticism. Journalists’ fragile frontiers of belonging are reflected in the following lines:

"What bothers me most is the fact that any critical discourses have to start with this sentence: ‘I am a revolutionary’. Is there a contradiction when someone says: ‘I’m revolutionary, but I think this, and that are bad’? If I’m being critical, if what I want is to improve this [the Revolution], why do I have to state that I’m a revolutionary? I am critical; let them assess that however they please.” (Young editor working for an independent digital project).
The excerpts above suggest that the interviewees’ willingness to criticize the Party emanates from a sense of legitimacy that is granted by revolutionary belonging. Some might wonder whether those who work within the institutional system can be really committed to change. However, being insiders can represent an advantage, according to the interviewees. For them, staying within the boundaries of the Revolution has the advantage of legitimizing their actions, and allowing the enjoyment of greater agency through the immediate ‘update’ of Cuban society. While the data reveals a professional disarticulation from the official discourse of the government, the interviewees also establish a clear boundary between the nature of their criticism, and that of dissidents. A young journalist who works at a non-institutional media outlet positions himself in a grey area of nuances and shades, which is lacking, according to him, in both the official and the dissident discourse:

“The defense of the nation, the defense of a project for a better country, for the people makes you say: ‘I’m not going to define myself by who I am, but by who I’m not’. I’m not an official mouthpiece, nor someone that spends his time looking for problems, searching the sun for spots. Because this country is more than Granma, and more than spots. It’s so diverse. The good and the bad have so many shades, this is the country of shades. We should make an effort to tell the story of the real Cuba.” (Young journalist working for an independent digital project who was trained at the institutional media).

According to these views, dissidents are seen as openly counter-revolutionary, allegedly collaborating with propaganda campaigns orchestrated by foreign governments and, therefore, not committed to the values of social justice, national sovereignty, and collective wellbeing, all elements that are at the heart of the Revolution. Online dissident media projects are thought to be addressed to a foreign audience (mostly the Cuban diaspora), and to have little support and impact on the Island.

Two journalists that finished their social work at institutional newspapers and stayed on for full-time positions (RA17; RA21) recall feeling overly curtailed and decided to collaborate with a non-institutional site. When their bosses found out, they were forced to leave the official press, which they were happy to do. One of them, who now works for a non-institutional digital newspaper, explains that she left because she could no longer tolerate the pressure:

“Everything is so closed, so closed! It’s a space in which you only have two options. You either do it their way, or you have no choice but to give up being a journalist for the rest of your life and start selling fries on the street. At one point, I felt suffocated, because I had to do it their way, and allow the wheels of the system to crush me.” (Young journalist working for an independent digital project who was trained at the institutional media).

**Centrism in Cuba**

The Cuban media system still contains a deeply embedded and systematized suspicion of dissent, which is seen to be dangerous, or at the least politically incorrect. The experience of past failures to achieve national sovereignty led the revolutionary leadership to conclude that the dream of full independence required national unity. This unity was created around the figure of Fidel Castro and the historical quest for national sovereignty (Guerra, 2012). However, unity also implied that the advancement of collective empowerment legitimized the suppression of dissent in order to achieve revolutionary goals. In other words, Cubans, including journalists, had to march in lockstep (pegaditos), reflecting a unified front in order to advance the goals of the Revolution. This has implications for dissenters, who can be subject to consequences such as the downgrading of their professional status (Díaz Rodríguez and Sokoh Valle, 2013: 64). The condemnation of dissent, and
its critical consequences, has certainly influenced journalists’ tendency to shift towards conformism, self-censorship, and to resist change.

As Cuba’s president Díaz-Canel recognized in 2014, journalists have accumulated legitimate frustrations with the official media system, which is more focused on defending a shared political project than on holding those in power accountable. When defining the role of the Cuban media as representing everyone’s interest, he is paraphrasing José Martí, a journalist and intellectual who fought for independence in the late nineteenth century and whose teachings symbolize the birth of a differentiated and united national identity (Palacios Ortega, 2017).

“Hoffman (2011) argues that the study of independent spaces of debate and media actors is essential for understanding the emergence of new identities in Cuba. In other words, independent media projects may give visibility to a widespread ‘worldview rupture’ (Guanche, 2008). However, counter-hegemonic projects are not necessarily oppositional. While some civic media projects use digital spaces to deliver counter-revolutionary messages, others are disseminating non-oppositional discourses, fostering deliberative debate, distention, and mutual understanding.

