Digitizing dissent: cyborg politics and fluid networks in contemporary Cuban activism

Digitalizando la disidencia: la política ciborg y redes fluidas en el activismo cubano contemporáneo

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ABSTRACT

Communication technologies shape how political activist networks are produced and maintain themselves. In Cuba, despite ideologically and physically oppressive practices by the state, a severe lack of Internet access, and extensive government surveillance, a small network of bloggers and cyberactivists has achieved international visibility and recognition for its critiques of the Cuban government. This qualitative study examines the blogger collective known as *Voces Cubanas* in Havana, Cuba in 2012, advancing a new approach to the study of transnational activism and the role of technology in the construction of political

narrative. *Voces Cubanas* is analyzed as a network of connections between human and non-human actors that produces and sustains powerful political alliances. *Voces Cubanas* and its allies work collectively to co-produce contentious political discourses, confronting the dominant ideologies and knowledges produced by the Cuban state. Transnational alliances, the act of translation, and a host of unexpected and improvised technologies play central roles in the production of these narratives, indicating new breed of cyborg sociopolitical action reliant upon fluid and flexible networks and the act of writing.

Keywords

Cyberactivism; transnational activism; blog; social media; transparency.

Resumen

Las tecnologías de comunicación determinan cómo se forman y se mantienen las redes político-activistas. En Cuba, a pesar de prácticas ideológicamente y físicamente opresivas por el estado, una escasez severa de acceso al internet y amplia vigilancia gubernamental, una red pequeña de blogueros y ciberactivistas ha logrado visibilidad y reconocimiento internacional por sus críticas al gobierno cubano. Este análisis cualitativo investiga el colectivo bloguero *Voces Cubanas* en La Habana, Cuba en 2012, desarrollando una nueva estrategia para el estudio del activismo transnacional y el papel de la tecnología en la construcción de narrativas políticas. *Voces Cubanas* se analiza como una red de conexiones entre actores humanos y no humanos que produce y sostiene poderosas alianzas políticas. *Voces Cubanas* y sus aliados trabajan colectivamente para coproducir discursos políticos disputados, enfrentando las ideologías y conocimientos dominantes producidos por el estado cubano. Alianzas transnacionales, el acto de traducción, y una abundancia de tecnologías inesperadas e improvisadas tienen papeles centrales en la producción de estas narrativas, indicando una nueva variedad de acción sociopolítica *ciborg* que depende de redes fluidas y flexibles y el acto de escribir.

Palabras Clave

Ciberactivismo; activismo transnacional; blog; medios sociales; transparencia.

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1. Introduction

Once the coveted jewel of the Spanish Empire and an early adopter of computerized networking technologies in Latin America, Cuba is now the least connected nation in the Western hemisphere (Biddle, 2013; Press, 2011). While the majority of Cubans continue to live without consistent access to the Internet, since 2007 a dedicated network of bloggers and cyberactivists has achieved international visibility and notoriety for their criticisms of the Cuban government. This ethnographic study focuses on the blogger collective known as *Voces Cubanas*, examining the networks of human and non-human actors that allow it to survive and thrive despite overwhelming ideological and physical repression.

In 2012 *Voces Cubanas* was engaged in challenging the Cuban state's control of knowledge through the construction and dissemination of contentious political narratives through blogs, videos, and digital publications. In analyzing *Voces Cubanas* as an activist network, this study contributes to contemporary conversations concerning the roles new technologies play in affecting social and political change. This paper situates itself at the knotted intersection of several bodies of scholarship, building upon new social movement and media theory to outline the contours of an activist network engaged in social change. Bruno Latour's actor-network theory is used to explore the micro-political connections between actors in the *Voces Cubanas* activist network and examine the development and dissemination of contentious political discourses central to the network's survival (Latour, 1987, 2007). Finally, the analysis turns to Donna Haraway's cyborg myth to understand the heterogeneous, fluid quality of the network itself (Haraway, 1991). Leveraging a distributed, transnational, heterogeneous and fluid network of technologies and allies, *Voces Cubanas* has succeeded in developing alternative discursive spaces and subversive narratives that deconstruct the binary logic of the Cuban state. Drawing upon three months of participant observation and interview-based qualitative research, this is an exercise in theoretical cartography. By mapping the activist network that embodies *Voces Cubanas* and the discursive terrain that the network traverses, we further our understanding of power that new breeds of networked cyborg activism might wield within highly hierarchical societies of control.

2. Methodology & Theoretical Foundations

In the spring of 2012 I spent three months in Havana, Cuba, investigating the possibilities that new media technologies might offer Cubans whose political and ideological views conflicted with those of the Cuban Communist Party's ruling elite. My data comes primarily from nine formal, semi-structured interviews with individuals contacted through 'snowball' sampling. Interviews lasted from half an hour to over three. I used a loose interview structure of five to six questions that evolved as I became more familiar with the discursive terrain. The bloggers and activists I spoke with were extremely open and generous, and conversations always took unanticipated directions. Further context was explored in numerous informal workshops, meetings, and events with members of the collective, as well as close reading of blogs and social media channels online and off.

I was deeply concerned about the safety of my collaborators. While many voiced strong preferences for total disclosure, part of the strategy of transparency that was widely adopted by prominent bloggers, I have chosen to use pseudonyms whenever possible for specific quotes. The stories I relate sometimes cite actual names as much of the relayed information could just as easily be read on a blog. Even so, I have chosen discretion whenever possible given the gravity of the political situation. Multiple names might correspond to a single individual, or one name to many. The exceptions are those you can look up on the web for yourself.

In the wake of the successes of the highly mediated protest movements that shook Middle-Eastern, European, and North American societies in 2011, a growing body of scholarship has devoted itself to examining the roles that digital communication technologies play in coordinating and augmenting contemporary collective action. To begin, I reject two common fallacies that haunt contemporary discourse. First, technologies are never neutral, but are products of social and material reality. They are inalienable from the social and material networks in which they are embedded, and often carry enormous political and symbolic baggage. Rather than remain passive instruments, "technologies bombard human beings with a ceaseless offer of previously unheard-of positions – engagements, suggestions, allowances, interdictions, habits, positions, alienations, prescriptions, calculations, memories" (Latour, 2002, p. 252).

On the other hand, neither can technologies be said to directly cause social change. To take a pertinent example, Twitter is not the revolution machine some cyberutopians claim it

to be (Morozov, 2009, p. 11), and there is nothing inherently democratic about the Internet (Best & Wade, 2009, p. 255). To say that *Voces Cubanas* is somehow the inevitable result of the adoption of new technologies by certain sectors of Cuban society would be fetishization (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 8), ignorant of the social relations and agenies that shape human reality. Against instrumentalism and determinism, "it is precisely the dynamic links and interdependencies among artefacts, practices and social arrangements that should guide our analytic focus" (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006, p. 3).

