

SEBASTIAN GUBERNATIS / FELIX HAHN
MEDIA



Fidel Castro's appearance on La Declaración de la Habana Revolutionary Square 1962 / fig.1

In order to understand the current state of media violence within Cuba, we need to look back to 1958. The media made a significant contribution to the Cuban revolution and the overthrow of the then ruling dictator Fulgencio Batista. While Batista assured the international press that the guerrilla army surrounding Fidel Castro and Che Guevara was not in danger¹, the rebels managed to spread their message and political position with the help of

the radio station Radio Rebelde founded by Che Guevaras. The station's aim was to use a propaganda tool to criticize the social injustice under Batista's government and to support the revolution.² Due to the lack of access to print media and the high proportion of illiterate people in the population (around 40 percent until 1960)³, the radio gained special importance as a mass medium. Thanks to the newly gained reach, the movement received the necessary attention and was able

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1. HISTORY UNTIL TODAY

to convince numerous groups from the broader population to join the rebels.

When Castro came to power in 1959, the regime also took over the media monopoly and continued to pursue the goal of using the media as a political instrument. While in the first years after the revolution there were still privately financed radio stations reporting contrary to the movement, in 1962 all radio stations were completely placed under state control.⁴ The constitution has since banned private media. To date, little has changed in the basic legal situation.

Instead of supporting diversified media, which cover a broad spectrum of aspects, the country has a large, relatively well-financed state media machine and thus holds the sole information monopoly.⁵ This can be recognized in particular by the fact that critical and independent news agencies are predominantly supported by the government are blocked for users or journalists have to report within the framework of the laws against "anti-government propaganda". Although the government tolerates some independent news sites, the fear of being blocked and arrested causes many



Che Guevara's speech on Radio Rebelde 1958 / fig. 2

independent journalists, bloggers, etc. to self-censure.⁶ Some of these news agencies therefore work in a legal limbo in which they are neither officially recognized nor prohibited by the state and thus cannot conclude legal contracts or bank accounts. The result of this can be seen in a survey by Freedom House, in which 190 Cubans were asked about their sources of information.⁷ Only 8 percent said that they obtain their information from independent media.

Internet access is also severely limited and has one of the lowest connectivity rates in the western hemisphe-

re.⁸ Reporters Without Borders has therefore classified the republic for years as "enemies of the Internet" and ranks 171st out of 180 on the 2020 international press freedom ranking.⁹



Castro and Díaz Canel, transition of power / fig. 4

Cuba's press is under the sole control of the Cuban Communist Party. Magazines such as Granma, Juventud Rebelde and Trabajadores have the greatest distribution and therefore a de facto monopoly. With print runs totaling around 1,000,000 copies^{10,11,12}, it can be assumed that the Cuban population regularly consumes print media, as they are usually also systematically exchanged with one another within the neighborhoods. The reporting covers national and international politics, cultural topics, sports and current issues. As the most published magazine, Granma often refers to the heroic years of the 1959 revo-

lution and reports increasingly on socialism, while Juventud Rebelde focuses on a younger audience as a target group with reporting that also includes POP culture.³ Overall, the reporting is focused very similar among the three most widespread print media - headings and entire articles are partially identical.⁵

As a result of the criticism that Raul



State-run newspapers in Cuba/ fig. 5

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2.1 THE PRESS

Castro himself voiced against the state-run media at the 2011 Communist Party congress, 13 newspapers and television began to advertise so-called "criticism sessions" in which citizens can speak out to address certain issues or to criticize.¹⁰ The population should therefore no longer just receive media, but also actively help to shape it. The Reuters Institute asked two state-recognized journalists for their opinion on the newly advertised criticism sessions.⁵ While the new sections on television and in the newspaper represent a new path to more transparency and reflection, Rafael Grillo, journalist for the "Caiman Barbudo" "The criticism there as too one-sided. "Criticism in the media is biased and superficial. Many times it is the citizens themselves who are blamed for the country's ills. If productivity does not increase, it is because people do not work." - Rafael Grillo. When looking at the economic cir-

cumstances, it is noticeable that the state media is heavily subsidized by the government. A subscription to *Granma Internacional*, for example, costs 50 US dollars a year - a sum that does not cover the production costs of the newspaper.³ Independent journalists therefore find it particularly difficult to compete with their articles in the market and to make enough money. Apart from the economic situation, journalists who publish information critical of the regime are consistently persecuted. This often results in harassment, violence, travel restrictions or even arrests.¹⁴ Reporting by foreign journalists is also subject to strict surveillance. Accreditations are awarded selectively and reporters critical of the government are expelled.

