Online Independent Cuban Journalism: Broadening the Public Space from a Contentious Dimension

Periodismo independiente cubano en línea: ampliación de lo público desde una dimensión contenciosa

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The context in which the online independent Cuban journalism operates, places it in a vulnerable situation, while in its undertaking, in an open defiance of state control over what is public, broadens and pluralizes that sector on the island. This article examines, from the combination of an analytical model with empirical analysis, how the strategies and demands of independent Cuban journalism in the face of the government –and the way in which it is assumed by power itself– allow it to be connected with forms of contentious action.

KEYWORDS: Independent journalism, contentious action, Cuba, public space.

El contexto en el que se desenvuelve el periodismo independiente cubano en línea lo coloca en una situación de vulnerabilidad, al tiempo que su quehacer, en abierto desafío al control estatal sobre lo público, amplía y pluraliza ese ámbito en la isla. Este artículo examina, a partir de la combinación de un modelo analítico con análisis empírico, cómo las estrategias y demandas del periodismo independiente cubano frente al poder –y el modo en que este es asumido por el propio poder–, permiten conectarlo con formas de acción contenciosa.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Periodismo independiente, acción contenciosa, Cuba, espacio público.

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EMERGENCY OF ONLINE INDEPENDENT CUBAN JOURNALISM

This article aims to analyze the way in which the working strategies of the online independent Cuban journalism allow it to be connected with forms of contentious action in the face of the government. Through interviews with independent digital media journalists, the strategies they follow to reach the public will be known, despite the shortcomings and limitations of access to the network in Cuba. When we refer to the *independent Cuban journalism* here, we refer to the new media that have emerged on the Internet in the last two decades and the work carried out by them. With this name we distinguish them from the state media, which follow the guidelines of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba and maintain an information policy based on the model of the Soviet socialist press.

We define as *contentious collective action* all those practices and strategies that are developed outside the institutional margins backed by the government and in open defiance of current regulations. These forms of action are generated within the country illegally, atomized and with discreet repercussions in the national environment and their development takes place in an area between repression and controlled tolerance. The symbolic spaces of participation and the demands that are generated from these forms of collective action confronted with the interests of the Government, are related to human rights and political and social freedoms. Their contentious nature is not always explicit or assumed by the participants that generate them, but they invariably represent a counter power against the Government.

A fundamental contentious activity due to its claims and visibility is independent journalism, whose work, both in physical and virtual space, defies state control over the public and as a constant disruption intervenes in the configuration of that sector on the island. Independent journalists carry out their work as part of civil society not recognized by the State and in confrontation with the regulations that punish the activities they carry out. The emergence of independent journalism in Cuba coincides with a diversification of the country's civil society, after the economic reform and the constitutional reform of 1992, which fostered new forms of association linked to new types of solidarity

and non-state ways of solving everyday problems. Groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious associations and community movements were assimilated by the government, which did not see in them a defiance to their authority. But the same did not happen with human rights groups, independent libraries and the independent press, organizations not tolerated by the State (Bobes, 2007, 2013).

Two government measures that made access to public communication more flexible and thereby favored the creation of new independent online media were, first, the legalization of the purchase of cell phone lines in 2008, previously prohibited to national citizens; and then, the gradual increase in Internet access. This has facilitated the generation from Cuba of alternative spaces for information and deliberation of public affairs in the digital context. It has promoted the connection of independent journalists with the media and other participants abroad, while allowing those who are connected from the island, inform each other and participate in debates that take place in a transnational public space.

Non-Cuban state digital media report the emergence in the virtual space of publications that are presented as alternatives to communication generated from the government. It is fundamentally informative spaces, whether daily, weekly or other update frequencies, but focused on generating journalistic materials, with the Cuban theme as a priority. Some have been created from outside Cuba and others from within, but in all cases they maintain correspondents on the island. Meanwhile, 50% have offices or newsrooms in foreign cities such as Miami, Valencia and Mexico City and are made up of small work teams, which in many cases do not exceed a dozen employees or collaborators (Díaz Rodríguez, 2017).

Our notion of independent journalism is nourished by the approach to independent journalism in Mexico carried out by De León (2018a), for whom the term *alternative* or *independent journalism* allows it to be differentiated from that produced by the dominant media industry.

> This term does not mean lower quality journalism, but independent efforts of professionalized and networked journalists... in a search to claim the social function of journalism as a vigilant of the environment to report abuses (De León, 2018a, p. 149).

The reference to an independent press and journalism in Cuba does not imply not knowing that these projects have financial support from different foreign institutions –which can generate editorial commitments– and that they must respond to the demands of certain markets in which they begin to insert themselves. However, as they are media that operate independently of the State, they generate new accounts of the Cuban social reality and, in many cases, their forms of self-management and codes of ethics emphasize financial and editorial autonomy.