This paper is fundamentally concerned with how *Voces Cubanas* reproduces and maintains itself despite the opposition of enormous institutionalized power. I thus seek to understand the micro-level socio-technical relationships that constitute the network and allow it to thrive. Actor-network theory, typified by the work of Bruno Latour, Michel Callon, and others (Callon, 2007; Latour, 1987, 2002, 2007), offers an approach to mapping these relationships. We can begin to identify and untangle the knots which embody a network when we take the time to stop and recognize each connection, passage, and co-productive actor, no matter how small or trivial, how heterogeneous or imperfectly fit. We can trace power as it works through and on the network, leading to an understanding of what possibilities these relations and interactions bring.

3. Cuban Technopolitics

Voces Cubanas is a space open to all Cubans living on the island who want to have a blog on the Internet. This site does not receive any kind of financing nor does it belong or have any relation to any political organization, fraternity, religion, commercial firm or trend (Voces Cubanas, 2012).

Vocescubanas.com is an Internet portal and blog aggregator hosted in the United States that provides links to over 30 personal blogs written in Cuba. Many, but not all, of these blogs openly criticize the Cuban government. As a result, many bloggers have been labeled dissidents, and some have been publicly insulted, assaulted, or imprisoned.[1] Despite this, some bloggers have embraced the dissident label, have continued to write, and have found limited success creating and disseminating alternative political narratives that challenge the Cuban state's near-monopoly on information. In this regard, as a project aimed at creating "a diverse media space in which any and all voices can be heard, and where anyone may

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[1] It is not my intention here to exhaustively innumerate the arrests, temporary detentions, legal threats, and physical assaults which Voces Cubanas bloggers and activists experienced. They can tell those stories themselves on their blogs.

contribute reporting or opinion with a minimum of prior editorial gatekeeping" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 121), *Voces Cubanas* fits comfortably within the new media genre of participatory or citizen journalism.

Source: Screenshot from vocescubanas.com

In order to understand how the activist network surrounding *Voces Cubanas* operates, it is important to develop a cursory understanding of Cuba's socio-political-economic system. In 1959, a populist militant revolution led by Fidel Castro succeeded in wresting political control of the island from Fulgencio Batista. Today, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), led by Raúl Castro, continues a modernist project in which the national economic, political, and social spheres are bound tightly to the centralized hierarchy of the Cuban state. Public discourse is informed by interlocking sets of nationalist, anti-imperialist, and revolutionary Marxist-Leninist narratives. Readings of José Martí and Ché Guevara are complimented by a highly-gendered "informatics of domination" (Haraway, 1991, p. 163) predicated on machismo patriarchy and ideological dogmatism. Collective identity and socialist values are espoused over liberal democratic ideals of individual freedom, human rights and free speech, which are seen to undermine the authority of the Communist Party and the revolution in its socialist project.

Criticism of the Communist Party or its policies is therefore dangerous. Those who contest dominant national narratives are labeled *contrarevolucionarios*, *imperialistas*, or *mercenaries* (Henken, 2011, p. 91), and the binary logic of revolutionary/counterrevolutionary pervades all discourse. The roots of this polarizing ideological framework can be traced to Fidel Castro's historic 1961 speech *Palabras a los intelectuales*: "What are the rights of writers and artists, revolutionaries or not? Within the Revolution: Everything. Against the revolution, no rights at all" (Castro, 1961)[2]. *Palabras a los intelectuales* serves as a reference point for critics of the Cuban government: a subjective political line that should not be crossed.

The Cuban state has a well-documented history of repression, though this history is beyond the scope of this paper (Biddle, 2013; Bloch, 2009; Voeux & Pain, 2006). Suffice to say that since 1961, journalists and critics have faced enormous pressure to keep criticism strictly within the bounds of the revolution. The result has been, in the words of one blogger, "fifty years of a culture of fear and apathy." Another blogger explained: "Since 1959, there has been a particular culture that the government imposes that all must have the same mentality, that all must be united." This is the discursive terrain that *Voces Cubanas* confronts and aims to subvert in contemporary Cuba.

Paradoxically, *Voces Cubanas* bloggers such as Yoani Sánchez and Miriam Celaya are "much better known outside of Cuba than on the island" (Hansing, 2011, p. 19), and the Cuban presence online is now disproportionately associated in the capitalist West with the Cuban blogosphere (Press, 2011). To read a blog, one must access it, and this usually means connecting to the Internet. In much of the world this poses little challenge, but in Cuba, access is as tremendously scarce. On one of my first evenings in Havana, a new friend explained to me that most Cubans are only able to access the domestic *intranet*, known as la *red cubana*, rather than the global World Wide Web. Private home connections are relatively unheard of, and connections at workplaces, educational institutions, or tourist hotels require special permission to access or are prohibitively expensive.

The connections that are available are also selectively filtered and monitored, though the filtering is neither comprehensive nor uniform (Biddle, 2013, p. 1). Walter, an *informático* friend of mine who worked for the government in an office downtown, explained to me that very little filtering in Cuba happens at the national level. Most controls are implemented at the local network level, which meant that he, as his office's network administrator, could circumvent those controls. Walter maintained a personal blog as well as accounts on Twitter,

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[2] "¿Cuáles son los derechos de los escritores y de los artistas revolucionarios o no revolucionarios? Dentro de la Revolución: todo; contra la Revolución ningún derecho" (Castro 1961).

Facebook, LinkedIn, and other social media sites. He was also able to access ordinarily blocked sites such as *revolico.com*, a site billed as the Cuban Craigslist, through which he bought and sold computer equipment. Walter's power over his workplace's filtering infrastructure allowed him access to websites inaccessible for most Cubans, but his nearly unfettered level of access is exceedingly rare. Thus, while Walter was able to contribute to the Herdict project started by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, a collaborative effort to report site blockages and Internet censorship around the world, he was thus far the only contributor from all of Cuba.

Walter summarized the Cuban situation like this: "The thing with the Cuban Internet is basically that Cuban surfers only have access to websites that have the top-level domain suffix ".cu" (as in http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/). Another blogger pointed out that many Cubans do not know the difference between *la red cubana* (the domestic *intranet*) and the World Wide Web. There are *red cubana* access points for Cuban citizens throughout Cuba, often located in post offices or other central locations, but from these access points websites such as Wikipedia, Google, Facebook and Twitter are inaccessible, to say nothing of oppositional blogger projects. The possibility of engaging with Web 2.0 technology, to collaboratively reinterpret reality (Tascón & Quintana, 2012, p. 67) or to choreograph protest in physical space (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 39), remains distant for most Cubans.