The beginnings of the Cuban Internet go back to 1994. At that time, with the help of UNESCO, a basic network could be installed on the island, which could only be used by doctors for national and international connections to medical databases and was subject to state control.¹⁵

Although internet access is still limited and one of the lowest connectivity rates in the western world Hemisphere³, accessibility has improved in recent years. While in 2000 only 60,000 Cubans (0.5% of the population - including doctors, government employees and journalists) had access to the Internet³, according

to internetworldstats.com there were 4.4 million Cubans (40% of the population) in 2017¹⁵. Public WiFi spots are installed in the metropolises by the only available provider ETESCA.¹⁶

Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba S.A. - ETESCA for short - is a government-controlled telecommunications provider that offers access to the Cuban intranet, but not to the global web. For Cubans, public hotspots or hotel connections have so far been the only way to connect to the local intranet, as private Internet access is only available to a certain proportion of the population. There are now over 11,000 hotspots,



KubanerInnen an einem der öffentlichen Hotspots / Abb. 6

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2.2. INTERNET

8,000 of which are in Havana alone.¹⁷ The intranet costs between 1 and 2 dollars per hour and is therefore possible with an average monthly salary of 32 dollars (as of 2019).¹⁸

The Internet has meanwhile become just as widespread a form of media as television or radio and is considered to be particularly important in the future development of the country⁵: It is seen as an opportunity to break away from the state media monopoly and to build up an international network. A project that is under enormous pressure from the US embargo, among other things.

In the past, Washington has emphasized the goal of making Cuba's media more independent and open. This is discussed in more detail later and the US influence is critically questioned (see 3.1).



KubanerInnen an einem der öffentlichen Hotspots / Abb. 14

Google and Gmail are allowed in Cuba.⁵ Facebook and Twitter were also allowed in 2009.

Figure 5 is in some ways a superficial and speculative depiction. However, since the government does not provide more detailed information on the social networks used, the Google Trend Search can provide an insight into the popularity of individual social networks. It is noticeable that Revolico, an online shopping site in

Cuba that was blocked by the government until 2016¹⁹, achieved more Google hits than the official news source Granma even before it was lifted. One can conclude that Cubans find their own way to illegal websites.

In addition, chat groups such as “Mercadillo Habanero” (Small Havana Market) or “Lo que quieran” (What you want) have enjoyed increasing popularity since the introduction of the messenger ser-

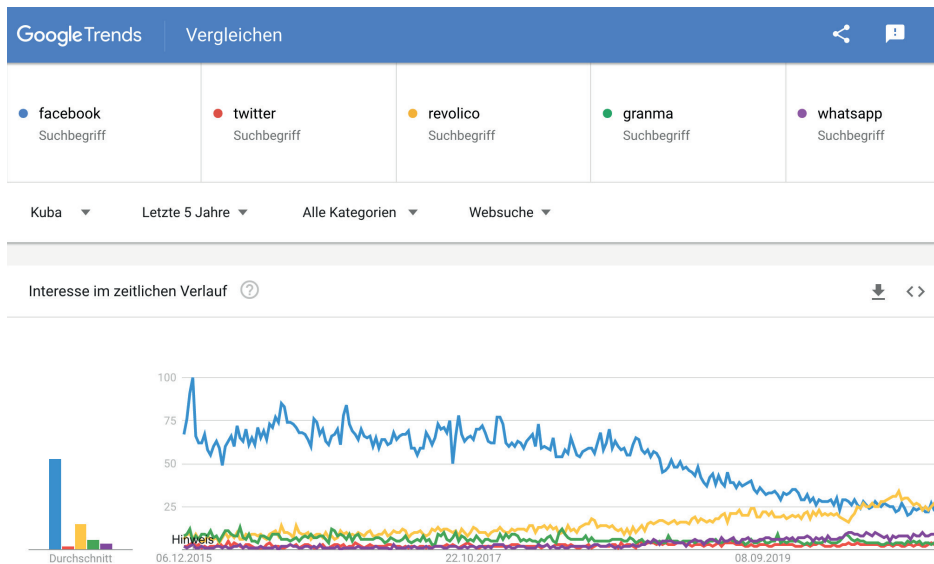


2.3 SOCIAL NETWORKS / GROUP CHATS

vices WhatsApp and Telegram. Since, for example, there is often a shortage of groceries and everyday necessities in shops²⁰, long waiting times are part of the daily life of most Cubans. The current pandemic has only exacerbated this situation.

out about the availability of certain goods, to carry out barter transactions or to offer coveted products for sale²⁰. Errands are organized more efficiently and save time in particular.