APROACHES PRIOR TO THE CUBAN MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

The study of the Cuban media environment and its evolutions in the last decades allow us to verify how with the arrival of the 21st century the emergence of new information participants on the web begins and the public sphere and debate are pluralized, mainly through digital networks (Díaz Rodríguez, 2017; Geoffray & Chaguaceda, 2014; Leyva & Somohano, 2008). Online independent Cuban media[2] began to appear from 2001 and a boom between 2014 and 2018 in the creation of these non-state publications can be seen. Precisely because they are external means to the revolutionary institutional system, some authors have already recognized its disruptive potential (García, 2018; Padilla et al., 2017).

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[2]   Among the independent Cuban digital media focused on the general informative work are: *Progreso Semanal* (2001), *Diario de Cuba* (2009), *OnCuba* (2012), *Palenque Visión* (2012), *Cibercuba* (2014), *14yMedio* (2014), *El Toque* (2014), *Periodismo de Barrio* (2015), *El Estornudo* (2016), *Postdata* (2016) y *Tremenda Nota* (2017). Likewise, there is a group of independent publications that cover thematic niches such as *PlayOff* (2015), dedicated to sports; *Vistar* (2014), on culture and entertainment; *Garbos* (2015), on fashion and lifestyle; *Negolution* (2016), focused on entrepreneurship; *Hypermedia Magazine* (2016), a specialized cultural magazine; *Cachivache Media* (2016-2017), which publishes on technology; *Havana2Go* (2017), on alternative culture and leisure; *La Tinta* (2018), on body art; and *Magazine AM:PM* (2018), specialized in music; among others.

There are other contributions to the understanding of the changes in the field of public communication in Cuba through research that addresses issues as diverse as the development of the Cuban blogosphere and citizen participation and deliberation in these digital spaces (Boentes, 2015; Díaz, 2014), the configuration of contentious public in a transnational environment mediated by the web (Celecia, 2019), the characteristics of the informative production in independent Cuban electronic media (Somohano, 2019) and the production, circulation and consumption of alternative content from those of the state through informal channels (Barrera, 2009; Cabrera, 2015; Concepción, 2015; Fonseca & Castañeda, 2015; Pertierra, 2011, 2012; Ramos, 2016; Rodríguez, 2019).

Among the approaches to the production, circulation and consumption of non-state content that rely on human and digital networks, those dedicated to the "weekly package"[3] stand out (Cabrera, 2015; Concepción, 2015; Fonseca & Castañeda, 2015; Pertierra, 2011, 2012; Ramos, 2016), which coincide in indicating a growing preference for informal consumption over state consumption. These analyses refer to the changes generated from the updating of the Cuban economic model and the way in which these have influenced the transformation of the media environment.

Works that have investigated both independent journalism and the consumption of alternative content to the state ones confirm the penetration of informal media consumption in Cuba, bring to debate the assimilation of global trends regarding the use of technologies in the particular Cuban environment and appreciate the diversification of participants that participate in the public sphere. Therefore, it is essential to explore the political dimension of these processes, through which a displacement of state control can be perceived as a producer and issuer of content.

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[3]   "The package" or "weekly package" is a compendium of content whose offline circulation is an adaptation to the context of disconnection that exists in Cuba and an option for informal consumption compared to state programming. We will return to this compendium and its relationship with independent journalism later in this article.

On the other hand, we find the absence of approaches on ways of responses to the government on the island from the Cuban academy. The discrediting campaigns by the official discourse, for more than six decades, towards the different forms of containment of power in Cuba, together with a fusion in the national symbolic field that homologates homeland, sovereignty and independence with the socialist project of the Revolution (Bobes, 2007), contribute to the lack of legitimacy of dissident participants or even simple critics of the political regime. Also, in many cases, their links with the United States Government[4] have facilitated their association with anti-national interests, which has repercussions on the production of knowledge from the island on the subject.