While journalists are aware of the shortcomings of the official media system and internal criticism is expressed within professional institutional circuits (Elizalde, 2014), the interviews suggest that it has been confined to these circles and, therefore, has yet to foster public debate. However, there have been instances in which criticism has been ‘leaked’ and published online. For example, Karina Marron, vice-editor in chief of the official organ of Granma, the Cuban Communist Party, voiced such frustrations at a professional meeting in which she described the structural factors that condition the problems of Cuban journalism. Her speech was transcribed and published online by one of the journalists who attended the meeting, who was then dismissed from his job.

“We cannot see this as a purely economic problem, there is an underlying professional problem because those young people chose to be journalists, they didn’t choose to do propaganda or advertisements, they didn’t choose to simply stay quiet and stand on the sidelines because otherwise they would have chosen another profession. However, we also find many young people who become disenchanted after graduation, when they arrive to the media - I don’t even know with which goals, because we give them sometimes the chance to do things, to transform things, to work, and they’re not interested, they don’t care about anything at all” (Marrón, in Ravsberg 2016)

What is clear is that independent digital media projects have eroded the state hegemony over information and communication channels. Since the advent of the internet, Cuban journalists are able -although not entitled- to collaborate with independent media outlets, or to create their own digital publications, channeling alternative articulations of belonging. These articulations can be classified in two groups: a) what is perceived as ‘possible’, a view that privileges an internal management of problems within the channels provided by the system, and b) what is perceived as ‘impossible’, a perspective that focuses on making visible the contingency and fictionality of the official discourse. This second
view sees potential dislocation as a possibility that enables new political subjectivities.

The ‘possible’ (what is possible) has been a recurrent concept in the work of well-known Cuban scholars (Guanche, 2008; Elizalde, 2014), who advocate for middle ground, conciliatory, consensual understandings of the Revolution, rather than more daring, radical (and perhaps ideal) scenarios. While professional and academic debates about Cuban journalism operate within the realm of what is possible in the current system, independent digital media outlets go beyond the boundaries of possibility and defy the discursive, organizational and material structures of the media.

Despite a state monopoly over the mass media and low Internet access, Cuba is witnessing the emergence of a variety of independent digital media projects that contribute to the Island’s emergent civil society. The Internet and digital technologies have the potential to create a virtual forum in which citizens can claim their voice in civil society and the political process. However, Cuban blogs and digital media still operate in a highly-polarized context, in which critical bloggers are accused of being oficialistas or pro-government propagandists by some, while seen as US mercenaries by others (Henken, 2011; Rubira and Gil-Egui, 2013; Díaz Rodríguez and Sokooh Valle, 2013). Polarization has led some scholars to question the potential of these new spaces for creating a deliberative debate.

There seems to be a growing awareness of the dangers of a dismantling of the Revolution from within, a topic that Fidel Castro publicly acknowledged in 2005, and to which Cuban scholar Julio César Guanche has dedicated a whole monograph (2009). The possibility of the Revolution being destroyed from inside has important consequences for the work of the media, as they are viewed as being in charge of creating and maintaining a revolutionary consensus.

In this context, finding the right balance for expressing criticism from within the revolutionary project is not an easy task, as heated online debates between different bloggers and journalists suggest. How to find a voice that is critical without being accused of dissidence? How to exercise criticism from within without being expelled as an outsider? Some independent journalists and bloggers have tried to position themselves in a critical yet moderate position that does not fit the apparent polarization of public debate between official and oppositional voices. In a context in which the official discourse exalts values such as discipline, collectivism and intransigence (Bobes, 2008; Garcia Santamaria, 2017), being undisciplined and expressing individual tolerant views might raise some eyebrows. Some critical journalists and intellectuals have been tagged as ‘centrists’, that is, as claiming a ‘fake’ (or independent, ‘non-official’) left-wing and revolutionary identity. According to this view, ‘centrists’ express a level of hyper-criticism that goes beyond the limits of revolutionary belonging, such as welcoming greater dialogue with the United States, advocating for the private ownership of the media or denouncing silences and taboos in the institutional media.

The debate on ‘centrism’ has been part of a campaign for purifying the Cuban online public sphere in the light of the post-normalization wake, leading up to Raúl Castro’s stepdown in April 2018 (Cárdenas Lema, 2018). They way in which frontiers of professional and revolutionary belonging are relevant because they touch upon a range of issues such as political participation, the respect of pluralism, freedom of expression and freedom of the press, digital rights, Internet governance or the political economy of the media.

