

Bridging the Gap: The Rise of Digital Media and its Impact on Cuban Society

Cerrando la brecha: el auge de los medios digitales y su impacto en Cuba

Gelsy García García 

Ph.D Candidate

Communication University of China

Cuba

gelsy_86@yahoo.com

Omar Mahmoud Khalaf Dabie 

Ph.D Candidate

Communication University of China

Egypt

amr.khalaf@yahoo.com

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RESUMEN: The aim of this article is to critically analyse the transformative changes in Cuba's communications landscape, marked by the introduction of new communication policies and the rapid rise of digital media. It also identifies persistent challenges that undermine the equitable use of digital technologies. Furthermore, it examines the inherent contradiction between the increasing accessibility of digital media and persistent state regulation and censorship, which impede the full realisation of digital platforms as instruments for civic participation and public discourse. Through a critical analysis of these dynamics, the article posits that while Cuba's communications landscape is undergoing significant modernisation, this transformation is fraught with contradictions. It concludes that the future of digital media in Cuba will depend not only on technological advances but also on strategic interventions aimed at ensuring equitable access, fostering digital literacy and addressing the underlying power structures that govern the flow of information.

KEYWORDS: communication; digital media; digital technologies; Cuba.

RESUMEN: El objetivo de este artículo es analizar críticamente los cambios transformadores en el panorama de las comunicaciones en Cuba, marcados por la introducción de nuevas políticas de comunicación y el rápido auge de los medios digitales. También identifica desafíos persistentes que socavan el uso equitativo de las tecnologías digitales. Además, examina la contradicción inherente entre la creciente accesibilidad de los medios digitales y la persistente regulación y censura estatal, que impiden la plena realización de las plataformas digitales como instrumentos para la participación cívica y el discurso público. A través de un análisis crítico de estas dinámicas, el artículo postula que, si bien el panorama de las comunicaciones de Cuba está experimentando una modernización significativa, esta transformación está plagada de contradicciones. Concluye que el futuro de los medios digitales en Cuba dependerá no solo de los avances tecnológicos sino también de intervenciones estratégicas dirigidas a garantizar el acceso equitativo, fomentar la alfabetización digital y abordar las estructuras de poder subyacentes que gobiernan el flujo de información.

PALABRAS CLAVE: comunicación; medios digitales; tecnologías digitales; Cuba.

In recent years, Cuba has witnessed significant changes in its communication landscape, marked by the introduction of new communication policies and the rise of digital media. These developments have had a considerable impact on various aspects of Cuban society, affecting the ways in which information is accessed, shared, and consumed by the Cuban population.

Cuba's communication infrastructure and policies have long been shaped by the country's unique political and economic context. For decades, the Cuban government exercised strict control over media and information, ensuring that public discourse aligned with state ideologies. Access to international media and the internet was heavily restricted, with only limited and controlled access available to the broader population.

A significant shift began in the late 2000s when the Cuban government started to slowly liberalize access to communication technologies. In 2008, restrictions on mobile phone ownership were lifted, allowing more Cubans to own and use mobile devices. This was a pivotal moment that set the stage for further technological developments. By 2013, the government had established public Wi-Fi hotspots in major cities, though access remained expensive and limited.

The most transformative change came in 2018 when the government introduced mobile internet services, allowing Cubans to access the internet on their smartphones. This policy shifts significantly expanded digital connectivity across the island, enabling a new era of communication where digital media began to play a central role. Also, that year a formal state and government communication policy was introduced. The policy sought to advance digital convergence in mass

media and acknowledged the function of information technologies in governance. which designates the Communist Party of Cuba as the "rector of social communication in the country," qualifies the independent press as "private media, with critical and demobilizing intentionality" (Asamblea Nacional del Poder Popular de la República de Cuba, 2019, art. 55).

This article presents a critical examination of the transformative shifts in Cuba's communication landscape, marked by the introduction of new communication policies and the rapid rise of digital media.

Methods

The methodology for the study is mainly qualitative, this research aligns with the critical paradigm whereby the communication system is conceptualized as situated categories, shaped by sociohistorical and cultural conditioning, and placed within the context of power relations.