COMMUNICATION, POWER AND PLURALIZATION OF THE PUBLIC

De León (2012) explains that the public has an abstract and conceptual sense and its constituent elements are the relationships between its participants –which take place in physical and/or symbolic spaces– and the symbolic constructions that these generate; meanwhile, the symbolic exchange practices carried out in the public space are classified as public communication. For its part, the political public space is built when the topics of common interest submitted to debate are related to the competences and tasks of the State. However, Del Palacio (1997) reminds us that:

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4   On January 19, 2020, the Radio Progreso station published on its Facebook account a list of 21 non-state media, which it classified as the "most reactionary sites that report on Cuba". The list included *CiberCuba*, *CubaNe*t, *Diario de Cuba*, *Cuba in Miami*, *14yMedio*, *Cubans around the world*, *La Joven Cuba*, *OnCuba*, *Periódico Cubano*, *Cubita Now*, *Isla Local*, *Cuba Trendings*, *Todo Cuba*, *Gracias Cubanos*, *Guru*, *Tremenda Nota*, *ADN Cuba*, *El Estornudo*, *El Toque* and *Periodismo de Barrio*. The publication, which was later deleted, sparked a debate on the social network about which media "deserved" or not to be on the list, based on their positions more or less at odds with the interests of the Cuban Government and whether they received or not US government financing ("Is there an official list of 'reactionary' media?", 2020).

The power of the State is not part of the public space, but rather its eternal opponent... The public space, thus, is located between the State and society and, in it, the public is the support of opinion (pp. 124-125).

This notion supports the idea that, in the Cuban case, independent journalism is necessarily going to be inserted in that public political space in which it finds in the State an adversary. As a member who participates in the public sphere, the independent journalism assumes tasks of criticism and surveillance of the state's performance, which allows us to connect it with a journalistic model that is vigilant of the political environment, contrary to what happens with the state press, which is part of the system, which determines a univocal relationship between the two (García, 2004; González, 2009) and connects it to a model of official journalism.

The journalistic models –understood as ideal types that help to compare, organize and systematize the empirical findings related to the functioning of the media, their editorial positions and their relationships with government– are assumed here following the categorization of: pro-government media, vigilante and alternative. The pro-government media reproduce an official representation of the event (Hallin, 2000); the vigilantes of the environment are distanced from the political power and the journalists carry out with their work a constant scrutiny of the exercise of power (Waisbord, 2013); while the militant or alternative model is observed when journalism identifies with certain causes –political, social or otherwise– and defends them (Harlow & Salaverría, 2016; Waisbord, 2013).

After the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the changes covered all areas of the country's social, economic, and political life. In a short time, all the media became social property and to be controlled by the State-Party merger that took place inspired by the Soviet model (García, 2004; Geoffray & Chaguaceda, 2014; Salazar, 2017). In the literature that addresses the Cuban press system, the external control of the media is attributed to three main reasons: the fear of losing communication hegemony, the need to protect the Revolution from foreign propaganda, and the adoption of the model of the Soviet press (García, 2018).

The most notorious changes in the field of public communication in Cuba have occurred since the mid-1990s, due to the contestatory uses of the Internet (Geoffray & Chaguaceda, 2014), although the levels of access to the network and their high costs[5] for the average income imply that these spaces are not very accessible to many. However, the recent commercialization of Internet services in Cuba, in different modalities, has considerably increased the number of users.[6]

The political system is fundamental as a mediating structure in the configuration of the power/counter-power relationship. In this process, communication processes and the construction of sense play a central role and, therefore, also in the media. The government model determines the ownership system over the media and the characteristics of the press system. Thus, independent journalism is an anomaly in the Cuban government-controlled media system that continually seeks to constrain it.

> Almost all the Cuban emerging media have been subjected to threats or any other form of harassment. The Department of State Security has questioned some journalists based in Cuba and others have been harassed on social networks by false or anonymous webpages and profiles (Díaz Rodríguez, 2017).

Castells (2012) explains that "power relations constitute the foundation of society because those who hold power build the institutions of society according to their values and interests" (p. 22). The counter-power, then, is the "capacity of social participants to

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[5] An hour of Internet connection in Cuba costs 1.50 Cuban Convertible Pesos (CuC) –a CuC is equivalent to a US dollar–, while an average salary is around 25 CuC.

[6] In 2019 the Internet World State (IWS) registered 5 642 595 Cuban Internet users, which represents 49.1% of the island's population (IWS, 2020). Starting in 2013, Internet marketing on the island gradually incorporated navigation rooms (2013), WiFi zones in public spaces (2015) and the connection in homes through Nauta Hogar and access via 3G mobile data (2017) (Rodríguez, 2018).

challenge the power incorporated in the institutions of society with the aim of claiming the representation of their own values and interests" (Castells, 2012, p. 22).

This researcher also reminds us that few systems last if they are based solely on coercion and intimidation, so that the fundamental power struggle develops around the construction of meanings, since this is a more stable and decisive source of power. Meanwhile, occupying spaces of power as a contentious strategy makes them have a symbolic power as far as spaces of power invaded (Castells, 2012). In this sense, independent journalism has appropriated areas of the national and transnational public space, recovering and generating environments for addressing public affairs and for the exercise of a watchful function of the work of the State, which become political spaces through which to recover rights.