Online accusations of centrism are just one of the multiple tags that are used in order to discredit those who have different political ideas and defend different ideas of a country. Even within the digital media sphere, there are heated debates over the identity and position of independent projects in relation to the government’s official discourse. Harold Cárdenas (2018), editor of the independent project La Joven Cuba (LJC), acknowledges that this platform has received harsh attacks from all sides of the political spectrum because of the publication’s willingness to respect different opinions, and to tolerate a plurality of views - even when opposed to
their own ideas. For instance, LJC has endured public criticism for being both too close (Lopez, 2018) and too far from the official discourse. Classified as a ‘critical revolutionary’ project by Henken (2017), Cárdenas is often referred to as a ‘centrist’ in the blog La Pupila Insomne (Cuba Posible, 2017), but also accused of being an ‘anti-democratic reformist’ (López, 2018) ready to overlook the civil and political abuses committed by the Party-state. The crossfire of accusations reveal that independent media projects are often delegitimized through personal attacks to the integrity of their editors, rather than fostering a public debate about the values and ideas that they defend (Cuba Posible, 2017; Cárdenas, 2018).

Over the last few years, there has been a lingering fear of an internal dismantlement of the revolution, slowing-down current processes of social change (Hoffman, 2011). This fear can take many shapes and is not restricted to appeals towards an external threat. The proliferation of non-dissident critical blogs and digital platforms has enhanced the fear of internal division. The anxieties about bloggers and journalists’ nonconforming ideas is often disguised as official claims of ‘deprofessionalization’ and weak ‘ethical standards’. The debate on political centrism shows that appeals to (a lack of) professionalism are a way of undermining the quality of independent journalistic works as well as the moral grounds upon which independent media projects develop. This has led to defamation campaigns, political pressure, and censorship - such as the temporary closure of certain blogs, or the lack of access to certain websites from the Island (Sánchez, 2017). For instance, some bloggers and journalists have used social media to denounce different degrees of harassment (Higuera, 2016; Periodismo de Barrio, 2016).

A close look at Party-led debates in Cuba indicates the persistence of a contradiction between official calls to citizens’ participation in decision-making, and the postponement of political debate. The VII Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba took place in April 2016 without a previous call to popular debate, which was an important element of the 2011 VI Congress. The lack of popular debate generated a mobilization of popular opinion and intellectuals that obliged the Party to organize debates in working centers after the celebration of the Congress. This decision to avoid debate, and subsequent response to public opinion, shows not only the apparent lack of political will to articulate ‘the Cuban people’ as active participants in political decision-making, but also the importance of taking into account popular demands as a means for advancing the ‘Updating’ of Cuban socialism.

Conclusion

The elites’ access to the Internet and digital media has consolidated the appearance of independent, non-bureaucratic media actors and outlets, breaking the state monopoly on the flow of information and its ability to impose a single hegemonic debate. While the limits of debate remain tied to the limits stated by Fidel Castro in his ‘Words to the Intellectuals’, the data indicates that Cuban journalists, bloggers and intellectuals can no longer fulfil their professional demands within the spaces of debate instituted by the Party. Instead, they are advocating for a structural change to the Cuban media system, and increasingly articulating their demands in non-institutional, alternative spaces. Furthermore, a number of intellectuals are asking for a radical change from within institutional media structures. This would enable a rearticulation of media discourse to be more coherent with the normative ideals of both the revolutionary project and journalist’s professional values. For Cuban scholar Rafael Hernández, ‘assimilating concepts such as human rights, civil society, pluralism, democracy, transition, freedom of expression, is a cultural and theoretical operation that passes through accumulated social knowledge’, which allows us to see these concepts as compatible with the revolutionary thought (Hernández, 2003: 26-27). Will the new revolutionary meaning be filled with those values, leaving behind the polarising ‘national unity’ versus ‘sieged society’ paradigms?

