



Connecting Cuba:

More Space for Criticism but Restrictions Slow Press Freedom Progress



A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists

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About this report

Cuba's press, emboldened by President Raúl Castro's call for reforms in 2010, are finding more space for critical comment, but harassment and intimidation from authorities, a legal limbo caused by outdated and restrictive press laws, and limited and expensive access to the internet is slowing the island nation's progress toward press freedom. **A special report by the Committee to Protect Journalists.**

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This report was produced by CPJ's Americas program. Carlos Lauría, senior Americas program coordinator, wrote the executive summary "**Cuba's media vitally transformed but cautious approach is slowing progress,**" Americas research associate Alexandra Ellerbeck wrote the sidebar, "**Staying connected in an off-line world,**" and Ricardo Uceda, a member of CPJ's Americas Advisory Group and executive director of the Lima-based Instituto Prensa y Sociedad (IPYS), contributed to the report. Ernesto Londoño, a member of *The New York Times* editorial board, who has written extensively about Cuba, wrote the foreword, "**Contemplating a free press in Cuba.**"

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This report is also available in Spanish.

Cover photo: Cubans tap into a Havana hotel's Wi-Fi connection to access their smartphones. Access to affordable, reliable internet is an obstacle for the country's bloggers. (AP/Desmond Boylan)

CONTENTS

Foreword: Contemplating a free press in Cuba	6
Executive Summary: Cuba's media vitally transformed but cautious approach is slowing progress	8
Press freedom restrictions	13
Cuba's evolving news agenda	14
<p>Cuba's media is opening up, with journalists and bloggers finding more space to be critical and delve into issues ignored by the state-run press. However, a legal limbo over independent reporting, restricted and expensive access to the internet, and the threat of arbitrary detentions is slowing progress. Cuba's bloggers, reporters, and online magazine publishers share their view of the state of press freedom.</p>	
I. Bloggers	17
II. News websites	19
III. Webzines	23
Sidebar: Staying connected in an off-line world	26
<p>Despite government promises to improve Cuba's internet service, journalists face limited access, high costs, and sporadic censorship. To overcome these obstacles, bloggers are using innovative ways to access and distribute content.</p>	
Graphic: How Cubans get online	30
Recommendations	36

Contemplating a free press in Cuba

A free press, at its best, is the conscience of a nation, an indispensable arbiter of truth and righteousness. When it is doing its job well, a free press unearths unpleasant truths, holds people in power accountable and champions marginalized communities.

At this remarkable juncture in Cuban history, the island would benefit enormously from a freer press.

Yet Cuban journalists remain shackled. The state press is subservient to the ruling Communist Party, which has sought for years to tightly control how Cubans get their news. Independent journalists who do critical reporting have limited reach because only the state is legally entitled to run news organizations and few people have regular, affordable access to the internet.

Nevertheless, as I contemplate the future of journalism in Cuba, I am heartened by the building blocks of a freer press that are already in place. First and foremost is the rich reservoir of talent. The Cuban journalists I have met are passionate, smart, inquisitive, and have a strong grasp of history. Their primary audience—the island’s 11 million citizens—is among the most literate and well educated in the world.

Even in the absence of a legal framework that establishes the right to gather and report news independently several are doing high-caliber and pioneering journalism. I’ve watched with particular admiration the work of the narrative journalism website *El Estornudo* and the immersive reporting about local issues in *Periodismo de Barrio*. The independent journalist Yoani Sánchez deserves recognition for the consistently high quality reporting on her website, 14ymedio, which provides readers with stories and perspectives they can’t find anywhere else.

The official press, meanwhile, too often appears stubbornly burrowed into Cold War trenches. It obfuscates far more than it clarifies. It justifies its self-censorship and a belligerent tone by pointing to its anachronistic foils, the largely irrelevant Washington-funded Radio and TV Martí. American taxpayers spend millions each year on subsidizing the Miami-based newsroom, which has had little success in building a sizeable audience on the island. The official Cuban press and Radio and TV Martí have become echo chambers that cater to ideologues on opposite ends of the political spectrum. As currently structured, neither is capable of delivering the type of transformational journalism that could help bring about the changes yearned for by most Cubans.

Achieving that kind of transformation will require clearer rules of the game. Some Cuban officials have encouraged the press to be more probing and to highlight aspects of the system that aren’t working. Those calls ring hollow without strong legal protections that establish freedom of the press as a fundamental right. They amount to little as long as there continue to be red lines about the questions the press is entitled to ask and the answers government officials are willing to provide.

The Cuban people deserve answers to numerous pressing questions. Among them: why has the government failed to implement a majority of the economic reforms Cuban leaders identified as

indispensable years ago? Why does the Cuban military control large segments of the economy and how does it justify the opacity of its finances? Why, exactly, do Cubans continue to live in the digital Dark Ages at a time when the state has the technical capacity to bring millions online in a matter of months? Why don't ordinary Cubans have more visibility on, and a say in, who will succeed President Raúl Castro when he is slated to step down in 2018? What is prompting tens of thousands of Cubans to emigrate every year?

“The Cuban people deserve answers to numerous pressing questions.”

Ernesto Londoño

It would be foolish to expect that substantive answers to these questions will be forthcoming anytime soon. But they would become significantly harder to ignore if more Cuban journalists were asking them. They should. 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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cuba's media vitally transformed but cautious approach is slowing progress

A lively blogosphere, an increasing number of news websites carrying investigative reporting and news commentary, and an innovative breed of independent reporters who are critical of, yet still support socialist ideas have vitally transformed Cuba's media landscape in the past five years.

The energized press scene is in stark contrast with the island nation's restrictive legal framework, which curbs freedom of speech under the pretense of protecting the "independence or territorial integrity of the state." The constitution bans private ownership of the press and all media are supposedly controlled by the one-party Communist state, but the spread of independent reporting is a sign of a changing Cuba.

Reporters, from the most critical—who are known as dissidents—to journalism graduates, documentary filmmakers, and pro-revolutionary bloggers are opening new spaces for free expression and entrepreneurial journalism that not long ago seemed off limits.

Bloggers with whom CPJ spoke said they have embraced the loosening of restrictions. "We are seeing opportunities that were inconceivable five years ago," said Alejandro Rodríguez, who quit his job in 2012 at *Adelante*, a state-run weekly in the eastern city of Camagüey, to start a blog.

However, many said that more work needs to be done, with the threat of arbitrary detention, vague and outdated laws, and limitations on internet access slowing Cuba's press freedom progress.

Internet access in Cuba, which the U.N. ranks in last place in the Americas, is still inaccessible to most citizens. And while large-scale systematic state repression has eased significantly, the most strident opponents in the media told CPJ they still face harassment and intimidation from authorities.

The burgeoning media field began its expansion in 2011, when President Raúl Castro introduced market-style reforms to reinvent socialism. However, many of those reforms have been implemented sluggishly, and even reversed in some areas.

When the call for loosening of restrictions was first made, the party leadership urged the Cuban population to be critical of the government and state institutions. Castro told the People's Assembly in a December 2010 speech not to fear discrepancies and differences of opinions.

Journalists, especially those working for the state press, have been emboldened by these statements. And while there is almost no criticism of government policies in state media, most newspapers—including the national daily *Granma*—have started "Letters to The Editor" sections that provide a vehicle for Cubans to express opinions.



President Barack Obama walks through the crowds in Havana in March 2016, a few months after diplomatic ties between the U.S. and Cuba were restored. (AFP/Yamil Lage)

State journalists and academics in Havana said they recognize the need for the official press to become more critical, and some have called for a public information law. Laura Blanco Betancourt, a reporter for the state-owned provincial daily *Vanguardia*, acknowledged that the lack of “a culture of debate” had prevented candid discussions within the official press. José Ramón Vidal, a former editor of the daily *Juventud Rebelde*, went further in an interview published in the December 2015-March 2016 edition of Mexican magazine *Razón y Palabra*, where he argued that Cuba should change its “communication model” because “important social issues” were being left behind. Vidal, now a communications professor at the University of Havana, said the propaganda-based media model was facing a crisis and Cubans no longer paid attention to it.

“We are seeing opportunities that were inconceivable five years ago.”

Alejandro Rodríguez, blogger

Raudiel Peña Barrios, a lawyer in Havana, wrote in the online magazine *OnCuba*, “the mere fact that [freedom of information] is under discussion is big news in the Cuban context.” In the article, “The



A woman reads a state-run newspaper in central Havana. The official press has been emboldened by Castro's comments that the media should be more critical. (AFP/Flippo Monteforte)

Right to Information Cuba: Possibility or Utopia?" Peña said that such legislation "should help to democratize access to information."

Blanco Betancourt, who is based in Santa Clara province, said that a public communication strategy could help, adding that any such legislation "must include access to public information for all Cubans."

While Cuba's tight grip on the press has waned in recent years, authorities still exert control over the media and the most critical independent journalists continue to face harassment. Long-term incarcerations have become rare since the 2003 crackdown—during which CPJ documented 29 journalists serving lengthy prison sentences—but detentions and summons are still common, CPJ research shows. The once-common accusation of acting as "mercenaries" at the service of the U.S. has become almost obsolete.

The restoration of diplomatic ties between Washington and Havana in December 2014, coupled with U.S. President Barack Obama's historic March 2016 visit to Cuba, have made it harder for the government to justify press censorship as a means to protect the nation from American aggression, Cuban journalists said.

However, on the day that Obama arrived in Cuba, independent blogger and activist Lázaro Yuri Valle

Roca was arrested and held in custody for five days after trying to cover a protest by the Ladies in White, an opposition group founded by the wives of jailed dissidents. The journalist told CPJ after his release that no charges were filed, but he was warned that he could face legal action if arrested again.