In the Cuban case, it is necessary to underline the notable asymmetry that exists between the State and the rest of the participants that intervene in the public space, the limited access to information, the little debate on issues of collective interest and the ritualization of participation. It is also a context in which traditional (State) and new (non-State) media represent divergent interests, participants and discourses.

An important difference between the first non-state media and the most recent online independent Cuban media on the Internet is the independence that the latter hold, both from the government and from anti-government groups.[7] Part of this new journalism, although it aspires to transformations in the political system, does not want to be related to the traditional human rights groups, their rhetoric about democracy and their ties to the United States, so they are looking for new discourses to participate in and transform the public, as well as new forms of financing. That could favor rapprochement with new sectors of the citizenry, while expanding the narratives of counter-power in Cuba.

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[7]   The first wave of non-state Cuban media and journalists maintained close ties with political participants in the United States, which contributed to its stigmatization by the Cuban official discourse.

Collective Contentious Action in Cuba

In Cuba, contentious action against the current political regime dates from the very triumph of the Revolution in 1959 and has gone on, in tune with contentious climates at the global level, from violent confrontation to a peaceful struggle focused on the defense of human rights. Svampa (2009) explains that the diversity of expressions of the collective action does not fit within a general concept, but requires empirical support to develop theoretical notions that explain specific experiences.

In the Cuban case, contentious action does not appear as an explosion or a massive social reaction to a crisis situation, but as a slow and cumulative process that is nourished by the personal discontent of specific participants who join these forms of activism consciously or that they begin to develop actions with political content outside the institutional framework. Among the practices that make up the contentious repertoire in Cuba are the strategies of mass self-communication adapted to the context of disconnection from the Internet, complaints to international organizations and the practices of communication and dissemination of information through human and technological networks traversed by transnational practices.

Although these are limited and inconspicuous initiatives towards the interior of the country, the various contentious experiences allow us to develop a sense of democracy and the struggle against the government that is experienced from the practices. These experiences reinforce the tendency to political participation and can transform the social identity and political values of the participants in the long term (Players, 2017). The daily resistances to the government on the island are expressed, for example, through the different forms of consumption of alternative content to those offered by the official discourse, which are integrated in one way or another into a clandestine network of information dissemination.

Methological Design

An analysis of independent Cuban journalism allows us to put into perspective the conditions in which this activity takes place on the

island, the elements that enhance and limit it, to approach the forms of political participation that emerge in the current Cuban context, as well as the ways that the government copes with them. This work derives from a broader investigation focused on the configuration of public communication of contentious Cuban activism, a phenomenon in which independent journalism is a fundamental participant. However, here are recovered only the methodological elements that contribute to the present object and that derive from the combination of an empirical analysis model, from a qualitative perspective.

As a general objective, it was proposed to analyze the way in which the strategies and demands of independent Cuban journalism against the government allow it to be connected with contentious forms of action, while the particular objectives were defined in terms of examining the way in which independent journalists assume their professional role, as well as characterizing their offline information distribution practices and their forms of online participation.

For this study, an in-depth interview was carried out to eight independent journalists[8] who collaborate with (and/or direct) the non-state Cuban media: *El estornudo* –one interviewee–; *Diario de Cuba* –five interviewees, one of whom has also been a collaborator of *14yMedio*–; *Cubanet* –one interviewee–; *Palenque Vision* –one interviewee–; and *14yMedio*. Of this total, some are assumed as human rights activists (2), others as activist-journalists (2) and others only as independent journalists (4), distancing themselves from activism.

The amount of testimonies collected had to do with the willingness of the people contacted to collaborate with the investigation. The variety of participants interviewed and the quality of their testimonies provided sufficient data to carry out this analysis, however, we did not use the theoretical saturation criterion (Valles, 1999) because the number of interviews was more determined by the accessibility of the informants and the feasibility of talking with them, due to a methodological closure decision.

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[8] The informants are cited as Journalist 1 (J1), Journalist 2 (J2), etc., according to the order in which they were interviewed.

The contacts were established through digital social networks and email. The first informants helped us access the following ones, so part of the process was developed thanks to the snowball effect strategy. The interviews were carried out by video call when the informants were outside of Cuba, which facilitated their access to online communication.

The analysis was carried out based on Thompson's (1998) proposal of depth hermeneutics as a general methodological framework. Its formulation emphasizes that the object of analysis in the social sciences is a significant symbolic construction that requires interpretation and that is inserted in a specific socio-historical context. Depending on the social contextualization of the symbolic forms, other methods of analysis should be used, such as, in this case, the in-depth interview.