From the analysis of the interviews, it seems that the erosion of unity and the ‘society under siege’
paradigms have been reinforced by the intellectual elite’s increasing access to the Internet, and the proliferation of blogs, digital media platforms and access to social media. Elites’ access to the Internet and digital media has consolidated the appearance of independent, non-bureaucratic media actors and outlets, breaking with the state monopoly on flows of information and its ability to impose a single hegemonic debate. However, the limits of belonging or not to the Revolution have been blurred, as there are increasing voices that declare themselves revolutionary, yet are highly critical of the Party. These voices are contributing to this shift from an external enemy to the internal problems of the Revolution, in an exercise of introspection and self-criticism that pressures political leaders to take public responsibility for their mistakes. The focus is turning, therefore, towards what Henken and Ritter (2014) have called the ‘internal embargo’ that the Revolution has imposed on itself. For instance, there have been some changes over the last few years, such as a column in Granma dedicated to reader’s letters, the possibility for readers to comment on news stories online, the coverage of relatively polemical topics, such as corruption and material shortages, as well as the campaign against secrecy promoted by the Union of Cuban Journalists (UPEC). The Communist Party of Cuba is facing a leadership crisis produced by the advanced age of the so-called historical leaders (those who fought against the Batista regime back in the 1950s) and the fading of Fidel Castro from public life, broadening the communication gap that exists between the leadership and citizens. Additionally, Cuba is enjoying closer relationships with the rest of the world –including the United States and Latin America–, which means further affiliation with different worldviews. It remains to be seen how ‘the Revolution’ adapts to current economic, political and technological changes, and negotiates an ‘Updating’ of Cuban journalism.

I conclude that, unless the tensions between fear and renewal are resolved to benefit the latter, the most recent attempts to reform the media will fail, as has happened in the past (Pérez González, 2008; García Luis, 2013). During my trip to Havana in 2017, I observed a much more lethargic attitude in the interviewees that I had not seen before. Since my first visit in 2013, some of the interviewees were pressured to leave the Communist Youth League or their state jobs. It seemed that official calls for media reform have not materialized, and some interviewees are losing their faith in a journalistic-led change from within (Hoffmann, 2015). A media-led transition from populist discourse to deliberative debate would need to include a reformulation of the enemy not just as an external threat, but also as internal deficiencies, an acceptance of the Cuban people in their difference, and a reconceptualization of journalism as a profession, rather than ideological tool of the government.

While Cuban citizens now have access to public spaces of debate, independent from the Party and the institutional media, mere access to the Internet and digital media does not ensure these spaces will become inherently democratic, or democratizing. Digital technologies reflect existing political and social structures, as well as the cognitive paradigms of the society in which they are used (Voltmer, 2013). Therefore, this newfound access needs to go hand in hand with a structural change of the current structures of power, as well as a deep debate around the current cultural paradigms and professional practices that give sense to the Revolution. A process of media-led democratization is only possible as long as all media actors are willing to accept dissent, to recognize different arguments as rational and honest (Voltmer, 2013: 57). This report concludes that both the official and the non-institutional media projects have the potential to become spaces for democratic debate as long as there is a structural dislocation that allows for a disaggregation of the people as individuals with a plurality of demands, a transition from an antagonistic to an agnostic culture of confrontation, and a professionalization of the media system. This implies accepting both internal and external historical enemies as political adversaries, and a political willingness to depolarize public debate.
Further Research

This report has examined the Cuban mediasphere from a historical perspective, analyzing sources of change and resistance within both institutional and independent media projects. However, some questions need further research. I envision my project expanding into a larger research agenda that examines the impact of the Internet and digital technologies on (1) discourses, (2) interactions and (3) media structures. Some potential future research questions include:

How do alternative media projects affect legal, economic and organizational structures?

How are they reconfiguring professional membership?

To which extent are populist, polarizing discourses influencing online media interactions?

What is the potential of digital media projects for fostering agnostic debate in Cuba?

Which are the conditions for an independent media promotion of deliberative debate?

What is the role of Cuban academia in mediating the policy demands of independent journalists?
Bibliography


ETECSA (2018b) Salas de Navegación. ETECSA. Available Online (Las Accessed 17/05/18) http://www.etecsa.cu/internet_conectividad/salas_de_navegacion/


Acknowledgements

This report has been possible thanks to the support of the Internet Policy Observatory, at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank Professor Monroe Price for his confidence in this project and in the importance of approaching Cuban media from a multifaceted point of view. A special thank you goes to Laura Schwartz-Henderson, who has followed-up the project since the very beginning and has made a valuable contribution guiding me through the project. I would like to thank the Faculty of Communication at University of Havana, and specially Raúl Garcés and Raiza Portal, who have facilitated my research stays throughout the last five years and have introduced me to the many shades of Cuban journalism. Finally, I would like to thank those interviewees who decided to share their experience, their hopes and their beliefs with me, always with a sharp view and a critical mindset. I believe it is important to recognize the contribution of all the actors that are working for the professionalization of Cuban journalism, whether they do it from within academia, the institutional media, or the independent digital mediasphere. I hope this report contributes to the visibility of the rich professional debates about journalists, and journalism, that are taking place in Cuba but are easily missed when looking from the distance.