The restoration of ties has led to suggestions from some analysts that Cuba may return to the Organization of American States, which expelled Cuba in 1962. But in June, Cuba said that as a show of solidarity with Venezuela, it would not join the group, the BBC reported. Castro's statement came after the OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro called for sanctions to be imposed on Venezuela. Membership to the OAS, whose charter includes a commission to protect human rights, would require Cuba to improve its press freedom record, including easing restrictions on internet access and ending the harassment of journalists.

Press Freedom Boundaries

Cuba, ranked 10th on CPJ's 2015 list of the world's most censored countries, has the most restrictive laws on free speech and press freedom in the Americas. Its penal code contains restrictive press freedom provisions.

Most criminal prosecutions that threaten freedom of speech include charges of contempt of authority under Article 144, "enemy propaganda" under Article 115, or acting against "the independence or the territorial integrity of the state," under Article 91, which is often used in conjunction with Law 88, "protection of Cuba's national independence and economy," according to a 2016 comparative study of criminal defamation laws in the Americas, prepared for CPJ by the law firm Debevoise & Plimpton in collaboration with the Thomson Reuters Foundation. The charges can carry a prison term of up to 20 years.

Most of the prosecutions refer to the defamation of public institutions, organizations, national heroes and martyrs, which is also often used in conjunction with other provisions to curb freedom of expression by preventing public debate and criticism of the authorities and government policies.

The far-reaching transformation of the media landscape has broadened the space for criticism allowing all sectors of the press to delve into issues previously perceived as taboo, such as gay rights, allegations of official corruption and poverty.

The internet is, perhaps, the biggest hurdle for journalists to becoming relevant, because most of their content is consumed outside the island. At the same time, they must pay high prices for online access and find original ways to disseminate their work to a home audience that is largely offline.

These new media journalists also operate in a legal limbo. Article 53 of the constitution bans private ownership of the press and recognizes "freedom of speech and the press in accordance with the goals of the socialist society." Many of the journalists CPJ interviewed said that they approach their work cautiously and sometimes veer away from publishing overtly critical work because of the current legal framework.

Dismantling this framework for the press, removing all barriers to individual internet access, while expanding it to the population at large are key to fostering a more open environment, according to analysts and Cuba experts.

The slow loosening of restrictions reflects a government with many high-ranking leaders above the age of 80 who are not part of an active online community. Within the government and the party leadership there is a debate on how swift this opening should be.

Dissidents, journalists who report on social issues but are not considered hostile, pro-government bloggers, and members of the state-owned press all agree on one point: they want the government to provide more, inexpensive and less-restricted access for Cuba's 11 million people.

In a July 2015 interview in *Juventud Rebelde*, José Ramón Machado Ventura, the second-highest ranking member of Cuba's Communist Party, accused foreigners of trying to promote expanded internet access "not for Cuban people to communicate but to penetrate us and do ideological work for a new conquest." This stubborn approach to internet access calls into question whether the government will meet its pledge of bringing internet access to 50 percent of the population by 2020, finances permitting. Such an achievement will demand a great deal of courage from the Cuban leadership.

Press freedom restrictions

Cuba's constitution, laws, and its penal code include restrictive provisions that limit the ability of journalists to report critically and independently.

Cuba's constitution

Article 53.

Citizens have the right to press freedom “in keeping with the objectives of socialist society.” The constitution bans privately owned media, ruling that mass media must always be state or social property.

Penal code

- Slander, defamation, and insult of injury against high-ranking public officials carries a maximum prison sentence of three years.
- Engaging in enemy propaganda is punishable by up to 15 years in prison.
- Disseminating “false news” with the aim to “disturb international peace” or “endanger the prestige of, or discredit, the Cuban state” carries a prison term of one to four years.
- Acting against the “independence or the territorial integrity of the state” carries a prison term of 10 to 20 years, or the death penalty.

1997 Law of National Dignity

- Collaborating with “the enemy’s media” carries a maximum prison term of 10 years.



President Raúl Castro waves a copy of the state-run *Juventud Rebelde* during a National Assembly meeting. Privately owned papers are banned under Cuba's constitution. (AP/Ismael Francisco, Prensa Latina)

Law 88: Protection of National Independence and the Economy of Cuba

- Passing information to the U.S. government “aimed at breaching the internal order” carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison.
- Looking for classified information to support the U.S. embargo or disrupt the internal order in Cuba carries a maximum sentence of eight years in prison. If the information obtained severely damages the Cuban economy, the sentence is 15 years’ prison.
- Accumulating, reproducing, or distributing subversive material from the U.S. government or other external entities to support the U.S. embargo or disrupt the internal order is punishable by eight years in prison, or 15 years if it causes grave economic damage.

Cuba's evolving news agenda

At the Argos Theatre in Havana, Yenys Laura Prieto Velazco purchased a ticket for *Diez Millones*, a popular play about a Cuban family torn apart by the ideological fanaticism of the Cuban revolution and by the father's departure to the U.S. during the 1980 Mariel boatlift.

Prieto, 27, is a poet, freelance writer, and an anchor on "Buenos Días," a TV news magazine for the state broadcaster Televisión Cubana. Although she specializes in cultural reporting, Prieto said that she did not bother proposing a story about *Diez Millones* for her program. She said that the very title of the play, which means "10 million" in Spanish, would raise eyebrows among her editors. It refers to a disastrous campaign between 1964 and 1970 by Fidel Castro's government to mobilize the entire country to harvest 10 million tons of sugar.

As she sat on a bench outside the theater, next to the Plaza of the Revolution where huge crowds gather for speeches by Communist government leaders, Prieto said, "You know which stories will be accepted and which won't."

So why is Prieto shelling out her own money for a ticket and taking along a pen and notebook? It turns out that she now has many options to discuss the merits of the play by way of Cuba's booming independent media. She said she planned to pitch a review of *Diez Millones* to one of the many news websites that have sprung up over the past five years and provide lively alternatives to censored state-run TV, radio and newspapers that, aside from Catholic Church publications, had been the only local and national news media available in Cuba since Fidel Castro seized power in 1959.

These online ventures range from *14ymedio*, the first Cuba-based independent news site co-founded by dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez, to *La Joven Cuba*, which publishes news and blogs that are critical of, yet continue to support, the Cuban state. In addition, throngs of bloggers who now use their own bylines rather than pseudonyms regularly post their thoughts to the web, and struggling young entrepreneurs are publishing sports, fashion and entertainment webzines.

Many of these journalists have taken to heart President Raúl Castro's December 2010 declaration that Cubans

should be more critical of the government. The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Havana in December 2014 also makes it harder for the Castro government to justify press censorship as a means to protect the nation from American aggression, said Harold Cárdenas Lema, who founded *La Joven Cuba* along with other professors from the University of Matanzas.

Now, independent journalists are digging into issues that were long glossed over or ignored by the official media. At times, the blogs and articles directly criticize policies and members of the Cuban government. Their scoops, in turn, sometimes prompt official news sources, such as the newspapers *Granma* and *Juventud Rebelde*, to publish follow up stories, said Ted Henken, former president of the non-profit research group Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy.

"When the independent media cover a story, the official media the next day is forced to deal with those issues because everyone is already talking about them," said Henken, who is an associate professor of sociology and Latin American studies at Baruch College in New York.

For example, when *14ymedio* broke a story last year about the killing of a transgender activist in the western city of Pinar del Río, state media wrote follow-up stories that prompted Castro's daughter, Mariela, who heads Cuba's National Center for Sex Education, to denounce the homicide as a hate crime.

The changes within the media represent an unprecedented loosening of press restrictions, Cuban bloggers and reporters told CPJ. Rather than leaving Cuba, many are now staying to explore these new possibilities, said Lázaro González, a 25-year-old blogger and documentary filmmaker. Journalism professors at the University of Havana—the country's most prestigious university—praise watchdog reporting as opposed to the kind of revolutionary journalism aimed at upholding socialist values and defending the Castro regime, said González, who studied there.

Few Cubans on the island read the online content. Broadband internet access is unavailable in most Cuban homes. There are about 330 internet cafés in Cuba and



Cubans make use of a Wi-Fi access point in a square in Havana. Access to the internet costs \$2 an hour. (Reuters/Ivan Alvarado)

dozens of publicly accessible Wi-Fi points. But the fees, usually about \$2 per hour, are exorbitant in a country where most formal workers are employed by the state and earn around \$30 a month.

The analytics for *OnCuba* show that most readers of the independent news website come from the Cuban diaspora in the U.S. and Europe, said José Jasán Nieves, the website's associate editor. However, he and other journalists and academics contend that these stories do trickle down to readers in Cuba. They point out that many state employees have access to the internet at work and read news sites critical of the government. Mobile phone use is also widespread—the U.N.'s International Telecommunication Union figures estimate that 3.3 million Cubans have mobile phones—giving citizens access to email (though not the internet) via the standard cell signal provided by ETECSA, the state telecommunications monopoly, and the ability to read popular articles that make the rounds via email chains.

Another offline option is “The Packet,” a weekly collection of TV programs, films, and stories from international news outlets and Cuba's independent press that are downloaded from the internet and sold to Cubans on USB sticks

and DVDs for a dollar. It is estimated that half of Cuba's population accesses content through The Packet, which is run through a network of around 45,000 people, according to an article in *The Nation* by Sujatha Fernandes, a sociology professor at City University of New York.

But for all the changes around the edges of Cuban journalism, the status quo remains firmly in place, with bloggers, reporters and editors still facing major restrictions and official harassment.

Access to the most critical independent news sites, such as *14ymedio*, have been blocked for internet users in Cuba. Fears of similar action or arrest prompt many independent journalists to self-censor, according to the journalists CPJ interviewed. The government blocked access to *14ymedio*

“There is not enough confidence in the journalists to do that kind of criticism.”

Laura Blanco Betancourt, *Vanguardia*

just hours after it went live in May 2014 and has done the same with the Miami-based *CubaNet* among other critical news websites.