Thompson (1998) includes three main phases or procedures: socio-historical analysis, formal or discursive analysis, and interpretation/reinterpretation. Here we focus on the phase of socio-historical analysis –although the other two phases are also present–, since it is oriented towards social practices located in their context and takes into account the fields of interaction, social institutions, structures, agency capacity of participants and asymmetries (De León, 2012; Thompson, 1998). The bibliographic review and the data provided by the in-depth interviews contributed to the socio-historical analysis. The formal and discursive analysis goes through the analysis of the interviews, while the interpretation/reinterpretation accompanied the entire investigation process.

In order to inquire about social life from the social sciences, verbal accounts are largely used and within these, different types of qualitative interviews, such as in-depth interviews. For Keats (2009), this technique is more effective when what you want to investigate is related to what people think, if you want to explore widely the reasons and motivations of people's attitudes and opinions and if potential informants have difficulties to communicate. These reasons were fundamental in choosing this technique to approach our object of study. The semi-structured interview was carried out based on a guide of general topics.

The interviews were conducted between October 31st, 2016 and February 8th, 2018, and elements of the proposed discourse analysis through coding proposed by Gibbs (2014) were integrated into his

Topic	Objective
Political trajectory (biographical frame)	To know the political journey of the interviewee and how they got into the independent press.
Perception of the public sphere	To know their perception about how the public sphere in Cuba is constituted, asking their opinion about the work of the official media and the new Cuban media on the Internet.
Relationship with foreign and independent media	To know how they establish links with these media and what characterizes their relationship with them.
Intervention strategies in the public sphere	To describe which are the intervention strategies in the public sphere (physical and virtual) that the interviewee carries out and what importance he/she gives them.

Source: The author.

study. In this case, we were guided by the data that emerged, so we worked with open coding that allowed us to incorporate the elements that emerged from the analysis process. Based on the interviews, their transcription and the subsequent coding process, the results were systematized and a selection of interview fragments was made to illustrate how independent Cuban journalism connects with contentious forms of action.

RESULTS: JOURNALISM AGAINST THE CURRENT IN CUBA

Independent journalism in Cuba is critical of the Government and public policies, and addresses issues that concern broad sectors of the citizenry, which, together with its forms of organization and management and its autonomy in relation to Cuban power, differentiates it in its entirety from the official media. Compared to traditional media, alternative media generally operate with few resources and limited infrastructure, their members tend to take on various roles, there is greater horizontality in the hierarchical structure, and predominate collaborative relationships within and with other external media participants. Obtaining resources

is generally based on the same financing strategies employed by its Latin American peers, which include fundraising campaigns, memberships, sale of advertising space, applying to funds from non-governmental organizations, international organizations and foreign governments, among other variants (De León, 2018b).

The independent media projects have decided to operate outside the formal frameworks established by the State, thereby "challenging institutionalized forms of journalistic practice, mediating debate, emancipating information, and pushing the boundaries of legitimacy established by the State" (García, 2018, p. 2). However, within the new media there is a wide spectrum that ranges from those who assume themselves as opponents of the regime –for example: *Diario de Cuba*, *CiberCuba*, *14yMedio* and *Palenque Visión*– to those who distance themselves from activism and political affiliations –like *El Estornudo*–; although a common characteristic is the exercise of critical journalism towards the reality of the country.

> Every media has an editorial policy and in the case of *Diario de Cuba* it is a newspaper openly opposed to the Cuban regime. As its director once said in an interview, the objective of *Diario de Cuba* is to reach the jugular of Castroism. It is a newspaper where all the participants of the opposition, of civil society, all those who suffer repression from the regime have a voice (J1, interview conducted on October 31st, 2016).

Although independent journalists do not define themselves or their media for the most part as contentious participants, their illegal status, their editorial projections and the place that the government itself has assigned to them by criminalizing and censoring their activity, they categorized as such.

> We are not opponents. We are interested in journalism, not activism. That is something that has begun to change; independent journalism has distanced itself from activism. Before, the media was in the hands mostly of activists. Now there are people who graduated the university and have started to write and criticize the Revolution and everything. What interests us is doing journalism, criticizing everything that is wrong (J8, interview conducted on February 8th, 2018).

However, in several cases the increase in the intolerance of the government towards independent journalism ends up driving the radicalization of the positions of its directors and the editorial lines of the new media. Initially, the creators of the independent magazine *El Estornudo* considered that the Cuban Government did not hinder the publication's work because it considered them "serious", a way of saying that the publication is not a project "opposed to the political regime", nor a space of "counterrevolutionary propaganda". Although, after one of its members was summoned by State Security to be questioned about the project and the publication was blocked by national servers, the team's outrage led to the editorial note to the censor: why can't *El Estornudo* be read in Cuba? (*Nota al censor: ¿por qué no puede leerse El Estornudo en Cuba?)*, in which they categorize the censorship of independent media as "acts of the dictatorship" and refer to the figure of the censor as "repressor" and "erudite of totalitarian states" (*El Estornudo*, 2018). With these actions, both parties –government and independent media, government and non-state journalists– crossed the thin and fragile line of tolerance that they seemed to share.