Access remains scarce for three reasons: the stagnation of the Cuban economy, the embargo imposed by the United States, and possibly a fear on the part of the Cuban state (Press, 2011). Certainly, domestic policy has favored an infrastructure and culture of centralized control and limited access in institutions of national importance (Recio Silva, 2013, p. 57). The "Internet" that is available, *la red cubana*, has been subsumed by the Cuban state's hierarchy of control (Gray & Gordo, 2014), promoting particular sets of discourses, ideologies, and possibilities for action that fall *dentro de la revolución*. It provides tangible benefits to the Cuban state[3] and reinforces dominant revolutionary narratives through content selection and access limitations, though offers little in the way of participation. As many scholars from various backgrounds have pointed out, *la Red Cubana* has thus far served to solidify rather than dissolve extant systems of power, and for most Cubans, Internet technologies offer few opportunities for anti-state collective action (Boas, 2000; Deibert, Palfrey, Rohozinski, Zittrain, & Stein, 2008; Kalathil & Boas, 2001, 2003; Mohr, 2007). In many global contexts where blogging is commonplace, online criticism without

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[3] See, for an exemplary case of a highly beneficial domestic informatics program, INFOMED, Cuba's internal health network that connects health specialists and patients across the island. For authoritative information on INFOMED and other Cuban Internet developments, see Biddle, 2013, Press, 2011, and Valdés & Rivera, 1999.

in-the-streets action is derided as 'slacktivism.' I contend, however, that even those bloggers and organizers who never lift a sign or march in protest are engaged in activism in Cuba. If the Cuban revolution permits no discourse outside of its own logic, then the creation of alternative political narrative that runs counter to this logic, whether online or in the home, is nothing less than an act of protest.

Despite the lack of an open Internet connection, digital media travels. The single most ubiquitous digital tool I encountered in Cuba was not the cell phone, digital camera, or personal computer, but the *memoria*, or USB flash drive. I once met a Cuban youth who had a highly evocative pair of personal affects dangling from his neck: a crucifix and a *memoria*. Both objects represent highly dynamic and mysterious technological black boxes with enormously fluid potentiality. Entire libraries can fit within a device physically the size of a matchbox car, and the marginal cost of copying a file is effectively nothing. Educational materials, photos, music, videos, poems, and caches of entire websites held space in my own *memoria* during the months I was in Cuba. It quickly became an indispensable companion as I navigated the mesh of informal hand-to-hand networks through which data flows.

Unlike the Internet, which requires expansive and capital-intensive infrastructure and maintenance, *memorias* can interface with almost any person sitting at almost any computer[4]. The *memoria* is thus a highly fluid technology: adaptability, affordability, abundance, standardization, and a lack of required knowledge make it well suited to the specificities and limits of contemporary Cuban information networking (de Laet & Mol, 2007, p. 209). Cell phones equipped with Bluetooth technology and compact discs can serve similar offline file-transportation and information-dissemination purposes, opening up further possibilities. Even without the World Wide Web, and even if transmission happens imperfectly in fits and starts, *memorias* and compact discs allow for the unprecedented flow of politicized new media through space.

4. Local Area Networking

While contemporary power increasingly subverts physical boundaries and distances (Bauman, 2000, p. 11; Castells, 2013, p. 18), the relatively high barriers to transnational communication within Cuba have drawn me to pay special attention to how technologies function locally. This section begins the task of investigating the networking that happens

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[4] Some of the public terminals I used during my time in Cuba were exceptions to this rule: software was installed to prevent access to most of the hard drive and hardware, making USB access impossible.

physically within Havana, Cuba: the localized confluences and intersections through which alternative political narratives move. Later, I address transnationalism and illustrate how *Voces Cubanas* overcomes these limitations.

Estado de SATS

Our first story is situated within a physical and discursive space where many of the actors implicated in the formation of *Voces Cubanas* meet and collaborate. Antonio Rodiles, a blogger and prominent oppositional activist, speaks English with a Cuban accent muted by twelve years living in the United States. Like many Cubans, he left as a young man seeking opportunities abroad. More unusual was his decision to return. "I felt bad, man… I would go to work, open my computer, and read some news on Cuba." Antonio is clear about his intentions and his vision for Cuba diverges radically from the Cuban government's. He formed *Estado de SATS* in the summer of 2010 to pursue of a particular brand of civil society constituting a free press and free access to information, something explicitly outside of the revolution. "We wanted a public space where we could meet and discuss different visions about the future," he explained.

Antonio lives with his parents and dog in a large house in Miramar, a traditionally wealthy Havana neighborhood west of downtown, where he hosts a series of events known collectively as *Estado de SATS*. His first event, a panel discussion with several bloggers and intellectuals, was held in a meeting hall in downtown Havana, but Antonio was unable to secure permission to hold further events there (or in any other lecture hall) after the first panel was deemed overly critical of the Cuban state. *SATS* now holds events every few weeks in Antonio's home. Two handheld digital camcorders are set up amongst a motley assemblage of plastic chairs and wooden benches where an audience gathers—between forty and sixty people at the events I attended. Lectures are held on topics ranging from beat poetry to the U.S. embargo, and events often spill over into conversations and refreshments in the backyard.

Still, Antonio would like more people to join, and explains the reason for the limited attendance at some of the events: *Estado de SATS* takes place in a private home that is monitored by state security. He believes people are afraid to be seen talking with known *contrarevolucionaros*, and told me that secret police have been based at the house next door. Following the first event I attended, Antonio received text messages from friends warning that police were stopping people outside to question them and take down their information. Surveillance is assumed to be constant, and movement and action are highly regulated.

Antonio once travelled frequently between the United States and Cuba, but was given an ultimatum upon his last return. He paraphrased the choice he was given: "Turn around and go home, or enter Cuba, and never leave again." He chose to stay, to attempt to change the political system he sees as repressive and totalitarian, and to be with his aging parents while his wife and children remain in the United States. He has been followed, harassed, beaten, and imprisoned. Still, Antonio says that he tries not to let his situation keep him from action. "I am always optimistic," he tells me.

Source: [Photograph] Getting ready for an *Estado de SATS* event in Antonio's home.