The Ministry of Communication did not respond to CPJ's request for comment about harassment, arbitrary detentions, surveillance, and restrictions that Cuba's journalists say they face.

Outside of the online journalism ventures, traditional media remain stagnant. All TV and radio stations continue to be controlled by the government and function as propaganda tools, while the distribution of independent printed newspapers and magazines, except for the Catholic Church publications, remains illegal. Or, as Sánchez told *The New York Times* in 2014, "In Cuba, printing presses are more guarded than military bases."

Laura Blanco Betancourt, a reporter for the state-owned daily *Vanguardia*, told CPJ she believes that Cuban state media—both national and provincial outlets—have "a huge debt with the Cuban people." Blanco Betancourt, who covers the economy and agricultural, said the media agenda is distant to the public. "Part of the responsibility relies on us, journalists, who became used to reporting on institutions rather than getting into the Cuban people's needs and problems," she said. Blanco Betancourt said that the directors of state media were also responsible because they "have not been able to interpret or manage the appeal of leaders of the Cuban revolution, who have clearly stated that the official press needs to get closer to the people, to report on their problems, to leave formalities behind and not to fear criticism."

Cuba has been under international scrutiny for such a long time that "officials feel they can hide information because it is a threat to national security or can be used by the enemies of the revolution," she said. The *Vanguardia* reporter added that having access to information "will help journalists to reveal corruption or official mismanagement in public services."

Part of the problem is the way journalism is done in Cuba, Blanco Betancourt said, adding that *Vanguardia* barely criticizes government policies. "There is not enough confidence in the journalists to do that kind of criticism." She admitted there should be "space" for incorporating critical views. "There has been a habit in the state media to care and protect the reputation of Communist party officials rather than criticize them," she said. "If we continue to be complacent by trying to avoid a scandal we will become even more distant from the public we need

to inform."

Jose Ramón Vidal, a communications professor at the University of Havana and former director of the state-owned daily *Juventud Rebelde*, gave a similar view in an interview with a Mexican magazine. "Journalistic criticism only stays on the surface and, as a consequence, it creates false conclusions, false generalizations, which do not dig deep into the issues," said Vidal in an interview published in *Razón y Palabra*. Vidal, who proposed turning state-run radio outlets into community stations, said that the "model based on propaganda is facing a crisis and should be left behind. People do not pay attention to it; it is worn out."

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Far more so than troubled media properties in the U.S. or Europe, Cuba's new media ventures are in a fierce struggle for survival. Although some receive donations, grants and advertising from foreign entities, there is little private advertising inside Cuba. Because this area is unregulated and informal, no one knows the rules. Elaine Díaz Rodríguez said that is why, just to be safe, she lists all the donors to *Periodismo de Barrio* on her website.

Then, there is Cuba's legal limbo. Most online news outlets are neither officially recognized nor prohibited, making it impossible to open corporate bank accounts or put together legal contracts in the name of these new ventures.

Some of the bloggers with whom CPJ spoke said they would prefer if the government established a clear set of rules, or a new media law that includes online publications. This way, they would know the boundaries and no longer fear the threat of having their sites shut down, which has led them to self-censor. Others said blurred lines were preferable, allowing them to take bigger risks in their coverage because web publications are not explicitly prohibited. Some of the newer bloggers told CPJ they fear a press law that extends to web publications could lead to a clampdown.

"Space is opening up. Things are moving and the status quo is breaking," Miriam Celaya, one of the founders of *14ymedio*, told CPJ. "But Cuba hasn't changed as much as we would like."

To further explore the state of journalism and free expression in Cuba, CPJ interviewed independent bloggers, reporters, editors, and online magazine publishers.



A webpage of 14ymedio, the first Cuba-based independent daily. A series of online news websites have been launched in recent years. (AFP/Panta Astiazaran)

BLOGGERS

Former University of Havana journalism student, Carlos Alberto Pérez was stunned in 2014 when he found that answer sheets for the history, math and Spanish entrance exams for his alma mater were being sold on the street. For between \$150 and \$300, high school graduates, hoping for a coveted spot at the country's best university, could essentially pay their way in.

At the time, Pérez was an editor at *Tino*, a computer and technology magazine. But he had also started a blog called *La Chiringa de Cuba*. A chiringa is a homemade kite and Pérez said that he adopted the name because he wanted to put his ideas and reports up in the air so everyone could see them. Pérez said that although Cuba's public education system is held up as one of the triumphs of the revolution, he went after the story.

Before posting anything, Pérez, who supports the revolution, said he tried to inform the Education Ministry. But, he said, officials ignored his attempts to warn them of

potential fraud and the entrance examinations went ahead. After receiving no response from the authorities, Pérez published a copy of one of the answer sheets on his blog. It was a scoop that was picked up by other Cuban bloggers and media and finally forced a reaction from the government. Education officials acknowledged the problem in an official statement, announced that the examinations would be repeated, and launched an investigation that led to the arrests of eight people.

"Half of Cuba had the answers. It did not seem right," Pérez, 34, said while sitting on a park bench in historic Old Havana. "That was what drove me: the injustice, the corruption. And Raúl Castro said that we are supposed to denounce corruption at whatever cost."

Pérez and *La Chiringa de Cuba* exemplify both the promise and the perils of Cuba's blogosphere, which emerged in 2007 when the first blogs were written under pseudonyms and Sánchez launched her influential

Generación Y blog. Sánchez, 40, and her husband Reinaldo Escobar, a journalist who had been fired from *Juventud Rebelde* in 1988 over a critical article on the Castro revolution, provided another boost by running a blogger academy for citizen journalists. During free workshops in their Havana apartment, Escobar taught journalism; Sánchez focused on technology and the internet; Miriam Celaya taught ethics, law and culture, while other volunteers taught photography.

“It was a very rich experience,” Celaya said. “There was a feeling that, ‘We are going to write and do big things.’”

“Space is opening up... the status quo is breaking. But Cuba hasn’t changed as much as we would like.”

Miriam Celaya, *14ymedio*

ing over its problems.

“If we try to be balanced, to reflect the bad and the good, we wouldn’t be doing our duty to balance national journalism,” Escobar told the English language *Havana Times* in a 2013 interview. “... official journalism sweetens reality and the alternative exposes it.”

Yet many of the new bloggers have veered away from this hypercritical stance. Today, about 3,000 blogs are based in Cuba and in Cuban communities around the world, Elaine Díaz Rodríguez, the founder of *Periodismo de Barrio* (News from the Neighborhood), wrote in *Nieman Reports*. These new blogs include a variety of styles and tones. Topics include gardening, cooking and sex. Some of the bloggers who focus on politics told CPJ that they try to pull off the delicate feat of analyzing and criticizing the government’s policies without provoking its ire.

Official backlash can take many forms. News sites and blogs deemed counter-revolutionary are blocked on the island and several of the journalists and bloggers with whom CPJ spoke said they had experienced surveillance. CPJ was unable to independently verify the allegations.

Miriam Leiva, a former diplomat and independent journalist who co-founded the dissident group Ladies in

Many of these online pioneers remain unapologetically critical of the government. Escobar described this posture as a necessary counterweight to official journalism, which he said sings the glories of the revolution while gloss-

White, said she is under constant surveillance at home and believes that state agents sometimes tail her when she travels abroad. In a March blog, Leiva warned that the Cuban government’s biggest concern “is maintaining strict control on society with subtle methods that don’t damage the international image that Raúl Castro has been able to create.”

Leiva said that while surveillance is not at the level it was five years ago, she is still being watched and followed. The journalist said, “I have noticed people following me. I know that one of them is a neighbor who lives close by. I believe he acts as an informant for Cuban officials.” She said that her blog had not been attacked by online trolls, and so far she has not been prevented from covering events. But when she meets other journalists or people who are considered dissidents, she sometimes notices people following her. “The faces have become familiar, and they want me to see them,” she said. “It is a way to tell me that they know where I am going and that I am a subject of surveillance. They are trying to intimidate me.”

Another method of backlash is short-term detentions that often last for hours or days. That’s according to Roberto de Jesús Guerra Pérez, a dissident-turned-journalist who founded the news website *Hablemos Press* in 2009. He said that so far this year, 30 writers for *Hablemos Press*, which is critical of the authorities’ policies toward the press, have been detained for short periods by state agents. Guerra said the arrests lasted between three and 72 hours and that during that time, the journalists were threatened and sometimes beaten. He did not specify whether the reporters were questioned about their work, but he said that some were told that their children would lose university placements if they continued to criticize the government.

The Ministry of Communication did not respond to CPJ’s request for comment.

To avoid such problems, Alejandro Rodríguez, a 29-year-old blogger from Camagüey, said that he uses satire and irony to discuss issues such as the deteriorating state healthcare system. He said he will sometimes address small injustices, such as bribe-taking by anonymous bureaucrats, but he stays away from addressing allegations of systemic government corruption.

Yet even mild criticism can ruffle feathers. *La Joven Cuba*, which publishes a collection of op-ed-like blogs, pushes for reform and often criticizes the Communist Party, government bureaucracy, and the official press. In 2012, its website was blocked without explanation by ad-

ministrators at the state-run University of Matanzas. It reappeared the following year after Cuba's first vice president, Miguel Díaz-Canel, who supports greater openness, met with the blog's founders at the university and asked them what they needed to get back online, *The New York Times* reported.

"You have to learn to choose your battles, but I don't think there are taboo themes," Cárdenas, one of *La Joven Cuba's* founders, told CPJ.

Even when bloggers and journalists carefully select their topics and targets, they sometimes end up as casualties—as Pérez discovered with *La Chiringa de Cuba*. "I figured if I'm going to do a blog, why not do something different, something polemic that sparks debate," Pérez said. "But I'm not a dissident. The idea is to have a dissident voice within the revolution."

Pérez followed his "exam scam" exposé with exclusive stories about government plans to expand broadband access to the public and start selling home-based internet access. He said his reports generated massive interest among Cubans, who constantly complain about their lack of connectivity.