The Internet now offers an alternative to circumvent these problems. More and more people who have access to the Internet are organizing themselves in chat groups to find

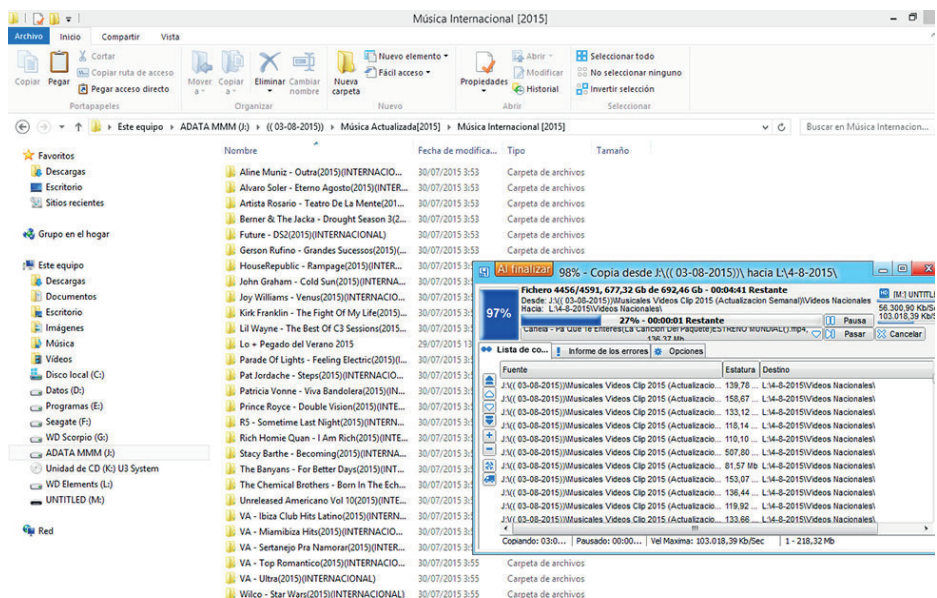


Offline networks have developed as an alternative to the existing slow and comparatively expensive Internet since 2006 and are based on the exchange of information via memory cards, hard drives and cell phones. Bluetooth in particular is becoming increasingly popular as a transmission medium in Cuba.

"El Paquete Semanal" (translated: the weekly package) is the best-known example of a digital media and information collection that has been distributed on the underground market in Cuba since 2008 as a replacement for broadband internet. The package includes regularly col-

lected films, news, newspapers, etc., which are saved on USB sticks and sold, among other things, in smaller shops²¹. "All you have to do is call. A guy will arrive at your door, on a motorcycle, carrying a hard disk. Then he will transfer the complete programming to your device" explains Alejandro Solís, a consumer of "El Paquete", in an interview in 2013.⁵

The Cuban population is able to see foreign film productions as well as alternative media that deviate from the state-controlled media. In addition to films, series and newspapers, the most popular content is soap operas, music and



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2.4 EL PAQUETE



local classified ads. Computer technology, educational video, and software websites are also popular. The contents of upcoming packages can be viewed in advance on the "Paquetedecuba" (<http://paquetedecuba.com/>) page. Many Cubans only buy part or an extract of the package and then pass it on to friends and relatives.²²

The exact number of Cubans who use El Paquete is not known, but the offline network is so well known that the government tries to circumvent the spread of El Paquete with the "Anti-Paquete". Mochila, also

called Maletín (book bag), are part of the Anti-Paquete and offer teaching material in addition to classic films and music. However, the anti-paquete is far less popular with the population than the original.²³