The origin of the name *Estado de SATS* is telling of this optimism. "Esther told us about '*Estado de SATS*,' a term used to describe the theatre prior to the time when the actor appears on stage. It's the moment when all energy is concentrated to explode… finally realizing what has been prepared for a long time" (Fernandez, 2011). *Estado de SATS* evokes a buildup of potential energy, an expression of hope, as well as an acknowledgement of theatricality. Paolo Gerbaudo's conception of a "choreography of assembly," in which collective mobilization is choreographed in public space through social media technologies, has a similarly theatrical tone (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 40). In Cuba social media has yet to cho-

reograph mass protests, but communication technologies such as text messages, emails, and blogs do orchestrate politicized assembly and, by extension, unification.

While *Estado de SATS* is limited by the physical space it is allowed, technology can partially subvert these limitations. Events are recorded, and after each one Antonio and others compile and edit the videos on his laptop and burn them onto blank compact discs. These videos, everything from round-table discussions on foreign policy to hip hop concerts, are constructed as alternative channels to the state's official news organs. Cuba may have extremely limited Internet access, a "zero percent" access rate by one blogger's indignant estimation, but that does not mean that knowledge and power do not flow.

Thus, spaces like *Estado de SATS* that would formerly have been limited by physical boundaries can now disperse their message far and wide. At each event, freshly-burned discs of the latest *SATS* programming are available on a countertop for free. Before and after each event, people mill about in Antonio's backyard, chatting and exchanging news, ideas, phone numbers, and files. It was at *SATS* that I first met many of my collaborators and began to get a grasp on what networking in Cuba beyond the Internet looks like. Antonio explained the growth of the aperture that has been created for several hours every week or two in his backyard: "Two years ago, we could never put twenty people together. Now sometimes there are more than 100. There is a great variety of people. This is something they [state security] cannot stop." I asked him what kind of role he thought technology could play in promoting change in Cuba. He answered immediately:

> The role [of technology] is huge. We can communicate; we can give different information to the rest of the population. For example, our project, we record the programs, we record the discussions, the panels, the conferences, and then afterword, we distribute them… The other day for example, my mother was travelling to the U.S., and we went to the airport, and the guy at the desk asked me, are you a journalist? I said, no, no, I am not a journalist. He said, well, you are the one who is working *Estado de SATS*. I said yes, I am him. It is funny because you start to see people in the street, they recognize you and maybe they ask you for more discs. This one guy, he said he had a few, but he wanted more. Do you have more? And I said, sure! By chance I had more. Or, I was in the bread line, and the guy in front of me asked me, are you the one from *Estado de SATS*… this means that it is moving.

Through dispersed and tangled networks, narratives are produced and spread, interrupting the dominance of state media organs (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 146). Antonio, his parents and

friends, the bloggers, journalists, artists and intellectuals who attend and publicize *Estado de SATS*, the cell phones that warn of police activity, the video cameras that film each event, the discs that the videos are burned onto, the computer that does the burning, the political narratives that the videos themselves carry, and even the state security officers that vilify Antonio and thus legitimize his work abroad: all are co-productive elements knotting together an increasingly messy activist network. Networks themselves become cyborg entities, homeostatic assemblages of heterogeneous techno-social elements with porous borders and radical political motivations.

Voces

There are other spaces in Havana that facilitate political knottings that might allow for emergent cyborg political action. The apartment of Yoani Sánchez and Reinaldo Escobar is one of these spaces. Yoani and Reinaldo are two prolific bloggers and formative members of *Voces Cubanas*, as well as occasional participants at *Estado de SATS*. Like Antonio, they are forbidden from travelling abroad and have been physically attacked, arrested, followed, and harassed.

This story leads as to new discursive spaces. Danilo, a graffiti-artist friend I had met at *Estado de SATS*, leads me up the last flight of stairs in an enormous tenement building south of the *Plaza de la Revolución*. It is my first visit to Yoani and Reinaldo's apartment and we are late. We are going to help assemble the fourteenth issue of *Voces*, a physical and digital magazine which compliments the blogs on *Voces Cubanas*. We come to a door on the top floor and are greeted by Yoani, who opens the door just a crack. "Who is your friend?" she asks. "He's an *Americano*, a *grafitero* (graffiti artist)," Danilo explains, and with the customary kiss on the cheek we are welcomed inside.
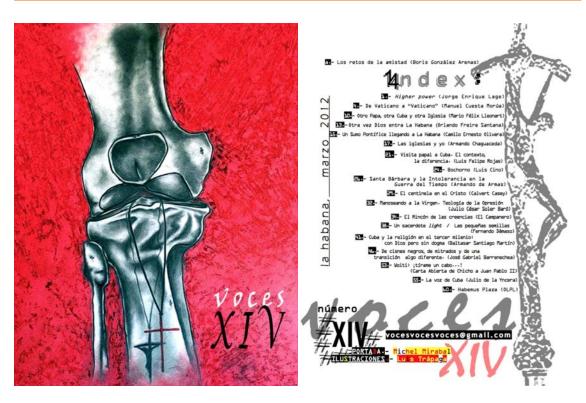
There are books everywhere: novels, pamphlets, historical and political treatises, *Wordpress for Dummies*. Five or six others are already present, working to stack and organize pages amongst the books that line the walls. Across the room a sliding glass door opens on to a balcony overlooking an overcast Havana and, in the distance, the *Plaza de la Revolución*. A gust of warm air pushes its way through the door and flutters the stacks of black and white printed pages lying on the floor and table. There are similar stacks of unbound leaves of paper are being stacked on chairs and bookshelves: fifty in all. Every couple of minutes, Yoani emerges from a room in the back of her apartment with a new stack of identical pages. We are building the magazine by hand, one page at a time. Sofía, a photographer and blogger, offers me a slab of freshly printed pages, still warm to the touch.

My hands are as good as anyone's for stacking, and a few hours later we relax on the floor surrounded by unbound magazines.

Source: [Photograph]Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, right, prepares for a slide show at the *Voces 14* release party in Reinaldo and Yoani's apartment.

The following evening Reinaldo and Yoani hold a release party. Sixty people cram into their tiny apartment; the rum and music flows freely as the night wears on. The fifty physical printed copies are quickly snatched up. Most people who read it in Cuba will do so in PDF format, copied freely and passed on person to person, *memoria a memoria, disco a disco*. Yoani reflects on this reality, writing "gone are the days when the official newspapers, radio, or television are our only sources of information, or disinformation. Technology has come to our aid. Now, in spite of all the limitations on accessing the Internet, watching television via satellite dishes, or listening, without interference, to shortwave radio, news reaches us" (Sanchez, 2011, p. 37). She is right that media technologies offer new ways for information to flow, but it is the cyborg network of humans and machines incorporating these technologies that poses a challenge to the monism of the Cuban government.