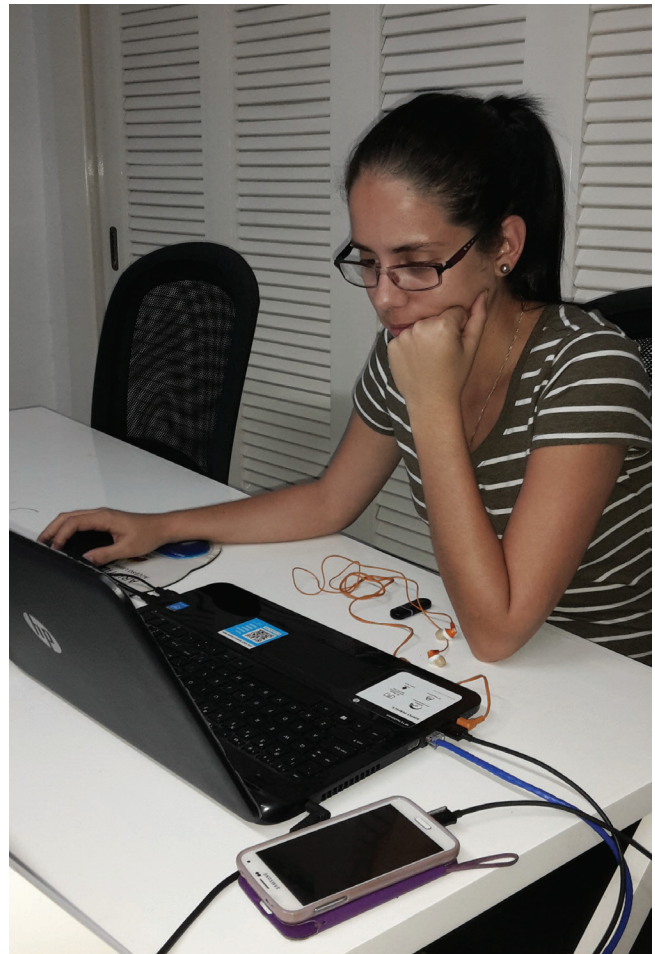
But Pérez's editors at the government-owned *Tino* magazine were less enthusiastic. Pérez said when he was fired last year, the editors told him they were uncomfortable with his blog. When CPJ contacted *Tino* for comment via the email address listed on its website, the message was returned as undeliverable.

Pérez now works as a government tour guide, showing tourists around Old Havana and other parts of the city. But he no longer has an office or regular access to the internet, which is key to researching material for *La Chiringa de Cuba* and interacting with his readers. In March he stopped blogging.

"To do a blog you need to be connected. You need feedback," Pérez said. "I now get a lot of emails from people asking, 'Why aren't you writing anymore?'"

One reason is that he is a new father and needs a steady job. Pérez said he's keeping a low profile for now to avoid problems with his current employers. He insists that *La Chiringa de Cuba* will fly again, but he plans to proceed with caution.

Comparing government press controls to a road barrier, Pérez said, "There is a big wall out there. You can go 120km per hour and crash against that wall. And maybe you will break a hole in the wall. But you will not survive. So, in my view, it's better to go slower and try to move past



Elizabeth Pérez, social media editor for OnCuba, works in the news website's Havana office. (Taken on behalf of CPJ)

the wall one day at time. That way you will survive."

NEWS WEBSITES

Before transitioning to independent journalism, José Jásán Nieves said he spent several disheartening years trying to poke holes in government press restrictions from within state media.

A native of eastern Cienfuegos, Nieves, 28, worked as news editor and program host for Radio Ciudad del Mar, the city's main station. It allowed no room for even mild criticism of government policies. In reporting on cases of cholera, for instance, Nieves said that he was ordered to describe the illness as "acute diarrhea syndrome." That's because his editors feared that revealing a cholera outbreak would reflect poorly on the state-run health system, he said.

Frustrated by the dull format, Nieves in 2014 convinced the station to commission a poll on listener figures. The results were shocking. On average, only 16 percent of residents tuned in even though it was the city's biggest radio station. That provided an opening for Nieves to shake things up. The comments from listeners during call-in programs were no longer censored, he said. The journalist said that calls were put on a 10-second delay to allow for if anything controversial was said. On his own show, Nieves began delivering commentaries that sometimes questioned the government.

But the new format didn't last long. When Olympic hurdles champion Dayron Robles announced in 2013 that he would no longer compete with the national team due to disagreements with track officials, Nieves criticized the island's sports authorities. He also slammed the government's 2013 decision to close private movie theatres set up in homes, which had been among the few sources of entertainment in small towns and rural areas.

"I thought it was a step backwards that made no sense," Nieves said. "It was a close-minded attitude inherited from the Soviet period."

But in voicing his opinions Nieves violated an unwritten code of official journalism, one that is often summed up by the phrase, "Yank the chain but don't touch the monkey." In other words, mild criticism of the way the system functions is tolerated, but not direct attacks on the system itself.

Nieves said that his supervisors reminded him that his role was to generate consensus around government policies, not to criticize them. He said he was demoted and had his salary cut.

Radio Ciudad del Mar did not respond to CPJ's request for comment.

The problems with his editors coincided with an explosion of new media startups. In 2014 Nieves left the radio station to work for *El Toque*, a website with news reports and radio podcasts launched by Radio Netherlands Worldwide, a Dutch broadcaster turned nongovernmental organization that promotes free speech.

Nieves also began writing for *OnCuba*, which was founded in Miami in 2012 by Hugo Cancio, a prominent Cuban businessman living in exile, who had long called for an end to the U.S. embargo. *OnCuba* started as a glossy lifestyle publication distributed at U.S. bookstores and on charter flights to Cuba. It later added a daily news website with stories produced by a team of reporters and collaborators on both sides of the Florida straits.

Nieves, *OnCuba's* associate editor, said the website is in a privileged position. After the U.S. and Cuba restored diplomatic relations, Cancio received a license to open a newsroom in Havana. Aside from traditional news services such as Reuters and The Associated Press, the only other foreign news outlet besides *OnCuba* to receive an operating license is the Miami-based *Progreso Semanal*.

Located on the ninth-floor of a rundown building near the Malecón seafront, *OnCuba* has a staff of four editors

“Our writers don’t do it for the money. They do it for the freedom. It is a way to rebel against the state.”

José Jasán Nieves, OnCuba

and writers and receives stories from about 100 contributors. Rather than editorial meetings, Nieves communicates with his journalists via Facebook messenger and text messages. The newsroom also

features a coveted internet connection—because it is registered as a foreign entity, *OnCuba* has the same right to a connection as foreign residents. Freelancers often wander in to log on, do research or write stories, he said.

The majority of *OnCuba's* audience is among the Cuban diaspora. However, the site's social media editor, Elizabeth Pérez, said that readership is growing on the island thanks to email chains, The Packet, and Facebook recommendations. Facebook is more popular in internet-challenged Cuba than Twitter, she said, because tweets can seem old when users are offline most of the day.

As an example of the site's offline readership, Pérez mentioned a popular *OnCuba* story about new regulations for buying and selling used cars. "We published on Saturday and by Monday, my mother in Cienfuegos—who is the most disconnected person in the world—was reading a print-out copy of the story," Pérez said.

The emergence of *OnCuba*, *14ymedio*, *El Toque* and other news operations represents a significant leap forward from Cuba's initial wave of independent bloggers, according to Henken, the Cuba expert at Baruch College. He said that these organizations go "beyond the blog" to produce news in a more professional, systematic and entrepreneurial way.

OnCuba, for example, sustains itself by selling advertising in Miami and pays its writers between \$10 and \$20 per



Pedro Enrique Rodriguez, editor of sports magazine Play-Off, is in a fight for editorial freedom and economic survival. (Taken on behalf of CPJ)

article. “We pay late and we pay badly,” Nieves said. “But our writers don’t do it for the money. They do it for the freedom. It is a way to rebel against the state.”

14ymedio, the first independent news website in Cuba, began operating in 2014 out of Sánchez’s 14th floor apartment with 12 staffers. The site launched with the help of \$150,000 from private donors. Although Sánchez and many of her writers hail from human rights and dissident communities, *14ymedio* strives for balance and its stories often have the down-the-middle tone of wire-service dispatches, Henken said.

“The site that is most like a professional news gathering organization is *14ymedio*,” Henken said. “They have made an intense effort to up their game.”

Another fledgling online news venture is *Periodismo de Barrio*, founded by Díaz, with the help of foundation grants, when she returned to Cuba after spending a year at Harvard University to explore online news organizations. In 2015, Díaz became the first Cuban awarded a prestigious Nieman Journalism Fellowship at Harvard. The reports in *Periodismo de Barrio* focus on how climate change and natural disasters impact local communities. The con-

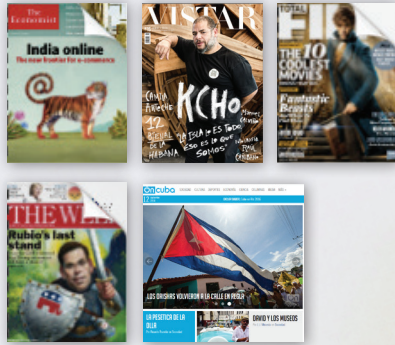
cept allows journalists to dig into issues without seeming to directly attack the Castro government.

Instead, Díaz’s team of four staffers and dozens of freelancers tries to hold local government officials accountable. A former Havana city council member, Díaz told CPJ that local officials are directly elected, have more accountability among the people, and have often provided her with interviews and information. The aim, she said, is to identify and resolve specific problems, such as inadequate public housing or contaminated water.