2.5 TELEVISION

With Cubavision, the educational channels Canal Educativo 1 + 2, Tele Rebelde and Multivisión, there are a total of five state television channels in Cuba, which can be received by the entire population via an analog antenna.²⁴ According to the press reference, there are 236 televisions per 1,000 inhabitants, almost all of them Cuban households have access to television.³ Since March 2020 there are 7 TV channels on the island. Canal Caribe is the first program that is mainly produced by young journalists. In contrast to the previous news formats, Canal Caribe was set up to try out new forms of reporting, including live reports.²⁴ In particular,

journalists who had already learned at Russia Today and Telesur and offer an alternative to Cuba's most important news program, Noticiero Estelar, were used for this purpose. It is the first program that is broadcast exclusively in HD quality and requires a corresponding digital receiver to receive it.²⁴



Kubanische Familie schaut staatl. Fernsehen / Abb. 10

3 INFLUENCE FROM ABROAD



Demonstration CANF Los Angeles / fig. 11

Access to international media and blogs within Cuba is not clearly accessible. The blog of blogger Yoani Sanchez, who is critical of the Cuban government, could still be accessed in 2014 from Cuba, for example, but no longer the digital newspaper she founded. The same is true of the BBC's website, which is largely accessible, while parts that are critical of Castro are inaccessible. International protests against the media leadership in Cuba include Cubans in exile. The Cuban American National Foundation is one such organization, run by Cubans in exile in the US, with the aim of building a free democracy in Cuba in place of the dic-

tatorship established by Fidel Castro. One of the foundation's first political projects was the call for a publicly funded radio station to be set up to provide the Cuban population with information that was not filtered by their own government.²⁶ This was achieved in 1985 with the launch of Radio Marti. Raul Gonzales is a former Cuban who grew up in Berlin and hosts the radio show "Ich bin ein Berliner". He was interviewed by us regarding our research chapter. In his opinion, the opening up of the media is symbolic of the opening up of the country. Since the international media reports predominantly from western, capitalist perspectives, there is enough reason

to assume that attempts are being made to degrade Cuban socialism.

The skepticism of the Cuban government is understandable, based on the examples from Radio Marti and the ZunZuneo app. Radio Marti is a state-owned US radio broadcaster based in Miami, which produces and distributes radio and television programs specifically aimed at the Cuban population, as well as an Internet information offering in Spanish.²⁷ During the H. W. Bush administration in 1990, TV Marti was seen as a symbol of a “free flow of ideas” for the Cuban population²⁸, whereas TV Marti is described by critics as an American propaganda instrument that tries to weaken the Cuban government.²⁹

Using the more recent example of the ZunZuneo social network, one could describe this arguably as

an American attack on the Cuban government. ZunZuneo was an US-funded short message service based on SMS for Cuban users of mobile phones. The app was used for the purposes of propaganda and data acquisition about the users.³⁰ The app shared content that was intended to encourage Cuban youth to rebel against the Cuban government.³¹ The service had over 40,000 users until it was discovered and subsequently shut down in the summer of 2012.



Obama and Castro 2016 / fig. 3

Since Fidel Castro's death in 2016 and Raul Castro's resignation in 2018, revolutionary passion has come to an ideological standstill.³² The gradual opening of the island state through the Internet and tourism has led to a profound intellectual and moral transformation. While older people largely accept state control of the media, the younger generation is increasingly losing interest in revolutionary speeches, views and general leadership style, which is unlikely to change fundamentally under President Miguel Díaz-Canel.³³ The civil organization in

group chats as well the spread of the digital media collection "El Paquete" suggest that Cuba's youth are increasingly interested in the use of social, alternative and foreign media than in the state-controlled television channels, newspapers and radio stations. "There are only two ways we can go: Either we solve the problem together and once and for all, or the credibility and persuasiveness of the Cuban media will simply disappear", Díaz-Canel recognized in 2013 on the Cuban press association UPEC and demanded a stronger involvement of young indus-



Women watching state-run television programs / fig. 12

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3.2 FUTURE PROSPECTS

try representatives.³³ The draft legislation leaked from the online portal “El Toque” in January 2020, which among other things will regulate the storage and provision of government data until 2028, and which are intended to grant editorial offices more rights for research, cautiously suggest that the signs point to change.³³ All of these complex developments raise the question of how the country can advance into a progressive future that is desired by part of the population, but at the same time preserves its unique history. This question is of

crucial importance for Cuban identity, but it also requires leadership that is willing to combine both interests.



Teenagers using their mobile phones / fig. 13

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