The critical realism paradigm acknowledges the existence of an objective reality but posits that our comprehension of this reality is invariably shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Moreover, it recognizes the active role of the researcher not only in the construction of the object but also in the becoming of the studied process itself. (Lincoln et al., 2018, p. 252)

Other research methods were use, among them:

Documentary analysis: In the case of this technique, the information to be tracked varies according to the type of document consulted. However, in all the texts accessed, information related to the indicators of the media market, political parallelism, and access. It was used to analyze the normative material or diffusion of the

population in its diverse formats and support such as government laws and regulations, decrees and ministerial legislation or political, cooperation agreements

Content analysis: Printed media and digital media information, covering topics as the values promoted, the treatment of the subject with possible negative implications for the environment. and the predominant orientation in the text

Results

For nearly a decade, the Internet was accessible solely to state-owned enterprises in Cuba. In 2008, a notable shift occurred when the Cuban government lifted restrictions on mobile phone ownership, thereby facilitating broader access to mobile technology for its citizens. This change initiated a series of subsequent developments in the country's communication infrastructure. By 2013, the advent of public Wi-Fi hotspots in select locations marked the beginning of a new era in Cuban telecommunications. However, the initial rollout of these hotspots was characterized by limited accessibility and high costs

Nevertheless, as of July 2015, select public Wi-Fi zones were made available for internet access. In its nascent stage, the service was plagued by poor wireless connection quality, which has since seen incremental improvement. However, the service remains suboptimal and is prohibitively expensive.

The most significant change occurred in 2018, when the government permitted internet access on mobile phones, thereby facilitating more extensive connectivity among the population.

The advent of mobile internet access has been instrumental in facilitating the proliferation of

digital media usage in Cuba. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have become increasingly popular among Cubans, providing new avenues for communication and information sharing. These platforms have facilitated connections between individuals and the outside world to a degree that has not been previously possible. The availability of digital media has also facilitated the emergence of independent online content creators and bloggers. These individuals use digital platforms to share a variety of content, including news, personal stories, and cultural commentary. While traditional media remains influential, digital media offers an alternative source of information and has diversified the media landscape in Cuba.

Notwithstanding the considerable control exerted by the state, recent developments indicate an increasingly intricate media environment in Cuba. The liberalization of migration policies in 2013, the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement in 2014, and the ongoing economic reforms under Raúl Castro and later Miguel Díaz-Canel have introduced new dynamics into the society and therefore media landscape. These changes, in conjunction with the ascendance of social media and autonomous digital platforms, have created avenues for alternative discourses, challenging the conventional monolithic perception of Cuban media as an exclusively state-controlled entity.

Access to technologies in Cuba is shaped by a multitude of intersecting factors, including technological obsolescence, limited broadband, and scarce technological infrastructure. These factors can be collectively conceptualized as the Technological Gap. Herbert Schiller and William Wresch (2002) were among the first authors to address the issue of the digital divide from a

sociological perspective. They argued that it was necessary to ensure that all sectors of the population had access to information made available through new information and communication technologies, and that this could have significant benefits.

The data in figure 1 indicates a global or regional trend towards increased digital connectivity, particularly through mobile devices. This is evidenced by the growing number of internet and cellular service users, especially mobile internet users.

Physical ICT indicators

CONCEPT	UM	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Number of existing computers* Number of existing computers* Number of existing computers* Number of existing computers* Number of existing computers* Number of existing computers	MU	1 410,2	1 223,6	1 131,2	1 187,1	...
Number of users of internet services* Number of users of internet services* Number of users of internet services* Number of users of internet services of them: users accessing via mobile data	MU	6 546,0	7 195,4	7 517,4	7 517,4	...
Personal computers per 1 000 inhabitants	U	126	109	101	107	...
Internet users per 1 000 inhabitants*	U	584	643	672	676	...
Total cellular system subscribers	MU	5 474,1	6 141,5	6 760,6	7 203,3	7 712,0
Mobile cellular system subscribers	MU	5 373,3	6 042,6	6 661,8	7 103,3	7 600,1
Fixed cellular system subscribers	MU	100,8	98,9	98,8	100,0	111,9
Mobile cellular population coverage	%	85,3	85,5	85,6	87,3	87,5

* Indicators under construction



Source ONEI, 2022.