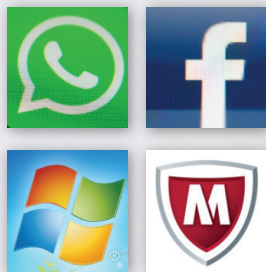
“I do not consider myself a dissident,” Díaz said. “I recognize positive aspects of socialism. What we have to do is improve things.”

So far, the Castro government has tolerated Díaz’s project. But when she launched the website last year, she said that several officials informally accused her of collaborating with the CIA and human rights groups. International human rights groups have long been perceived by Cuban officials as being aligned with the interests of foreign powers. Díaz responded by publishing an 86-point ethics code on her website, which details the origin of the site’s funding. She said such accusations were designed to stigmatize the

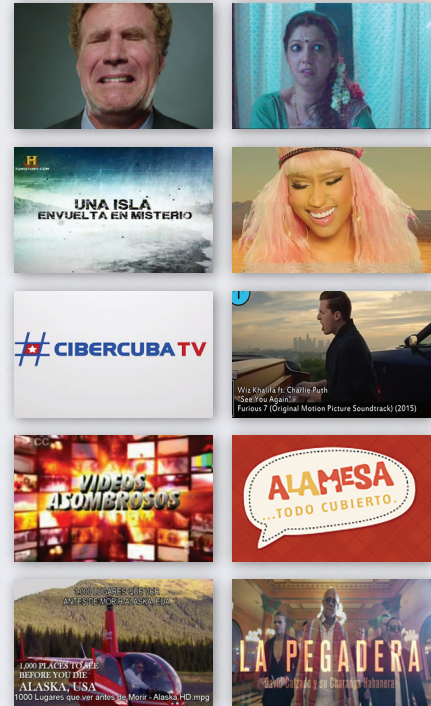
NEWSPAPERS & MAGAZINES



SOFTWARE & APPS



ENTERTAINMENT



Unpacking the Packet

The Packet—up to a terabyte of files including English and Spanish-language news sites, magazines, movies, directories, and software—is distributed across Cuba via flash drive every week. Representative sample based on CPJ interviews, a copy of The Packet shared with CPJ, and analysis by Larry Press, professor of information systems, California State University of Dominguez Hills.

Images: AFP/AP/Larry Press/Packet screen grabs

independent press and convince young reporters to seek jobs in the official media.

“But that no longer works,” Díaz said. “When journalists see new projects that are better than the state-run media, it becomes harder for the government to convince them.”

Other ambitious news sites include *Diario de Cuba*, which is based in Madrid but posts stories written by Cubans on the island, and *CubaNet*, based in Coral Gables, Florida, and founded in 1994. Both are highly critical of the Castro government, which at times has blocked access to both sites on the island.

To avoid a similar fate, *OnCuba*'s Nieves said he must constantly decide whether to push the envelope or pull back—a concern that he said worries him more than the risk of online surveillance. Recent examples of the former include a warts-and-all profile of Che Guevara, a story

about a woman with a rare skin disease struggling to get treatment under the state health system, and articles about Cuban doctors who were infected with Ebola while treating the deadly virus in Africa.

“We are trying to show that you can do good journalism here, without leaving the country,” Nieves said.

However, *OnCuba* must stay in the government's good graces. Otherwise, it risks having its Havana office shut down. Nieves said that nearly happened this year when hardliners inside the government complained about coverage and tried to convince officials to close *OnCuba*. The result is self-censorship, Nieves said. Many *OnCuba* stories are soft features that avoid controversy. Nieves readily admits that he's intrigued by many issues—such as the growing economic power of the Cuban armed forces—but doesn't dare write about them.

Still, he is optimistic because the government is gradually losing control over the flow of news and information.

“We want a society in which power and knowledge is in the hands of the people, not the vanguard of the Communist party,” Nieves said. “That is what the people are demanding. They want to know what is really happening in this country.”

WEBZINES

The *OnCuba* newsroom, with its coffee machine, conference room and reliable internet connection, seems like CNN world headquarters compared to the tumble-down operations of the monthly sports webzine *Play-Off*.

To upload stories and administer its website, *Play-Off*'s founder and editor Pedro Enrique Rodríguez sits at a bench in a public park in Havana that doubles as a Wi-Fi access point. He edits the magazine from the cramped basement apartment in Havana that he shares with his father and grandfather. On a spring afternoon, his cat darted through a window and settled on his lap while he worked at a computer that sits atop a stack of books, including one called *The Great Battles of History*.

Like many of Cuba's nascent webzine founders, Rodríguez is engaged in his own great battle for editorial freedom and economic survival.

Rodríguez, 30, comes off as a kind of Cuban Bill Simmons, one of the first prominent internet sportswriters in the U.S. who is famed for his cantankerous, yet literate, opinions. Like Simmons, Rodríguez holds passionate views about players, coaches and athletic controversies but found no place for them within traditional media. He said he dreamed up *Play-Off* last year while watching a baseball game with his girlfriend and complaining about boring sports coverage in official media.

Play-Off looks like a Cuban version of *Sports Illustrated*, with page after page of lush photography and insightful essays. As he scrolled through the fifteenth edition on his computer, Rodríguez called *Play-Off* “my child.”

But like health and education, sports is one of the proud pillars of the Cuban revolution. Thus, coverage of baseball, soccer, track and field and other sports can be controversial.

One essay lamented the poor quality of Cuba's Olympic athletes and pinned part of the blame on the island's economic problems. Another article looked at proposed reforms to Cuba's Baseball Hall of Fame and how those plans were shot down by sports officials who refused to consider

including Cuban exile greats—like four-time World Series champion pitcher Orlando “El Duque” Hernández.

“These are absurd positions that make no sense,” Rodríguez says.

Rodríguez calls *Play-Off* “a sports magazine that's not just about sports.” But for this reason he must proceed with caution. He said his aim is to publish a magazine that challenges conventional wisdom and government policies while staying within the boundaries of the government's playing field for independent journalism.

For example, he said he is itching to publish an analysis of whether the quality of Cuban baseball is declining, in part, because so many top players are leaving to sign lucrative contracts overseas. Meanwhile, soccer is gaining ground with

many youth now more interested in what the Brazilians call “the beautiful game” than “pelota,” Cuban slang for baseball. But Rodríguez said he has balked at assigning the story because he fears the government could retaliate by blocking his website in Cuba.

“We write from a critical viewpoint. But we can't be as critical as we want to be,” he said.

So far, Rodríguez said, he has not had any reprisals for his work but, if *Play-Off* was closed he would give up hope of reforms in Cuba.

Play-Off is one of many new independent webzines that are testing the boundaries. They include the literary magazine *El Estornudo*, fashion and lifestyle publications *Garbos* and *Venus*, *NICKS* for electronic games aficionados, and *Vistar*, an entertainment publication. Printing independent magazines is illegal, punishable by three months to one year in prison; however, these digital magazines can be read online or via PDF downloads and the law currently does not extend to web-based publications. Some webzines are available via The Packet. Influenced by a posse of young writers, Cuba's new magazine journalism is “defining cultural tastes and aesthetics,” Cecilia Campos, of the Cuban non-governmental organization Asociación Pro Libertad de Prensa, wrote on the free-speech website

“We are exhausted, but we are enjoying this... The reason we exist is due to all the changes in Cuba.”

Abraham Jiménez Enoa, *El Estornudo*

Cuba Prensa Libre.

One of the most ambitious is *El Estornudo*, or “the sneeze,” a name that alludes to the chronic allergies or irritations of daily life in Cuba. *El Estornudo* publishes literary journalism and aims to be Cuba’s answer to *Vanity Fair*, Mexico’s *Gatopardo* or Colombia’s *El Malpensante*. Stories have included a profile of an impoverished Havana neighborhood, a piece slamming the lack of reforms at the Cuban Communist Party’s VII Congress in April following Obama’s visit to Havana, and an essay questioning whether there’s reason for optimism given the slow pace of change.

It is rich fare—and a radical shift for Abraham Jiménez Enoa, a 28-year-old who studied journalism at the University of Havana and is *El Estornudo*’s founder and editor. After graduating, he monitored foreign press coverage of Cuba for the Interior Ministry. He said he hated the job but the university was churning out too many journalists for the ranks of *Granma*, *Juventud Rebelde*, and other traditional state media. After a few years at the ministry, Cuba’s independent press began to grow and Jiménez quit to freelance for *OnCuba* and *El Toque*. He launched *El Estornudo* in March.

Rather than directly criticizing government policies, *El Estornudo* often addresses them in a roundabout way through lengthy profiles. To discuss official corruption, for example, Jiménez spent days with a street vendor in Old Havana and recounted how the vendor was hit for bribes by policemen to continue operating. His writers have tackled subjects ranging from underground sex shops to the government’s apparent lack of concern for Cuban migrants who get stuck in transit countries such as Ecuador and Colombia while trying to reach the U.S. So far, Jiménez said, there has been no response from government officials, but he points out that his magazine is only a few months old.

Like *Play-Off*, *El Estornudo* is an austere undertaking with no office, no staff and no internet connection. Jiménez puts it together with the help of a group of literary-minded friends who write for free, and uploads stories and photos from Wi-Fi points. Although available on the web, Jiménez lacks the \$15 weekly fee to place *El Estornudo* in The Packet. He said he has no idea how to turn his project into a sustainable business. But for now, he is simply thrilled by the challenge and the adrenaline rush of putting out his own magazine.

“We are exhausted, but we are enjoying this,” Jiménez said. “I am optimistic. The reason we exist is due to all the changes in Cuba.”

Except for a sex column, the fashion magazine *Garbos* mostly steers clear of controversial issues, including politics. But like *Play-Off* and *El Estornudo*, its editors, Rebeca Alderete, 35, and Gabriela Domenech, 26, face challenges in putting out Cuba’s answer to *Vogue*. For starters, they say Cuba isn’t much for haute couture.