> For them you are an opponent, even if you make your journalism as balanced as possible, questioning the independent civil society, questioning the opposition and questioning the ruling party. You are doing a balanced job, but doing it outside their premises already puts you on the other side (J3, interview conducted on March 30th, 2017).

One of the main problems for non-state journalism in Cuba is the environment of illegality in which it operates, an element that limits and violates this activity on the island. Cuban independent journalism projects challenge the Constitution, which, in article 52, prohibits the existence of non-state press media; while Law 88 for the Protection of the National Sovereignty and the Economy of Cuba typifies a series of crimes related to the dissemination of information that threatens the interests of the Government and the political system. Several independent journalists have been accused of the crime of "usurpation of legal capacity" for not having graduated from journalism and practicing in non-state media, a complaint that is supported by article 149 of the

Cuban Penal Code, which punishes anyone who performs "acts typical of a profession for whose exercise he/she is not duly authorized" (Pentón, 2017). Meanwhile, journalists who worked in official media while collaborating in alternative media have been sanctioned or fired from their state jobs.

According to data from the Patmos Institute[9] (2019), until September 2019 there were 196 Cuban citizens prevented from leaving the country, including political activists, artists and independent journalists. Non-state Cuban media have denounced, during the same period, the "exit ban" of three journalists from the magazine *La Hora de Cuba*,[10] a journalist from *14yMedio* and a journalist from *Diario de Cuba*. In each case, the migration offices have informed those affected that they are "regulated for reasons of public interest".

Sometimes government repression of independent journalists is explicit, but sometimes it operates in sneaky ways, through threats from authorities. These threats are denounced by those affected through the independent media themselves, or on social networks on the Internet and are also recorded in the reports of the Cuban Observatory for Human Rights. From these encounters in which journalists are exposed –a practice that is also applied to human rights activists– the consequences that their work can have for them and their families, there are no records of these. These are informal appointments and conversations, which prevents them from filing legal actions.

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[9]   The Patmos Institute is defined as a Cuban civil society organization founded in the Eben Ezer Baptist Church in 2013 and which works according to four fundamental objectives: interreligious dialogue, political advocacy, monitoring and defense of religious liberties, and education in the human rights (Instituto Patmos, 2019).

[10] Unlike the rest of the media included here, *La Hora de Cuba* is an independent printed magazine that is published in Camagüey, province of central Cuba.

There are some articles in the Constitution and some laws, the so-called Gag Law,[11] for example, that regulates and deals with penalizing the independent exercise or journalism on their own, as we could also call it. So we know of cases of people who have been accused, or that their harassment has not been brought to the legal plane, but has been in the shadows, people who have been threatened, discredited (J7, interview conducted on December 21st, 2017).

Arrests of journalists working for independent media are almost always aimed at stopping them from covering an event, attending an organized underground activity, or arriving at the airport in time for a flight. But arrests typically last for a few hours, without charges being brought, while sometimes authorities limit themselves to preventing the journalist from leaving their homes. These ways of operating by the government place journalists in a situation of legal vulnerability.

When we enter Cuba we are defenseless. Every time I am arrested, I am helpless. They use their own law and go against their own law to crush those of us who are against those laws that harm all the people (J6, interview conducted on November 9th, 2017).

The interviewees who suffered some of these situations reported that it gave them some peace of mind that their arrests, searches and interviews with the police were referenced in the independent press, which also allowed them to verify the support of many people who shared and commented on the information in social networks. When the police do not give relatives information on where journalists and activists are being detained, the independent media and some foreign media keep the alert on the fact.

According to a study that analyzes, among other things, who and from where independent Cuban digital media are read, only 41% of them make Cuba the main source of traffic. While, for 50%, the fundamental source of readers is in the United States, especially in Miami, where

[11] Law 88 for the Protection of the National Sovereignty and the Economy of Cuba is also called in some circles as the "Gag Law".

most of the Cuban diaspora is grouped in the United States (Díaz, 2017; Portela, 2016).

However, the independent media also have receivers/readers, although limited by the low and expensive connectivity, which is why some media have implemented alternative mechanisms for offline distribution of their content, an activity that crosses the limits of journalistic work and is related to activism. The independent audiovisual agency Palenque Vision, whose works are published on Univision, on Channel 41, Channel 51 and on Television Martí, in addition to being published on its YouTube channel, are also distributed free of charge through CDs and external storage devices.