Source: [PDF document] Cover and table of contents page from *Voces 14*.

5. Sobre el Muro

My focus thus far has been on exploring the spaces, passages, and linkages through which political narratives are woven within Cuba, highlighting the connections which are spatially localized in Havana rather than those linking actors transnationally. The following sections describe additional complexities of these network cartographies.

Sin EVAsión: How to Blog in Cuba

I now describe the process through which one blog, written in Cuba, is realized as a public web page on the World Wide Web. Miriam Celaya is one of six founding members of *Voces Cubanas* along with Yoani, Reinaldo, and three others. She holds a PhD. in anthropology, though her business card reads only: "blogger." Her blog *Sin EVAsión* (Without Evasion) is devoted to a lucid and incendiary critique of contemporary Cuban society and governance. To say that Miriam is unfriendly with the Cuban authorities is a vast understatement, and like other members of *Voces Cubanas*, she is no stranger to political violence.

This story begins in Miriam's living room on the second floor of a hulking concrete apartment building in downtown Havana. It is hot and sticky outside, but her building stays cool indoors even in the Caribbean afternoon. We sip coffee and talk about social change in Cuba while two voices argue about baseball in the street below. "My neighbors" Miriam tells me by way of explanation, indicating her open window. "They don't think about politics, they don't have any kind of citizen's responsibility." The networks in which Miriam operates frame discourses in terms of civic identity and liberal democratic conceptions of personal freedom, responsibility, and civil rights, and these narratives that she herself helps to produce sit completely at odds with those of official Cuban discourses—hence her label as dissident.

The table where we sit is bare but for several placemats, one of which insulates her laptop, a boxy black gift from a foreign journalist. This is where she writes. At the moment she is in the midst of an article that will be published by an online news source focusing on Cuba but hosted outside of the country. She explains that because of her political orientation (unabashedly anti-communist), she could never be hired by a state-run business, and so exists outside of the state economy. Like many independent journalists in Cuba, she is paid by the online news sources she writes for and says she makes ends meet in the style Cubans have become famous for: *improvisación*. Although she refuses to accept monetary help from foreign governments, she does accept gifts from people she considers friends, including journalists and visiting sympathizers. Miriam's laptop, equipped with word processing software, is well suited to the creation of political narratives. However, like the vast majority of personal computers in Cuba that do not have an Internet connection, it is limited in how it might share them.

Miriam elaborates how communication technologies have facilitated the formation of alternative information networks within Cuba:

> Without technology it [*Voces Cubanas*] would not have been possible. If we didn't have mobile phones, if we didn't have the Internet to post our blogs and didn't get to know one another through that, if we didn't have these civic networks that exist, informal, underground, of people who even have our work and our videos on their computers in their workplaces… it is a beautiful thing…

As we have seen, digital information can be accessed and disseminated in numerous ways, even if an Internet connection is unavailable. In Miriam's statement above even computers

in government workplaces are implicated. Still, the question remains: how does one actually *blog* in Cuba?

Unlike the vast majority of Cuban citizens, foreign residents living in Cuba are able to acquire Internet connections relatively easily, so embassies and the houses of the people who work there are some of the best-connected places on the island. Several embassies, notably the Swiss embassy which houses the U.S. special interests section in Havana, offer Cubans weekly Internet time slots, part of a political strategy aimed at undermining the Cuban government's control of the media. Miriam Celaya does not like to use the U.S. connection because of the political situation between the two countries. This is one way in which she attempts to subvert the U.S./Cuba, *revolucionario/contrarevolucionario* binary.

Later in the week Miriam will load her most recent blog post onto her *memoria* along with her articles and head to the Swedish embassy in Havana. The Swedish embassy does not promote the kind of access for all that the U.S. special interests section does, but Miriam has explained her situation to officials there and they permit her to use the Internet during scheduled times for one to two hours per week. This is why writing all of her emails and blog posts must be done at home: access time is a precious and rare resource that should not be wasted on the writing itself.

Miriam very literally logs on in foreign territory, crossing international frontiers in order to access particular virtual spaces. National sovereignty is called into question in the politics of an Internet connection, for now foreign governments are entangled in the activist network that produces *Voces Cubanas*. In our networked reality, the boundaries between state and non-state actors are increasingly blurred. Cyborg techno-politics transgress conceptual as well as international boundaries, calling into question the categories some social-change theorists have become accustomed to dealing with.

Embassy connections were not always open passages, however. Connecting to the Internet in Cuba is never straightforward and requires constant reconfiguration (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 216). As Andrew Barry notes, "the development of technical artefacts and practices involves the formation, translation and contestation of new blockages and impediments as much as their dissolution" (2007, p. 291). Miriam shows me the mobile phone that she uses to communicate with friends and family, as well as to coordinate meetings with other activists and receive the occasional warning about police activity. The state-owned service provider *Cubacel* charges 1 CUC (equivalent to 1 U.S. dollar) per SMS: prohibitively expensive for independent journalists and those with state salaries alike. With her phone bill paid by friends and strangers living abroad who deposit funds regularly into her account online, phone calls and text messages offer other potential passages for transmission. At times when

Internet access is unavailable, Miriam has placed calls to friends abroad and dictated her posts word for word. These friends can then transcribe her posts and upload them to her blog for her. It is a time consuming and expensive strategy, but effective nonetheless. Strings of text messages can be used to similar effect, subverting blocked passages by appropriating open ones for alternative uses. In this way, "new media technologies are recombinant, the product of the hybridization of new technologies and innovative techniques" (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 216).

Sometimes a visiting journalist will give Miriam an Internet card with some remaining balance for use at a tourist hotel. At one time Cubans were forbidden from entering such establishments. On her blog *Generación* Y*,* Yoani Sánchez has written about donning disguises and speaking German in order to pass as a foreign tourist and enter hotels to access their Wi-Fi. Restrictions have been eased as of late and Cubans are allowed to enter tourist establishments like hotels, but economic barriers remain. Hotel connections cost 5.00 to 12.00 CUC per hour for speeds associated in the United States with dialup Internet access, and the average monthly salary in Cuba was 455 pesos, or about 19.00 CUC, in 2011 (El Nuevo Herald, 2012). Even if Miriam or Yoani do get access in a hotel, *Voces Cubanas* and its nearly-identical mirror site *desdecuba,com*[5], or either of their individual blogs, might be blocked by filtering software. If their blogs are blocked domestically, there is no way for them to administer or update them themselves. Passages open and close unexpectedly. Becoming fluid and adaptable is crucial to keeping a cyborg network alive.