In the 1950s, a more stylish era, the island was home to cabarets and casinos frequented by European celebrities and U.S. film stars. But Cubans began dressing down in the 1960s when the Castro revolution stressed equality and took some of its fashion cues from the Soviet Union. Foreign clothes brands weren’t sold on the island until the 1990s. That, combined with economic problems and Cuba’s tropical heat, discourage the wearing of fancy jackets, vests, scarves and other staples of high-end fashion.

“Cuba used to be more elegant,” Domenech said. “My grandmother always wore high heels.”

But with Cuba slowly opening up to the world, people now have more fashion choices, the editors said. In addition, the island is home to a handful of professional and would-be models as well as houses and buildings in Old Havana that provide elegant settings for photo shoots. Anxious to build up their portfolios with the glossy PDF pages of *Garbos*, actors, singers, models and photographers often pose and work for free.

Despite relatively low production costs, Alderete, a self-employed sound engineer, and Domenech, who works at the Culture Ministry, said they are struggling to stay afloat. Their business model is based on advertising. But because Cuba’s economy was totally controlled by the state for so long, they say there is little knowledge of advertising and its benefits.

As an example Alderete pointed to Cuba’s two main beers: Bucanero and Cristal. “Both are owned by the same state company,” she said. “There’s no competition, so why would they advertise?”

Managers of many state companies, in turn, often balk at buying advertising from *Garbos* and other webzines because they are not licensed. Due to the peculiarities of Cuba’s legal system, the only way to secure official recognition would be to first establish overseas offices, like *OnCuba* has, then register as a foreign entity on the island. And, while the lack of regulations means no formal punishment has been laid out, the recognized boundaries mean that state companies tend to err on the conservative side.

There is a small but growing private sector. Recent issues of *Garbos* included advertisements for family-run restaurants called *paladares*, bars, a tattoo parlor, candy

stores, and a photocopying shop. The income is just enough to scrape by.

In May, *Garbos* scored a coup when the French fashion house Chanel staged its first Latin American catwalk show in Havana. To mark the occasion, Chanel personnel spent three months collaborating with *Garbos* on a special issue, providing clothes, technical assistance on shoots, equipment, and advice. But because Chanel's luxury goods and fashion accessories are not sold in Cuba, the company did not purchase any advertisements, the editors said.

Rodríguez faces similar challenges in financing *Play-Off*. His monthly production costs of about \$350 include fees for stories, for the layout artist and for inclusion in The Packet. He describes his freelancers as being among the best sports reporters working in government media. But, he said, they jump at the chance to write for *Play-Off* because he pays \$10 per article compared to about \$3 for state-run newspapers and magazines. In another sign of loosening media restrictions, the freelancers write under the same bylines they use in state media, Rodríguez said.

To cover these costs, Rodríguez said he makes the rounds at the beginning of each month to peddle advertisements to *paladares*, bars and privately owned bed-and-breakfast ventures that have sprung up in recent years. But he's often shut out because owners spend most of their money on the nuts-and-bolts aspects of their businesses, such as food and alcohol.

"Publicity is the hardest part," Rodríguez said. "Owners of *paladares* don't believe in digital media. They don't think it will help their businesses. I have to go to 20 *paladares* for one to say 'yes.'"

As an informal business, Rodríguez cannot sign contracts with advertisers in the name of *Play-Off* or open a bank account. Deals are done verbally. He said he has yet to be let down by advertisers, but they sometimes pay several months late. He said that one solution—if the U.S. trade embargo was lifted—would be for a big American firm, like Nike, to step in and sponsor his magazine in exchange for exclusive publicity. But he has no contacts with the sportswear giant.

As he hammers on his keyboard and sips coffee,



Chanel teamed up with the editors of *Garbos* to produce a special edition of the magazine when it held its first fashion show in Havana. (*Garbos*)

Rodríguez admits that he has moments of both ecstasy and despair.

On good days, he said he feels like a publishing pioneer pushing the boundaries. He got another boost in March when President Obama's motorcade sped right past him through the streets of Havana. He said the improved ties between Havana and Washington send a strong signal that the Castro government is capable of reforms.

On bad days, he frets that these changes will come too slow for many of Cuba's new media ventures—including his own.

"*Play-Off* is my offspring," he says. "To see it die would be terrible."

Staying connected in an off-line world

For Elaine Díaz Rodríguez, founder of *Periodismo de Barrio*, internet access in poorly connected Cuba comes at a premium. “Our reporters have less than 10 hours a month of internet access,” she told CPJ during the Latin American Studies Association conference in New York, where she was taking advantage of the hotel Wi-Fi. “Between midnight and 3 a.m. every night, I download information off the internet. It’s already part of the professional culture to bring a flash drive back to Cuba.”

Díaz’s experience reflects that of other journalists and bloggers in Cuba who, despite government promises of greater access, said that when they can get online—often in brief spurts and at high prices—they face state monitoring, online harassment and sporadic censorship. Other obstacles include slow connection speeds and limited access points, bloggers and Cuba experts including Larry Press, a professor of information systems at California State University of Dominguez Hills, said.

To get around these challenges, bloggers are using innovative ways to access and distribute content to their offline audience, including through underground computer networks, flash drives and email networks.

Over the past three years a series of reforms have started to open up the country’s telecommunications sector: the first high-speed fiber optic internet connection, internet access points available, for a fee, to the public, and a new national email system for mobile phones. Last summer, the Cuban government announced the opening of publicly accessible Wi-Fi points, of which there are now 90, according to the country’s sole internet provider ETECSA, which provided an emailed set of responses to CPJ via Cuba’s International Press Center. These are major changes for a country where ownership of home computers was prohibited as recently as 2008.

Despite these moves and government promises, Cuba has one of the lowest rates of internet access in the Western Hemisphere. Figures citing independent estimates and government statistics place it between 5 and 27 percent, but none of the estimates clearly state the methodology for calculating access. In the case of the government statistics, the figure does not differentiate between connecting to the internet and the Cuban intranet, a closed-off network of sites mostly hosted on Cuban domains.

“Given the long-tail effect, the fact is that for everyone who has an internet connection, more than one person is getting online at some point in a given week. What counts? To say that they have access to the internet, what does that really mean?” said Ellery Biddle, a fellow at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, and the director of Global Voices Advocacy.

Internet speeds are also poor, with an average download speed of about 1 Mbps, according to the Brookings Institution. In comparison, the United States Federal Communications Commission ruled that internet download speeds in the U.S. must be greater than 25 Mbps to qualify as broadband.

The president of ETECSA, Mayra Arevich Marín said in December 2015 that the number of daily users of the publicly accessible internet points had doubled since 2014. In an interview with the state-run



A flyer lists Cuba's internet service providers and fees. Authorities have pledged to expand Wi-Fi in the country. (AP/Franklin Reyes)

outlet *CubaSí*, she said there were about 150,000 daily users—a figure that represents approximately 1 percent of Cuba's population of 11 million.

The government has said that the low level of internet access is a result of the U.S. embargo and the constraints of a developing economy. The government has also said that its strategy is to prioritize the service for public officials, doctors and public points as a means of better distributing a limited resource.

“It is certainly plausible from a development perspective, to concentrate scarce resources on those sectors regarded as social and economic priorities,” Bert Hoffman, head of the Berlin office of the German Institute of Global and Area Studies and an expert on the internet in Cuba, wrote in *The Politics of the Internet in Third World Development*. “This official line of argument loses credibility to the degree that it is offered not as a complement, but as a negation of the—rather obvious—fact that the prohibition of individual internet access might serve a political function.”

Cuba has always taken a cautious approach to the internet, with Fidel Castro describing it at a rally in 1995 as a new way for the U.S. to impose its ideals “on the world through propaganda and manipulation,” and a military leader the following year describing it as “an invasion not led by marines but by information.”

More recently, Cuban officials have signaled a willingness to embrace technology and expand access, while making clear that it will be on Cuba's terms. A December 2014 editorial in the state-newspaper *Granma* read, "Cuba has been, and is, intent upon being connected to the world, despite propaganda to the contrary." And in July 2015, José Ramón Machado Ventura, the second-highest ranking member of the party, suggested that Cuba had rejected offers to expand internet access for free, to protect the country's independence. The secretary told the state-owned daily, *Juventud Rebelde*, "We must have internet, but in our way."

Miriam Celaya, who writes for *14ymedio*, said, "The state owns the media outlets, a monopoly on the press— television, radio, newspapers and so on. For years this was the only 'truth' that Cubans heard. Independent journalism, journalism online has the tendency to break this monopoly." She added, "The changes have come in spite of the government. In the 21st century, there is no way to justify that people don't have access to internet, so the government has had to open small spaces of access."

Restraints on access

Cuban law rules that the sole state-run internet provider can "prevent access to sites whose contents are contrary to social interests, ethics and morals." However, blocking is limited to a handful of prominent sites and many of the sites run by dissidents are accessible, according to journalists with whom CPJ spoke.

14ymedio, the first independent digital news magazine to be based in Cuba, is blocked on the island, although its founder, Yoani Sánchez, has tweeted that the site is accessible through a proxy server. Boris González Arenas, a journalist and activist, said that the Miami-based site *Cubanet* has also been blocked at times, and the blogger Taylor Torres said that *Cuba Encuentro* and *Martinoticias* are also blocked occasionally.

When Sanchez launched *14ymedio*, those trying to access it were re-directed to a site named "yoani\$landia" that accused Sánchez of being obsessed with money and said that people were tired of her presenting herself as the "Mother Teresa of Cuban dissidents." The people behind the redirect site did not identify themselves, but the BBC reported at the time that the site was believed to be run by government officials.

Yuris Nórico, a blogger and journalist, said, "I have access to almost all sites, except *14ymedio*. But you would have to ask someone else why that precise site is blocked when it is easy to access much more belligerent sites."

Although those running Cuba's more critical outlets face the risk of having websites blocked, the larger

"In the 21st century there is no way to justify that people don't have access to internet, so the government has had to open small spaces of access."