> We seek to make people think, to have a reaction. We started distributing the materials in Cuba first on compact discs. Later, when the Internet opened for Cubans –technically not, but it did open– people could already access it. The other problem is that people do not have money in Cuba to connect; we know that it is very expensive. But I used compact discs and USB drives and then the famous "package" (*paquete*) came up and there we put the materials and so it has expanded and people have started to see things (P2, interview conducted on March 29th, 2017).

Independent media are looking for alternatives to reach more readers by sending newsletters to their subscribers via email and through other mechanisms to circumvent censorship in Cuba, such as sharing in social networks like Twitter and Facebook the work blocked by Cuban servers. Meanwhile, the newspaper *14yMedio* publishes a summary of its publications in a PDF version every week, which it distributes through external electronic means.

Behind some journalistic projects are the political interests of the United States, evidenced in various documents that have been made public in recent years. Among the measures approved during the Barack Obama administration, for example, is an assistance program for Cuban civil society that includes the granting of funds to promote human rights activities, private initiative, professional training, and technological access and communication (Núñez, 2014).

For some media, it is important to mark the distance between their work and that of other independent Cuban media with an anti-government editorial line, since they do not want to be identified as "political dissidents", something that affects not only editorial decisions but when it comes to accepting or not financial offers.

> Many people in the United States have offered us money and we do not accept it because we cannot smear the name of the magazine with organizations that we know are demonized, such as NED.[12] NED and USAID[13] finance thousands of projects throughout Latin America and in the world and nothing happens, it does not even point out things in editorial policies, but we know that in Cuba it is demonized and we cannot accept it to simply avoid a problem. I do not know if at any time we will pass that stage (J8, interview conducted on February 8th, 2018).

Given the lack of access to the Internet and to programming different from that transmitted by national channels,[14] an offline content distribution system, mainly foreign, known as "the package", (*el paquete*) has become popular in recent years, which includes mostly entertainment (movies, reality shows, humorous and musical programs, etc.), although it also incorporates publications from the emerging independent Cuban press –not considered contentious or enemy– and materials produced in Cuba specifically for this type of consumption –especially advertising for national ventures–. The compendium also works as an offline store for applications, video games, antivirus updates, among others.

Its update began on a weekly basis, but in the face of consumer demand, it currently becomes daily. This new form of content circulation, although illegal, is tolerated by the Government, with which there is supposed to be a kind of tacit agreement on the part of

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[12] National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

[13] U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

[14] Cubavisión, with varied programming; TeleRebelde, with mainly sports programming; Multivision; two educational channels; and recently they added Canal Clave, of music; and Canal Caribe, specialized in news.

its producers not to include materials with subversive or pornographic content. Distribution is usually at home and the price of approximately one Terabyte of downloaded or pirated materials ranges from two to five dollars depending on the current materials.

The chain of elaboration of the package includes in the following order: *suppliers* –who download the contents from the Internet–, *matrices* –select and organize the information–, *couriers* –are in charge of making sure that the hard drives with the package reach the whole country–, *distributors* (at various levels) –they market the package locally– and *consumers* (Concepción, 2015). But the package is constantly evolving as distributors and users can remove or add content and continue to share it. In this dynamic process, materials from the independent press usually reach the weekly compendium.

> With the recently edited program I already had people taking me their memory sticks to copy it, people who share "the package" and go to my house for it. People ask for it, they contact me and I give it to them for free. My program does not leave the matrix because they are closely watched. Those who distribute my program in "the package" are below, because they are not so closely watched (J6, interview conducted on November 9th, 2017).

The relationship of independent Cuban journalism with the authorities is also complex because it places on the agenda topics censored by the official press, ranging from questioning public policies, criticism of the political system and analysis of social problems, such as increased poverty and inequality in the country. These elements contribute to the official discourse associating independent journalism with the imprecise, movable and stigmatized strip of "dissent".

The government strategies to curb independent journalism range from intimidation to criminal penalties, but in all cases the surveillance, inhibition, annulment, arrest and punishment of journalists is the result of official guidelines. The ways in which the government operates against independent journalism in Cuba can be summarized as:

1. Blocking of digital media on national servers.
2. Surveillance and intimidation of independent journalists.
3. Arbitrary arrests.
4. Dismissals from study and work centers.
5. Confiscation of work materials.
6. Interrogations by the State Security.
7. Limitations on leaving the country.
8. Hacking accounts and using false profiles on social networks to attack independent journalists.
9. Media smear and disinformation campaigns.