Yoani writes of the phenomenon of administering a blog "blindly" (Sánchez 2011:219). In a 2008 interview with Ted Henken, Sánchez responds to a question about the blockage of her blog thus:

> I have not seen my own blog since the last week of March. I am a "blind blogger," which is very strange, but well, that is Cuba, in Cuba things always happen a lot like science fiction. And so, I send my texts by email, Cubans outside of the island post them and in return by email send me the comments left by readers. That is how "Generación Y" survives, and that is how the entire portal *DesdeCuba* survives: through the solidarity of

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[5] *Desdecuba.com* hosts fundamentally the same material as *vocescubanas.com.* As of December, 2012 they worked essentially like mirrors, though the formatting differed slightly. Interestingly, when I was testing website filtering in hotels, sometimes one or the other site would be blocked but not both. This mirroring strategy is a powerful and easy way to subvert rudimentary blocking software that relies on lists of sites. Note that as of the publishing of this article, *vocescubanas.com* was unreachable.

people who we do not know but who have offered to support our work (Henken, 2008, p. 92).

Friends as well as strangers living abroad are integral to the formation and maintenance of the *Voces Cubanas* activist-network. Blogs are intensely contested collective projects, far beyond the scope of the individual. Miriam's text document, the manifestation of the technological act of writing, is knotted with mass-produced USB technologies manufactured in East Asia which are brought to Cuba by European journalists. These technologies are in turn transported physically across porous national borders into the sovereign territory of the Kingdom of Sweden, where Miriam will use software developed in the United States to send her writing to friends and colleagues around the world. Foreign capital, Cuban businesses, and visiting journalists might collaborate to allow activist bloggers a few minutes of access time, or else hostile governments, prompted by restrictive Cuban policies, might allow access without charge. Unexpected combinations of actors reveal constellations of possibilities and vulnerable yet potent passages.

Hemos Oido: Translation and Participation

By 2008, hardly a year after she started her blog Generation Y, Yoani was the most widely known Cuban blogger worldwide, receiving many millions of hits per month (Henken, 2008, p. 84). Yoani has received numerous awards for her writing and journalism, having written for the *New York Times,* the *Wall Street Journal, El País, Foreign Policy*, and many other Spanish- and English-language publications. In 2011 her first English-language book, entitled *Havana Real*: *One Woman Fights to Tell the Truth about Cuba Today*, went to press. It is of considerable interest, then, that she does not speak English.

Mary Jo Porter lives and works in Seattle, Washington. M.J., or María José as her Cuban friends call her, is one of the creative forces behind the website *hemosoido.com*, a page devoted to the translation of Cuban blogs into languages besides Spanish. *Translatingcuba.com*, a parallel website, hosts those blogs translated into English, aggregated onto a single page. M.J. translates Yoani's blog *Generación Y*, as well as Miriam's and Antonio's, even though she has never met any of them in person.

Source: [Photograph] Mary Jo at home in Seattle.

Hemos Oido (we have heard) is an experiment in cooperative translation: Anyone with a working knowledge of Spanish can translate individual blog posts into English, French, German or Danish, uploading them for the world to see when finished, 'wiki'-style. Taking credit for this translation work is optional, and much work is done anonymously. From a webpage entitled "Direct Help to Bloggers" on *Translating Cuba* there are also detailed instructions outlining how to pay for Cuban cell phone accounts (Translating Cuba, 2012). It is possible to put money directly into the accounts of many bloggers, including those of Yoani and Miriam. Anonymity is possible, begging the question of who (or what) is implicated in the maintenance of the activist network surrounding *Voces Cubanas*. Though Miriam is highly critical of the United States and other countries that have historically interfered in Cuban affairs, it is certainly not outside the range of possibility that governments or organizations with vested interests in regime change are helping to pay her phone bill.

Translating Cuba implies that you, too, can help Cuban bloggers in their liberating projects, drawing upon a particular romance surrounding resistance in Western discourses and a popular demonization of Cuban governance which the blogger network itself contributes to. The open invitation to participate means it is possible to engage in techno-political action on the other side of the world without leaving the comfort of your home. The effective mobilization of complete strangers in conjunction with their money and time indicates alluring possibilities and passages for activist networks constrained by scarce resources. Another form of translation: Political affinities and sentiments informed by discourses become material resources in the form of cell phone minutes, extending possibilities for action through anonymous monetary contributions.

Bauman writes that "Power can move with the speed of the electronic signal… power has become truly *exterritorial*" (2000, p. 11). This exterritorialty becomes possible through cyborg technological networking. While Bauman laments the disintegration of social structures within fluid modernities, Donna Haraway asserts that technological acceleration can be appropriated for collaborative and meaningful political action. In this case, both sides are present at once. *Translating Cuba* effectively crowdsources certain operating costs through fleeting virtual engagements, sacrificing centralized control for partial understandings and vastly increased networking reach. Alliances of appropriated technology, global capital, political narratives, and people are knotted together to allow certain network actors to successfully transcend the institutionalized power of the nation state.

Making Visible

Translation grows the network by diversifying readership and increasing blogger visibility in other parts of the world. The same webpage on *Translating Cuba* that gives instructions on how to pay Cuban cell phone bills contains a statement reading: "Many people want to do something to help the bloggers directly. The most important thing is to read them, talk about them, comment on their blogs, share their blogs with others, keep them IN THE PUBLIC EYE, which is a shield that helps to protect them" (Translating Cuba, 2012). Being visible means being safe, so making visible becomes a defensive strategy. Being visible rather than clandestine means that Cuban cyberactivists must face scrutiny from authorities openly and transparently. How does this visibility change the life of an individual?

Ana Luisa Rubio once made a living as a well-known stage actress, but she now describes herself as a blogger, poet and writer. Reluctantly at first, she describes the head injuries she suffered after being pushed roughly down her own staircase by state security agents. She explains that she was "marked" after standing in the Plaza de la Revolución

with a sign reading "¡Justicia!" during a 2010 protest of the arrest of a friend. "For many years I had lived alone," she tells me, "and they knew that there would be no witnesses. In my case, they have committed horrors." Since the violence in her staircase, she has had six surgeries and feels profoundly vulnerable, but mitigates that vulnerability with creative use of the tools at her disposal.

Outside of her apartment, Ana Luisa takes a picture of a car with the grainy camera on her flip phone, explaining that state security likes to monitor her actions and that the car belongs to an agent that sometimes tails her. Yoani Sánchez has done similar things, posting pictures and descriptions on her blog of the undercover policemen who followed her after what she describes as a "gangland-style kidnapping" (Sanchez, 2011, p. 170). Her heart-rending account reads: "How can I describe the despotic faces of those who forced us into that car, their visible enjoyment as they beat us, their lifting my skirt as they dragged me half-naked to the car?"(Sanchez, 2011, p. 172). Surveillance leads to violence, typifying the coercive discipline used to discourage dissent.