Miriam Celaya, *14ymedio*



A member of Cuba's sole internet provider, ETECSA, helps customers at a Havana cyber café. The number of publically accessible Wi-Fi spots has increased, but bloggers say more are needed. (STR/AFP)

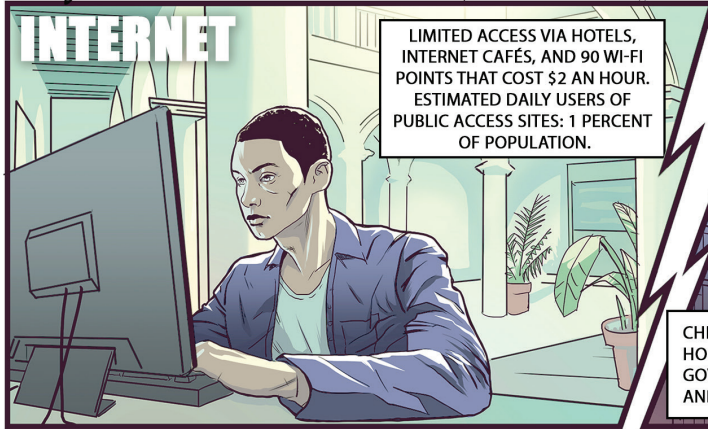
concern is having easier and more affordable access to the internet.

“I connect for one hour a day, but that is too expensive. It is \$60 a month, which in the Cuban economy is a huge hit,” said Alejandro Rodríguez, who writes on *Alejo3399*. “But it’s not enough time. It’s nothing. I don’t have time to comment on my blog or post to Twitter.”

The restrictions also mean that despite the rise of independent journalism and blogging in Cuba, there are often more readers outside the country than on the island. “You write a blog and because of the internet situation in Cuba, you’re writing for a very small group of people,” said Torres, who writes about Cuban youth and his personal life on *Visperas*.

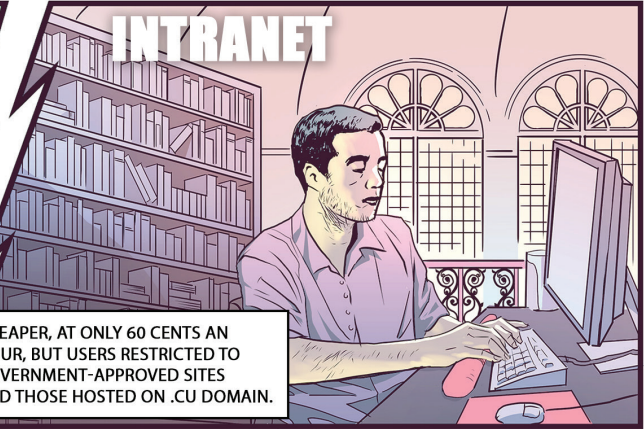
Luzdely Escobar, a journalist with *14ymedio*, added, “The limitations are many because when you are writing an article, you need to be able to pull up information. It’s difficult for us to do daily notes because we often work from archives or documents that we’ve downloaded from whenever we had a chance to connect.” She added, “During a hunger strike by the dissident group Patriotic Union of Cuba in Havana, it was very hard for us to stay informed because information was going around on Facebook and Twitter or on the YouTube channel of the group. We can call using telephones, but the telephones were cut off [for the hunger strikers] and then we didn’t have a way to cover it.”

HOW CUBANS GET ONLINE



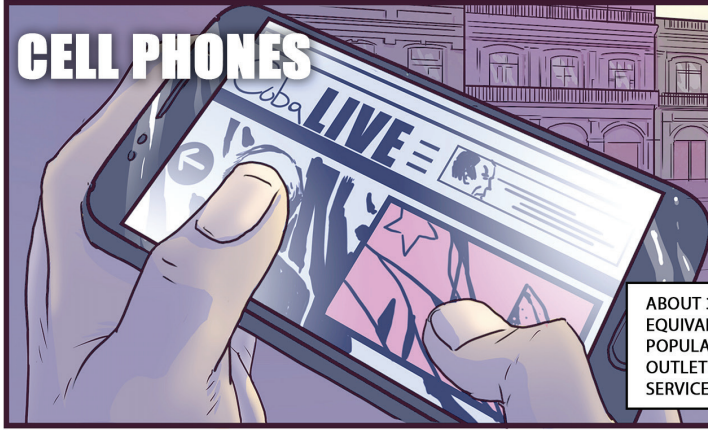
INTERNET

LIMITED ACCESS VIA HOTELS, INTERNET CAFÉS, AND 90 WI-FI POINTS THAT COST \$2 AN HOUR. ESTIMATED DAILY USERS OF PUBLIC ACCESS SITES: 1 PERCENT OF POPULATION.



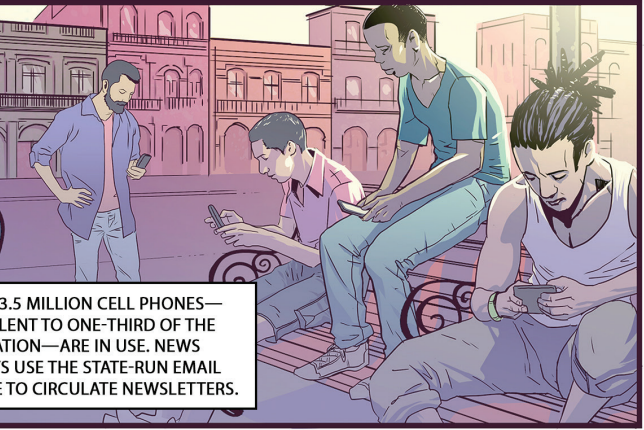
INTRANET

CHEAPER, AT ONLY 60 CENTS AN HOUR, BUT USERS RESTRICTED TO GOVERNMENT-APPROVED SITES AND THOSE HOSTED ON .CU DOMAIN.



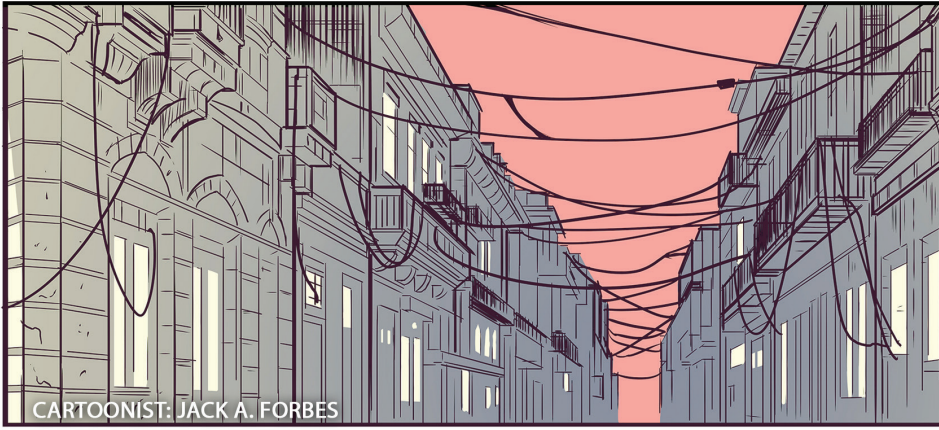
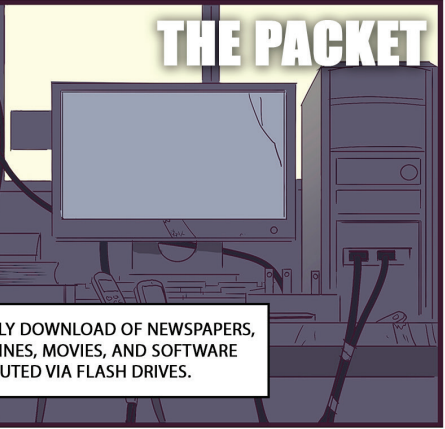
CELL PHONES

ABOUT 3.5 MILLION CELL PHONES—EQUIVALENT TO ONE-THIRD OF THE POPULATION—ARE IN USE. NEWS OUTLETS USE THE STATE-RUN EMAIL SERVICE TO CIRCULATE NEWSLETTERS.



THE PACKET

A WEEKLY DOWNLOAD OF NEWSPAPERS, MAGAZINES, MOVIES, AND SOFTWARE DISTRIBUTED VIA FLASH DRIVES.



STREET NET

STREET NET, A SPRAWLING UNDERGROUND NETWORK OF NEARLY 9,000 COMPUTERS IN HAVANA, IS USED TO SHARE NEWS AND EXCHANGE FILES. POLITICAL CONTENT IS BARRED.

CARTOONIST: JACK A. FORBES
SOURCE: CPJ RESEARCH

Díaz said that her team of five reporters use the publicly accessible Wi-Fi points. But, she added, they often plan investigations a year in advance so they can take advantage of the rare chance to travel abroad or have a good connection.

For the majority, the only option is Cuba's intranet, which allows access to websites that are registered with the .cu domain or are supportive of the country's government. The ETECSA statement provided to CPJ said that it costs 60 cents per hour to access the intranet at state-run internet cafés, compared to \$2 for access to the internet. Some Cubans have free access to it through work, school, or public spaces.

Among these .cu domain names is Reflejos (cubava.cu), a state-run blogging platform that lists about 1,500 blogs and is run by the Youth Club of Computing and Electronics, also known as the Joven Club. Writers have the potential to reach a wider home audience on this platform because it can be accessed whether a reader is connected to the internet or intranet. One of the site's directors, Kirenia Fagundo García, told *Granma*, "The only condition is that the bloggers tell the truth about Cuba, without offences, disrespect or denigration."

Torres, whose blog is not hosted by the platform, said the administrators sometimes remove content that is critical of the government. *14ymedio* has also reported that Reflejos removed a blog it had set up on the site, stating that *14ymedio* had "repeatedly published information that does not correspond with the objectives for which the Reflejos platform was created."