Figure 1. Physical Cuban ICT Indicators.

Notwithstanding the decline in the number of physical computers, the overall connectivity has improved, with a greater proportion of the population accessing the internet via mobile devices. The expansion of mobile cellular

coverage lends further support to this trend, indicating a shift in the manner by which individuals access digital services, moving away from traditional computers towards more portable and accessible mobile devices. This shift has

implications for both the information and communication technology (ICT) industry and broader societal access to information and communication services.

The confluence of technological obsolescence, constrained broadband accessibility, and inadequate technological infrastructure in Cuba engenders considerable obstacles to the equitable and efficacious utilization of digital technologies. These factors not only restrict the population's capacity to engage with the digital realm to its fullest extent but also serve to exacerbate existing inequalities within the country. The reliance on outdated technology restricts access to modern digital tools and services, while limited broadband further exacerbates the digital divide between urban and rural areas. The scarcity of infrastructure serves to compound these issues, thereby creating a cycle of technological disadvantage that hinders social and economic development.

It is crucial to recognize that this situation reflects broader systemic challenges that require strategic interventions. To address these issues, it is essential to invest in modernizing the technological landscape and implement policies that enhance digital literacy, guarantee equitable access, and cultivate an environment conducive to innovation. In the absence of such initiatives, the prospective advantages of digital technology in improving education, communication, and economic prospects will remain unattainable for numerous Cubans, thereby perpetuating the cycle of technological and socio-economic exclusion.

In his 2005 study, Van Dijk (2005) identifies four key factors that facilitate access to technology: motivation, access, skills, and usage. Motivation and, in particular, access, are typically regarded as the primary components of the digital

divide. In recent years, the digital divide debate has focused on the acquisition of the skills necessary for efficient and effective Internet use and the types of online activities people engage in, which is also referred to as the second-level digital divide. Scholars of digital inequality frequently utilize one of these access types as the dependent variable, subsequently examining individual, socioeconomic, or geographical factors as potential determinants.

The issue of motivation is a crucial one in this context. The concept of motivational access, as postulated by Van Dijk (2005), is primarily shaped by attitudes towards technology. Negative attitudes towards technology, such as computer anxiety, have been demonstrated to reduce access to the Internet (Van Dijk, 2005), negatively impact patterns of Internet use (Meuter et al., 2003), and impede minorities from accessing it. In Cuba, the general population is keen to gain Internet access in order to enhance connectivity at both domestic and international levels.

One of the primary motivations for Cubans to adopt new technologies is the fact that nearly every Cuban has family members residing outside of Cuba, many of whom have not been in contact for years. Furthermore, communication with individuals outside of Cuba is costly, and the Internet is therefore facilitating novel communication avenues

Another specific motivation for Cubans to utilize the Internet is to obtain further information about the domestic and international spheres. Individuals with Internet access frequently retrieve content for others and disseminate information to their local communities.

The concept of material access, as defined by Van Dijk (2005), refers to the opportunity and means to access the Internet. Following an

examination of motivation, Van Dijk (2005) presents the concept of material access, which can be defined as the opportunity and means to access the Internet. The initial aspect of material access pertains to the location of the Internet connection. It has been demonstrated that individuals who have an Internet connection at their place of residence tend to experience a superior quality of service and engage in a more extensive range of activities than those who lack such a connection. Home access also provides a greater opportunity for informal learning and the development of digital skills than access in other locations.

The primary avenues for accessing the Internet in this context are government-run computer clubs and schools, as well as workplaces. Exceptions to this include some black-market venues. Furthermore, material access entails financial costs associated with the acquisition of hardware, software, and services.

While the material divides in developed countries are increasingly visible in terms of the devices used to access the Internet (differences in Internet use on laptops, handheld computers, smartphones, game consoles, and interactive televisions), in Cuba, despite the quadrupling of mobile phone use since its legalization in 2008, very limited mobile Internet service is available due to restricted infrastructure.