Cuban activist networks engage in social and highly public networking as a protective measure. "It [protesting in public] was very dangerous because I didn't have any family" Ana Luisa tells me as she sways back and forth in her rocking chair. Now that she blogs and has a cell phone, she feels connected as well as protected. Modern Latin American history is tragically full of unsolved political assassinations and disappearances, but Ana Luisa is all over the Internet. "I cannot disappear," she explains.

It is dangerous to reveal one's identity online while criticizing government policy, but it may be more dangerous to criticize the government in secret. Privacy is sacrificed in the interest of safety. The blogger Eduardo agrees, explaining "we don't hide anything." The government, he thinks, feels more at ease because it knows what is going on and is not spurred into paranoid repression. At the same time, activists are protected by their prominence on the world stage. Visibility alone cannot prevent arrests or attacks, but bloggers can no longer disappear without a trace. Bloggers trusted that international organizations and foreign governments would respond in the event of a violent crackdown. By making oneself conspicuously and widely visible to a diverse and global network, the blog itself becomes a co-productive defensive prosthetic. For Ana Luisa and Yoani, their blogs and cell phones are keeping them alive just as they in turn keep their blogs and phones alive. The prosthetic of celebrity in this case is wielded for a cause as well as for survival.

Source: [Photograph]Nothing to hide: Yoani Sanchez displays her national identification card on her blog
Generación Y.

Donna Haraway writes that "From one perspective, a cyborg world is about the final imposition of a grid control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse waged in the name of defense, about the final appropriation of women's bodies in a masculinist orgy of war" (Haraway, 1991, p. 154). In Cuba, Haraway's informatics of domination are terrifyingly real. Oppression is gendered as well as political, and technologies of state surveillance, economic domination, and ideological homogeneity support a monolithic militarized patriarchy. Yoani finishes her entry on her assault with a note of determination and hope. "I managed to see, however, the degree of fright in our assailants, a fear of the new, of what they cannot destroy because they don't understand it, the blustering terror of those who know their days are numbered" (Sanchez, 2011, p. 173). Cyborg contemporaneity might be as much about slippage of power and emancipatory possibility as it is about domination.

Narratives as Technologies, Narratives as Nodes

On its website, the digital publication Voces presents itself to be "a *maleconazo* of opinions and ideas," *maleconazo* referring to the riot which broke out on Havana's iconic *malecón* oceanfront in August, 1994. Drawing associations to the most direct oppositional collective act against the government since the beginning of the Special Period, *Voces* is situated historically within a narrative of contentious Cuban oppositional politics. Simultaneously,

Voces is distanced from the kind of open protest which marching in the streets typifies: it is about ideas and opinions, not open rebellion. Miriam Celaya, critical as she is, told me "I have opinions and I express them. Social revolutions have been very violent, look at the Cuban revolutions. Cuba has had three revolutions, and three times liberty has been truncated. I do not want a revolution." Thus, rather than succumb to what Yoani Sánchez terms "verbal violence," blind arguments and insults, *Voces Cubanas* works to spur discussion and build discourse by creating and disseminating alternative bodies of knowledge and narratives that lead to new understandings.

Cristina Venegas identifies a recent trend in Cuban society: "At the end of the twentieth century, during the Special Period, a decade when major development of digital technology, global networks, and a redirection of the economy took place, the situation of the individual grew progressively more at variance with the myths of Cuban identity propagated by the State" (Venegas, 2007, 404). The set of narratives which embody these "myths of Cuban identity" are propagated through popular media and public discourse. The bloggers who write for *Voces Cubanas* are engaged in the production of alternative narratives which seek directly to challenge these myths, drawing upon personal histories as well as established international discourses.

Narrative technologies can become nodes themselves, fluid loci around which relationships form and alliances are built. Appropriated as any technology is, discourses about human rights, civil society, freedom of speech, or any other narrative body of knowledge, can become powerful nodes in and of themselves. Within networks, narrative technologies allow new relationships with other actors. When Ana Luisa Rubio writes: "I consider that MY HUMAN RIGHTS HAVE BEEN VIOLATED, fundamentally and specifically, the 1- 3- 5- 7- 8- 9- 10- 12- 18- 19- 23 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (Rubio, 2012),6 Amnesty International, Reporters Without Borders, the United States Government, and *Foreign Policy* magazine are all hailed through the translation of individual experience into the parlance of international law. Suddenly, the Cuban government becomes a treaty violator and an authoritarian regime.

The fluidity of discourse can leveraged by activists with access to distributive social media technologies. *Voces Cubanas* succeeds in developing multiplicities, eschewing the dualism of revolutionary Cuban politics. Yaoni Sánchez writes:

It occurs to me to take advantage of the cutting edge of this new world, sharper than a machete, to slaughter authoritarianism and censorship. To launch a call for:

- Freedom of opinion

- Freedom of access to the Internet

- Freedom to enter and leave Cuba

- Freedom of association

- Freedom for prisoners of conscience

- Freedom for Cuba

(Sanchez, 2011, p. 163)

While most of the bloggers who write for *Voces Cubanas* would agree in spirit with the above emancipatory call, they would not agree on the finer points of its interpretation. Dimas Castellanos, a founding member of *Voces Cubanas*, was once a professor of Marxist philosophy, while Lilianne Ruíz considers Marxism more akin to Naziism, an anti-democratic abomination. The subversion of the Cuban state's revolutionary duality is only possible through plurality: International discourses are contested within the network for the simple reason that it is a network rather than a hierarchy.

It must be conceeded that *Voces Cubanas* really has myriad uncountable contributors, as many thousands of comments in numerous languages from around the world enrich each blog post. *Voces Cubanas* rejects ideological unity in favor of fluid and messy partial understandings. The machete Yoani mentions in the above quote is the iconic revolutionary weapon symbolizing Cuban independence, a technology of nationality as well as of production and war. Sharper still than a machete is the ill-defined edge of a brave new cyborg world, an edge *Voces Cubanas* collectively wields to behead the phallocentric monolith of state authoritarianism.

Written narrative is the ultimate appropriate technology, infinitely translatable, transportable, dynamic, fluid, and powerful. According to Donna Haraway, "Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs... Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism. That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution" (Haraway, 1991, p. 176). The writing that appears on the blogs on *Voces Cubanas* is the political technology par excellence we must be most concerned with, for it is discourse that shapes social life.