CPJ contacted Reflejos and the Joven Club for comment via email, social media and online contact forms, but did not receive a reply.

State monitoring and online harassment

Facing weak legal protections for privacy and internet and cell phone traffic directed through the state-owned internet service provider, many bloggers said they operate under the assumption that they are being watched online.

The use of anonymity and encryption technologies is illegal, according to a 2015 Freedom on the Net report by Freedom House. And, because home connections are authorized for select state employees only, most Cubans have little opportunity to log on from the privacy of their home.

Before obtaining a card that grants online access at public Wi-Fi points or state-run cyber cafés, Cubans must show service providers their identity cards. Norges Rodríguez, who writes about tech issues on the blog *Salir a la Manigua*, said however, that it is possible to buy temporary cards anonymously on the black market.

“[Surveillance] is something that we’ve learned to live with and we don’t have anything to hide. Everyone just assumes that it’s natural.”

Luzdely Escobar, *14ymedio*



Laptops are laid out in the studio of Cuban artist Kcho as part of a Google tech initiative in the country. (AP/Ramon Espinosa)

The use of Nanostations, a device that helps extend Wi-Fi signals and is also available on the black market, is also spreading, according to Rodríguez, and an article in *Cubanet*. The device enables Cubans to access a public Wi-Fi signal from home. However, residents would still have to log in through the state-provider and pay a fee, Rodríguez said.

Under a 2008 resolution from the Ministry of Information and Communications, a service provider must record and store internet traffic for at least a year and ensure that users do not use encrypted software or share encrypted files. Web traffic is also routed through the software program Avila Link, which has monitoring capabilities, according to the Freedom on the Net report. Still, several bloggers and journalists said that end-to-end encrypted apps including Facebook messenger and WhatsApp are widely used.

When asked about user privacy, ETECSA said that it “guaranteed the security of [its] networks.” The statement did not include a response to CPJ’s request for comment on state surveillance. The Ministry of Communications did not respond to repeated requests from CPJ for an interview.

The online surveillance tactics mimic the widely reported pervasive offline surveillance in Cuba, where nearly every community has a designated member of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, tasked with reporting unusual or counterrevolutionary activity. Yaima Pardo, a Havana-based filmmaker who has produced documentaries on internet access, discrimination against the elderly, and gay rights, said that state security agents have described her as a traitor in phone calls to her mother.

The blogger and activist Lázaro Yuri Valle Roca said there is a general belief that communications are tapped and he has seen state security agents near his home. Valle Roca added that these agents had asked his neighbors about him. CPJ was unable to independently verify their accounts.

“Although some Cuban internet users surely do worry about electronic surveillance, it is important to recognize that the general expectation of physical surveillance often trumps this concern,” according to Biddle’s research paper for the Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. Biddle added that many bloggers were open about their identities, seeing this as a form of protection.

Several of the journalists said that they believe the state has the power to intercept communications. When asked whether she thought that her communications were being intercepted, Escobar said, “Totally.” Ted Henken, former president of the non-profit research group Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, said that the national email system available on the state-run phone network was widely believed to be monitored. However, many critical journalists who are often accustomed to offline surveillance, seemed to take monitoring for granted. “This is something that we’ve learned to live with and we don’t have anything to hide,” Escobar said. “Everyone just assumes that it’s natural. I don’t think people really think about it.”

Other critical bloggers have reported being harassed online by trolls who they suspect are organized and encouraged by the state. In 2013, Sánchez posted a video interview with Eliécer Ávila, a former student at the University of Information Sciences, who said he was part of a project known as “Operation Truth.” According to Ávila, as part of the project, which is allegedly associated with the youth wing of the Communist Party, he monitored internet conversations for signs of dissent and wrote rebuttals and comments attacking the reputation of journalists or bloggers who criticized the government. Ávila, who now leads an opposition group called Somos Mas (We Are More), told CPJ that project participants were not paid and that the project has expanded.

When CPJ called the youth wing of the Communist party for comment in August, a representative said he did not know about Operation Truth and asked CPJ to call back at a later date. A university employee, who said he worked in security and protection at the University of Information Sciences, told CPJ he did not know about Operation Truth and because the university was in recess, no one else was available to answer the query.

Reconnecting with the world

Since the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba, a number of U.S.-based tech companies, including Netflix, Google, and Paypal, have announced plans to open operations on the island. Although Congress has not lifted the embargo, Obama has already removed restrictions on ICT trade with regulation changes in January 2016 and September 2015 that allow exports of telecommunication items and permit U.S. residents to have licensing and marketing agreements in Cuba.

To date, no major deals on internet access between U.S.-based tech companies and the Cuban government have been announced publicly. The only exception, a Google-sponsored center for free public Wi-Fi in the studio of the Cuban artist Kcho, remains more a symbolic gesture than a solution. The partnership, billed as an art museum, has Chromebooks, cardboard virtual reality viewers, and

nexus phones, but several bloggers dismissed the project to CPJ, saying that 20 laptops sharing a single Wi-Fi connection is a small gesture in a nation of 11 million who are trying to get online.

Google has not commented in the press on any other projects planned for Cuba beyond saying talks are in “early stages.” Google’s press office did not respond to CPJ’s request for comment.

In January, Daniel Sepulveda, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and U.S. Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy at the State Department, told *OnCuba* officials had been reluctant to take up offers for an undersea cable connecting Cuba and the U.S.

The U.S. embargo’s restrictions on banking and money transfers have limited Cubans ability to access some paid internet content and apps. In July, Cuban journalists reported that the Bitly URL shortener had stopped working, leaving hundreds of broken links, after the company transferred to a hosting provider that blocks access in countries under U.S. embargo. Bitly’s chief executive officer said that the company was working with the provider to resume operations.

Cuba has partnerships with some countries. Venezuela financed a roughly \$70 million undersea internet cable built between the two countries in 2013 and in January Cuba announced that the Chinese telecoms company Huawei would assist in its effort to expand home broadband.

Huawei has previously been accused of facilitating censorship in Iran, including during the disputed 2009 elections, according to reports. Huawei denied the allegations. The company released a statement in 2011 that said its operations in Iran were no different than its operations in the rest of the world. Doug Madory, director of internet analysis at Dyn, which helps companies manage internet infrastructure, said he thinks Huawei was chosen because it was inexpensive and non-Western. He said that Cuban authorities had worked with the company previously and noted that a number of Western and U.S.-based companies also sell surveillance and censorship to foreign governments.

Circumventing the web

Despite facing many obstacles, Cuba’s journalists and bloggers have found innovative ways to distribute content, including using flash drives and underground computer networks, and sending articles via the state email system.

“I distribute through flash drives and CDs. Sometimes I give it to friends who help distribute,” said the filmmaker Pardo, when asked how she got her films into the hands of Cubans. “Sometimes when we go to rural areas, people have already seen my film.”

The Packet is another way Cubans share and access media. A terabyte of documents, websites, movies, YouTube videos, books and TV shows is downloaded each month on to hard drives and flash drives,

“I distribute
through flash
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Sometimes I
give it to friends
who distribute.”

Yaima Pardo, filmmaker

and distributed across the country. A survey cited in the state-run *Cubadebate* in October 2015 found that about 39 percent of people in Havana access the downloaded content, although the author of the study described the number as conservative. The Packet's reach is probably why the producers of TV series "Game of Thrones" found a strong fan base when they visited Havana last year. One of the distributors told *The Wall Street Journal* that interest in the HBO show and similar entertainment content was high among his customers.

The Packet offers an opportunity to reach a wider audience. It often carries content from state-owned news sites, as well as from *OnCuba* and foreign news sites. Political writing and reports from independent outlets associated with the Cuban opposition usually don't make their way in. "There's not much journalism in The Packet, but every now and then you'll see it," said Alejandro Rodríguez.

Escobar, from *14ymedio*, said that the outlet's journalists get around their site being blocked by distributing content in other formats. "We have a PDF that gets sent around and people download and pass around on flash drives," she said. "We have an email bulletin that goes out to thousands of subscribers a few times a week."

Another option is Street Net, a more than eight-year-old underground network of about 9,000 computers in Havana that are used to share files, games and videos, and to chat. Authorities have forced similar networks to close. In 2012, *Granma* reported on a government investigation into an illegal telecoms network, and in 2014, the *Miami Herald* wrote about a crackdown on a network of 120 users. The team behind Street Net said they have a policy of avoiding anything that could set off the censors, including political content, which often restricts independent journalism, according to a report on the website *Gizmodo*.

The off-line distribution may be a stopgap solution, but it is one that has enabled a generation of Cubans to talk and listen to the outside world. As an editorial in the independent tech website *Cachivache Media* said, "The idea of a Cuba, blind and deaf, that is waiting to discover and be discovered by the rest of the world, is far from being real."

Recommendations

TO THE CUBAN GOVERNMENT:

1. Implement constitutional and legal reforms to ensure full respect for freedom of expression and to allow journalists to work freely without fear of reprisal.
2. Amend the restrictive legal framework that bans privately owned media ownership and ensure freedom of speech and the press in accordance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Cuba is a signatory.
3. Allow the creation of press cooperatives or privately owned media so that journalists are not forced to operate in a legal limbo.
4. Foster an environment that encourages the state press to operate independently and report critically.
5. End the practice of summonses, brief detentions, and harassment of independent journalists.
6. Make internet access more affordable and extend connectivity to the internet without restrictions.
7. Accept the 2015 request by David Kaye, the U.N. special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, for an invitation to visit Cuba as part of his mandate.

TO THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES:

1. Request authorization for the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression to conduct a mission to Cuba to assess the state of press freedom and freedom of expression, and report its findings and recommendations publicly.
2. Ensure any dialogue with Cuba regarding its participation in the multilateral body includes consideration of its press freedom record, including harassment and intimidation of journalists, summonses, and brief detentions.



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