The term "Internet skills" is used to describe the abilities and knowledge required to use the Internet effectively. Research on digital skills initially focused on technical aspects, recently, a more pluralistic understanding has emerged. In a study published in 2016, Van Deursen and colleagues developed and validated an Internet skills framework comprising four distinct types of skills. Operational skills are the fundamental

technical abilities necessary for navigating the Internet, but also Information navigation skills pertain to the ability to search for and locate information, as well as to select and evaluate sources of information on the Internet.

The operational and information navigation skills are fundamental to the Web 1.0 activities, which are the basis for the social and creative skills that form the foundation of Web 2.0 activities. There are other terms as "social skills" and "creative skills" encompasses the capacity to utilize online communication and interactions to comprehend and exchange meaning and the abilities required to create content of an acceptable quality for publication or sharing with others on the Internet. The combination of these skills provides a comprehensive understanding of the abilities required for individuals to function effectively in an online environment.

All this associated to the fact that the real access is also conditioned upon the capacity of the state to furnish an internet connection and the prices imposed by the Cuban telecommunications company (ETECSA), make Cuba one of the countries with the poorest internet access and uses of the internet.

In the 2022 United Nations e-Government Development Index (EGDI), Cuba was ranked 148th out of 193 countries, with an index score of 0.4918. This ranking serves to underscore the considerable challenges that Cuba faces in developing its digital infrastructure. The discrepancy between Cuba's EGDI score and its Human Capital Index (HCI), which stands at 0.62 (World Bank, 2022), highlights the nation's comparatively robust human capital in education and health but also underscores significant deficiencies in digital infrastructure. The telecommunication infrastructure component of

the EGD is particularly low, at 0.0709, which further underscores the necessity for substantial improvements in Cuba's technological and digital infrastructure to bridge the existing digital divide.

Despite Cuba being one of the first countries in the region to develop an explicit government-backed informatization program, it failed to evolve from its very inception. This was hindered by the lack of a country strategy that went beyond mere survival in the face of external hostility and accumulated internal structural deformities (Recio, 2014, p. 327).

The management of the scarcity of connectivity and the definition of its strategic uses have been problematic due to the use of selective and exclusionary criteria at different times. Recio (2014), identifies a preliminary phase, spanning approximately from 1990 to 1999, during which resources were allocated and networks utilized for scientific and technical advancement. Until 1996, when Internet access was made available, the policy was oriented toward establishing the foundations for professional networks for scientific and technical development at the national and community levels. This was pursued through the Joven Clubs initiative. The second period was distinguished by the institutionalization of the sector and the initial formulation of a regulatory framework to guarantee the secure utilization of computer networks.

For example, Decree 209. Around 1999, it coincided with the so-called "battle of ideas", which prioritized those actors who would "multiply Cuba's message", was an official policy initiated by the Central Committee of the PCC.

The expansion of IT usage throughout society is a key priority for the country. The utilization of digital media for the purpose of enhancing Cuba's global image and combating the challenges posed

by international media outlets represents a strategic approach that is both astute and prudent.

The "Five Heroes Campaign," which commenced in 1998, represents a notable instance of how media was mobilized for nationalistic and diplomatic objectives, leveraging emerging technologies to build international support for Cuba's political objectives.

The third domain pertains to social resources and reflects involvement in and attachment to networks that provide access to the knowledge and support of others. Consequently, a multitude of Internet applications may be integrated into this process, including the formation of connections with family members and the dissemination of images or the establishment of connections with friends. It may be reasonably assumed that this type of Internet use is particularly prevalent in Cuba, given that the majority of the population lacks consistent access to any form of communication technology. Consequently, social media, particularly Facebook, is poised to become a primary conduit for communication within Cuba and for reaching audiences abroad (Recio, 2014, p. 330).

The reforms announced by Raúl Castro at the Cuban Economic Model Update in 2011 with the overarching objective of enhance economic efficiency, is why the Internet access policy should be regarded as an investment for development, tailored to align with the prevailing economic rationality paradigm. In this economic era, the State is promoting measures to lighten its structure, without strengthening civil society and its deliberative capacity. Furthermore, the intensive use of telecommunications was not a priority (Recio, 2000).