Given this scenario, nineteen independent Cuban media[15] joined to write and sign a document demanding legal recognition of their work as independent journalists. The document, published in different spaces on the web on October 7th, 2019 under the title of "Declaration of Cuban independent media" (*Declaración de medios independientes cubanos*), states that since January, 2018, 183 attacks on journalists have been documented in the country, which include elements of the nine points described above.

> These attacks are part of a systematic campaign by the Cuban Government with the purpose of silencing those who practice independent journalism. These attacks, in turn, curtail the right of Cuban citizens to information of public interest and, therefore, prevent them from accessing and participating in decision-making (*Declaración de medios independientes cubanos*, 2019).

Likewise, the signatories demand the repeal of all laws that restrict freedom of expression or of the press in Cuba, transparency and access to public information, and demand the right of Cuban citizens to information (*Declaración de medios independientes cubanos*, 2019).

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15 The signatories are: *14ymedio*, *ADN Cuba*, *Alas Tensas*, *Inverted Tree*, *Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa (APLP)*, *CiberCuba*, *Coexistence*, *CubaNet*, *Diario de Cuba*, *El Estornudo*, *Havana Times*, *Hypermedia Magazine*, *La Hora de Cuba*, *Play-Off Magazine*, *Project Inventory*, *Bridge in sight Rialta*, *Tremenda Nota* and *YucaByte*.

Conclusions

Independent Cuban journalism represents the conquest of a space in the public sphere that pluralizes that area and represents an advance in the search for greater freedom of expression and circulation of information. Among its strengths is the fact of having highly trained information professionals, the international visibility they have achieved thanks to their presence in other media, both alternative and mainstream, as well as the awards and nominations obtained by the work of members of these projects in prestigious contests.[16]

The independent media have taken advantage of new technologies that obscure the limits between the local, the national and the global, making possible the emergence of new communication environments. In the Cuban case, we find that the Internet, even with its limitations, presents itself as a privileged space for expression and participation, which is nevertheless affected by the constraints that the system and the Government impose on public space and public communication in general.

The democratizing capacity of the Internet and digital platforms, in a given context, also depend on the fact that the rest of the participants that make up public communication and the general public are willing to accept dissident voices and recognize the legitimacy of their arguments. In this way, independent Cuban digital media can foster the potential for greater public debate and challenge polarizing state narratives around their existence (García, 2018), to the extent that they are increasingly accepted towards the interior of the country.

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[16] The Gabriel García Márquez Prize for Journalism (2017) was awarded in the *Text* category to the interview "Historia de un paria", by Jorge Carrasco, published in *El Estornudo*. The same prize (2019), also in the *Text* category, went to Mónica Baró –who had already been a finalist of that contest in 2016– for the report "La sangre nunca fue amarilla", published in *Periodismo de Barrio*. Meanwhile, the multimedia special "La Cuba que viene", published by *El Toque*, won the Online Journalism Awards in 2019, in the *Explanatory Reporting of a Small Newsroom* category.

If from the state media predominates the function of propaganda over the news and their characteristics and management modes connect them to the official press model, in independent journalism the critical and reflective function of a journalism that claims the vigilant model of the political environment stands out, which is frequently interwoven with the militant or alternative model. Among the characteristics shared by the independent Cuban press are the coverage of topics traditionally excluded from the state media; the gamble for an attractive writing and a visual design that exploits the possibilities of the multimedia language and the creation of collaboration networks with other communicative participants, both alternative and traditional.

The different theoretical notions about public space conceptualize it as a field of convergence of different participants and interests, mediated by tensions related to the various power struggles and in which it is fought through communication strategies. When thinking about this in a situated way, we find that independent Cuban journalism presents itself as a key participant in the configuration of the national public, whose strategies intervene disruptively in this symbolic space of participation.

Among the particularities of the Cuban case is the fact that, as there is a single party and there is no legal political opposition, the counter-power is generated from contestation practices developed by citizens and by civil society not endorsed by the State. It is, therefore, diverse and generally dispersed participants, who develop forms of contentious action against the government as a monolithic participant embodied in the party-state. The values that independent journalism claims, its discourse and its practices conflict with the values, discourses and practices promoted by the government, generating new forms of dissent. All these elements affect in that the government identifies independent media and journalists as opponents and generate strategies for them to undermine their work.

The work of the new online independent Cuban media pays tribute to the pluralization of the sphere and public debate. Their critical speeches outside the institutional framework make possible the emergence of new communication environments in Cuba and its presence, in addition, complicates citizen interaction due to the appearance of alternatives

to build exchanges in which opinions are made invisible on a daily basis in official spaces. These characteristics, whose transgressive and rebellious nature turns them into forms of resistance to the government, account for the contending nature of Cuban non-state journalism, which seeks to recover spaces for participation, while generating new ones.

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