As with all technologies, it is through meaningful relations and mobilized networks that written narratives such as blogs affect change. Thus, it is when actors engage in co-productive relationships and alliance building with technologies as well as humans that potentiality is born, through what . In Cuba, despite an apparent lack of Internet access, new technologies in conjunction with mobilized networks are profoundly changing how written narratives are produced and communicated. *Voces Cubanas* is a cooperative cyborg network involved in hacking the technologies it comes into contact with in order to further its political goals. There can be no stable definitions, but here I propose that cyborg political action is about creating fluid heterogeneous networks that bend rather than break when the stakes change. It is about hacking narratives and technologies to fit local problems and situated political ends, subverting the god-trick of author-less knowledge and binary for/against logic. Above all, it is about establishing valuable partial understandings and using the tools at hand to build better futures.

6. Conclusion

I believe that technology is more than hardware. Today, technology is access. If not, then these tools become just things, things that take up space, like having rocks sitting around your house. The potential of all of this technology reduces to one percent if it isn't connec- ted. I believe that the first technical act is a connection between human beings.

-Eduardo, blogger and activist.

Eduardo's belief in technology as access implies that myriad possible worlds are hinted at by the technologies we create and are created by. This conception of technology acknowledges the importance of relationality. Connection is the first technical act, and connections are about opening passages to new futures.

Zygmunt Bauman notes that "The prime technique of power is now escape, slippage, elision and avoidance, the effective rejection of any territorial confinement" (Bauman, 2000, p. 11). Even in isolated Cuba, this is beginning to hold true, as information flows rapidly, Internet connection or no. Increasingly, the activist networks we see mobilizing towards goals are themselves fluid, heterogeneous assemblages of human and non-human actors that cross national, cultural, linguistic, technological, and ideological frontiers.

Voces Cubanas is an intensely collaborative entity composed of a seemingly limitless constellation of actors. For *Voces Cubanas*, writing and narrative are the manifestations of cyborg politik par excellence. Writing is the essential technology of discourse and narrative creation, both of which establish knowledge through technological practice. Thus, following both Foucault—"Power and knowledge directly imply one another" (Foucault, 1984, p. 175) —and Haraway—"Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs" (Haraway, 1991, p. 176)—blogging is a cyborg technology of power as well as a co-productive networking strategy. Translation, beyond extending the power of writing, is also a crucial mechanism for growing and maintaining the network. In turn, by making oneself visible to a broader network, the network itself becomes an immensely powerful and personal defensive prosthetic.

We should not hold our breath for a Cuban Spring. Even so, social change is afoot. *Voces Cubanas* is building a vision, or perhaps many visions, of a future that subverts the dualism of dominant discourse. The blogger produces the reality of the blog, but so does the blog produce the reality of the blogger, and each is irreducible to the other. *Voces Cubanas* is an exercise in cyborg politics, an unexpected emancipatory collaboration, a powerfully fluid yet vulnerable new breed of social activism predicated on porous boundaries and the creative reconfiguration of networks and technologies. In cyborg social change, technologies and narratives become more than resources on which to draw, but active loci within networks that open up vast constellations of possibilities and flow with the network itself.

7. Post-Script

Since 2012, when this research was undertaken, Cuba's relationship with the rest of the world has continued to shift. Some things have changed, but physical repression of dissent has continued. Pope Francis became the third pope in history to visit the island, after John Paul II and Benedict XVI, but as with previous papal visits the Cuban government detained opposition activists in advance of the pontificate's arrival. Antonio Rodiles, the founder of Estado de SATS, and artist Danilo 'El Sexto' Machado, both of whom I interviewed in 2012, have each been assaulted and imprisoned since I left. Danilo was held without charge for nearly ten months beginning on December 25th, 2014. Amnesty International turned its attention to the case and began campaigning for him on September 30th, 2015, almost nine months later, and on October 20th, 2015, he was unceremoniously released (Amnesty International, 2015a, 2015b) . Visibility, it seems pays off.

Many members of *Voces Cubanas* have undertaken new projects, and not all have remained in Cuba. While the Cuban media space remains overwhelmingly dominated by the state, cracks are appearing. As of this writing, *vocescubanas.com* returns an error page, but *desdecuba.com*, *translatingcuba.com*, and *hemosoido.com* remain online. Yoani Sánchez has founded an online news source called 14ymedio (14 y Medio, 2016). Eminent Cuban blogger and Niemen Fellow Elaine Diaz has founded her own media startup (Londoño, 2015). Estado de SATS continues hosting events and has launched an online magazine. Yesterday's bloggers may yet become tomorrow's media tycoons.

Data flows have increased as well. What began as informal file sharing between individuals using USB drives and cell phone cards has become formalized by an innovation known as *El Paquete Semenal* (the Weekly Packet). *El Paquete* offers Cubans up to a terabyte of new material each week, downloaded from the Internet by unknown cyborgs presumably using a rare high-speed Internet connection. An underground information exchange and economy has blossomed around this and other technologies such as mesh networks, facilitating an unprecedented flow of bits across the island (Fernandes & Halkin, 2014; Press, 2016).

Cuba and the United States simultaneously announced the joint resumption of diplomatic ties in December 2014, coinciding with a historic prisoner exchange, and in March 2016, President Obama became the first U.S. president in 88 years to visit Cuba. He met with President Raúl Castro, as well as with a small and diverse group of critical Cuban activists in a well-publicized meeting. Among those present were Antonio Rodiles and, sitting to Obama's right, Miriam Celaya (Wilkinson, 2016). The images of this meeting were published in newspapers and on social networks around the world. We are left with a vision of a network continuing to extend itself, engaging directly with the highest levels of global power.

We are all increasingly entangled in the same webs, networked together by global techno-capitalism. Even Cuba, once staunchly opposed to capitalist development, is experimenting. As academics concerned with social change and the contested role of technology in humanity's future, our challenge will increasingly be to come to terms with the blog, USB drive, dog, bot, algorithm, or narrative as an active political agent without falling into the trap of believing that a new technology or a new narrative will cause change on its own. As this paper demonstrates, *Voces Cubanas* has remained resilient and effective because it is largely horizontal, fluid, and takes an active role in building and re-building its network and narratives. For social movements working within highly ordered hierarchical societies, heterogeneity, plurality and partial understandings need not be weaknesses. Rather, messiness

—that same quality which allows *Voces Cubanas* to bend under pressure rather than break—may ironically be the most solid foundation on which to model and build lasting change.

8. Acknowledgements

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