The growing access to the Internet in Cuba has enabled the convergence of new scenarios

and the creation of a transnational contentious space. This space is differentiated and autonomous from the official political and cultural sphere, intensifying interactions and allowing the recognition of contentious protagonists as legitimate opponents (players in the same game). A common goal is to contribute to social and political change in Cuba from below. This new space of transnational contention is where certain issues previously excluded from the public eye begin to be visualized and become partially public through the independent online media, most of them without official government recognition.

The principal obstacle to the development of digital independent journalism in Cuba is the limited, selective, monitored, and highly regulated access to the Internet for the Cuban population. Universal public access is constrained by four factors: ambiguity and restrictiveness of legal provisions, limited coverage and high cost of the connection, blocking and censorship of critical media, and network surveillance strategies.

The impact of globalization and internet access in Cuban, particularly in the context of digital transformation, has yet to be sufficiently explored. The advent of independent media and citizen journalism in Cuba represents a crucial yet understudied domain, despite its increasing prominence in recent years (Gallego, 2021; Vidal, 2017; Recio, 2014).

Cuban society is characterized by a growing diversity from a socio-economic point of view with the emergence of a non-state sector of the economy, the public emergence of cultural and spiritual expressions that struggle for their presence and recognition in the communication space, and the transformation of communicative systems on a global scale with the infiltration of digital networks and supports that create the

possibility of democratizing the production and access to information and cultural production (Vidal, 2017).

Conclusions

The transformation of Cuba's communication landscape, driven by new communication policies and the rise of digital media, represents a significant departure from the historically controlled media environment that has characterized the country. This shift has undoubtedly expanded the avenues for information access and expression within Cuban society. However, it also reveals the intricate relationship between progress and the persistence of challenges.

Although the advent of mobile internet access and the proliferation of digital media have arguably democratized information to a certain extent, it is imperative to conduct a critical examination of these developments in the context of the existing state controls and technological limitations. The Cuban government's incremental liberalization of communication technologies can be viewed as a pragmatic response to global digital trends. Nevertheless, the state's continued regulation of content and constrained infrastructure illustrates a dialectical tension between openness and control. This tension gives rise to questions regarding the extent to which digital media can genuinely serve as a conduit for free expression and societal transformation within the context of such stringent regulation.

The persistence of a digital divide in Cuba, characterized by technological obsolescence, limited broadband, and infrastructural scarcity, reflects broader systemic inequalities. While digital media has provided new platforms for communication, the unequal distribution of

technological resources serves to exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities. This divide not only constrains the potential for digital inclusivity but also reinforces patterns of exclusion, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Critical examination reveals that without targeted interventions to address these disparities, the benefits of digital media will remain unevenly distributed, further entrenching social inequalities.

The advent of digital media in Cuba has unquestionably contributed to the diversification of the media landscape, thereby facilitating the ascendance of independent voices and alternative discourses. Nevertheless, the extent to which this diversification translates into meaningful civic engagement and political discourse remains a matter of contention. The state's selective and exclusionary criteria for internet access, coupled with surveillance and censorship practices, create an environment in which public discourse is both enabled and constrained. A critical perspective suggests that, while digital media has the potential to challenge the monolithic control of information, the reality of state oversight and the digital divide limit its effectiveness as a tool for widespread civic participation.

Looking forward, the evolution of Cuba's communication landscape will depend on strategic interventions that go beyond mere technological upgrades. It requires a holistic approach that addresses the socio-political dimensions of digital access. Investments in infrastructure, coupled with policies that promote digital literacy and equitable access, are essential. However, these initiatives must be critically aligned with broader goals of social justice and inclusivity. Without addressing the underlying power structures that govern access to

information, efforts to modernize Cuba's digital landscape may only perpetuate existing hierarchies and inequalities.

In conclusion, while the rise of digital media in Cuba represents a significant step toward modernization, it is a development fraught with contradictions. The potential for digital media to serve as a tool for empowerment and societal transformation is contingent upon the dismantling of the very barriers—both technological and political—that currently limit its reach. A critical analysis thus reveals that the future of communication in Cuba will be shaped not only by technological advancements but by the ongoing struggle for greater equity and inclusivity in access to information.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' contribution

Gelsy García García: Conceptualization, methodology, validation, writing-review and editing, and approval of the final version.

Omar Mahmoud Khalaf Dabie: Formal analysis, visualization and approval of the final version.